Using Sartrean existentialism to understand the lived experiences of constituency activists

Thomas McGrath

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Dedicated to my parents Tom and Cecilia.

And to my sister Martina, and to Mark.

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Lastly, I'd like to pass on this quotation from the existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre:

> *When you realize that by changing your perspective, big things can be seen as little things, it becomes much harder to worry about anything.*

Abstract

This research uses Sartrean existentialism to better understand the lived experiences of constituency activists. This research identified and analysed the existential themes and concepts that motivated individuals to become and remain constituency activists. Data on constituency activists' motives and desires was gathered from 26 constituency activists in the Leeds City Region, using one-to-one interviews, focusing on their stories and experiences of constituency activism activities. Interviews were analysed using grounded inquiry.

The research found that an individual's lived experience of constituency activism is primarily an *individual existential project of action*. The existential project of action demonstrates the individual's constant effort to avoid self-deception and make sense of their *being*-in-the world through political participation. These *individual existential projects of action* are sustained by four existential themes. These are: 1) consciousness, which creates the *individual existential projects of action*; 2) praxis, which brings the *individual existential projects of action* into the world; 3) anxiety, which helps shape and form the *individual existential projects of action*; and 4) authenticity, which evaluates the *individual existential projects of action* for the constituency activist.

The research contributes to existing knowledge on political engagement and incentives by revealing that: 1) constituency activism can be better understood as *individual existential projects of action* sustained by the existential themes of consciousness, praxis, anxiety, and authenticity; 2) ontological freedoms and opportunities for self-creation are outcomes of *individual existential projects of action*; 3) 'anxiety' is a creative force vital to a constituency activist's *individual existential projects of action*; and 4) there is an inescapable presence of bad faith in a constituency activist's *individual existential projects of action*.

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Introduction

This research is motivated by my experience of community-based activism and campaigning in Scotland, Bangladesh and England, and in supporting a range of community activists and leaders, and elected councillors to represent their communities and to tackle a range of social issues. Conversations with voluntary and paid constituency activists over the years about what drives their individual political activities brought out reasons such as “it is important to bring about a fairer society”, “I had some spare time”, “it is a good way to contribute to the community”, “it’s something to do”, “it was a good fit for my interests at a particular point in my life”, “I was asked to help out, liked the people and stayed on” and “I was voted onto the committee” among a range of many other reasons. Among some of the other reasons offered by constituency activists included motives that felt, at the time of telling, more personal and nuanced to me. Their reasons included, “it fits with my sense of self”, “it’s who I am”, “I owe it to…” and, “it’s the right thing to do”. These latter responses are no more or less important than the former comments exemplified here; however, they suggest that the responding constituency activist is tapping into another layer of their lived experiences and personal needs. In further conversations with some activists and community leaders about their activism, they expressed that they were also attending to involuntary motives often driven by positive as well as adverse life events.

These positive and adverse life events are recorded in political memoirs of high-profile politicians. Political memoirs and autobiographies often explore influential life events and name the trials that shaped the politician’s political journey and interests. For example, Tony Blair is on record as saying that after his mother died, “life was never the same after that. This was when the urgency took hold, the ambition hardened, the recognition grasped that life was finite” (Blair, 2010:9). The event – the death of his mother – offers a sharper contrast to the motives mentioned in my conversations with constituency activists over the years. However, reflecting on grief and bereavement can give us an insight into the deeper motivations of political engagement. Experiencing personal tragedy was also a motivation for

David Blunkett. He experienced the death of both his father and grandfather before he was 13 years old and “vowed then that he would devote himself to ensuring that others were spared such treatment [in a geriatric ward where his grandfather died]” (Prince, 2015). Not only is his motivation rooted in grief, but it exposed him to the beginnings of a cause to prevent others suffering at the hands of a system in the way his father and grandfather did. Politicians often cite exposure to unjust systems as a motivating factor that informed their thinking and political engagement and ambitions. Roy Hattersley tells of observing an unjust moment during his summer job delivering milk in Sheffield. During door deliveries he witnessed women asking for milk without the needed tokens. The milkman he was assisting would often oblige but never if a woman came to the door smoking a cigarette. When Roy asked why the milkman favoured some women over others, the milkman responded that if they can afford cigarettes then they could afford milk (Hennessy and Shepherd, 2016). This experience shaped his approach to welfare and gave him the courage to challenge MPs who argued against serving what they described as the “undeserving poor” (2016:141). Shortly before this, he claims to have “been struck by a thunderbolt” in reading about equality:

> *“I admit, until I was 17 or 18, I knew I was Labour, but I couldn’t have told you in more than a couple of sentences why I was Labour…and [for school] I read [R. H. Tawney’s] ‘Equality’, and it was as if I’d been struck by a thunderbolt… Equality seems to me to be the good life, the good society, the good nation. And I’ve felt like that ever since I was 17.” (2016:140)*

Ted Heath’s political policies to reduce poverty were similarly borne out of a desire for a better world “with greater prosperity for all, fewer injustices and more opportunities” (Heath, 1998:56). He goes on to state that he was also “haunted by the daily spectacle of witnessing so many people enduring hardships, hopelessness and loss of dignity…I resolved to do everything within my power to spare future generations similar horrors” (1998:56). Likewise, John Major expressed a desire to join the Conservative Party to care for “the weak, the poor and the old” (Major, 2013:2).

The fight for equality and justice features heavily in some political memoirs and is written about as a sense of duty. In the case of Gordon Brown, duty is at the forefront of his personal political journey:

> *"Mr Brown said his father, a Church of Scotland minister, had taught him that politics was "about public service and a vocation borne of high ideals…and a great sense of duty". [He] said: "I still hold the belief in something bigger than ourselves. I still hold to the belief in the moral purpose of public service." (Johnson and Riley-Smith, 2014)*

Gordon Brown's father was a church minister, and "his ministry was woven into [Brown's] life" (Brown, 2017:80) teaching Gordon to "treat everyone equally – subservient to no one, and condescending to no one" (2017:80). Religion and duty combine for other politicians too. Clare Short speaks about how her Catholic upbringing "is a deep part of who I am; the belief that you have to try and be truthful and care for people and be fair, and the poor should be looked after" (Hennessy and Shepherd, 2016:262).

Duty can be viewed not solely as service to the public, but also as an obligation to family and heritage. When reading the events that shaped the coming to political consciousness and power of Indira Gandhi (Frank, 2001), her reluctance to be a public figure is noted throughout her life, and she is acutely aware of her father's ambitions for her. In a letter to Indira, her father Jawaharlal Nehru states:

> *"There are very few persons in India, I think, who could give effective help not only in public life but almost for any activity…hundreds and thousands of young men and girls have wanted to serve me as secretaries…I have never encouraged anyone and have shouldered the burdens alone, for I have always imagined you to occupy that niche." (2001:171)*

Later in her life, she confides to a journalist that she believed she had a "debt to pay" (2001:245). It is through this debt to her father that Indira's position as Prime Minister of India is presented as *a fait accompli*, where duty is all consuming. This

dynastic link is emphasised once again following Indira's death, where it is noted that her son, Rajiv, was appointed to replace her "whether he wanted it or not" (2001:495).

Similarly, Margaret Thatcher is indebted to her father. "The influence of her father – and her mother and grandmother – was unquestionably real and lasting" (Campbell, 2011:2). Her frustration at her father's ousting as Alderman by a Labour councillor was an influence on her early political ambitions (Campbell, 2011), with historian Peter Hennessy commenting that "the country was ruled by Alderman Roberts from beyond the grave" (2011:2).

The influence of individuals on shaping the thoughts and agendas of politicians is clear. Clare Short, when working as a civil servant, claimed to be influenced by the "principled-ness" of Alex Lyon, a Minister of State (whom she later married), "to think you can, with honour, serve in politics and become a minister, and do good and be a decent person" (Hennessy and Shepherd, 2016:267). Kenneth Clarke's "particular hero was Iain Macleod", a Conservative Government Secretary of State. because Macleod was "an original thinker, and a man of real political courage as he withstood the hatred…of the diehard imperialist right of the party" (Clarke, 2016: Ch3, p11). Interestingly, Ian Macleod, "a brilliant platform orator" (2016: Ch3, p11), was also the inspiration for John Mayor to go with his "Conservative instinct" (Hennessy and Shepherd, 2016:123):

> *"I think it was Iain Macleod who most attracted my attention as a young teenager…he had a voice like a ringing bell, and it was inspiring to listen to. And certainly as an 11, 12, 13, 14 year-old, if I could hear Iain Macleod speak, I would, and I drank in every word." (2016:124)*

Political memoirs and autobiographies present interesting accounts of complex human decisions, internal motivations and external circumstances but, I assert, they cannot fully represent the lived experience of the average constituency-based activist for a number of reasons. Firstly, served and serving politicians are acutely aware that their public accounts of political life will be scrutinised, and as such,

their accounts are written with particular audiences in mind. This suggests that the authors who are political activists in their own right are presenting themselves as ‘characters’ on ‘front-stage’ in a ‘performance’ (Goffman, 1959), and as such, they are often presenting a ‘smoothed out’ version of both themselves and of the existential events and emotions that they experienced, which helped inform their journey into politics.

Secondly, published memoirs and biographies present a chronological, linear journey where events happen in succession and the end result, such as Indira Gandhi’s inevitable destination to political office (Frank, 2001), is a product of what has come before; the natural progression of a great person ending up in high office. This has the effect of giving a sense of natural progression in one’s life – a somewhat deterministic or fatalistic rendering of complex human decisions, motivations and external circumstances. In accounts such as these, high office is the ultimate role, a place of power to create a better society. This omits the valuable and powerful work being undertaken at constituency level and omits the stories of individual political activists who have and continue to make meaningful change outside of high office. Arguably, this undervalues the role, experiences and work of constituency activists. This research will give voice to these individual constituency activists and in doing so address their underrepresentation in the political landscape.

Thirdly, the dominant sources of motivation appear to be a sense of public duty, religion, and the influence of family and other individuals. This offers some insight into some but not all life events and their emotional impact, namely personal tragedy, grief, alienation and seeking a sense of purpose. These life events are rarely fully explored in these public accounts, yet are important existential moments (Stephan, 2017; 2012), and in the instances cited above, they are framed as catalysts for public service and political ambition. Anecdotal evidence from my experiences as a community activist suggests that these instances of tragedy, grief, alienation and seeking a sense of purpose – called *existential fears* (Sartre, 1994) – are more common than we realise in shaping individuals’ political engagement. The public accounts of high-profile politicians do not however contain these moments in any detail in their writings. This suggests that existing public accounts of individuals’

political activism are not representative of people engaging at all the hierarchies within a political party system. Arguably, these accounts do not represent the lived experience of the majority of constituency-based activists.

Finally, what is also missing from these accounts is the emotional rawness of the existential experience, what Sartre's calls the unease and disquiet (Sartre, 1994). In existentialism, this unease and disquiet is often described as individual behaviour characterised as *restlessness* and *fears* (Blomme and Bornebroek-Te Lintelo, 2012). Restlessness and fears can be interpreted as death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness (Blomme and Bornebroek-Te Lintelo, 2012). This unease or restlessness, often experienced alongside a heightened sense of individuality is clearly stated as the catalyst for Obama's political journey: "It was a consequence of that restlessness that I decided to challenge a sitting Democratic incumbent for his congressional seat in the 2000 election cycle" (Obama, 2006:3). Such infrequent insights help the reader to understand the political forces that shaped political stories but are missing from many of the above political memoirs.

It is my aim in this research to record and discuss some of the life events and personal choices that influenced individual activists to engage and remain with their constituency activism. In the context of this study, 'constituency activist' refers to branch members of national and regional political parties, individuals standing on independent political manifestos, and locally elected councillors, all based and active within the Leeds City Region. To do this I use the existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre to understand constituency activists' lived experiences.

Sartre's philosophical vision and existential ideas are person-centred and focus on the choices individuals makes in pursuit of their own freedom and the freedom of others (Sartre, 2003; Solomon, 2005; Cerbone, 2015). Existential freedom coexists with self-responsibility and involves the individual taking responsibility for reflecting on their actions and choices (Flynn, 2006; Cox, 2008). For Sartre, the individual chooses their own destiny in life and in dealing with the anxiety of doing so, the individual makes more of themself (Cumming, 2003; Solomon, 2005). Sartre's existentialism is also concerned with the individual's interaction and collaboration with others and the events that structure and maintain the individual's

freedoms. Interaction and collaboration with others take place in a range of situations including political settings (Bronner, 2021). These collaborations include shared aims and collective actions to promote and protect the rights and responsibilities of the individual and others. There are very few studies giving voice to ordinary political branch and constituency activists and their lived experiences, and none that use Sartrean existentialism to understand said lived experiences. This research therefore presents unique insight into constituency activism by revealing the existential themes that underpin the motivations and actions of constituency political activists.

The concept of “lived experience” refers to personal experience, namely experiences that “reflects the flow of meanings that persons bring to their immediate situations. These experiences can be routine or problematic. They occur within the life of a person” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994:356). They give the researcher “thick descriptions” (Denzin, 1989:26) rooted in “meaning that is biographical, emotional, and felt in the streams of experience of the person” (1989:80). Understanding the lived experience is therefore important in this research as it means that the study starts from constituency activists’ reflections and accounts of their “real world experiences” (Robson, 2002) of constituency activism; their first-hand involvement in constituency activism and their knowledge gained from direct face-to-face interaction with other activists and constituency voters. The lived experiences offered by the constituency activists in this research therefore represent their constituency realities.

The value of existentialism as a framework for enquiry into constituency activism

Research that encompasses existential philosophy as a framework for enquiry has been used to examine the desires and motives of individuals in pursuing particular careers and actions in a range of sectors. Fraternali, (1998) explores Sartre's existentialism and social work, concluding that moving from individual to cooperative action helps to "unify social work practice on the micro and macro levels" of social work (1998:62). Fraternali (1998) starts with an analysis that social work, as an "eclectic profession" (1998:62) has relied on a range of theoretical and ontological foundations that fail to fulfil the profession's community of practitioners need for a philosophy and theory that captures their distinct praxis and complex support activities. What the profession and its social workers need are practitioner guidelines that better represent their identity and the "social realities" of their interventions (Fraternali, 1998:73), an exemplar that is a fusion of "science and humanity" (Mohan in Fraternali, 1998:62). Fraternali's (1998) study finds that this crisis in professional social work identity and practice gap can be relieved by the profession embracing a variety of Sartrean existential principles. These existential principles accommodate the important relationship between the social workers *freedom* to practice and their public *responsibility* to those they support (Fraternali, 1998). In the dynamic between *freedom* and *responsibility* the social worker heightens their praxis of doing and thinking which leads them to undertake an individual review of their obligations and the quality of their cooperation and relationship with those they support (Fraternali, 1998). In attending to the details of their support arrangements to others they discover their creative 'being' and a deeper understanding of their independence, freedom, and choice to be effective and authentic in their practice. In the moment of recognising the power of 'choice' and choosing to be effective and unique in their approach, they also reappraise the content of given knowledge accumulated in their formative professional years about such things as human nature and social behaviour. In this appraisal, and their own first-hand experience of refreshing their social work identity through their own 'choices', they also extend this experience to others by recognising that as they did, other workers and service beneficiaries also benefit when they are supported in

their freedoms to choose and negotiate the services they need. In this arrangement, a support and caring relationship based on mutual freedoms, responsibility, empathy and choice between the social worker and the supported individual, confidence and identity continues to grow in the social worker and their community of practice. This emerging cycle of cooperation and authenticity creates another paradigm of practice and an assured community of practice. This clarity extends to systematically defining and measuring with confidence social work's public value. Together these results can "be understood in relation to the [social worker's fundamental] existential project, the continuous attempt to make sense of one's existence" (Fraternali, 1998:71). These developments and corrections to social work praxis and identity are built on Sartrean existential principles of freedom, responsibility, engagement, and cooperation "towards fulfilment of [individual and collective] needs" (Fraternali, 1998:62).

In presenting an existential examination of palliative nursing care Arman (2007) provides another sensemaking dimension to individual existence. In Arman's (2007) study the existential themes considered are *responsibility* and the existential *freedom* to *be.* These themes are examined in the context of participating nurses' *courage* to approach the reality of their palliative caring responsibilities. Arman (2007) argues that the quality of palliative nursing care not only impacts the beneficiary, but that it can also transform the care giver. Central to transformation is the "existential position of being a witness" (2007:84) to patients' needs. As a "witness" the nurse will experience an existential encounter in the form of an awakening to their responsibilities and a freedom to care. Additionally, Arman (2007) highlights an often-forgotten aspect of the human psyche – courage – as crucial to nurses' lived experience as both carers and witnesses to suffering and death, whereby courage is "a bridge to an existential encounter" (2007:84). This bridge transcends "earlier limits [to palliative care and caring] … to open up without prejudice as to what might happen" (Arman, 2007:89) in the nursing relationship between carer and palliative patient. In this regard, courage is the "first step into a deeper existential reality of 'being' and an existential caring encounter" (2007:91). These encounters and engagements with *being* are a "conscious option to be existentially present for the patient" (2007:91). Being present is *being* at "the

disposal of the other" (2007:85) and also serves to "enrich both parties' life of shared meaning" (Arman, 2007:84). It is in these existential encounters that the whole *being* is present, and it is where the palliative care nurse displays their "expression of love and charity" (2007:91) and the courage to recognise and witness "the person's whole reality including suffering" (Arman & Rehnsfeldt, 2003 in Arman, 2007:86). The "courage to be" (Tillich, 2000; Solomon, 2005; Arman, 2007) is an important concept in existentialism because the condition is viewed as a positive force in accommodating the anxiety that accompanies an unconditional acceptance of responsibility, decision-making and action. Existentially, this "courage to be" presents opportunities for the individual to experience greater freedoms and an authentic existence alongside others (Sartre, 1946). It is this courage to embrace existential *freedom* that Arman (2007) advocates in palliative nurses and care givers because it will "bring a new understanding of life in the face of death and suffering" (2007:92).

The use of the existentialist lens extends to the discipline of business decision-making, with Jean-Paul Sartre's notions of freedom and responsibility being used to reframe ethical decision-making in business (West, 2008). A heightened awareness of one's existential freedom and responsibility (Sartre, 1946) is the central feature of West's (2008) study into ethical decision-making in business. West (2008) suggests that the application of Sartre's (1946) existential concepts of *freedom* and *responsibility* "reframes" (West, 2008:15) the normative decision-making approaches undertaken in business management. This reframing is achieved by an upfront acknowledgement that the decision-makers "subjective experiences and personal situations" (2008:15) are central and unavoidable features of the ethical decision-making process. No matter how complex the decision-making conditions, to avoid such an acknowledgement would be "an exercise in 'bad faith'" (2008:19). West (2008) also notes that addressing subjective experiences and personal situations does not diminish or complicate what must remain a practical decision-making activity, nor does it undermine "laws, regulations or rules which restrict choices" (2008:16). Existentially, an authentic action of *responsibility* follows awareness of experiences and personal situations and brings about clarity of one's *freedom* in the decision-making process. In addition, a decision-making model structured on existential principles of freedom and responsibility provides some

protection against a prescribed course of action as it gives space to a subjective and interdependent *being.* There are, however, weaknesses in the existential decision-making model. For instance, the application of the model relies on the “good faith” (2008:23) of decision-makers and can lead to highly individualistic behaviour of individuals, where the needs of others are viewed as disruptions to decision-makers’ own “goals and projects” (2008:23). West (2008) acknowledges the danger of individualistic behaviour and its link to Sartre’s (1946) view that relationships are defined by tension and conflict. However, West (2008) comments that society dictates that the individual functions interdependently with others to live and is therefore reliant on their reciprocity. In accepting the terms and reality of their own freedoms and responsibilities, the individual is better equipped to accept the choices and complexities of the “subjective experiences and personal situations” (2008:24) of others.

The research by Fraternali (1998), Arman (2007) and West (2008) have applied existential concepts and values to social work, nursing, and business management settings. In Fraternali’s (1998) study, existential themes of *freedom* and *responsibility* (Sartre, 1946) provide a framework for social workers and their profession to review and clarify their unique support to their service users and beneficiaries. The outcome of these existential reviews of praxis and relationships serve to strengthen social work’s professional identity and enhance individual social worker’s job satisfaction. Arman (2007) observes that palliative care nursing is a unique experience in that it presents the nurse with a unique opportunity for an existential encounter. Not only is the care setting exceptional – a place where suffering and death is ever present – it is a place where nurses are required to show extraordinary levels of courage to overcome the anxiety of caring for vulnerable patients. The nurse, in addressing the demands of the “courage to be” (Tillich, 2000; Solomon, 2005; Arman, 2007) fully committed to witnessing the holistic needs of those they care for, is rewarded with “a new understanding of life” (Arman, 2007:92). West (2008) observes that when managers openly address their own bias and needs and actively place them at the centre of their decision-making responsibilities and processes, the decision outcomes have the potential to be ones that serve the needs of all stakeholders. However, to ensure that the decision is an ethical one, the decision-maker must recognise that their individual *freedoms* and

being are dependent upon the *responsibilities* and *freedoms* of others (West, 2008). The existential themes contained in these studies are further explored in studies that look at broader existential themes of *becoming* and *being* a teacher (Gorodetsky & Barak, 2016; Orland-Barak, 2016), and in the career choices of women accountants (Wallace, 2009).

The human being as teacher in Gorodetsky & Barak's (2016) study is an involved *being* where they find their personal identity closely intertwined with their professional effectiveness. Gorodetsky & Barak (2016) note that this intense "affect-loaded" (2016:85) aspect of personal and professional identity, where self-image and self-esteem is so closely linked to work performance, has shortcomings. They see these affective aspects of the teaching vocation invertedly stoking individual teacher's vulnerability and exposing them to prescribed outputs that are predetermined and standardised. These prescribed outputs and "objective truisms" (2016:85) erode teacher creativity and close down opportunities for the teacher-student relationship to develop into transformative encounters (Sartre, 1994).

Gorodetsky & Barak (2016) discuss the need for education "as a *landscape of becoming"* (2016:85) to extend – and in some cases abandon – its focus on issues of "true or false" (2016:85) to better reflect an ontology that nurtures difference, experimentation and the unknown. In existential terms, this means rejecting the notion of *essence* (Sartre, 1946) and making way for new *becomings*; a different discourse in learning and teaching (Gorodetsky & Barak, 2016:86). A new *becoming* enables the teacher's praxis and professional standards to emerge "rather than just revealing manifestations of more or less successful copies of the already known" (2016:86). Opportunities for new *becomings* are found in the nomadic space where the teacher's focus is on creative pedagogy, and theirs and their students' subjective teaching and learning needs. In these revised "spaces of experiences" (2016:87) participating individuals are raised to another level of involvedness, existential freedom and responsibility that lead to intense feelings, agency and *being*.

Orland-Barak (2016) writes that for this *becoming* to be sustainable it requires those involved to take their commitment to teaching and learning beyond instrumental objectives to include developmental and organic activities. This requires the

individual teacher to engage with a level of reflection-in-action to address what restrains their creativity and openness to change, and to be alert to environmental and social connections that are important to others. In this learning community, teachers and learners are "free of a predetermined structure or discourse" (Orland-Barak, 2016:4), enabling non-conformist thought and action in those involved.

There are links here for *being and becoming* a constituency activist, not least that *becoming* a constituency activist involves commitment to one's choices and responsibilities, and in return, one experiences a sense of belonging and identity. While a sense of belonging is established in a relationship with and proximity to other constituency activists, arguably a constituency activist identity can be more difficult to explain. An approach that can help inform this research is Gorodetsky and Barak's (2016) technique of using individual stories and examples of subjective experiences to explain activist identity. Furthermore, there are parallels between Gorodetsky & Barak's (2016) teacher and learners "unforeseen territories" (2016:87) of learning, and the constituency activists' roles and responsibilities in an ambiguous political environment. Both territories are "nomadic spaces" (Gorodetsky and Barak, 2016:88) and are complex because they are free from predefined objectives and bounded spaces for collaboration. Instead, both spaces rely on the creativity and resilience of the individuals who occupy these spaces and their ability to form working relationships with others.

Additionally, both settings are lively and contain self-motivated individuals; however, the settings are prone to volatility and factions. The constituency activist's environment, like the teaching and learning environment of Gorodetsky & Barak's (2016) study, share similar conditions where the constituency activist must be spontaneous and astute to function in a space where conditions are forever dynamic and unstable. It is in these lively conditions where existential *freedom* and *responsibility* can provide the individual with the means to accommodate these conditions, while at the same time support their subjective commitment to a cause and solidify their teacher or activist identity. In return the nomadic space provides a place of belonging for the teacher and activist, consequently creating an environment that provides opportunities for enhanced and shared experiences and individual choices. Together, these conditions can serve to shield the individual

teacher and activist from conformity and predetermined configurations of *being* (Gorodetsky & Barak, 2016).

Wallace (2009) applies Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existential philosophy to a study of the career choices of women chartered accountants (CAs). Wallace (2009) was interested in giving voice to these professional women, underscoring their personal agency, and the timing of their career choices. Study participants described their careers and career choices as decisions they took responsibility for, commenting that they "left organizations when either individuals or the organization attempted to make choices on their behalf" (2009:74).

The human resources policies Wallace (2009) encountered at the time were underpinned by an "essentialist approach" to workplace employment and corporate practices. These approaches included workplace recruitment and retention practices that emphasised biological differences, male advantage, cultural and "everyday processes and unwritten rules that… privileged certain groups of people over others" (2009:63). Consequently, the women's professional identity was diminished on certain levels, and women were directed into "a state of inauthenticity or bad faith where they enact prescribed roles" (2009:66). As a result, Wallace (2009) advocates for a more in-depth "understanding of the multiple contributors to women CAs' career decisions" (2009:78) and improvements to human resource policies that support and retain women CAs.

Wallace (2009) addresses de Beauvoir's biological determinism and essentialist credentials and concludes that de Beauvoir is fully aware of the dangers to marginalised women who experience a "false consciousness" (2009:64) where they are driven or even manipulated by a desire to compromise and succeed in a masculine environment. For Wallace (2009), de Beauvoir understands that the situation of women in the workplace "is profoundly different [from that of men]" (2009:67). It is through de Beauvoir' existentialist philosophical principles that the individual creates and defines themself in their exchanges with others, and that they take responsibility for choosing their own careers. Nevertheless, women were still obliged "to assume the status of other" (2009:66); an *object* of inequality.

Wallace (2009) was interested in revealing how this 'otherness' hindered women's career goals and created passivity and feelings of anxiety and incompetence in

many women who held senior accounting positions. Wallace (2009) finds that research participants viewed their career obstacles as situations of their own choosing. The women CAs therefore accept their choices, and in doing so, they understate the “socially produced” (2009:75) factors that serve to reinforce that their “lack of success is the fault of the individual woman, not the fault of the system” (2009:74). Wallace (2009) observes that this “form of false consciousness” (2009:64) undermines women and erodes their existential freedoms and choices, and potential for career development. Wallace’s research also presented evidence that not all career obstacles were found in the workplace; for example, negative feedback at home was a debilitating influence on the women and their career satisfaction levels.

There is ambiguity present in Wallace’s (2009) study, as illustrated in one woman’s comment that they “like the way my career ended up anyway, right. So you know it all falls into place” (2009:74). Wallace (2009) acknowledges that there were active and passive career choices made by women in the study, however, the study set out to promote individual voices and provide an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the “multiple contributors to women CAs’ career decisions” (2009:78). These contributors included the women’s individual agency and independence, their identity construction, motherhood, and significantly, the structures found in the institution of work. Wallace (2009) concludes that de Beauvoir’s existential feminist philosophy is an effective framework for a study of the careers of women CAs. Notwithstanding, Wallace (2009) emphasises de Beauvoir’s particular ethical stance that one must avoid pressing for their own freedom if it is achieved at the expense of another’s freedom. This position also means that the individual must, controversially, come to terms with the ambiguous tension between the subjective *self* and objective *other*.

These studies show how the application of existential principles such as *freedom*, *choice*, and *responsibility* to a range of communities of practice can reveal new insights into the lived experiences of those involved. These insights include a deeper understanding of how individuals communicate their specialised roles and expert identities, how they form their own ‘spaces of experiences’ through their choices, and why decision-making may require courage and an alertness to one’s

false consciousness. In these communities of practice, we see individuals existing in everyday situations and responding to a range of experiences that include witnessing suffering (Arman, 2007), the anxiety of teaching and learning (Gorodetsky & Barak, 2016; Orland-Barak, 2016), career choices and conflict in the workplace (Wallace, 2009), fallibility in decision-making (West, 2008), and threat to individual and collective authenticity (Fraternali, 1998).

The individual experiences considered in these professional areas offers guidance and confidence to this research study that existentialism and existential themes are relevant to examining constituency activist identities and motivations. In addition, the five research areas also offer a standpoint, except for Wallace's (2009) important observation on socially produced factors, that there is no pre-scripted purpose and plan, only the outcomes of individual choices and actions. This condition is summarised in Sartre's refrain that 'existence precedes essence' (Langiulli, 1997; Solomon, 2005) and as such the individual creates their own projects and the significance of their own purposefulness and existence (Langiulli, 1997; Solomon, 2005). In addition, existing research on both existentialism and activism overlap on concepts of *freedom* (e.g., to choose to engage in the world), *praxis* (e.g., to participate with purpose), *contingency* (e.g., accommodating political change and rejection) and *authenticity* (e.g., running a clean and honest campaign, and avoiding bad faith in one's actions as an activist and a voter).

By applying existentialism and existential themes to the activities of a range of communities of practice, such as those discussed above, we are better able to see and understand that there are deeper human desires that motivate our existence and actions. It is worth reflecting on the case that we do not often acknowledge these deeper desires to ourselves, nor articulate them to anyone else unless presented with the opportunity to do so through, for example, the five research studies discussed above (Solomon, 2005). Existentialism is chosen to contextualise this research into the lived experiences of constituency activists because it allows for the analysis of both behavioural and mental experiences (Cerbone, 2015).

Existentialism also embraces the role of anxiety and emotions in communicating the human condition and stresses self-responsibility in the lived human experience

(Solomon, 1993, 2005; Sartre, 1994; Wild, 2011). This research therefore seeks to apply existentialism to a community of constituency activists to examine the deeper desires and existential emotions, feelings and fears that have guided them to become politically active.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980)

Frenchman Jean-Paul Sartre was a novelist (e.g., *Nausea*, 1962), dramatist (e.g., *No Exit*, 1989b: a play notable for exploring the idea that 'hell is other people'), essayist (e.g., *Words*, 1964), diarist (*War Diaries*, 1984: many of his notebook entries were abstract journal reflections because Sartre never experienced combat and his philosophical meditations were further developed in his later ontological study, *Being and Nothingness,* (2003), and lecture, *Existentialism and Humanism*, (1946). In his 1961 talk about the link between existentialism and Marxism at Rome's Gramsci Institute, Sartre said:

> *"My goal is to pose the problem of our time, which interests us as philosophers, politicians, sociologists, ideologues and psychologists, as men of culture and also as common men."*
> *(Sartre, 2016: Ch. Marxism and Existentialism, p106).*

He regarded himself as a philosopher of social and political issues of his day (Sartre, 2008). According to Birchall (2005), from the 1940s onwards Sartre became less interested in 'timeless' questions and more focused on "concrete realities of his own age" (2005:251). His attention to *particular* issues and concepts over *universal* ones was important because such issues and concepts called for *choices* to be made, a theme central to his study into human existence. For example, he was suspicious of claims of universal principles, observing that the "universal knowledge that is taught in [the French] educational system [was] bourgeois knowledge universalized," (Sartre, 2008: Ch5, p795). Sartre accepted that universal knowledge, such as medical knowledge, was valid, however he emphasised that, in this instance, it is knowledge applied to *particular* people and their circumstances (Philosophical Library, 2010).

Sartre's defence of *particularism* included the advancement of individual responsibility and an existential interpretation of freedom: a "philosophy of radical freedom and responsibility" (Arthur, 2010:64). He was regarded as presenting an original philosophy based on a range of concepts including personal responsibility, choice, commitment, and action (Cox, 2008; Arthur, 2010; Aronson and van den Hoven, 2013).

Foundational concepts in Sartrean existentialism

Sartre initially defined existentialism as a humanism (Sartre, 1946), meaning that existentialism is interested in the human experience, especially the individual's knowledge of themself and their use of the freedoms that arise when they make choices in pursuit of their own interests and values. Sartre's existential humanism projects a vision of personal freedom and abundance, specifically the riches found through autonomy, choice and responsibility (Solomon, 1993; Wild, 2011; Tubbs, 2013). In the domain of this freedom and abundance, existential freedom "confronts man with a possibility of choice" (Tubbs, 2013: 480). It is in the choosing where the individual declares their independence and interdependence in the world. To choose existential freedom one accepts the related responsibilities attached to their choices and in doing so they project an authentic self and a *self* in transition (a being-for-itself and for-others) (Sartre, 2003). To choose freedom but reject all accompanying responsibilities is to deceive oneself that one is free (Sartre, 2003). To repeat this pattern of choice-making, and to continue separating freedom from responsibility, anchors the *self* to a fixed and stagnant being (-in-itself) and to existentially *be* in bad faith (Sartre, 2003). Sartre's concepts of authenticity and bad faith illustrate a hierarchy of living; however, he is mindful of the different situations and conditions individuals inhabit and notes that freedom and authenticity is found in wherever and whatever the individual values and commits to in life.

There are different modes of responsibility attached to Sartre's existentialism. Primarily, the individual is responsible for what they make of their own life, and what they do to support others in finding purpose in theirs. In making life their own, viewed as a *fundamental project*, the individual creates themself through their

freedom and choices. Constituency activism is a place and a purpose, a lived experience apt for existential analysis, that presents opportunities for the individual to define their own meaning and purpose in life as they reflect on their existence. In humanistic terms, it is an opportunity to “self-actualize during moments of creativity” (Gordon, 2012:85). Constituency activism involves a variety of individual and joint creative assignments, including plans for coming-up with original, local political messaging, through to inspiring sceptical individuals to vote.

This creativity may be found in periods of contentment and calmness; however, creativity also arises in moments of compromise and anxiety. It is in episodes of anxiety where Sartre argues that the individual is at their most vulnerable and at their most productive. In these episodes of anxiety, the individual is vulnerable to existing in the world either as an object and a fixed being, or existing in the world as a conscious subject and transcendent being. An individual’s use of their consciousness is therefore an important component in Sartrean existentialism. The essence of consciousness for the individual is a feeling that they own their actions and are equipped to “develop their self-conceptions through experience over time” (Ratey, 2001:144). An individual interacting in the world through a pre-reflective sphere of consciousness presents as a transactional but passive being in their relationship with themself and others. Alternatively, the individual interacting in the world through a reflective sphere of consciousness presents as active, self-aware and empowered to transcend their human condition. A level of self-awareness, intentional consciousness and emotional maturity is necessary if the individual is to be able to recognise opportunities for their existential freedoms and responsibilities, and choose actions that nourish authenticity, leverage anxiety and stifle self-deception (Flynn, 2006).

As noted above, the individual is at their most productive during episodes of anxiety. Here, productivity relates to the use (and abuse) of personal and political freedoms. To be productive, existentially, is to be committed to something unconditionally and to choose one’s actions based on one’s responsibility for their own freedom, such as political and social causes pursued through their constituency activism. To be non-productive in this context is, for the individual, to be

committed to everything and nothing, a secular quietism where personal choices are avoided, and freedoms ignored to the point where personal and collective situations and conditions are sustained through self-deception – choosing not to choose is a choice – and the agendas of others.

Existential freedom, choice and responsibility is found in the subjective experience of struggle, and “humanity is to be found in learning of the truth carried in such experience” (Tubbs, 2013:489). The human condition also involves human struggles such as loneliness and fear, and it is in how the individual deals with their struggles that humanism and Sartrean existentialism show their respective hand. For both humanism and Sartrean existentialism, truth and freedom respectively lie not in the resolution of a struggle, but the struggle itself (Sartre, 1994; Tubbs, 2013). Where humanism expects personal growth and progress to come out of such struggles, Sartrean existentialism is more cautious and looks to displays of personal *choice* and personal *responsibility* on the part of the individual to quantify the value of the experience. Displays of personal choice and responsibility are the bellwether for change in the individual’s situation and conditions, but they remain intemperate and impermanent states. It is under these conditions and states that Sartre’s believes that the individual reveals their authenticity and relationship with others in the world (Gorz, 1966; Gordon, 2012).

Existing academic research into political activism lacks the deeper insight into the lived experiences of local constituency activists in the UK. The focus of prior research is outward looking in that it focuses on approaches and attitudes towards activism (Jasper and McGarry, 2015) and in labelling the ‘doing’ of activism into identifiable categories, such as *agitator* (Ingelhart and Norris, 2003), *organiser* (Battilana and Kimsey, 2017), or *reconciler* (Cortese, 2015).

Consequently, the voices, desires and motivations of local activists remains at the periphery of academic research in favour of continued research into activist approaches, or research into broader incentives, such as how to encourage altruist behaviour (Bekkers and Wiepking, 2011), or activists’ commitment to political ideologies (Scarrow, 2009). The reflective, emotional, and existential events that shape local activists’ engagement is rarely considered. The extent to which activists

are viewed as assets is also evident (Lees-Marshment and Pettitt, 2014), and this research moves away from viewing activists as assets to be motivated to fit organisational or strategic objectives. In applying an existentialist lens to their lived experiences, this research humanises the activist by giving them a voice to express the motivations and desires that sustain their local constituency activism. Furthermore, in using a deeply reflective lens of existentialism, this is a marked step away from analysing activism in terms of the cause and effect, or the input/output correlations of activist actions or people's voting behaviour (Rose, 2009).

Research aims

When viewing all these foundational existential concepts together, it is evident that existentialism underlines human interests and desires and that it can be usefully applied to a range of social settings, and in particular, to constituency activism. The benefit of using existentialism to understand individual constituency activist experiences is that, as a theoretical framework, existentialism emphasises human existence and accommodates the actions of the individual as a self-creating being; a *being* whose actions are closely linked with their emotions and therefore cannot always be explained rationally. Although existentialism is a broad philosophy, it views the individual as first existing, and then rationalising their condition and place in the world. In addition, a scaling down from the broad principles of existential *freedom* and *responsibility* are easily mapped onto an individual level without losing the substance of what existentialism says about subjective and individual experiences. Indeed, this focus on subjective individual experiences will enrich research into constituency activists' experiences.

There is evidence from previous studies that use existentialist concepts to inform their qualitative research, that the data collected is often a rich tapestry of reported lived experiences. Existential themes such as *authenticity*, *consciousness*, *engagement* and *bad faith* are exposed and highlighted as part of the human condition, and as such these studies emphasise the commitment, courage and (extra)ordinariness of human existence. This (extra)ordinariness is shown in occurrences where individuals are purposeful and keen to contribute to activities

that support other individuals; where individuals express their freedom in the choices they make, including where they choose a course of action where there is no guarantee that the outcomes will benefit them; where the individual steps outside the crowd (Gardiner, 2002) to live their values and ethics that reflects their authentic self; where the individual shows courage to reject the control of the 'look' of others and avoid self-deception; and where the individual shows commitment to their choices and projects, including unconditional support for others. Exploring these extraordinary qualities in the context of someone *being* a constituency activist are consistent with a socio-political activity that has existential features of (social) responsibility and (political) engagement built-in and inseparable to activist practice and its community of practice. Existentialism acknowledges that individual experiences are multi-layered and incomplete. Existentialism advocates studying the individual in a whole range of existing situations (Macquarrie, 1972), this includes existing as an active, passionate, and emotional being in the role of a constituency activist.

Existing research is helpful in identifying areas of political activism that display human interests and desires. What the application of existential philosophy to existing research shows is that a) existentialism offers a powerful and insightful framework for examining the lived experiences of communities of practice; and b) there is a lack of similar research on the lived experience of constituency activists and campaigners, and specifically how existential emotions, feelings and fears influence them to commit to their chosen cause, and how they make sense of those existential events. This represents a clear gap in existing knowledge.

This study will therefore address this gap in knowledge by uncovering the influence of existential experiences, desires and motivations of constituency activists in becoming politically active. It will give voice to distinct activist experiences that are predominantly unheard and unrecorded, as constituency political party activists are seldom given the space to talk about their stories and life events, or the *existential* experiences that shaped or triggered their individual motivations to become politically active. This research therefore aims to:

1. identify the Sartrean existential themes and concepts that are present in the lived experiences of local constituency activists;

2. analyse how these existential themes and concepts frame their constituency activism and what this reveals about their lived experience as constituency activists; and
3. contribute to a deeper understanding of the lived experience of local constituency activists.

By focusing on the previously unheard voices of constituency members, this research will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on constituency activism by showing that there are *individual existential projects of actio*n evident in the lived experiences of constituency activists.

Structure of thesis and chapter summaries

Following this introduction to the research aims in *Using Sartrean Existentialism to Understand the Lived Experiences of Constituency Activists*, this thesis is organised into this introductory chapter, five chapters detailing the research and a concluding chapter. Each of the chapters are summarised below:

Chapter 1: Overview of activism

This chapter presents an overview of activism, which includes research into the pathways to constituency activism, such as education experiences (Clark, 2000), civic awareness (Inglehart and Norris, 2003) and social capital, as well as barriers to constituency activism. The chapter also defines activism (Cortese, 2015; Hirschberger *et al.*, 2016; Stuart et al., 2018), activist attitudes (Rodgers, 2010; Atkinson, 2017) and approaches (Battilana and Kimsey, 2017). The chapter then considers the role of political parties in political participation (Webb, 2000; Scarrow 2009; Fagerholm 2016), the evolution of constituency activism (Johnston and Pattie, 1998; Lees-Marshment and Pettitt, 2014), incentivising activists (Bale et al., 2020), and the political ambitions and traits of those interested in political office (Allen and Cutts, 2018). Existing research on the motivations of constituency activists are also discussed, specifically the communal and shared experiences of constituency activism and the tension that arise from it (Permut, 2016; Levy, 2020). Motivations also include altruism (Bekkers and Wiepking, 2011) and commitment to ideology and public service. The chapter concludes with a summary of the

existing research mentioned and reiterates the value of viewing constituency activism through an existentialist lens.

Chapter 2: Existentialism

This chapter expands on the existential concepts discussed in this introductory chapter. An historical overview is provided in the form of the three waves of existentialism. In each wave the key ideas of existential writers and practitioners are considered. In the first wave the theories of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche are discussed. In the second wave, the work of more contemporary existential writers is considered. These writers include Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. The third wave is considered as an ongoing wave focusing on neuroscience and existentialism (Caruso and Flanagan, 2017). The chapter then focuses on the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, from his phenomenological beginnings to his central existential themes of *choice*, *freedom* and *responsibility*. This includes Sartre's philosophy of existence and his theory of how individuals engage with the world and its possibilities. This theory of existence is located in his concepts of commitment and being-in-the-world and illustrated as three modes of existence: *being-in-itself, being-for-itself,* and *being for others* (Sartre, 2003). Sartre's *fundamental project* of 'self-creation', *bad faith* and *authenticity* are also examined.

Chapter 3: Methodological foundations for this research

This chapter discusses ontological (Jacquette, 2014) and epistemological (Goertz and Mahoney, 2012) foundations for this qualitative research. Sartre's three modes of being – *being-in-itself, being-for-itself* and *being-for-others* – are considered in the context of Sartre's ontology and epistemology. Aspects of Sartre's existentialism and political activism are also considered as a precursor to exploring Sartre's existentialism as a method for examining lived experiences and individual actions. The ontological and epistemological foundation, and the knowledge constructed through this research, are also considered as part of the foundation to this research. The chapter then discusses the research methodologies and methods used in the research, beginning with an overview of three approaches to Grounded Theory – Glaser's Classic Grounded Theory; Strauss's Grounded Theory; and Constructivist Grounded Theory – and its application to the research in the form of

Grounded Inquiry (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Fendt and Sachs, 2008), not Grounded Theory. The chapter then outlines the method used, including the benefits and limitations of semi-structured interviews to collect primary data. It details the recruitment and sample size of participants as well as ethical issues, and how the interview data was coded. The chapter concludes with setting out the existential themes evident in activists' lived experiences. These existential themes are analysed and discussed in detail in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 4: The individual existential projects of action

This chapter presents the significant finding from this research. This finding reveals that constituency activism is an *individual existential projects of action*. These *individual existential projects of action* in the context of constituency activism are expressions of individuality, choices and existential freedoms. *Individual existential projects of action* are also unique because they present moments of self-awareness, questioning and clarity for the individual constituency activist. Furthermore, within *individual existential projects of action*, there is the inescapable presence in constituency activism of bad faith.

Chapter 5: Existential themes that sustain the individual existential projects of action

This chapter expands on the previous chapter by analysing and discussing the contributions of the four existential themes that sustain the *individual existential projects of action*; consciousness, praxis, anxiety and authenticity. As entry points into these themes, the chapter begins by setting out ontological, epistemological dimension and autobiographical dimensions to the *individual existential projects of action.*

Conclusion

This chapter concludes the thesis by revisiting the research aims, summarising the research findings, and discussing how the findings contribute to existing knowledge and practice on constituency activism. The chapter reiterates the value of existentialism and its contribution to how we view constituency activism and offers areas for future research.

Chapter 1: Overview of activism

Defining activism

Activism often involves individual action that goes beyond conventional politics and, as a concept within political research, "defining activism in general and prefiguration in particular is acknowledged to be tricky" (Nolas et al., 2016:253). As such, 'political activism' is difficult to define, as definitions are diverse and multi-faceted (Gilliatt, 1987; Clark, 2000). Inglehart and Norris (2003) also acknowledge the inherent diversity of political engagement and participation and its related definitions and affirm that political activism is "a multidimensional phenomenon [spanning] traditional, civic, and protest activism" (Inglehart and Norris, 2003:104).

Activism is present in every type of political system; however, it is of contested value and remains at the margins of conventional politics (Anderson and Herr, 2007; Jasper and McGarry, 2015). Inglehart and Norris (2003) recognise three dimensions to political activism as *traditional political activism*, *civic activism*, and *protest activism*. The dimensions do not exist as three self-contained, bounded dimensions because political parties and civic organisations do not necessary campaign on issues solely focusing on, for example, voting, social movements, or protesting. Nonetheless, the three dimensions offer some insight into participation objectives, and the skills, knowledge and values called upon in each of the dimensions.

Traditional political activism emphasises using conventional political mechanisms, such as voting in local and national elections, and party and trade union membership, to achieve political goals (Ingelhart and Norris, 2003; Theocharis and van Deth, 2018). These traditional mechanisms are perceived to be "low-incentive" (Ingelhart and Norris, 2003:105) in that they present fewer barriers to political participation. The benefit to members is that they can engage in politics on arguably a low level (Ingelhart and Norris, 2003), for example, assisting with fundraising, displaying posters or leafleting. Union membership is based on a broad-based interest in politics, rather than single-issue political concerns, and offers the

member traditional avenues for training and entry into future leadership roles (Ingelhart and Norris, 2003).

Civic activism is “a distinct dimension of political involvement” (2003:111) that encompasses the work of voluntary and community-based organisations. This dimension of activism broadly engages in “service-oriented” (Pavlova et al, 2021:2) public service issues. Membership of these organisations is based on shared issues and shared identity (Ingelhart and Norris, 2003) that can lead to alliances between various marginalised groups. Members benefit by being part of such collectives as they experience a sense of belonging and achievement. However, the activities associated with civic activism can be seen as more intensive than some features of traditional political activism such as ‘voting’.

Protest activism is an approach where politics is viewed as a personal and individualised form of engagement (Theocharis and van Deth, 2018), and a way of finding justification and satisfaction in exercising one’s values and political beliefs (Brown and Pickerill, 2009). This form of activism occurs outside institutional and electoral participation settings and includes the use of petitions, demonstrations, and boycotts (Inglehart and Norris, 2003) to influence decision making processes or protest the outcome of some decision (Theocharis and van Deth, 2018). Rucht (2007) states that protest politics, except those activities related to violence, have become normalised and gained legitimacy as a form of political participation, moving it closer to traditional activism politics.

There is a performative element to *protest activism* (Brown and Pickerill, 2009) where intense positive (e.g., humour) and negative (e.g., hate) emotions can be “strategically deployed and fostered by organisers” (2009:26). Such emotions serve as an “affective attachment” (Jaspers 1998 in Brown and Pickerill, 2009:26) and means for establishing and strengthening activists’ loyalty to an organisation and its causes. Additionally, the emotions of the individual – such as anger and rage – also serve to support collective emotions and create solidarity. Indeed, protest activism relies on creating “spaces of familiarity, solidarity and support” (Brown and Pickerill, 2009:29); however, these spaces can become “cliques”, which exclude some activists and their opportunities for political activism. The benefits of protest

activism to individuals is that the protest itself can become a cathartic ritual for the activist and the group (Brown and Pickerill, 2009).

Contemporary research tends to analyse the causes of political activism and political participation and avoids the challenges inherent in analysing the consequences of political activism (Norris, 2009). By under-engaging in the effects of political participation, Norris (2009) suggests, researchers present weak answers on, for example, political activism's influence on reducing social inequality, and the lasting impact on activists' capabilities and aptitudes. Norris (2009) concludes by considering whether "chequebook activism" (Clark, 2000:36) has undermined action-based activism, and on a strategic level whether the public policy agenda has benefitted from participation and activist processes and outputs (Norris, 2009).

Mele (2000:66) describes activism as "political action outside the formalised boundaries of traditional politics". In this study all three types – traditional, civic, protest – of activism will be considered in the research into constituency activism. And all three activism types share a common principle that constituency activism is a prosocial and cooperative activity (Batson and Shaw, 1991; Gagné and Deci, 2005; Bénabou and Tirole, 2006; Ariely, Bracha and Meier, 2009; Bekkers and Wiepking, 2011; Chan, 2017) that aims to progress individual and collective political interests through shared experiences, and that constituency activism is often undertaken on an altruistic basis (Elad-Strenger, 2016). Constituency activism in this study can also consist of behaviours directed towards challenging political policies and oppression on one hand, and on the other hand consist of behaviours designed to consolidate existing political priorities and conditions of domination (Anderson and Herr, 2007).

Jasper and McGarry (2015) classify activism as a political phenomenon. For them political activism is a state of dissatisfaction and an animated challenge to the existing social order. In this study, activism therefore includes all on the political spectrum and involves challenge and change, conservation, and protection to the status quo (Jasper and McGarry, 2015). Out of this dissatisfaction emerge activists and other change agents who share a desire to promote their opinions and causes. Some activists are content with this and have no yearning to control and manage any subsequent changes that may occur as a consequence of their ideas and actions.

All do, however, set out to realise some individual need and aspiration but these, and other activist motivations have not been very well defined and supported (Jasper and McGarry, 2015). This represents a gap in academic knowledge and an opportunity for this research to contribute new knowledge about constituency activists' *existential being*.

Activism and volunteerism

Activism is part of a larger movement of social action and social change (Kende et al., 2017). This movement includes both activism and volunteerism and provides an individual with opportunities to enhance and develop an individual and political identity (Mele, 2000). Although activism and volunteerism are located within a broader category of social change, it is important to note that there is a difference between activism and volunteering. This difference offers some insight into the attitudes and approaches of the political activist, for example; the *reformist* activist and the reactionary activist (Hirschberger *et al.*, 2016); and the activist *agitator*, *planner*, and *organiser* (Battilana and Kimsey, 2017).

Activism is distinct from volunteerism in that volunteerism is recognised as helping and providing community services, whereas activism is change-oriented and involves social disruption (Kende, et al., 2017). Both social actions intend to achieve social change; where they separate is "in the interpretation of the situation and the perception of required action" (Kende, et al., 2017:276). For example, volunteerism contributes to social cohesion and service provision within traditional structures (Kende, et al., 2017) and can be viewed as a "helping system" (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995) involving brokerage between service users and the traditional systems. However, the contributions of volunteerism can become politicised (Kende, et al., 2017) when volunteerism becomes political in the "subjective experiences of engaged individuals" (Pavlova et al., 2021:15), and what Kende et al. (2017), describe "as an expression of political dissent" (2017:262). This demonstrates that activism and volunteerism can overlap in their objectives in achieving "social action for the benefit of other people" (Kende, et al., 2017:264). In contrast to volunteerism, Kende at al. (2017) find that activism employs more

radical, or “in-your-face” tactics (Cortese, 2015:217), to bring about social change objectives.

Defining the activist

Being an activist is not necessarily a good thing or a bad thing (Anderson and Herr, 2007) and there are a variety of ways that individuals demonstrate their activism and attachment to causes and shared concerns (Clark, 2000; Rodgers, 2010). Activism attracts individuals who want to find political solutions through a range of means and settings (Scarrow, 2007; Rodgers, 2010). This includes individuals whose interests range from their own biased interests, through to individuals who want to pursue even-handed agreement (Young, 2001).

Activism is politics made personal where protesting or commitment to a cause is a way of saying something about oneself and one’s values, and of finding meaning in them (Brown and Pickerill, 2009; Blomme and Bornebroek-Te Lintelo, 2012). Being a constituency activist communicates to others the activist’s specific interest in politics, including a preparedness to discuss those political interests with others (Norris, 2009; Rodgers, 2010). It is also a place to be creative and original (Yalom in Blomme and Bornebroek-Te Lintelo, 2012) and viewed as an investment in developing new relationships, building up goodwill and potentially enhancing the activist’s standing (Isin, 2009; Memoli and Vassallo, 2016).

Who participates in activism?

Although definitions of what an activist is and what they do vary, Cortese (2015) attempts to unpack three important types of activists and what they do: *Emphatics*, *Demarcators* and *Reconcilers*. *Emphatics* are ‘extraordinarily positive’ in how they define themselves, favouring and identifying with an “activist ideal-type” (2015:2017). They are leaders, setters of activism standards, and hugely dedicated to their cause. *Demarcators* rely on clear distinctions between “good activists” and “bad activists” (i.e., radical activists) to establish themselves as “good”. They understand that “everyday sites of talks and interaction” (2015:217) are valuable settings for activism to occur and as such, can often hold leadership positions within a political party. In comparison to *Emphatics* and *Demarcators* who are

central to the organisation itself, *Reconcilers* remain relatively peripheral; they may be new to the organisation, or they may “take a back seat, opting for a less-labor intensive role in order to focus on their personal lives that compete with the time necessary to their activism” (2015:217). It’s important to note, however, that even less labour-intensive or less frequent contributions are still viewed by individuals as activism, reinforcing that both the “doing” of activism and the derived political identity is a negotiated and reflective process. Overall, what is emphasised in Cortese’s (2015) study is understanding the activist through their own sense making of their activist experiences, the role and extent of their involvement, and the influence of personality in shaping their political identity.

In applying a broad definition of the purpose of constituency activism in which activists “aim to challenge or protect the status quo” (Stuart et al., 2018:247), there are two activist positions – the *reformist* and the *radical* (Atkinson, 2017:103) or *reactionary* (Hirschberger *et al.*, 2016) – that blend the activist’s activity and the activist’s objectives (Jasper and McGarry, 2015). Reformists use existing power structures as a basis upon which to change or reform legislation (Atkinson, 2017). The *reformist activist* seeks to change public policies and influence every-day politics and has collective, future-oriented concerns (Hirschberger *et al.*, 2016). Their activism includes actions to raise public awareness about issues such as sexual harassment, domestic violence, environmental and ecological issues in society, and may involve being part of a network of pressure groups aiming to challenge corporate and public policy (Jasper and McGarry, 2015). In contrast, there is the *radical* or *reactionary activist*, an often past-oriented activist, who strives to protect against collective victimisation (Hirschberger *et al.*, 2016) by “engag[ing] in militant tactics that might undermine authority figures” (Atkinson, 2017:103).

These two activists’ positions – or attitudes – of the *reformist* and *radical* not only “describe the worldviews of organizational members” (Atkinson, 2017:103), but also present openings for cognitive and social liberation to the individual activist. There is the potential for liberation through a deconstruction and reflection on the activist’s experiences and a ‘decentring’ of their existing personal values (Jasper and McGarry, 2015). This freedom to consider different aspects of their

experiences is similar to Paulo Freire's 'conscientization' or critical socio-political consciousness, where activists find themselves better informed in their praxis because their knowledge is grounded in their first-hand experiences (Freire, 1982).

The two broad activist attitudes are not the only 'labels' that academic research has sought to uncover. Existing research contains numerous activist 'types' or approaches, each of them seeking to add further insight into the nuances that delineate one type of activism from the next. For example, within the two broad activist attitudes of the *reactionary* and the *reformist*, there are three additional activist approaches identified by Battilana and Kimsey (2017), each of which involve the *doing* of activism: the actions individual activists say they have undertaken. Here, 'doing' means, at minimum, joining others to persuading people to vote for their party or to promote their cause. These 'doers' are individuals prepared to act in the public sphere and openly demonstrate their political interests and discuss their political views (Inglehart and Norris, 2003). These three activist approaches (Battilana and Kimsey, 2017) include:

1) the activist as *agitator*: a front-line activist bringing issues and grievances into the public arena. For their part, agitators use their skills to get their message across through emotion and appeals to reason in their activism. There is a link here to Cortese's (2105) *demarcator* activist with their clear sense of what makes them a 'good' activist and their rejection of 'radical' or 'bad' activism;
2) the activist as *planner and innovator*: an individual who offers potential solutions to grievances and issues. Planners and innovators start with the familiar and proven approaches for achieving change and then use their networks to gain views on potential new solutions to change live issues; and
3) the activist as *orchestrator and organiser*: someone scaling-up the innovator's plans and coordinating the inputs and monitoring activities of all others, then measuring the impact of the overall strategy.

Arguably, both the *reformist* and *radical/reactionary* undertaking is present in protest activism, also called "protest politics" (Rucht, 2007:720), which is a significant outlet for the individual activist, requiring varying levels of commitment

and energy on their part. Protest activism involves a range of petitioning actions on the part of the activist to influence policy makers and alert parliamentarians to, for example, their direct experiences of prejudice and inequality. Alongside others, protest activists assemble support for change (Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Rodgers, 2010). At a constituency level within Leeds City Region, this could manifest in the individual activist protesting by withdrawing their support for a housing development on the greenbelt or objecting to poor air quality levels in their area, or they could contribute to media campaigns that oppose local airport expansion plans.

Activism can also be a force in undermining human rights, such as attacking minorities and strengthening tyranny (Anderson and Herr, 2007; Rucht, 2007); for example, in forcing evictions and the use of police force against protestors during Rio 2016 Olympic Games (Talbot and Carter, 2017). Opposition and disruption through activism can therefore serve to forge new pathways in communications between stakeholders and raise the level of transparency in political and institutional decision-making (Young, 2001). It is also worth noting that the activist attitude for both the reactionary and reformist activist can be numbed by the guilt of not doing enough, or where the activist has to contain any displays of enjoyment in working with others' misfortune (Rodgers, 2010).

Being an activist presents intense encounters with others of a different ideology, intense relationships with fellow activists and intense reflective moments around lost campaigns, political leadership styles and policy directions. These subjective and emotional experiences are indicators of "a processual flux" (Gorodetsky and Barak, 2016:86), and contribute to the intensities of becoming and being an activist. The concept of intensity also extends to the degrees of political engagement and participation demonstrated by the activist during campaign participation (Bale et al., 2020). Low intensity participation is present where the individual is tweeting or retweeting a party-related message or displaying a poster on behalf of their candidate (Bale et al., 2020). Medium intensity activism includes posting leaflets through letterboxes and attending local branch and constituency association meetings (Bale et al., 2020). High intensity contributions include agreeing to stand for elective office as a local or national candidate or running a local party committee (Bale et al., 2020). These three intensity levels express different

commitments of time and effort, different skill and knowledge levels and different levels of responsibility and freedoms (Bale et al., 2020), and they are present across all activist positions and attitudes, as well as political identities.

The shaping of activists' political identities

Political activism can be a setting for the formation of a political identity (Mele, 2000; Cortese, 2015). As a force for change and political dissent (Kende et al., 2017), "activists can be defined as people who actively work toward social and political causes" (Curtin & McGarty, 2016 in Kende et al., 2017:264). Activists can also be viewed as social "movement actors" (Cortese, 2015:217).

Furthermore, individuals can self-identify as activists (Cortese, 2015), often through "catalytic moments" (Bale et al, 2020:15) that contribute to the formation of one's political identity. Indeed, an individual's political activism emerges from a "self-defined standpoint" (Collins 1998 in Mele, 2000:67; Cortese, 2015) in addition to capabilities that have been shaped by group and singular experiences of authority and power relations at different levels of society (Mele, 2000). Mele (2000) adds that becoming a political activist is primarily an individual achievement untethered to a "single dimension or social location" (2000:67). This individual perspective on activism presents an appropriate premise on which to explore an existentialist interpretation of political constituency activism and the actions of activists, as existentialism priorities the individual's freedom and responsibility (Sartre, 2003).

Activism as an expression of the "politicisation of social identity" (Biddau et al., 2016:154) is built on membership of social movements and political parties, and with that comes a sense of belonging. The politicised identity is reinforced in the intersection of political agency and engagement in the political culture of parties and community groups (Mele, 2000). This allows for the political identity to become a "life project of personal identity" (Biddau et al., 2016:159). This life project, and the catalytic moments experienced by individuals, have parallels with Sartre's (2003) *Fundamental Project*, whereby an individual makes something of who they are through their political engagement. During an activist's political

engagement there are opportunities for a review of their “self-centred life” (Bellah et al. in Mele, 2000:80) and other personal choices to arise out of their own self-reflections and collective acts (de la Sablonnière et al., 2013).

A politicised identity requires the individual to engage with critical reflections on the structural aspects of their citizenship, such as pathways to accessing public goods and services and various instruments of social justice and civil rights (Kende et al., 2017). These reviews, self-reflections and collective acts also involve considering the interests of others, and processing direct and indirect experiences of inequality and structural, economic and social barriers (Kende et al., 2017). A critical reflection of the political system can therefore lead to dissatisfaction, ultimately propelling the individual into political participation (Mele, 2000). What these moments, however small, share is that they expand the concept of politics for the individual to include issues such as social and economic (in)justice.

Additionally, the activist identity relies on the dynamic of collaboration, shared understanding, and collective action to secure social change (de la Sablonnière et al., 2013). Activists will mobilise the mechanisms of collective action to challenge both the large structural issues and the “incidental…suddenly imposed conditions” (de la Sablonnière et al., 2013:257) on society. It is from these acts of self-discovery – catalytic moments, dissatisfaction, collaboration, attention to others, collective action – that the activist standpoint emerges (Mele, 2000). Furthermore, these “cognitive, emotional and behavioural” (Speer and Hughey, 1995:734) experiences further cultivates the individual’s capacity for observation, reflection and action, and extends their understanding of the dimensions of their own political and social power.

Summarising definitions

These definitions and features of activism and the activist help inform this research as they offer an understanding of what activism entails and how activists form their political identities. This research, with its existential analysis of activism and the lived experiences of activists, contributes to a deeper understanding of constituency

activism beyond the existing definitions, and of the existing activists' and politicians' voices.

These definitions also give an indication of the locations of political activism: political parties, social movements, civic volunteering, and community-based activities. This is a reminder that activism is a complex, multi-faceted activity that spans these locations. This research is located within the traditional political party arena, but at the constituency level, and interviews both paid and voluntary constituency activists. As stated in the *Introduction*, the use of the term "constituency activist" refers to branch members of national and regional political parties, individuals standing on independent political manifestos, and locally elected councillors. The range of their constituency-based activities, though not exclusive to them, are illustrated by Dalton (2020) and include: discussing election issues with friends and family; undertaking work on behalf of their political party or candidate; attending association and constituency meetings; displaying a poster or wearing a party insignia; using a party's website and social media platforms; subscribing to party membership; and reading and discussing the party's manifesto. The constituency activists in this research all share individual experiences of the above election-centred political activism at a constituency level.

The role of political parties

Political parties are important for and to political participation (Webb, 2000). UK political parties are crucial instruments of democracy (Webb, 2000; Scarrow 2009; Fagerholm 2016) and have functional roles, for example, recruiting members and political candidates (Rye, 2015). Their ultimate objective, however, is to gain power (Rye, 2015). In the act of organising for political power, political parties mobilise and inform voters by "aggregating and articulating political interests" (Fagerholm, 2016:501) with the aim of gaining votes and electoral support to propel them to government. These political interests are filtered through ideology and economic preferences and formed into manifestos that are implemented through policy objectives (Fagerholm, 2016; Bale, et al., 2020).

Less than thirty years ago, political commentators and party campaign strategists across all mainstream parties in the UK were questioning the contributions made by

constituency activists to election outcomes (Johnston and Pattie, 1998). The view at the time was that electoral performance and success was attached to levels of campaign spending on the party's election candidate; constituency activists served to display posters, deliver leaflets and canvass voters on a heavily centralised and coordinated message (Johnston and Pattie, 1998; Lees-Marshment and Pettitt, 2014; Dalton 2020). In the mid-2000s, local campaigning and the contribution of local activists were beginning to be recognised as a keystone to local and national campaigns (Lees-Marshment and Pettitt, 2014; Dalton, 2020). Volunteer constituency activists were being prepared to function as door-to-door evangelists 'selling' the party message to influence voter turnout, increase their party's share of the vote (Pettitt, 2011; Lees-Marshment and Pettitt, 2014), and act as "informal contacts in its communities" (Scarrow, 2009:643).

This evolution of constituency activism into an essential component of constituency campaigning over the last 20 years, amounting to "a renaissance" of local campaigning according to Lees-Marshment and Pettitt (2014:250), was supported by a systematic approach to constituency activism that involved the organisation of pre-campaign activities; campaign workforce planning; tactical planning on the volume and frequency of literature to be distributed to target voters; and the use of digital media platforms (Johnston and Pattie, 1998). With this 'renaissance' came an emphasis on political parties duly coordinating their centralised support processes along the lines of operational and managerial processes and products. To illustrate the point, Webb (2000) observed that the Conservative Party "often seemed instinctively hierarchical" (Webb, 2000:192; Bale et al., 2020:96) and centralised in its operations, while the Labour Party intentionally extended its community-based work to accommodate and appeal to an "active and influential membership" (Webb, 2000:199). However, these centralised programmes were designed to prepare activists for constituency leadership positions in the main and provide opportunities for political parties to identify future candidates (Scarrow, 2009) and sometimes input into internal decision making. Arguably, despite strategies to integrate activists into the working practices and mechanisms of party politics, central and regional party organisers still viewed constituency activists as an "army" (Whiteley and Seyd, 2003) of assets and a resource to "increas[e] a party's vote" (Lees-Marshment and Pettitt, 2014:250) and to be incentivised.

Incentivising activists became important, though they still had to behave in a manner consistent with the incentives offered (Payne and Woshinsky, 1972; Lees-Marshment and Pettitt, 2014). However, it is difficult to separate organisational and party incentives from the motivations of individual party members, party supporters and activists (Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Jasper and McGarry, 2015).

Notwithstanding, there was a growing recognition that constituency activists had needs – emotional and intellectual (Barker, Martin and Zournazi, 2008) – and that their campaigning enjoyment came from, for example, opportunities for social interaction (Clark and Wilson, 1961; Lees-Marshment and Pettitt, 2014). To some extent this recalibrated the support offered to the constituency activist to include arrangements to care for an activist's subjective expectations, emotions and desires alongside their political policy interests (Barker, Martin and Zournazi, 2008; Callander, 2008). For example, there were calls to develop mechanisms for individual contributions on policy formation and political messaging (Lees-Marshment and Pettitt, 2014). This marks a turn away from addressing solely the needs of the political organisation towards including the needs and desires of individual activists, albeit a small one. However, the needs of the individual activist remained secondary to collective concerns, particularly if activists were "service-users" (Montenegro, 2018:620) and outsiders.

Given the influence of political party culture and the relationships of other activists, it is important to consider organisational power and individual empowerment and how party structures, organisational processes, and political participation effects the constituency activist.

Power in political parties

Organisational studies find that organisations "are conceived as political sites where various organisational actors and groups struggle to 'fix' meaning in ways that will serve their particular interests" (Mumby in Grant et al., 2004:237). Political parties are no different, and as part of their organisational culture, they are the site of political praxis (Mumby in Grant et al., 2004); a place of narratives that raise questions about relations of power, knowledge, ideology and identity.

Political parties are also the site of internal power struggles, and Rye (2015) offers a framework for analysing power in political parties. The framework presents five avenues of power to secure party goals: *individualistic power*, used to attain personal and political goals; *strategic power* that focuses on decision-making mechanisms that favour or supress voices and opinions; *administrative power* that directs individuals through rules and regulations; *constitutive power* that reinforces existing power structures and relationships within the party; and *disciplinary power* that tightly controls activities and behaviours of its membership and political messaging. These five conditions highlight the uneven relationship between a party's leadership and its members, the challenges of bureaucratic and fixed structures, and how individual agency can be manipulated by organisational culture, norms, rules and regulations.

Of these avenues of power, it is constitutive power that offers the most scope for individuals to explore their political identity and to reinforce their values and ideology through political participation and engagement with aspects of political party life, such as training and candidate opportunities. However, Rye (2015) suggests that constitutive power within political parties retains existing structures and relationships, and instils and maintains habits within its membership, for example through internal training programmes or attending party conferences (Rye, 2015). These constitutive devices promote what are regarded as 'common sense' habits, and as such, their purposes are rarely questioned (Rye, 2015). The use of constitutive power makes it difficult for the individual to counter existing relationships and structures within the party. This can slow down organisational change, but change can occur through individuals' coming to consciousness, for example, through changes in training programmes that allow for reflexive, participant-led activities (Rye, 2015). However, it could be argued that participant-led training merely reinforces existing party structures not through traditional means, but through "the actions of agents themselves" (Rye, 2015:1063).

Rye's (2015) framework offers a multi-layered approach to power. Whilst it is a valuable framework, what Rye (2015) highlights are organisational devices that contain the individual while at the same time outwardly projecting a structured, organised political party. In such a framework, it appears that the needs of

individuals members are secondary to the rules and norms of the organisation. The ‘power to’ is limited to individuals learning new skills, however this is within the confines of the needs of the party, reinforcing the notion of the member as a ‘follower’, not an active member. Arguably, all these five avenues to power perpetuate internal power imbalances and allow for control, discipline, or coercion – the ‘power over’ members by the party elites (Rye, 2015; White, 2016). Power can also be a positive force that enables individuals to exercise agency and become empowered – the ‘power to’ realise political goals (Rye, 2015).

Building on the notion of ‘power to’, individuals use political participation to *empower* themselves and those around them. It is inclusive and intended to reduce marginalisation and is a problem-solving activity that starts from the individual perspective (Peterson, 2014). The *power to/empowerment* notion also functions as a method for shaping the individual members’ responses to the expectations of their party’s leadership and the needs of the organisation (Speer and Hughey, 1995).

Incentivising activists and activism

Particular areas of academic research focus on incentivising individuals to engage with politics and the demand that parties have for members in order to reach their political goals (Clark and Wilson, 1961; Payne and Woshinsky, 1972; Gilliatt, 1987; Scott, 1989; Webb 2000; Miller and Krosnick, 2004; Gagné and Deci, 2005; Granik, 2005; Bénabou and Tirole, 2006; Berglund, Kleven and Ringdal, 2008; Ariely, Bracha and Meier, 2009; Ryan, 2009; Scarrow, 2009; Brown and Pickerill, 2009; Stadelmann-Steffen and Freitag, 2011; Norris, 2011; Bale et al., 2020). Incentives can be viewed as factors that increase the *supply* of members, and as such increase the supply of activist skills and resources to the party. From a political party perspective, parties have a clear *demand* for individuals to join and remain loyal to the party (Bale et al., 2020). The reasons for individuals to engage with activism range from passive to proactive conditions, and from needs-based internal drivers (e.g., anger and gratification) to external incentives (e.g., exclusive access) (Schlozman et al., 1995; Scarrow, 2009; Rodgers, 2010). Bale et al. (2020) offers a profile of party members in the UK. Broadly they are male; white; educated; older; financially better off; interested in politics; and believe they can

make some differences for the good, and therefore believe in their own political efficacy (Bale et al., 2020). Education levels are one of the best predictors of political engagement and participation, especially in those who have made successful use of higher education opportunities (Clark, 2000). This is important as it suggests that individuals with higher education experiences provide a ready supply of skills and possibly the financial means to support a political party if they can access opportunities and optimum incentives to engage and participate.

Incentives can be regarded as *supply-side* factors that emanate from the individual (Bale et al., 2020). Individuals join political parties for multiple reasons: their interest in an economic or cultural issue has been piqued in relation to a political message; “to express support for the party’s values” (2020:173); for vocational and career opportunities; to make friends; to “conform with the behaviour and expectations of personal contacts” (2020:78); to address ‘affective’ and altruistic motives; to get their party elected; and because they connect with the party’s leadership (2020). These could be perceived as material, social, and civic rewards (Schlozman et al., 1995); three types of *gratifications* that address individual interests and that are located in community and other collective settings. These three gratification types – forms of participation rewards – are: 1) personal and selective *material* benefits or self-interest gains, such as career progression; 2) *social* gratifications including the respect and recognition for joining collective actions; and 3) *civic* gratifications that include a sense of satisfaction and desire to contribute to a local and or national cause (Schlozman, et al., 1995). Schlozman et al. (1995) found that that there was a significant interest in civic gratification, a direct challenge to the rational choice perspective (Schlozman, et al., 1995; Clark, 2000) that “self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests” (Olsen 1965, in Clark, 2000:29). In addition to identifying a commitment to political engagement for civic reasons they also found that active citizens maintain an active interest in local politics (Inglehart and Norris, 2003) “to influence government policy” (Schlozman et al., 1995:31). Furthermore, individuals’ involvement in the collective planning and action of policies and priorities presents opportunities for them to experience a sense of achievement. The collective experience also offers a sense of group efficacy (Scarrow, 2009; Bale et al., 2020).

These motives or gratifications are individually diverse though some motives overlap to satisfy the demands of the party. For example, political parties offer individual members and supporters the opportunity to pursue ideological interests alongside like-minded individuals, and in return, an individual's participation in group activity increases their chances of securing party resources and a commitment to their preferred policies.

Parties want to win elections and gain power. To achieve this, they have a clear demand for loyal members and the skills and financial resources that members offer. These *demand-side* factors (Bale et al., 2020) present individuals with opportunities, choices and incentives offered by parties, for example "for education, recreation, and economic benefits such as access to insurance schemes" (Scarrow, 2009:637), and the social capital they are able to accumulate and trade (Stolle, 2009; Norris, 2009; Jasper and McGarry, 2015).

According to Bale et al. (2020), political parties recognise that "politics is local" (2020:177) and therefore requires the local input and support of members for local initiatives to achieve national goals. Research also shows that when individuals join parties, the party views the individual activist as an asset (Webb, 2000; Scarrow 2009; Bale et al., 2020) valued for their "human and financial resources… as well as the links into the community, and the legitimacy and the momentum they can bring" (Bale et al., 2020:192). Not only do they bring skills and financial resources, but as assets they also provide "a bit of bridge, a link, between [the MP] and the community" (Bale at al., 2020:166). As such, party members and activists serve as a local sounding board, as motivators for MPs and councillors, and as advice givers to their party.

Scarrow (2009) observes that members are at the 'heart' of political parties. Parties structure how they organise and support members, which involves offering material, solidary and purposive incentives, as first identified through the General Incentives Model (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992 in Bale et al., 2020). The General Incentives Model presents material, solidary, and purposive (Bale et al., 2020) incentives and opportunities spanning the needs of both the member and the collective. These incentives and opportunities are implemented using organisational mechanisms and strategies. These organisational needs are opportunities for

members and supporters to join their political club and to contribute to the political direction of the party. However, there is a trade-off in that “those who do commit must continue to be afforded particular rights and privileges” (2020:192).

Material incentives include pay and possible pathways to a political career (Clark and Wilson, 1961; Lees-Marshment and Pettitt, 2014). According to Jones (1996), political party activism has always been a training ground for public service and a site to find public service talent and political leadership. Party activism allows individuals the opportunity to have a career in politics and access to the training that may prepare the individual for some sort of political leadership. From a party perspective, once people are part of a community of activists, addressing the lack of training and responsibility offered to individuals can help encourage them to remain with the cause for longer (Lees-Marshment and Pettitt, 2014). In addition, activists have opportunities to practice their communication and listening skills, develop knowledge about planning and campaigning, and teamwork, and have access to resources about political trends not easily accessible to the layperson (Jasper and McGarry, 2015). These maintenance and task functions are some of the skills and knowledge to come out of political activism, as are critical thinking skills, that come from ‘doing’ activism and having exposure to a range of viewpoints and other lived experiences (Rowlands, 2008).

These material incentives is complemented by *solidary* (Bale et al., 2020) or “solidarity incentives” (Clark and Wilson, 1961:134) that offer individuals a sense of belonging, status, friendship and solidarity (Clark and Wilson, 1961; Jasper, 2011; Lees-Marshment and Pettitt, 2014; Bale et al., 2020). Activism therefore offers a ‘warm glow’ of involvement in something meaningful (Bale et al., 2020), as well as the chance to be part of a peer group or amongst like-minded individuals (Bale et al., 2020). Additionally, the political party group activity offers collective benefit incentives (Webb, 2000) leading to a desired, collective, positive outcome for vulnerable groups. This enhances a sense of group efficacy and a sense of shared experiences (Bale et al., 2020). Parties recognise that “the greater the demands of campaign activity, the more important material and solidary motivations become” (2020:113) and may structure activities to capitalise on these incentives and to encourage long-term commitment and loyalty to the party.

Additionally, there are "purposive incentives" (Clark and Wilson, 1961:135), which are more ideologically based and focus on meeting organisational needs (Clark and Wilson, 1961; Lees-Marshment and Pettitt, 2014). Individuals make emotional connections with the cause and a specific socio-political viewpoint, and purposive – also viewed as selective incentives by Webb (2000) – incentives allow the individual to take part in official processes to influence policy, and to promote specific political interests to support the goals of the party and achieve personal political goals (Bale et al., 2020).

However, members' contributions are carefully managed. Although members are used to spread the message of the party, the message is crafted and shared from a centralised campaign office (Denver *et al.*, 2003). Parties see the individual activist as part of the collective with behaviours to be tightly managed. Parties are concerned with their image and messages communicated by party members and control their behaviour to increase the impact of a party's political reach.

There are, however, costs and barriers to individuals participating in activism. This includes time available to individuals, and the resources needed for networking that are available to some individuals and unavailable to others. It also includes 'constrained alternatives' that prevent some individuals registering their support for, or opposition to, social and political policies (Young, 2001). Constraints manifest in a variety of ways. In addition to individuals being challenged by the logistics (e.g., organisation and timetabling issues) and location of activism settings and arrangements (Young, 2001), there is also the potential for them to experience participation fatigue and over exposure to their social and political issues (Clark, 2000; Chen and Gorski, 2015). What the range of barriers highlight are that entry to activism is not free of friction or barriers, that individuals weigh up the pros and cons of party membership throughout their political participation, and that joining a party is more than a financial or social calculation.

Summarising incentives

Joining a political party is primarily an individual choice that may have been shaped by family habits, community conditions, employment and educational experiences and emotional events (Bale, et al., 2020). However, the political party

and member relationship starts with the member, whereas the incentives and opportunities offered by parties are largely strategic or managerial strategies relating to the ‘doing’ of activism; focussing on extrinsic motivations. They use actions designed to meet organisational objectives and outcomes such as constituency campaigning (Degli Antoni, 2009; Finkelstien, 2009), and as such follow in the tradition of analysing political party membership (Scarrow, 2009; Bale et al., 2020) and cause-related activities and activism (Schussman and Soule, 2005), and less so the needs and motivations of the individual activist. This external and organisation focus on the undertaking of activism further reinforces the need for a deeper understanding of the underlying motivations of the constituency activist. Self-determination theory offers us some insight by showing us that “competence, autonomy and relatedness” (Ryan and Deci, 2000:68) are important underlying psychological needs. However, intrinsic motivations – our deeper needs and desires – are often not obvious and are innate, for example, achieving satisfaction and joy from a task.

Webb (2000) finds that selective and altruistic incentives are central to activism and support the reasons people give for their activism. As a result, research focuses on how best the political party can incentivise the individual to become part of the party so as to extend the party’s voice and ‘market’ it into local areas (Lees-Marshment and Quayle, 2001; Pettitt, 2011). Furthermore, the General Incentives Model (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992 in Bale et al., 2020) explores activism through material, solidary, and purposive incentives. However, the model presents a somewhat contrived separation between the individual’s needs and the party’s needs. As such, the General Incentives Model can be viewed in terms of supply and demand factors (Bale et al., 2020): what pushes people into political participation are the need to contribute (e.g. altruist needs), and what pulls them into political participation is the promise of what a party can give them (e.g. a sense of purpose, belonging, achievement and a voice). This contrasts with this research, which aims to reveal the existential motives, desires and concepts that underpin individual activists’ engagement with local constituency politics.

Empowerment

Overall, individuals respect the purpose of rules and customs (Rye, 2015). As Rye (2015) also observes, power can provide “a sense of empowerment” (2015:1064) and purpose for the party member, enabling individuals to experience a sense of belonging or feel part of a cause (Perkins, 2010). However, organisational customs and rules to encourage loyalty and reduce conflict can also become barriers to participation and empowerment (Speer and Hughey, 1995). Empowerment, like power, can control as well as enhance individuals, communities, and organisations (Zimmerman, 1995).

Empowerment is a process for gaining understanding and control over issues that concern individuals, communities, and organisations, and provides associated quality of life outcomes (Zimmerman, 1995). Empowerment can be thought of and experienced as life and outlook-changing, serving as the catalyst for the individual to applying, for example, their civic knowledge to undertake political leadership. As such, empowerment can lead to a deeper sense of being political in the world. The purpose of empowerment in the political setting is to become effective leaders and decision-makers (Perkins, 2010).

Empowerment is a multi-level construct where the three individual empowerment components of intrapersonal, behavioural and interactional factors act as interdependent indicators of individual empowerment (Zimmerman, 1995). The *intrapersonal* component is concerned with how people feel about themselves and their abilities to exercise control in different socio-political contexts. The *behavioural* component considers individual actions that influence one’s “social and political environment through participation in community organizations and activities” (Zimmerman et al., 1992:708). The *interactional* component is more social than the other components in that it is concerned with the development of decision-making and problem-solving skills, so that members are aware of their community and the resources needed to achieve the individual’s civic and political goals. This last component would also demand self-awareness and critical thinking skills of the individual.

Although Zimmerman's (1995) three components address individual analyses, empowerment can also occur on organisational and community levels (Speer and Hughey, 1995; Perkins, 2010), where participation and collective action, and decision-making are features. In the context of collective action, empowerment allows party members to mobilise their skills, develop networks, build coalitions with those who share their values (Perkins, 2010) and actively engage with a variety of roles within their party (Speer and Hughey, 1995). Zimmerman (1995) argues that effective empowerment in community and organisational settings is achieved when the needs of all members is considered, and individuals are treated as co-equal in the pursuit of community and organisational objectives. This leads to an individual belief and collective confidence – personal and collective efficacy – that those involved can contribute to, and together achieve, a desired change (Zimmerman, 1995) and create social power (Speer and Hughey, 1995).

To create social power, it is important for political parties to understand that empowerment is both a *process* and an *outcome* (Speer and Hughey, 1995; Perkins, 2010). Both these empowerment features are experienced by the individual in the dynamics of their group identity and in their organising actions within the organisation (Speer and Hughey, 1995).

Empowering experiences as a *process* are present and available in a range of formats to members of community groups and political parties (Rye, 2015; Bale et al., 2020), for example, in members' active engagement in organisational tasks and opportunities for training and gaining new skills. In the process of engagement, the member sets themselves goals and objectives, for example, to learn about canvassing or fundraising, and join a certain number of canvassing or fundraising events over a set period. In undertaking these commitments alongside others, the individual is taking the opportunity to control their own learning, development and destiny, and experience a sense of achievement in meeting their goals and objectives (Zimmerman, 1995). There is an established two-way, cyclical relationship here between the member and the party that enhances power and empowerment for both agents: members' engagement in organised party activities contributes to the party's political power; and the party's training and career

opportunities, as well as opportunities for 'action-reflection', empower the individual to become more politically aware (Speer and Hughey, 1995).

Empowerment *outcomes* involve an individual realisation that one has "mastery over issues of concern to them" (Zimmerman, 1995:581). Empowering outcomes result in strengthened relationships, loyalty, and trust amongst party members (Speer and Hughey, 1995). Political parties can aid empowerment by creating spaces for reflection and debate, creating specialised roles for members, and organising collective action (Speer and Hughey, 1995). The foundation of both individual and organisational empowerment is active participation, freedom to engage and mutual respect; qualities that are crucial to "real-world empowering processes" (Perkins, 2010:217) and "access to, and control over, important decisions and resources" (2010:207). However, as Perkins (2010) suggests, these qualities can prove difficult to sustain in political movements and require clear and effective support through organisational and political leadership.

Constituency activist motivations

Political ambition

Scarrow (2009) writes that most political parties' source their local and national candidates from their own membership pool. Furthermore, an effective party membership structure contributes to political stability at both national and local levels (Scarrow, 2009). Stability at a local level is important for attracting and maintaining "active, enthusiastic party members and supporters" (2009:7). It is because of their influence on political processes and outcomes, Scarrow (2009) comments, that it is important to form a picture of the people who join parties and consider what motivates them in their desire to influence political outcomes. Allen and Cutts (2018) takes up this challenge by framing individual political motivation as political ambition. Their (2018) study looks at the political ambitions and personality traits of those who come from the general British population and may find themselves involved as local and national candidates at some point in the future. Here political ambition is viewed as a predictor of an interest in a party's candidates programme and as a driver to compete for political office.

These political ambitions can be understood through a variety of demographic and social and economic categories. A key finding was that "having parents who are active in politics during individuals' political socialisation makes a difference to the political ambitions of their offspring" (Allen and Cutts, 2018:77). There is evidence to support this in the life stories and biographies of high-profile politicians that early exposure via family ties to political campaigning acts as a form of political socialisation.

Of greater significance was that trust and "faith in politics and politicians [is] a prerequisite for expressing political ambition" (2018:79), with low levels of trust and faith in politicians' intentions deterring individuals from applying for positions in political office. Furthermore, individuals displaying ambition for political office were more likely to be more open to different experiences, more extravert, and more emotionally stable. A further distinction exists between the ambitious and less ambitious in that those with an ambition to enter politics "are not necessarily the kindest or the most sympathetic of people" (2018:78-79). Less politically ambitious individuals, however, were more agreeable and conscientious; traits that did not lend themselves to the political arena of "conflicting ideas, suggestions, and solutions" (2018:78).

Allen and Cutts (2018) find "overall, it is clear that the politically ambitious in Britain are unlike their fellow citizens in many important and politically salient ways" (2018:80). They find that the political ambitious are predominately university educated, well paid, upper class, white men who live in the London and the South and whose parents were politically active. More specifically, "a highly-educated relatively young man from social grade ABC1 is more likely to be politically ambitious than any other kind of person" (2018:76). Of those involved in the Allen and Cutts' (2018) study: men were twice as likely to have considered running than women; there was a small difference in the political ambitions of white and non-white respondents, though respondents of mixed heritage were far more likely to report higher levels of ambition than those with South Asian heritage. On the theme of education experiences as an entry point into politics, university educated people were twice as likely to run for political office than secondary educated, and three time more likely than those who reported an

unfinished secondary education. This does not mean that individuals from ethnic minority groups and women are lacking political ambition; however, it does indicate that there are inequities in the political system and in the political party environment. These inequities maintain conditions that favour some individuals and hinder others in their engagement with politics. Indeed, Allen and Cutts, (2018) confirmed an ongoing marginalisation of the working class and a further professionalisation of politics. They comment that local and national political life needs to be far more inclusive for the benefit of the voting population and all political parties, and this should proceed with a review of political parties' candidate recruitment practices to closer reflect the demographic and socioeconomic profile of the British population.

Commitment to ideology and ethos

Activists are likely to be motivated by ideology (Scarrow, 2009). Individual activists do deliberate over the shape and form of their activism (Nolas et al., 2016) and find their direction of travel informed by their moral convictions and threats to their values and beliefs (Kende et al., 2017). In writing about the impact of new social movements on left-wing political activism, Jones (1996) notes that members and activists alike generally remain loyal to their party and broadly share the party's values (Bale et al., 2020). There is, however, a reformation of their political doctrines; a strengthening of allegiance to party ideology at one end, and a fresh support for pragmatic politics at the other end. In left-wing political activism this shows in a more pronounced schism between those who support social and economic intervention and those committed to a 'looser ethical socialism' (Jones, 1996:530). Chamberlayne, (1978) provides a similar version of an ideology/ethos separation framework at city politics level. The ideology/ethos split is represented in this framework by a 'representative-mechanistic' emphasis at one end and a 'participatory-organic' emphasis at the other end (1978:66).

Within the divisions of 'ideology' and 'ethos', activists share common ground in that "they want to attain some goal" (Jones 1996:530). For those at the ideology end of the continuum, the motivation for their activism lies in their commitment to the needs of others and a preparedness for conflict in the process, what Jones (1996) calls "purposive-generalised goals" (1996:517). For those at the ethos end of

the continuum, their motives are to unify others around party involvement, and experience at the individual level the "benefits of collective involvement and status" (1996:516). It is important to remember that Jones (1996) is presenting two complex concepts in a format that allows him to emphasise difference. Indeed, many activists may not agree with Jones's (1996) categories and locate themselves between both concepts with some detailed caveats. One such important caveat is the party itself: a party's allegiance to their ideological foundations and manifesto commitments can make political parties inflexible. This inflexibility can also exist internally, in terms of "structures, practices, procedures, resources, roles, identities, analyses, directives and so on" (Nunes, 2021:15). This inflexibility presents problems as political parties need to respond to their political and membership environment and adapt accordingly, for example, in supporting local structures and developing the skills of local members. A further factor that may affect ideological motivations are what Clark and Wilson (in Bale et al., 2020:109) term "purposive incentives", such as working towards a common ideological goal. However, commitment to ideology and the needs of others alone may not be enough to inspire active participation, leading to minimal participation.

It is worth noting that Jones (1996) finds party activists (active party members) to be more extreme in their ideology than their parliamentary representatives and Scarrow (2009) too states that parliamentary representatives are in step with the wider electorate in being less radical than their active party members. Webb (2000) suggests that one reason for this disparity is a tension in party roles; where parliamentary representatives look outside their parties to maximise election votes, and party activists look inside their parties to test their authority and make sense of the levers of power open to them to exploit party policy and influence party leadership. These differences may contribute to an ideological incongruence between party members, parliamentary elites and the electorate, and is referred to as May's (Special) Law of Curvilinear Disparity (Norris 1995:30; Scarrow, 2009:9; Webb, 2010:210; Bale et al., 2020:86). There are, however, some opposition to this in Norris's (1995) observations on what she terms "intra-party ideological conflicts" (1995:30). Norris (1995) finds that party members may be more radical than their party voters, but it is clearly their MPs and party elites who present as the

most ideologically radical. Norris's (1995) perspective is supported by Bale et al. (2020) who write that "so-called activists" (2020:17) are no more radical than their current parliamentary representatives, or those they support to get into parliament. They acknowledge that party activists and volunteers may be passionate about their politics, but no more so than their parliamentary representatives (Bale et al., 2020). Bale, et al., (2020) also observe that there is evidence of political parties extending member rights and organisational access (for example, opportunities to participate in candidate and leadership selection) to grassroots members to blunt the actions of their "radical activists" (2020:87) and to overcome internal opposition presented by unmanageable parliamentarians (2020).

Communal and shared experiences of constituency activism

Activism provides opportunities for individuals to participate in communal and shared experiences and engage in the main, though not always, with like-minded people to pursue shared projects (Permut, 2016; Levy, 2020). These shared projects and concrete experiences often require an emotional investment on the part of the activist (Chen and Gorski, 2015; Gorski and Chen, 2015) and can lead to existential social friendships that form "a solid, long-term bond between individuals" (Dreher, 2009:404). An existential friendship is one where the quality and dynamic of the relationship between individual activists encourages the development of an individual's self, as well as encouraging them to show otherwise undisclosed dimensions of thinking, attitudes, values and actions. For the individual(s) involved, this could be viewed as an event uncovering their authentic self "and perhaps a second self" (2009:406). These relationships involve reciprocity and communication that serve to enhance dialogue between activists, solidify individual values – including beliefs that may favour some and prejudice others – and include tactics and acts that disrupt (Talisse, 2005).

Activism can be undertaken in isolation and involve infrequent contact with other activists. However, we tend to view activism as a collective activity, offering mutual support and shared emotional events, in the pursuit of individual and common objectives. Together, these features interrelate to create a "psychological sense of community" (Permut, 2016). For the activist this sense of community presents opportunities for belonging and influence, comradeship and solidarity,

participation and meaning (2016). Additionally, the sense of community translates into a shared social identity and culture that is recognised by individual activists (2016). The sharing of identity (Friedman and McAdam, 1992) and culture can also offer a feeling of safety and efficacy to individual activists and transfer into other aspects of the individual's lived experiences.

Tension in communal constituency activism

However, social identification with others in activism is also tension prone. For some individuals, identifying with and advocating for the ignored, voiceless and disadvantaged can bring tensions and anxiety with whom they share similar grievances (Stuart et al., 2018). An example of this tension and anxiety is found in my own experiences of working with community groups whereby there are diverging views on campaigning preferences expressed by individual activists within those groups, which creates tension on how to bring about change. Arguably, the moral conviction of some activists may bring them to the conclusion that a campaigning strategy needs to be more aggressive ("we need to fight dirty"), more public ("we need to get media coverage") and better resourced ("we need more money from regional office"), than do others in their activist community.

Activists often function at emotional and adversarial high energy levels, and some attach themselves to group cultures that expect undeclared levels of selflessness within minimally resourced pastoral and caring arrangements (Clark, 2000; Chen and Gorski, 2015). For example, Clark (2000) observes how an overwhelming sense of duty in activist organisations and networks, including constituency activism, distracts the activist from giving full attention to their own health and wellbeing. Over time this leads to high staff and volunteer turnover in some of these organisations and networks. Additionally, Rodgers (2010) comments on how the emotional strain of a culture of selflessness can contribute over time to non-participation. A promise to uphold a cause or to challenge an oppression can therefore also be a place of tension for the individual activist. Their overcommitment and selflessness, when left unsupported, can turn to a sense of guilt and martyrdom (Clark, 2000; Levy, 2020).

In activism, a threat to an individual's convictions and values will tempt some to withdraw their support for their cause and activist community. However, for other

individuals the anxiety of threat will encourage a re-evaluation of their activism and campaigning contributions (Miller and Krosnick, 2004). In a study into ‘goal oriented’ activism (Miller and Krosnick, 2004), threats to an activist community’s material interests, such as securing financial and investment resources for education and health services, showed that the community was able to raise more financial support on the back of a threat to their goal. Notwithstanding, it was noted that the financial dividend faded when the activist community failed to set a new campaign direction in good time and activists displayed “threat fatigue” (2004:515). There was also evidence of the “social loafing effect” (2004:510) or “free [riding] on the efforts of others” (Schlozman et al., 1995:2) where some individual activists will intentionally make less effort as they see more of their activist community working towards the same goals.

Altruism

Altruism is a feature of constituency activism, whereby one endeavours to protect the vulnerable and improve society (Yalom in Blomme and Bornebroek-Te Lintelo, 2012). The link to altruism and philanthropy is strong, with much research focusing on the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of ‘giving’ time and money to causes. A systematic review of charitable giving research by Bekkers and Wiepking (2011) presents eight philanthropic predictors, spanning the internal and external incentives, as to why people donate money to their causes, with the caveat that the predictors are “rather broad and multi-dimensional” (Bekkers and Wiepking, 2011: 928). These reasons are: 1) their awareness of a need for support, whether they are “tangible as well as intangible” (2011:929); 2) solicitation, for example, a ‘call to action’ by a charity; 3) financial costs and benefits (for example, exclusive access to certain people) to the individual; 4) opportunities for altruism; 5) reputational reasons that encourage “recognition and approval from others” (2011:937); 6) psychological benefits, such as a ‘warm glow’ (Andreoni, 1990) effect that counter negative feelings such as guilt, and act as a catharsis; 7) values that are in line with an organisation’s values; and 8) efficacy, which individuals believe can be seen through endorsement of an organisation by the strength of others’ financial contributions.

The multi-dimensional aspect of these predictors of philanthropic giving are useful in that they serve to highlight the complexities and combinations of how people choose to engage with the act of giving. These categories provide interesting background for this research, as arguably they could be viewed as a broader indication of 'giving' that encompasses one's time and engagement with local constituency activism.

In addition to the motivator of altruism, Jones (1996) also reports that for activists "there are immediate personal material gains: money, gifts, favours" (1996:516), countering the altruism incentive somewhat. For Saito (2015) individuals acting altruistically and feeling the 'warm-glow' of being recognised for their actions is acceptable and conventional; a type of altruism that Katz and Malul (2015) believe is based on individuals being concerned about the well-being of others; a "pure" altruism (Andreoni, 1990:464). However, Saito (2015) and Katz and Malul (2015) acknowledge that some individuals make a conscious decision to move away from meeting the needs of others to meeting the needs of themselves that includes adulation and status (Payne and Woshinsky, 1972). This is considered "impure" altruism; the act of giving over to the temptation to perform selfishly (Katz and Malul, 2015:2757; Saito, 2015). Saito (2015) also brings into focus additional motivational dimensions to altruism, such as the influence of pride, shame and temptation in justifying an activist's actions (Bénabou and Tirole, 2006).

Volunteering as a form of altruism presents further insight in the motivations of constituency activists. In writing about giving voluntary contributions Katz and Malul (2015) find that some individuals give unconditionally, not for benefits to themselves and a return on their resources, but as a demonstration of their "values or beliefs" (2015:2757).

Clark (2000) also considers these unselfish actions firstly in the context of "the structural limits of individual action" (2000:30), and secondly, as a consequence of the participatory environment and the strength and nuances of a relationship-based culture found in a wide range of social and political networks. Even though acts of altruism, volunteering and donating to charity provide feelings of self-satisfaction and personal motivation, the acts remain focused on improving the activist's social standing and social capital (Katz and Malul, 2015). However, these acts are also

subject to misinterpretation as they may be undertaken for selfish reasons (Bénabou and Tirole, 2006). In existentialism, this would be interpreted as being in bad faith (Sartre, 2003).

Viewing activism through an existentialist lens

Experiencing anxiety

Anxiety – a key existential concept (Sartre, 2003; Solomon, 2005) – appears to the activist in the refining of their ethos and in the sharpening their ideology, often leading to a conflict of loyalty and a loss of authenticity (Jones, 1996). Jones (1996) writes that "the dichotomy between ideology and ethos should not be exaggerated" (1996:517). However, Jones also notes that the political doctrine of the centre (e.g., party HQ) will eventually overshadow the spirit and process of local activism and aspirations. The activist's anxiety and the 'surreptitious symbiosis' relationship with their constituency and party collude to either continue with activism and politics as usual, or lead to an outright rejection of the way things have been done. A rejection may include a rebuff of the party and an undermining of its strategy for addressing "structurally determined class politics" (Jones, 1996:511), or lead the activist to move out of party-political activism into single-issue activism, for example, environmental activism. For Jones (1996) any rejection and exit from the process of activism is an erosion of socio-political unity (1996).

Introspection and self-knowledge

Engaged activists can access a level of self-knowledge and awareness, leading to self-actualisation (Yalom in Blomme and Bornebroek-Te Lintelo, 2012) and an 'introspective gaze' that opens up an internal dialogue between the subjective and objective self (Rowlands, 2008). The internal dialogue leads to an exploration of all the opportunities to participate in life (Blomme and Bornebroek-Te Lintelo, 2012). However, having an appreciation of others' perspectives and experiences is not enough; the new understanding also requires a level of objectivity for knowledge to be worthwhile in the context of their activism (Rowlands, 2008). Rowlands (2008) offers a first-person perspective on experience and how introspection prepares the

individual to access a level of self-knowledge and awareness that opens up an internal dialogue between the subjective and objective self, a consciousness "from the inside" (2008:288). In addition to gaining political knowledge through activist experiences, an "introspective gaze" (2008:283) directs the individual activist "towards objects other than itself" (2008:287). This awareness involves a growing and expansive compassion and empathy on the part of the activist towards others, and a closer alignment with the activities and politics of their constituency and party.

Constituency activism is what people do, and it presents as a place of belonging, identity, struggle and resistance (Isin, 2009; Brown and Pickerill, 2009). It includes the potential for sentiment and emotion attached to campaigning successes and failures (Ingelhart and Norris, 2003; Brown and Pickerill, 2009). A sense of political constituency defeat or victory is filled with the potential for intense emotions (Groenendyk, 2011) and loyalty to the extent that activists can experience "feelings-in-common" (Ahmed, 2004:27). Such feelings emerge in an emotional atmosphere (Anderson 2009) where activist "think like individuals and feel like a group" (Groenendyk, 2011:456).

Chapter summary

In this chapter I have defined activism in this research as encompassing the traditional, civic and protest forms of activism (Ingelhart and Norris, 2003; Brown and Pickerill, 2009; Theocharis and van Deth, 2018) In doing so, this research allows for the inclusion of different types of activists, such as reconcilers, reactionaries, reformists (Cortese, 2015; Hirschberger *et al.*, 2016; Stuart *et al.,* 2018), and for different activist attitudes (Battilana and Kimsey, 2017). Additionally, I have highlighted how activism, in shaping the activists' political identity (Cortese, 2015; Bale *et al.,* 2020) can encompass collective membership (Permut, 2016; Levy, 2020), mutual support activities (Isin, 2009; Dreher, 2010; Chen and Gorski, 2015; Memoli and Vassallo, 2016), shared emotional events (Ahmed, 2004; Groenendyk, 2011), and the pursuit of individual ambitions, needs and common objectives (Permut, 2016; Allen and Cutts, 2018). Furthermore, in seeking to understand the motivations of activists, existing research views the

motivations of individuals as being altruistic (Jones, 1996; Saito, 2015; Katz and Malul, 2015), and as displaying their commitment to ideology and ethos (Jones, 1996). Existing research therefore undoubtably contributes much to a broader understanding of the important phenomenon of constituency activism.

Through the influence of political parties, prior research also views political activism motivations as “extrinsic rewards rather than intrinsic motivations” (Elad-Strenger, 2016:49); indeed, it is a dominant viewpoint where people are motivated by external incentives to become politically active, and where individual activists are viewed as assets to be exploited by political parties (Webb, 2000; Scarrow 2009; Bale et al., 2020). However, these incentives do not offer us the complete picture of the lived experiences of local constituency activists, nor their existential needs. Additionally, the narratives of political memoirs written by high profile politicians present their political engagement as stemming from their sense of duty to family (Frank, 2001), their public service ethos (Johnson and Riley-Smith, 2014; Prince, 2015), or linked to their beliefs or values (Heath 1998; Straw, 2012).

Prior research fails to fully explain some of the deeper and unstated philosophical and existential drivers behind an activist’s actions and gestures towards their political community and others. This research therefore seeks to identify what, if any, are the “needs or compulsions that the individual constantly carries around” in themselves (Payne and Woshinsky, 1972:520) that have motivated them to engage in constituency activism.

This research differs from previous studies, principally by examining the existential experiences that prompted and shaped the political engagement of 26 constituency activists. It does this by identifying the existential experiences, including a range of life events and decision points that impact on an individual’s political beliefs, desires and activist actions. This study engages with the existential sources of the drivers and gestures displayed in constituency activists’ actions. The term ‘gesture’ is borrowed from the culture and arts discipline and used here because it represents “a means of expressing the emotional state of a person” (Voronovskaya, 2020:420) as they create structure and communications in their relationship with others. The notion of gesture sits easily alongside existentialism because it is part of a person in the practice of their silent communications and bodily speech to others and their

environment (Beith, 2015; Voronovskaya, 2020). In addition, a 'gesture' often precedes a social and public deed (Voronovskaya, 2020).

There is a scarcity of research that has engaged with the influences of existential experiences on the motivations of constituency activists. There is therefore a place for research that is attentive to the lived experiences of activists shaped by their own concerns for what is means to *be* in the world through their constituency activism, and how existential themes such as *freedom*, *choice* and *responsibility* influence their approach to local constituency activism. This research will therefore apply a Sartrean existential lens to examine the political engagement of constituency activists. Sartre's existential philosophy of freedom can teach us much about an individual's motivations for becoming politically active. Furthermore, this research will go beyond the dominant experiences of high-profile politicians who write about a 'higher calling', as well as going beyond what we already understand about individual motivations of ambition, altruism and alignment to political ideologies and values, and the influence of political parties in empowering the individual activist. By viewing constituency activism through the lens of Sartrean existentialism, we are able to use key existential concepts to better understand why individuals have chosen to become politically active and identify what sustains them in their activism beyond extrinsic and party-led motivations. In applying Sartrean existential philosophy to examining and making sense of the lived experiences of constituency activists, this research will also be contributing to a clear gap in knowledge.

Chapter 2: Existentialism

Introduction

As stated in the previous chapter, existing research on activism focuses on who participates in activism (Clark, 2000; Ingelhart and Norris, 2003; Scarrow, 2009; Norris, 2011; Cortese, 2015; Jasper and McGarry, 2015), as well as motivations such as altruism (Payne and Woshinsky, 1972; Andreoni, 1990; Katz and Malul, 2015; Saito, 2015), commitment to ideology and ethos (Chamberlayne, 1978; Jones, 1996; Scarrow, 2009), and incentives derived and used by political parties to encourage individuals to join their cause (Clark and Wilson, 1961; Denver *et al.*, 2003; Pettitt, 2011). As such, this has resulted in an incomplete picture of the motivations of political activists, and specifically, what sustains their political activism. The closest we have to examining the inner sensemaking of constituency political activism is through examining ideas of public service ethos and the frictions within that (Rowlands, 2008). This study takes the idea of an inner sensemaking one step further by using a Sartrean existentialist perspective to examine the motivations and desires of political activists. Flynn (1975, 2006) writes that existentialism deliberately confronts the individual to reflect on their outlook towards oppression and exploitation in the world and the choices they make to engage with such conditions.

In this chapter, I examine the concepts within existentialism that lend themselves to examining the lived experience of constituency activists and their motivations. This chapter begins with an overview of three existential waves, followed by specific concepts – especially of the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre – that are particularly relevant to this research. The chapter concludes by summarising what existentialism can contribute to understanding the lived experiences of constituency activists.

Existentialism

Existentialism as a philosophical discipline is a member of the continental tradition of philosophy (Langiulli, 1997). As a branch of continental philosophy, existentialism is concerned with the aims and purposes of human existence and

what it means to exist as a human (Cerbone, 2015). To exist as a human in existential terms is to be self-aware and commit to life, and to apply one's talents to uncover one's possibilities and passions (Solomon, 2005; Flynn, 2006; Cerbone, 2015). As a philosophical movement, existentialism stresses individuality and personal responsibility. An existential exploration starts with the recognition that an individual is in the world engaging, and has a personal and explicit interest in the world, which is to define themselves (Sartre, 1946; Solomon, 2005; Bernasconi, 2006; Gardner, 2009; Cerbone, 2015): "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism" (Sartre in Langiulli, 1997:395). Subsequently, an individual's engagement with people and objects reveals their values and views and how they exist in the world.

Existentialism is intent on *theorising* how individuals engage with their world (Flynn, 2006). Specifically, how confident and creative they are in meeting their responsibilities and applying their freedoms in response to happenstance and its accompanying obligations. For Heidegger it is in these 'existential conditions', having been thrown into the world and *abandoned*, that the individual exists in their being, what Heidegger calls *Dasein* (Cooper, 1996; Solomon, 2005). It is in their 'being' as *Dasein* where the individual finds their authentic existence (Solomon, 2005). Arguably, there is a connection here between existentialism and activism, where activists may be engaging with politics to find their authentic selves. As Andrews (1992, in Clark 2000) states that "activism is not merely something which the respondents do, or even a part of them. It is them. During their long, accumulated years of engagement they have come to define themselves through their activism" (Clark, 2000:27). In existentialism, "if man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself" (Solomon, 2005:207; Sartre, 1946).

Furthermore, the term 'responsibility' in existentialism is used to convey an expectant condition full of potential, and anticipation. Additionally, the term 'freedom', while retaining its connection to free will and choice, corresponds to an existential sensation of 'fear' and 'anxiety' in the individual as they respond to abandonment (Sartre, 2003; Heidegger in Solomon, 2005). These are emotions and

passions that recur when an individual recognises and experiences an inability to define themselves as a consequence of unhindered unsupported freedom. Broadly, defining oneself lies at the heart of existential thought, and this is aided by the *existential attitude.* For Tillich (1952, in Solomon, 2005) an 'existential attitude' is one of involvement and participating in a situation:

> *"It is the attitude not of the detached spectator, but of the actor who must face the future and make personal decisions." (Tillich, 1944:62)*

Existentialists are not looking to verify the world; they are in the world engaging not merely as a physical entity, but as an assembly of actions and interactions. Mary Warnock notes in her forward to Sartre's (2003) *Being and Nothingness* that some existentialists are anti-cartesian (they do not believe the mind and body are separate) because they engage from a place of consciousness, an 'impure' consciousness shaped by what is in the world (Warnock, 1965; Sartre, 2003). Furthermore, existentialism looks beyond a regulated world and expresses individual experiences of meaning and purpose in subjective ways (Cerbone, 2015; Fondane 2016).

Historical overview – three waves of existentialism

This section sets out the development of the existential philosophical movement through a review of the writings of some of the foremost existential writers of the 19th and 20th centuries. This includes the early existential themes of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, the phenomenology of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, the feminist writings of de Beauvoir, and the essays of Sartre and Camus. Many of these philosophers and writers would neither recognise themselves as part of a movement, nor welcome the label *existentialist* (Solomon, 2005; Flynn, 2006; Kaufmann, 2016). Notwithstanding, their writings and contributions to their fields of study have become recognised as providing context and intellectual content for ongoing discussions and developments in *existentialism*. This review takes the form of a summary of the historical development of existentialism in three waves, what I have labelled – the ecclesiastical, the political and the neuroscientific waves.

Caruso and Flanagan (2017) distinguish between three waves of existentialism. Their use of the term ‘wave’ is used here to communicate the vitality of each era of existentialism and draws an image of turbulence and energy flowing throughout its network of ideas, advocates and opponents of each era. Wave one revolves around the human anxiety attached to accomplishing the Will of God (or another spiritual framework as in the case of Nietzsche) and engaging with a prescribed truth and morality. Wave two is a secular interpretation of anxiety revolving around freedom and choice, and wave three considers existentialism using a neuroscientific approach where our brains define who we are and what we do; all three waves are outlined below.

The first wave of existentialism: an ecclesiastical phase

In this wave of existential history, the theologist and religious philosopher and first existentialist Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) sets out to establish his credentials as an ‘honest’ human committed to knowing himself through his Christianity (Kierkegaard in Solomon, 2005). Kierkegaard considers his Christian faith as the best place to find his tools for living and teachings for life. This commitment involved baring his innermost self to the anxiety of reflecting on life’s struggles, and what he saw as absurd and empty times, created by the tyranny of the masses (Kierkegaard in Solomon, 2005). This innermost self, or inner life, involved reflecting on and confronting what Kierkegaard regarded as the absurdity of existence, the tension between individual aspirations and the inevitability of death. His reaction to the tyranny of the masses was shaped by a strong desire to recover and maintain his individuality so that he was clear on “what I am to do not what I am to know” (Kierkegaard in Solomon, 2005:7), and controversially, a desire to challenge aspects of *Hegelian* attitudes that were prevalent in Christian and Lutheran church culture in Denmark. Consequently, Kierkegaard encouraged expressions of individuality as crucial to accessing deep meaning, such as making sense of one’s experiences of suffering and anxiety. This sensemaking in turn enables individuals, he writes, to make a “leap of faith” (Kierkegaard in Solomon, 2005) towards creating an honest relationship with their Christianity and the mystery of God.

This attention to the individual – the subjective – also provided Kierkegaard an opportunity to unpack what he saw as an overlooked philosophy of existence; *a philosophy of the individual* (Kaufmann, 2016). This involved him taking action to challenge the prevalent focus on abstract processes and grand narratives that reduced individuals to objects and subsequently underreported the individual as a complex *being* anxious about finding their purpose in an intricate and absurd world (Cox, 2008). In *The Journals* Kierkegaard writes, "the scientific spirit… has forced its way down into the people – true religiousness goes down the drain and existential respect is lost" (Kierkegaard in Solomon, 2005:7). For Kierkegaard, recovering this existential respect involved society acknowledging the passion and risk involved in personal existence and individuals challenging the mass conformity and optimism, and what he regarded as insincere public displays of religion.

Kierkegaard adopted a Socratic questioning method and indirect communication style to present his concepts (Solomon, 2005; Cox, 2008). This involved him writing many of his books and journals under various pennames and presenting his ideas in the form of dialogues between characters representing distinct modes of living, all with the intention of challenging the reader to confront their individual-ness and individuality (Kaufmann, 2016). For Kierkegaard, there are three modes of living, each representing a lifestyle choice. These are: one, an aesthetic mode of existence; two, an ethical and rational style of existence; and three, an existence shaped by religion. Kierkegaard believed that the individual was always in the process of *being* and becoming, and consequently was presented with decisions and opportunities to change their lifestyle. This 'becoming' was an active and passionate process requiring personal and voluntary choice, and commitment to one of the three lifestyle choices (Kierkegaard in Solomon, 2005; Kaufmann, 2016).

In *Either-Or*, Kierkegaard (1987) writes (in the character of Judge Wilhelm) that in the *aesthetic* mode the individual is ill at ease, drifting without fixed tasks and purpose and experiencing their aesthetic pleasures as diversionary activities that ultimately lead to boredom (Kierkegaard in Solomon, 2005). It is in their boredom where the individual seeks out the company of the crowd and in joining the crowd, they undermine their own individuality and paradoxically, accentuate their despair (Kierkegaard in Solomon, 2005). For Kierkegaard, the route out of their despair is

found in the *ethical* mode of existence where the individual is invited to find purpose by identifying and accepting responsibilities. The ethical mode is a transformative phase, where opportunities for responsibility present themselves to the individual, and it is also a transit stage for progress to the religious mode. In undertaking these responsibilities, the individual finds obligations and choices that serve to give them purpose and in turn solidify their status in society (Kierkegaard, 1923). The ethical mode of living has frustrations, not least because it is defined by universal principles that often places the needs of others over the needs of the self. The religious mode of living has aspects of the ethical mode, however, according to Kierkegaard both modes are in conflict because the *faith* of the religious mode will necessitate a suspension of the ethical. Kierkegaard sets out this tension in *Fear and Trembling* (Kierkegaard, 1985) where God commands Abraham to kill his own son Isaac. Here Abraham experiences the challenge (felt as fear and trembling) of following God's command and rejecting an ethical duty not to kill. Here, Kierkegaard is illustrating Abraham's anxiety in realising that he has freedom of choice.

To Kierkegaard, these three modes of living are hierarchical, with the religious mode being the only place that provides the conditions for the individual to live a full life by being both unique and self-aware, and experience genuine freedom through choice. Kierkegaard rejects both an aesthetic mode – a path to disappointment, boredom, and dissatisfaction with one's existence – and an ethical mode, on the grounds that it is too idealistic and rational for the world he experiences (Kierkegaard in Solomon, 2005). He advocates and chooses a religious mode, specifically Christianity, primarily because he viewed God as the foundation and power behind the will of the individual. In *The Sickness Unto Death* Kierkegaard (1941) writes that:

> *"the fatalist is in despair – he has lost God, and therefore himself as well; for if he has no God, neither has he a self... he who is unconscious of despair is further away from truth and salvation" (1941:42-47)*

Only God, according to Kierkegaard, can ensure salvation, otherwise salvation of one's soul is impossible or "an accident" (Kierkegaard, 1985:56). To work towards

and experience the possibility of “deliverance” (Kierkegaard, 1985:56. Note that in Hannay’s 1985 translation of *Fear and Trembling*, the word *deliverance* is used in place of *salvation*. *Salvation* is used by Derrida, 1995, in Reé and Chamberlain, 1998:153) – one had to be an honest Christian, and this involved commitment, focus and effort on the part of the individual. For Kierkegaard, it is not enough to merely claim Christian credentials, the individual must cultivate a connection with the God that transcends their material world (Kierkegaard in Solomon, 2005; Judaken and Bernasconi, 2012). For Kierkegaard, a mere claim is hypocrisy; going to church is not enough, one has to *live* one’s Christian values. Living these values, he observes, will involve the individual experiencing uncertainty and anxiety in an active relationship with God. By embracing a relationship with God in the religious mode, he wrote, the individual would experience the true and worthwhile anguish of their Christian faith and in doing so, realise their authentic and higher self (Kierkegaard, 1923).

Kierkegaard believes that a relationship with God is life transforming and when this relationship is pursued with passion, *truth* is the reward (Moyn in Judaken and Bernasconi, 2012). In this context there are two aspects to Kierkegaard’s explanation of truth. Aspect one represents an activity or action undertaken by the individual to ‘make a leap of faith’. For Kierkegaard, this leap, or committing to their Christianity, is a bound towards freedom, e.g., ‘the truth shall set you free’ (Solomon, 2000). The second aspect represents a challenge to subjective truth and is an appeal to the individual to have confidence in their faith and belief in Christianity because ‘knowledge’ or ‘information’ may be adequate for understanding the world in rational terms, but ill-equipped for the ‘incomprehensibility of God’ (Solomon, 2005; Cerbone, 2015). Kierkegaard has confidence in his faith though he cautions against relying on knowledge alone and finding faith without self-awareness. Indeed, faith *should* come from self-awareness, what he views as a condition of existing without despair, and not through information alone (Solomon, 2005; Cerbone, 2015). Living through information alone is not enough, the individual needs to experience the world as Kierkegaard demonstrates in *Fear and Trembling* (Kierkegaard, 1985). Perhaps not to the same intensity as Abraham, but Kierkegaard concludes that faith demands passion, and it has to be experienced to be understood.

For Kierkegaard, to fully experience the world, the individual must embrace *anxiety* and *despair* as paths to adventures and possibilities. *Anxiety* is ever-present and indicates an opportunity for freedom and *being*, and *despair* may arise from a concern that the individual has been forgotten by God (Kierkegaard, 1985; Solomon, 2005; Onishi, 2019). However, both sentiments are informative in that they have the capacity to establish self-knowledge for the individual. For example, it is in the experience of *despair* where the heroic individual who commits to an inner-life and relationship with God is rewarded with insight into the function of their *anxiety*.

Kierkegaard believes that "anxiety is the dizziness of freedom" (Gron, 2008:19). Furthermore, he maintains that this dizziness also represents the individual becoming aware of the burden of choice and the anxiety of continually having to choose one preference or another and realising that not choosing is still a choice (Kierkegaard, 1985). Unlike fear, which attaches to something specific, anxiety attaches to the "possibility of the possibilities" (Gardiner, 2002:113), where possibilities are *choices*. We can, however, engage with anxiety as part of retreating from what life expects of us (Rée and Chamberlain, 1998).

For Kierkegaard there is many elements to the heroic individual. Being heroic in this context means putting faith in one's emotions and passions to make sense of the mystery of one's faith, and to progress with a leap of faith is attending to the needs of God. The mystery here is that in having *faith* and giving oneself over to God's needs one is fortifying their subjective self, and in doing so, confronting the *absurd* and absurdity of one's existence. Kierkegaard views these actions as virtuous and courageous and acknowledges that *freedom* has its own challenges, such as separating oneself from others and standing apart from the crowd.

In summary, Kierkegaard is clear that, for him, the meaning of life and the route to knowing oneself is found in a relationship with God, thereby placing the religious mode of living above the ethical and aesthetic modes. Pursuing a religious mode also demands commitment and the experience of anxiety on the part of the individual. Within the ecclesiastical wave, another philosopher – Nietzsche – rejects the religious mode, advocating instead the value of living in the aesthetic

mode. For Nietzsche, this mode is a courageous and life-affirming one, aspirational and lived first-hand in the ‘here and now’.

Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844–1900) existential writings were shaped by his interest in the traditions of ancient Greece, the writings of Schopenhauer and a fascination with defining *truth* (Solomon, 2005). Nietzsche challenged the value of Judeo-Christian traditions for their exploitation of the weak, stagnation of culture and perpetuation of an absolute value system, specifically a ‘slave morality’ (Nietzsche, 2003; Solomon, 2005). In his major work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Nietzsche, 2003), he used the Persian prophet Zarathustra to parody and contest Christianity’s ‘otherworldly’ ways of living (Solomon, 2005). Nietzsche (2003) derided the society of his time for distorting and driving out what he saw as healthy human instincts and for colluding with Christian philosophy to enable unhealthy habits, such as cowardice and escapism, to prevail. In challenging what he saw as anti-human (Christian) morality and utilitarianism, Nietzsche promoted a morality of aspiration based on life affirming (healthy) and life denying (unhealthy) instincts (Hollingdale, 2003).

This life-denying concept was a critique of the ostensible approval of religion and a critique of contemporary culture that nurtured self-denial in people, in effect excusing the individual from their responsibilities, thereby inhibiting the individual’s quality of life. In *The Gay Science* (Nietzsche, 1974) we read:

> *“What? A god who loves men, provided only they believe in him, and who casts an evil eye and threats upon anyone who does not believe in his love? What? A love encapsulated in if-clauses attributed to an almighty god? A love that has not even mastered the feelings of honour and vindictiveness?” (1974:190).*

Indeed, in declaring that “God is dead, God remains dead. And we have killed him” (1974:181) and writing again in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Nietzsche, 2003), “when Zarathustra was alone, he spoke thus to his heart: ‘Could it be possible! This old saint has not yet heard in his forest that *God is dead*!’” (2003:41), he was emphasising the end of a monotheistic structure of Western thought (Solomon, 2005). This sentiment was borrowed from and earlier proposed by the religious

reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) and philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1843) (Solomon, 2005).

Central to Nietzsche's beliefs was that tragedy is unavoidable, and its experience has much to teach us (Nietzsche, 2004). Christian morality for him had created weak human beings and prolonged their impotence, and slave or herd morality in humans. Similarly, utilitarianism had ignored the nobleness that can rise out of tragedy in favour of the illusion of happiness (Hollingdale, 2003; Solomon, 2005). A tragic culture is endowed with a pessimism that can act as a catalyst for the courage needed to face the emptiness of a no 'God's eye' view of the world. However, Nietzsche was a paradox. Despite his objections to the Christian traditions that he claimed encouraged and preached a slave morality, he too displayed a strong desire to cultivate 'disciples' to his interpretation of individualism and what he viewed as *natural life skills* (Steiner, 2003). Furthermore, although uncomfortable with slave morality, he nevertheless felt a need to dictate to and direct his readers.

In challenging the Judeo-Christian status quo and its morality, he intended to secure a paradigm shift from one of self-denial, what he termed mediocrity, to an existence based on excellence that included responsibility for the self and responsibility for others (Solomon, 2005). This paradigm shift away from the religious realm toward responsibility for the self and for others included what de Beauvoir called a recognition of human responsibility for evil (Ansell-Pearson, 2011). For Nietzsche (2003) "the evil impulses are just as useful, indispensable and preservative of the species as the good, only their function is different" (2003:93). In taking responsibility and control of their actions, and "to transform every 'It was' onto an 'I wanted this'" (2003:161), he saw responsibility as a moment of individual liberation and redemption from the slave morality of one's past to a master morality in one's future.

For Nietzsche, individuals have in their power the ability to create a full and authentic life through their own convictions and interests. However, to flourish they must embrace the isolation and dislocation caused when they take control of their own morality (Nietzsche, 2004; Solomon, 2005; Kaufmann, 2016). In this state of isolation and dislocation, and no longer reliant on a God to organise them, the

individual experiences anxiety when faced with their own desires. Nietzsche (2004) saw anxiety (and mediocrity in society) relieved through a love of fate and a preparedness to take personal responsibility to be who you are. Like the pre-Socratic philosophers and ancient Greek tragic playwrights he studied and admired for their views on tragedy and acceptance of suffering in life (Solomon, 2005), Nietzsche (1974) believed in fate:

> *"I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. Amor fati: let that be my love henceforth!" (1974:223).*

Nietzsche's (1974) celebration of fate, 'amor fati', also conveys his belief that based on our given natures we are free spirits, each with a destiny to "become what one is" (Nietzsche, 2004:3). This acceptance of fate should not be a resignation and acceptance in the mode of slave-morality gone before, but instead a revolt on given morality. He advocated *perspectivism* and the view that knowledge of the world and of oneself is assembled from one's particular point of view (Solomon, 2005). In addition, he observed that it is important to participate in life, to be a "Yes-sayer" (Nietzsche, 1974:223) and experience its potential for suffering, because the emotions and passions experienced are of great value and the "greater good" (Nietzsche, 2004:60) to the individual.

Nietzsche (2004) believed that the meaning of life and self-esteem is found in the experience of emotions, passion and the will to power: "the value of a thing lies not in what one attains with it, but in what one pays for it – what it *costs* us" (Nietzsche, in Hollingdale, 2003:271). It is in the intensity of life – the cost – where the individual finds themself, and in their self-affirmation, they uncover what is important to them, what they *value* (Nietzsche, 2004). To Nietzsche (2003), the individual engages with the world through their *values* not facts and he tasks the individual to be actively engaged in the world, and not be like the hermit Zarathustra meets in the valley, a passive product of circumstances.

This point was also a challenge to the enlightenment thinking that reason and rationality explains everything, that emotions are secondary lived experiences, and a superior humanity is based on knowledge and happiness (Solomon, 2005). For

Nietzsche, reason will not provide an answer to 'the meaning of life'. Rather, the meaning of life is to be found in the passions. Nietzsche was an optimist, (having rejected Schopenhauer's pessimism) though sceptical about those declaring truth. He was a contra-nihilist because he advocated engagement and commitment in and to the world, challenging the individual, and society, to put aside an ingrained humility and embrace a master-morality viewpoint.

For Nietzsche (1974), without a master morality, there is no salvation to be found, only the illusion of compassion, the continuation of individual weakness and a recurrence of the emptiness of modern life (Solomon and Higgins, 2000; Solomon, 2005; Cerbone, 2015). This emptiness and isolation, a sense of insignificance and meaninglessness – the experience of the hermit in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* – Nietzsche acknowledges, could lead to a rejection of all values: nihilism (Solomon and Higgins, 2000; Kaufmann, 2016). To realise a master morality, he expounds the need to establish a cohort of "individuals of superior intellect who will be devoted to new values, artistic creativity and the quest for philosophical wisdom" (Birx, 2000:24-25).

Nietzsche shared a common mission with Kierkegaard, to become 'subjective' through passionate commitment, however, he departs from Kierkegaard on the issue of 'salvation' (Cerbone, 2015), challenging the Christian claims of Kierkegaard (Solomon and Higgins, 2000). He contends that the individual can maximise their human power by digging deep into their subjectivity, including the quality of their thoughts and actions. This subjectivity involves a commitment to science, a self-designed morality and a 'will to power' (Nietzsche, 2003; Solomon, 2005; Kaufmann, 2016) .

Nietzsche (2003) stressed that human *will* was the only real force in personal and cultural life and believed only human drives and human *will*, located in an *übermensch*, can overcome the emptiness and sense of meaningless experienced by the individual and society. The *übermensch* was Nietzsche's aspirational image of a super-human being, a self-expression of authority and self-discipline, and a dynamic expression of energy in the form of a human *will* to power (Solomon and Higgins, 2000; Nietzsche, 2003). This *will* to power is motivation, a drive towards

purpose and ambitions. For Nietzsche (2003), truth is a matter of perspective and, significantly, truth remains secondary to the *will* to power.

Nietzsche (2003) states that not everyone is capable of flourishing as the *übermensch* and therefore there will also exist the risk averse *last man*. The *last man* is the individual who intends maintaining their comforts and securities, and ignoring opportunities to express creativity and originality; nonetheless Nietzsche proposes:

> *"Let us therefore limit ourselves to the purification of our opinions and valuations and to the creation of our own new tables of what is good and let us stop brooding about the 'moral value of our actions"! (Nietzsche, 1974:265-266)*

He challenged the notion that what is morally good is good for humankind and what is morally bad is bad for humankind. For Nietzsche, morality is neither subjective nor objective, the highest values are not God-given, but are natural not supernatural, and bad (and evil) impulses also preserve humankind. Furthermore, Nietzsche defended the aesthetic life, viewing the aesthetic perspective to be the very meaning of life – to love life is to love that one is alive – not just an escape from the suffering and burden of life. Ultimately, Nietzsche's (2004) position is that there is no absolute, objective view of the world and there is no knowing the truth: "All truth is simple – Is that not a compound lie?" (2004:73). Nietzsche saw the aesthetic mode as offering some reprieve from the rhetoric of seeking an absolute truth; the aesthetic mode was an opportunity for the individual to think for themself and commit to action (Hollingdale, 2003; Solomon, 2005).

In this aesthetic mode of living, the individual rises above their resentments and reactionary instincts to find their *übermensch* (their godliness) and their authentic value to society (Solomon and Higgins, 2000; Nietzsche, 2003; Solomon, 2005; Cerbone, 2015). For Nietzsche (2003), the *übermensch (*or *superman)* stands outside the crowd and finds their consciousness by expressing their subjective voice (Solomon and Higgins, 2000; Kaufmann, 2016). Zarathustra says:

> *"I teach you the superman. Man is something that should be overcome… All creatures hitherto have created something*

beyond themselves… The superman is the meaning of the earth" (Nietzsche, 2003:237-238).

The *superman* or *übermensch* appears only in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Hollingdale, 2003), however, Nietzsche, (1974) refers to heroic acts in Book Three of *The Gay Science*:

"With a great goal one is superior even to justice, not only to one's deeds and one's judges. What makes one heroic? – Going out to meet at the same time one's highest suffering and one's highest hope" (1974:219).

Nietzsche projects the *übermensch* as spiritual in their love of the earth, agnostic in its formation, yet not part of a divine order. This is another example of Nietzsche's paradox in that the *übermensch* is disposed to becoming a god unto themself whilst at the same time diminishing the religious and other worldviews of others (Solomon, 2005). In their actions to create new values and invent a new morality they experience hubris and, like religious prophets and the tightrope walker in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra's Prologue* (Nietzsche, 2003), they are, metaphorically, likely to fall to their death (Solomon, 2005).

There is, however, an ominous aspect to the *übermensch.* Nietzsche's (2003) life-affirming philosophy is a complex and intense relationship with what he describes as, the "creative good" (Nietzsche, 1979:60), essentially a combination of "the greatest evil… [and] the greatest good" (1979:60). To engage with both evil and good, the individual will need to experience "joy in destruction" (1979:61); an immoral, human condition. He writes: "I am the first *immoralist*; I am therewith the *destroyer par excellence*" (1979:61). The *destroyer* qualities proffered by Nietzsche (1979) include doubting the extent to which an individual can empathise with someone else. Nietzsche also finds acts of pity and resentment to be wasted emotions that transform all those involved into weak victims. In addition, Nietzsche (2003) believed that equality was the greatest of all lies, stating that when one shows pity for another, they are in fact placing the other in an inferior role and showing contempt for them: "you preachers of equality! You are tarantulas and

dealers in hidden revengefulness" (2003:123). Furthermore, destroyer qualities are expressions of force and cruelty:

> *To become superman, an individual "must overcome themselves again and again… And he who has to be a creator in good and evil, truly, has first to be a destroyer and break values" (Nietzsche, 2003:139).*

In recent times Nietzsche's philosophy of the *übermensch* has been appropriated by far-right political movements. The roots of this can be traced back to Nietzsche's sister, Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche (1846–1935), who is ill-famed for inviting Hitler to visit her brother's archive of literary work 33 years after his death. In doing so, she set in motion a connection between Nietzsche's philosophy and German National Socialism and, more disturbingly, this presented ideas and justifications for Nazi brutality in the 1930s and 1940s (Solomon, 2005). She may have been the catalyst in formalising the relationship between Nietzschean philosophy and Nazism, however, Nietzsche's glorification of strength, his dogma of "the will to power," and images of the *übermensch* fitted neatly with Nazi requirements and propaganda.

There is something unsettling about some of the aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy represented here. Beyond his call to action to take control of one's own life and decision-making, he advocates rejecting compassion towards others and in finding enjoyment in destruction. Arguably, these are qualities likely to fragment human relations and nurture a social and political culture of isolation and tension, as well as emphasise a hierarchy of human power from the strength and control of the *übermensch* to the passivity and followership of the *last man*. While taking charge of one's own needs and resources are noble intentions, it is the case that we tend to live in interdependent communities of practice and living. This interconnectedness requires cooperation and tolerance of differences and of change. However, Nietzsche identifies conditions, I would suggest, that undermine the necessary cooperation and solidarity present in peaceful and cooperative times, including effective constituency activism, making Nietzsche's philosophy less appropriate for this research.

In this first wave we find that existentialism places limits on individuals to exercise and commit to free choice, primarily through religious acceptance or rejection. The settings for free choice are not random and Kierkegaard sets out three modes of living to aid the individual to come into being: religious, ethical and aesthetic. Kierkegaard argued that the true inner life must cultivate a connection to the divine, through a leap of faith and relationship with God. His choice of religious mode – Christianity – requires a commitment of faith and trust. This faith is reward by coming to consciousness and being through God's guidance.

Nietzsche, however, challenges the Christian orthodoxy. As the father of atheistic existentialism, and therefore a strictly secular worldview, Nietzsche understood the human predicament in terms of a "God is dead" philosophy. He managed to unsettle and agitate the religious authorities by suggesting that individuals do not require organised religion to mediate on their behalf and find meaning in life. Instead, he promoted a type of morality based on 'heroic' and god-like (creator) qualities of the *übermensch*. Nietzsche's view was that the individual had responsibility to find their own meaning in life by exploiting their own talents and abilities, and they themselves were judges of their responsibilities, not God.

He shows how the individual, through their own will to power, can frame their own morality, and in doing so they can flourish independently as the *übermensch*, or be marginalised as the *last man*. He is clear that we cannot find our meaning through accepting faith, as this creates a learned helplessness, a powerlessness. Instead, Nietzsche considers the individual to be 'heroic' through their disruptive and destructive actions when dealing with tragedy, fears and anxieties, a contrast to Sartre's notion of existential freedom and responsibility.

In their writings, what Kierkegaard and Nietzsche share in interpreting existence – also shared with existentialists in the second wave – is the experience of human anxiety when encountered with issues of choice and responsibility. Kierkegaard interpreted anxiety through religious affiliations and experiencing anxiety as part of the conditions attached to a 'leap of faith'. Nietzsche took this further by considering anxiety in the context of fate and in the pursuit of an individualised morality, stressing that responsibility always remains with the individual. For Kierkegaard, his anxiety was driven by a need to make God satisfied, or to keep

God 'on side' – an *interior* anxiety –, whereas for Nietzsche, anxiety provided the catalyst for sharing knowledge and insight of the self and others – an *exterior* anxiety. There is a significant amount of Nietzsche's existential philosophy founded on an offering of despair and anguish and as suggested in Chapter One, there is also some anguish displayed in the motivations and communal experiences of activists. However, the activists' anguish represented in Chapter one is not the pessimism found in Nietzsche's angst; activists' anguish is more complex and founded on inter-relatedness of loyalty, loss of authenticity, belonging and identity, and commitment to ideology, to name a few experiences. Furthermore, Nietzsche's intensity of his fear and discomfort is at odds with the mutuality and solidarity represented in the activism discussed in Chapter One.

From the first wave one can, however, take away Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's enthusiasm for living passionately and apply this to activism. Nevertheless, within the first wave, the religious and moral undertones, the hierarchy of human power, and the isolation endured through the exclusivity of striving to be an *übermensch*, place constraints on how the lived experiences of constituency activists could be examined using Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Furthermore, for this research, the existential concepts of freedom and individual responsibility, and anxiety, further developed by second wave existentialists are better suited to researching the lived experiences of constituency activists.

The second wave of existentialism: a political phase

Individual responsibility and anxiety remain fundamental themes in existentialism's second wave. In this second wave, the meaning of existence is found in individual actions and intentions, not in a relationship with God. The focus is inherently political, for example, being in the world is now filtered through human rationality and classifications of equality and justice, through which individuality and personal freedoms was emphasised. Personal knowledge about the world is gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations constructed by other people, or God or a higher being. It is in this era of direct responsibility and free will where anxiety expands its sphere of influence. To examine this expanded influence, the work of five existential writers

takes precedence: Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre.

In the second wave, meaning and sensemaking is found in 'how' the individual lives, as a *being* in the world (Solomon, 2005). In this context, the 'how' refers to an individual's engagement with and experience in the world. The emphasis on 'how' is demonstrated in the writings and philosophy of phenomenologist Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Heidegger's *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 2001) was the basis for modern existentialism (Cooper, 1996; Solomon, 2005; Cerbone, 2015). In it, Heidegger posited two positions of the lived experience, namely "*forgetfulness of being*, a position concerning the activities of everyday existence, and *mindfulness of bei*ng, a position concerning existence itself and the responsibility felt by an individual to have a meaningful life" (Blomme and Bornebroek te-Lintelo, 2012:414). A reluctant existentialist, Heidegger was interested in the meaning of *being* and the human experience of reality (Cooper,1996; Solomon, 2005; Cerbone, 2015). For him, *being* is to ontologically exist and engage in the world. It is through *engagement,* not thinking, that things become real (Dreyfus and Wrathall, 2005); for example, the content of an individual's experience is the content of their reality (Solomon, 2005). He defined individual existence, and being in the world through experience, as *Dasein,* translated as *being there* (Dreyfus and Wrathall, 2005). *Dasein* has no fixed nature, and its essence lies in an existence bounded by the horizon of time, specifically the human life cycle and the inevitability of death (Cooper, 1996; Dreyfus and Wrathall, 2005). Heidegger also prioritised future time over present time, because it is in the time period to come (the future) where the individual defines their own being (Cooper, 1996). Heidegger's notion that the world is to be first engaged with and is then only known through engagement, is a precursor to Sartre's 'existence precedes essence' principle (Langiulli, 1997; Solomon, 2005).

Heidegger saw direct engagement with the world as difficult for the individual to avoid, and ultimately other agents and technology lead the individual to inauthentically engaging with the world (Cooper, 1996). He emphasised the value of experience and knowledge gained from direct face-to-face interaction, rather than gained through another agent (people), or technological mediums (e.g.,

computer programmes that required skills and knowledge) (Cooper, 1996). Heidegger was not against modern technology; he was however cautious about technology that made the human a slave to the technology and presented opportunities for the user of the technology to cut corners in experiencing life. In relying on the technology, the individual would eventually be technologised as *das man,* (an inauthentic existence and) a deficient mode of *being* (Cooper, 1996; Gratton, 2011; Cerbone, 2015). For Heidegger using other agents and technology diminished the individual's curiosity about the world, blunting their practical knowledge and skills, and their authentic *being* in the world (Cooper, 1996; Cerbone, 2015). He also observed that the individual can be consumed by the demands of the ordinary and every-day to the extent that they lose sight of their authentic self and their potential and stop asking themselves what it means to *be* in the world (Cooper, 1996). Heidegger's concern was that the individual loses their human and authentic way of *being – Dasein –* and is ultimately defined in terms of their productivity, social utility, and vulnerability (Flynn, 2006).

Human reality for Heidegger also involved the individual confronting their 'angst', i.e., an individual's "sense of being towards its end" (Cooper, 1996:44). For Heidegger, angst came from 'playing it safe' and being risk averse when *being-in-the-world*. Moreover, angst served to intensify the individual's *moods*, and in doing so heighten the individual's sense of their potential and possibilities in the world (Cooper, 1996). According to Heidegger, *moods* reveal the individual's situation and also involve specific anxieties, such as the individual's thoughts on their finitude and inevitable death (Cooper, 1996; Cerbone, 2015). It is through an individual's comprehension of their finitude — the finality and inescapable possibility of their death — and in the certainty of their impermanence, where the individual experiences their authenticity. It is in the individual's engagement with their mortality and authenticity, a mode of *being-towards-the-end* that "cannot be represented by someone else" (Solomon, 2005:141) where the individual comes "face to face with the possibility to be itself… free from illusions" (Solomon, 2005:146). This encounter is a disruption, a mode of being-towards-death (Cooper, 1996), where the individual takes hold of themself and resolves to make way for new possibilities and experiences (Cerbone, 2015). The state of disruption offers the individual the opportunity to question everyday experiences, reframe their

habits, and view the familiar as full of new possibilities and potential (Cooper, 1999; Cerbone, 2015).

> *"Anticipation utterly individualizes Dasein, and allows it, in this individualization of itself, to become certain of the totality of its potentiality-for-Being. For this reason, anxiety as a basic state-of-mind belongs to such a self-understanding of Dasein on the basis of Dasein itself. Being-towards-death is essentially anxiety." (Heidegger,2001: 310)*

The proposition of *being-towards-death* is a fundamental feature of Heidegger's attachment to *time* and is central to his analysis of authenticity and (an inevitable *fallenness* into *cowardly fear* and) inauthenticity (Heidegger,2001; Solomon, 2005; Cerbone 2015; Kaufman, 2016). Heidegger also introduced the existential themes of *facticity* (facts that are true about us; for example, our age, weight and height) to existential debate, as well as the notion of being *thrown into the world* and *abandoned*. The latter concepts of being thrown into the world and of abandonment were existential concepts later adopted and adapted by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (2003).

For the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), whose interest is in the meaning of human experiences, *being* in the world is physical and the human body is our "being in the world" (Solomon, 2005: 271; Matthews, 2006:88). Carman (2020), in restating Merleau-Ponty's 'bodily point of view' that perception is essentially a bodily phenomenon writes, the "bodily point of view is our ordinary point of view on the world. It is not just one more arbitrary perspective among others, nor is it a mere methodological contrivance, for we inhabit it every day of our lives" (2020: Ch3, p90). This physicality is a shift from the knowing and thinking 'being' attached to Kierkegaard's existential existence, rooted to Christianity in the first wave; it is a move from the soul of the being to the body of the being. Merleau-Ponty reiterates how bodily experiences involve the purposeful use of emotions – *subjectivity* – to accommodate lived experiences, and that the physical world outside the self has significant influence on human existence and meaning too (Solomon, 2005). He also suggests that the body is an instrument of communication in the world, an instrument that allows for a connection between

the mind and the body enabling conscious and subjective experiences to be explained (Solomon, 2005). This also points to a recognition that the human being and the existentialist must extend their subjective focus and awareness to include being in the world through physical, objective experiences. This will involve reviewing moral principles and reconsidering the adequacy of intellectual tools currently used to explain human experiences. In this second wave, subjectivity (emotions) and objectivity (the physical world) both play a role in determining an individual's meaning and significance, which in turn informs responsibility and freedoms.

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), philosopher, novelist and feminist writer, focused on the importance of personal action (Solomon, 2005). A companion of Jean Paul Sartre, de Beauvoir considered what 'being' means in relation to gender and ageing in the context of an 'authentic' self (Solomon, 2005). She was interested in how women get to be themselves in a world where others make demands on what they should be, calling on women to reject the cultural and masculine traditions that define them as the 'other'. For de Beauvoir "otherness is a fundamental category of human thought" (Solomon, 2005:299) and an act of hostility that limits freedoms. She was instrumental in raising concerns about the limits of human nature to create conditions for gender equality. In her book *The Second Sex* (de Beauvoir, 1980), de Beauvoir urges women to go beyond the limits of their nature, reject any sense of inferiority and act in the interest of their own freedom (de Beauvoir 1980, in Solomon, 2005). Indeed, de Beauvoir's call to *freedom* is also an appeal to welcome *ambiguity* – a theme of her 1947 book *The Ethics of Ambiguity* – because she writes that in experiencing and embracing uncertainty and dualities in life the individual finds their subjectivity (Cerbone, 2015). In this 'will to freedom' and a life not defined by men, there are links to Nietzsche's 'will to power' and slave/master morality. In addition, de Beauvoir inserts political power and moral dimensions into existentialism that include outcomes of misfortune and happiness (Solomon, 2005).

Albert Camus (1913-1960) was an author and dramatist who disliked being identified as an existentialist philosopher; nonetheless, his writings presented new perspectives on central existential themes, such as Kierkegaard's *anxiety*,

Nietzsche's *tragedy*, Sartre's *freedom*, and Heidegger's attention to *angst,* as fundamental to the human lived experience (Solomon, 2005; Robinson, 2009; Foley, 2014). Where these matters of anxiety, consciousness, freedom, and angst provided the above-mentioned philosophers with their own existentialist theory of reality, Camus's reality and existentialism was shaped by his view that human existence was driven by *absurdity* (Solomon, 2005; Skrimshire, 2006). This *absurdity* is the product of our human inability to hear and understand the "silence of the world" (Camus,1991:10). The *absurdity* Camus refers to here is not that the world is silent; rather, it is in the *absurdity* of the request and the *absurdity* that we humans expect the word to be listening and interested in our plight (Camus, 1991; Foley, 2014).

Camus is questioning our logic in thinking that not only has the world an interest in us, but it also has the capacity to reward and punish us for the life we lead, and that we have expectations that we will find the meaning of our individual lives 'out there' in the universe. Camus (1991) believes that the mystery of life itself should be enough to sustain our curiosity.

For Camus this absurdity is summed up in the dichotomy of the rational and irrational, where the needs of rational humans will not be met by an irrational world (Langiulli, 1997; Camus, 1991; Foley, 2014). Camus also rejected existentialist theorising because it attempts to give rational form to the irrational, and he believed that the *absurdity* of existence cannot be satisfactorily explained, it must be lived through, confronted, and suffered (Foley, 2014). He stresses that to expect the world to be rational is baffling and blames the glorification of science for creating an abstract and unsatisfactory relationship between the world and humans:

> *"[S]cience was to teach me everything ends up in hypotheses, that lucidity founders on metaphor, that uncertainty is resolved in a work of art" (Camus, 1991:7).*

In asking whether an individual's life has meaning he also asks whether an individual's life needs meaning (Camus, 1991). For those among us who need their life to mean something, he offers some thoughts on why the answer may be problematic for some and less problematic for others. The others, he contends, are

those who are at one with the *absurdity* of life he writes about and have taken steps to mitigate against disappointment and emotional fallout. Examples of mitigation is when the individual – in neither a selfish or selfless way – focuses on their personal experiences; where the individual concludes that they have only one life to lead; where the individual acknowledges that the meaning of life is 'a meaningful life' (Foley, 2014); and, where one's self-awareness is obstruse but will nevertheless shine a light on one's assets and one's vulnerabilities.

Camus draws the conclusion that for a self-conscious and reflective individual trying to find meaning in a meaningless world, it is equivalent to an invitation to commit suicide (Camus, 1991; Langiulli, 1997; Solomon, 2005). There is some parallel here with Kierkegaard's boredom and dissatisfaction (to the point of suicide) within the aesthetic mode discussed above. Camus rejected this invitation to suicide and asserts that 'absurdity as confrontation' heightens our passions to seek significance in our freedoms and ultimately leads to actions of revolt (Camus, 1991; Langiulli, 1997; Solomon, 2005); we find meaning and significance in what we do, especially in the most difficult situations (Camus, 1991).

In his philosophical essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus (1991) introduces his concept *the absurd* (Skrimshire, 2006). His vision of Sisyphus's punishment by the gods of Olympus of repeatedly rolling a rock up a mountain until it rolls back down of its own weight, again and again, illustrates the futility of and absurdity of life. It is important to note that the myth is a thought experiment and as such Sisyphus is in no position to escape his punishment by the gods (Foley, 2014). Fortunately, few of us are likely to face the same constraints in our lived experience and therefore will be able to exercise more agency. Staying true to the details of the myth, and in his analysis of Sisyphus's behaviour, Camus counsels us to consider addressing *the absurdity* we face in daily life in the manner Sisyphus deals with the futility and absurdity of his task (Camus, 1991). Camus (1991) presents Sisyphus's behaviour and actions as exemplars on how to respond to absurdity; in experiencing absurdity we can either throw ourselves into our task and commit to it wholeheartedly or continue with the task but do it with resentment.

Camus may not have enjoyed the existential label he was given, but he did nurture existential themes within his writings on rebellion and (anti-)heroics (Foley, 2014).

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he sees Sisyphus as heroic (in the face of absurdity) for getting on with the task and making the task his purpose in life, even if he does it with resentment. Foley (2014) and Solomon (2005) were less convinced of Camus's claim that Sisyphus was resentful, highlighting Camus own words: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus, 1991:24).

As reinforced in Camus's (1991) analysis, *The Myth of Sisyphus* is an invitation to the reader to *live* and *create meaning for* themself and to tenaciously face down thoughts of suicide as a way of defeating absurdity. Camus (1991) also presents a range of additional conditions to support successful outcomes. He proposes, like Sisyphus, that the individual considers the "greatest quantity of experiences" (1991:21) above the quality of their life. This is in direct contrast to Sartre's emphasis on the quality of the lived experience. For Camus, when the individual focuses on the quantity of life, they will find momentum in reviewing their practices and habits that create limitations in their life, specifically habits that close down opportunities for a far greater spread of lived experiences (Camus, 1991). Crucially, the use of time is also a source of anxiety and alienation. Camus (1991) is making the point that when we engage in life, including its boredoms, it becomes meaningful, and in expanding the quantity of our experiences we add value to the time we spend alive.

Camus (1991) wrote about what he called 'philosophical suicide'. This theme, philosophical suicide, was also his vehicle for challenging existentialism, specifically an existentialism underpinned by religion and prophets, such as the existentialism of Kierkegaard. He saw at least two weaknesses in existentialism underpinned by Christianity. Firstly, why would a human being allow themselves to be negated by an 'otherworldly' being (e.g., a god), a being that mediates and dilutes their prospects (Foley, 2014)? Secondly, why would a human being look for guidance from a being that compounds the absurdity of one's existence (Camus, 1991)? These weaknesses aligned to his view that the universe is indifferent to our expectations, and we find dignity and meaning in life through encounters with absurdity (Camus, 1991). Additionally, he had a view that the pursuit of consciousness can lead to greater absurdity. For example, in moments of heightened consciousness, the individual can contaminate and misinterpret the

'silence of the world' (Camus, 1991), whereas Sartre views consciousness as *being* free and the route to liberation.

The 'silence of the world' that Camus writes about is an example of his pessimism. His concept of absurdity alienates the individual, as it is only those in unity with the silent world and its absurdity who are able to discover their authenticity. Authenticity is discovered by embracing either the crisis or the absurdity of one's lived experience. This existential starting point is essentially pessimistic and counter to the literature on activism in *Chapter 1,* which suggests activists are proactive (Inglehart and Norris, 2003: Allen and Cutts, 2018) and anti-alienation (i.e., seek solidarity and support) in their political engagement and participation (Brown and Pickerill, 2009; Dalton, 2020).

Sartre did recognise absurdity in the world; however, his interpretation of absurdity was that it was located in the *lack* of individual purpose and meaning (Cox, 2008). Furthermore, where Camus's *absurdity* spotlights the despair attached to the experience, Sartre's *absurdity* concentrates on individual responsibility and the actions and attitudes that make *meaning* out of absurdity. Additionally, in Sartre's interpretation of existence before essence, he presents refined modes of *being* in the world. These refined modes of being (-in-itself and -for-itself) provide this research with a unique lens with which to view the constituency activist experience.

The concept of absurdity was not the only existential theme they diverged on. Camus was critical of Sartre's thesis that existential freedom was limitless, especially Sartre's view that pursuing freedom was justification for violence, persecution, and murder during the Algerian war (Foley, 2014). For Camus, claims to freedom were no excuse nor did they confer privilege to perform acts of violence and cruelty. As someone who advocated finding the middle ground and unity (Foley, 2014), Camus was uncomfortable with Sartre's absolute and unconditional loyalty to a belief system maintained through violence and force, and he saw Sartre's zeal for "pure mind and perfect freedom" (Merkel, 2019:22) as disingenuous. For Camus, there is no legitimacy in political violence (Foley, 2014).

In Camus's (1956) book, *The Rebel* he was critical of Stalin's state terror practices and the use of labour camps. Sartre took offence at this characterisation of communism and profoundly rejected Camus's moral perspective (Foley, 2014).

Camus, like Sartre examined concepts of liberty and terror in the context of revolution, and described them as essential lived experiences (Clouet, 2002). For Sartre at the time, Marxism and communism were central to achieving social justice, however, unlike Sartre, Camus believed that it was no longer relevant to characterise revolt as the poor against the rich, or the slave against the master (Clouet, 2002). Sartre saw Camus's rejection of Marx's theory of history (dialectical materialism), as a denial of capitalism's part in legitimising the role of the oppressor and an endorsement of *political quietism*; a viewpoint that was promulgated by the far-right in French politics at the time (Foley, 2014). For Camus, these differences of opinion were important moments of rebellion against the given morality of the time and allowed him to publicly distance himself from the violence of a post- and cold war world (Robinson, 2009; Foley, 2014). These differences led to Sartre and Camus ending their relationship (Solomon, 2005; Foley, 2014).

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) was interested in the first-hand accounts of human existence - *being* - and appraising human existence initially in two different modes of *being*: *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself*. By exploring individual experiences of existing in both modes of being, he was contributing to a wider existentialist tradition that states that human beings have a deep desire to make sense of their existence. Sartre's central belief was that human life has no inherent meaning or essence and individuals are free to choose how they act in the world. However, human beings are distinct from 'things' that simply exist in themselves as objects (Sartre, 1946, 2003; Solomon, 2005; Aronson and van den Hoven, 2013; Cerbone, 2015; Kaufmann, 2016). More controversially, and unique to Sartre's thinking, his belief shifted philosophical convention further away from a priori assumption of human nature by asserting that existence *precedes* human essence (Langiulli, 1997; Solomon, 2005).

Sartre reasons that every individual is responsible for how they engage with the world and how the world is. Sartre's vision of the world is *being*. This *being* is the tension between the objectified self – *in-itself* – with the subjective – *for-itself*. He contends that our access to the world is through conscious experience that involves engaging with the world in pre-conscious and conscious states. These two states

mirror Heidegger's two positions of the lived experience: forgetfulness of being and mindfulness of being, respectively. In Sartre's pre-conscious state, we exist as a thing and object (being-in-itself); in a conscious state we exist as a self-aware human being (being-for-itself) (Sartre, 2003; Aronson and van den Hoven, 2013).

In 'Being and Nothingness', Sartre (2003) rejects any appeal to causal determinism; that every event is necessitated by antecedent events and conditions. Sartre's existential freedom or radical freedom maintains that I (as a responsible agent) am not simply another object in the world. As a human being, I am always open to (and engaged with) things in the world. According to Sartre, how I exist in the world is a function of my free decisions to create meaning out of the facts with which I am confronted (Sartre, 2003; Aronson and van den Hoven, 2013).

In this second wave Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, de Beauvoir, Camus and Sartre move further away from the religious doctrine of the first wave. They remind us of the absurdity of the world and the unpredictability of human nature to deliver equality and gender justice, and that finding meaning in the world requires an element of confrontation. In this confrontation, we each have free will and responsibility to commit and engage in spite of the anxiety and discomfort experienced if we are to find our authentic selves. This authentic self can be found in revolutionary commitment and other acts of solidarity with others (Heter, 2006b). In each of their work, however, there remain close links with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche's interest in commitment and passionate living. Significantly, this includes accepting full responsibility for the meaning we make of the world in which we exist.

It is important to note that Sartre's existential themes and concepts, also discussed below in *The Influence of Jean-Paul Sartre*, are built on the work of both first and second wave existentialists. Sartre's existentialism has been informed by Husserl's *phenomenology* that life is about engagement and experiences; Nietzsche's *will* to create and invent our own values; Heidegger's concepts of being *thrown into the world and abandoned*; Merleau-Ponty's concern for *the emotions attached to physical experiences*; de Beauvoir's *identity and political power*; and Camus's views on individual alienation in an *absurd world*. Sartre's existentialism therefore is not merely an amalgam of previous existentialists' ideas and themes, rather it

represents a reworking of central existential tenets, and a formation of his social and political interests, making his existential philosophy relevant for this research. For example, he agreed that the individual is defined by the choices they make and the responsibilities they undertake, however he extended these choices and responsibilities (an aspect of existential freedom) to incorporate the freedom and needs of others.

Sartre's existentialism broadens the concepts of *freedom*, *authenticity*, and *responsibility*, and it is his interpretation of these concepts that separate him from other existentialists. For example, Sartre emphasised that *responsibility* extends to the use of one's emotions and motives, and as such are individual choices (Solomon, 2005). These emotional choices are relevant to research into constituency activism because they can be both insightful and 'magical' in shaping individual opinions (Sartre, 1994) and powerful enough to create self-deception and nurture bad faith (Solomon, 2005). These choices also encompass how and why, in the landscape of political activism, the individual engages with others and the wider community, exposing broader themes of freedom, personal responsibility, and accountability. This research is also interested in existential freedoms and choices as emotive experiences that are the catalyst for political possibilities, limitations, rights, and entitlements, and how these situations influence constituency activists. In absorbing and interrogating the existential viewpoints and themes of other philosophers, Sartrean existentialism offers: a philosophy of engagement, as opposed to passivity and isolation; a richer lens for analysing the constituency activist through a focus on freedom and responsibility; a focus on *others*; and no *a priori* conditions of human nature. These are the important existential qualities for making sense of the lived experiences of constituency activists' and are therefore being taken forward into this research.

The third wave of existentialism: an ongoing scientific phase

The origins of the third wave are in neuroscience, which focuses on the brain and its impact on behaviour and how people think. As such, the third wave starts from a very different place than waves one and two. In the third wave, freedom and authenticity are challenged by a growing public consciousness that all mental processes relate to the nervous system and patterns of neural activity in the brain

(Caruso and Flanagan, 2017). This emphasis on behaviour and thinking places the human on par with other animals and means that what we view as conscious actions and decisions may in fact be down to a network of nerves.

In this wave, individual anxiety is found in science's confidence in explaining away autonomy and confirming our actions based on impulse (Caruso and Flanagan, 2017). What compounds this anxiety is that in this unconscious mode of existence we have very limited, if any, access to corresponding mental processes. Neuroscience alters the mind-brain relationship to conclude that the "mind is a function of the brain" (Caruso and Flanagan, 2017:6). Caruso and Flanagan (2017) and high-profile neuroscientist Anil Seth, stress that the scientific phase is ongoing. At this point, Seth (2008) says there is a long way to go in the science, but we should be prepared to consider a world built from the inside out, governed by natural laws. For their part Caruso and Flanagan (2017) suggest that we need to be mindful that our sense of self and self-knowledge may in part be an illusion.

The common thread of existential anxiety

Throughout all the existential waves, anxiety remains a common thread that ties them together. Samuel Moyn (2012) writes about the secular 'invention of anxiety' and its separation from its origins in Kierkegaard's "theistic framework" (2012:280). However, Moyn cautions that the secularisation of anxiety may not be as obvious as first thought, notwithstanding:

> *"[The] psychological concept [Kierkegaard's concept of anxiety] ... eventually became "one of the principal categories through which our epoch has come to understand itself". Much like the larger trajectory of existentialism, anxiety drifted – as it made its way in the world – from the sacred to the secular" (Dupré (1985) in Moyn, 2012:280)*

In moving from the sacred to the secular, anxiety remains a central feature of 'being' in the world today (Moyn, 2012). In the first wave, anxiety is rooted to the theme of *abandonment* and it is experienced in situations where individuals find their actions and thoughts prohibited. Situations attached to religious conditions, moral and legal interpretations of good and evil are the obvious location to consider

prohibition. Here *prohibition* agitates anxiety, and it also serves to stir a consciousness of liberty and action (Moyn, 2012). Moyn (2012) explains further using Kierkegaard's views on *salvation*, noting how repentance (and salvation) offer opportunities for the rehabilitation of thoughts and actions (Moyn, 2012). With this rehabilitation comes thoughts of 'possibility', and in the mix of possibilities, the individual becomes conscious of their freedoms and potential. Within these possibilities and freedoms, we find and exercise *choice.* In the mode of choosing, the individual experiences anxiety twice, albeit within different levels of intensity and subjectivity; once in the anxiety of choosing between objects and a second time in the anxiety rooted in the burden of being free to choose (Moyn, 2012). It is in anxiety that the individual finds freedom, and anxiety is the foundation of secular freedom according to Sartre (Sartre, 2003; Aronson and van den Hoven, 2013).

The influence of Jean-Paul Sartre

Sartre was a significant voice in the second wave of existentialism (Warnock, 1965; Gorz, 1966; Macquarrie, 1972; Flynn, 1975, 2007b, 2007a; McBride, 1989; Howells, 1992, 2018; McCulloch, 1994; Matthews, 1996; Cumming, 2003; Catalano, 2005, 2008; Bernasconi, 2006; Birchall, 2007; Cox, 2008; Aronson and van den Hoven, 2013; Kaufmann, 2016). This was a period where anxiety came from the human realisation that there is free-will and it is the sole responsibility of the individual to find their life's meaning in the world (Solomon, 2005). The second wave was a departure from the religious discourse of the first wave of existentialism and a challenge to the permanency of religious doctrine.

> *"Aesthetic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man, or as Heidegger has it, the human reality." (Sartre 1946:5)*

Sartre embraced the label 'the philosopher of the instant' in reference to his study into time and his focus on the present (Sartre, 1984; Mori, 2012). He was an atheist

and he advanced existential thought by rejecting the notion of God's benevolence and divine intervention. In doing so, he made a significant case for the reality of nonbeing (Solomon, 2000, 2005). Sartre's existentialism, like Camus's, was framed in response to moribund times where the shock and horror of war and the behaviour of nation states and their citizens led to a reform of human moral standards. He was connected with the French resistance in World War II and made Existentialism popular as a movement (Langiulli, 1997). Sartre rejected the invitation to define Existentialism (Bernasconi, 2006) and challenged the use of systematic approaches and rational categories to define life and people in life. After the Second World War, he became concerned with developing a political philosophy including Marxist social ideas. Sartre wrote novels, plays, and philosophical treatises such as *Being and Nothingness* (Kramer, 2002; Sartre, 2003) and in 1964 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, but he declined to accept the award to protest what he considered the corrupt values of bourgeois French society (Langiulli, 1997). In rejecting the prize Sartre further portrayed himself as an outsider, dismissive of his bourgeois upbringing and the privileged education he received and distancing himself from the academics who had become critics of his philosophy (Merkel, 2019; Kimball, 1987).

Sartre's phenomenological beginnings

Sartre was heavily influenced by the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) who studied the structures of human consciousness and experience (McBride, 1989; Cooper, 1999; Sartre, 2003; Guignon, 2004; Solomon, 2005; Kaufmann, 2016) and Heidegger's phenomenological writings on human experiences and knowledge (Cox, 2008).

For Husserl, knowledge is accrued on the physical plane as first-hand experiences in the 'life world' of immediate experiences and on an intellectual plane as 'objects of consciousness' (Langiulli, 1997; Solomon, 2005). These objects of consciousness are intentional mental acts and do not need the presence of an external object to mean something in the world to the individual. For example, bringing to mind feelings of melancholy or cheerfulness are mental acts of meaning. These mental objects are subjective experiences and do not require confirmation from others that the sensation is real for the individual experiencing

the melancholy or cheerfulness. Here, the self is important as a conduit for the mental act and as an interpreter of meaning (Solomon, 2005). Husserl notes that physical experiences also require a mental act, an object of consciousness, to give it meaning and value for the individual (Langiulli, 1997). Sartre endorses the role played by emotions in supporting knowledge (and decision making). However, he deviates from Husserl on the process of knowledge development. For Sartre, knowledge is posteriori and derived from experience and interactions with others, and as such he weakens Husserl's central argument about the centrality of 'self' and the integrity of the introspective aspect of the mental act (Gardner, 2009). For Sartre, the input and feedback from other people is also needed if someone is to find meaning and significance in what they do (Solomon, 2005). He is making a distinction between the being of consciousness and the being of facticity; for-itself and in-itself, respectively. These are the themes of his 1943 phenomenological ontological study *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre evolved Edmund Husserl's phenomenological method by bringing the human experience of imagination alongside Husserl's principle of perception. For Sartre, this arrangement better reflected the human conditions that made the world a reality for individuals and enabled the individual to make sense of and find meaning in their cognitive and affective states when expressing their existential freedoms, responsibilities, and actions.

As a phenomenologist, Sartre was interested in analysing and making sense of intentional acts of consciousness, and what the acts mean to human existence. In addition to demonstrating what goes on in human consciousness these intentional acts also reveal how individuals choose to engage with their environments and others. Phenomenology also piqued Sartre's interest because it spoke to his interest in real-world experiences, i.e., those expressed from the first-person point of view (Merkel, 2019).

This phenomenological lens led to a deep interest and focus for Sartre on two aspects of the self: firstly, phenomenon – that the world can be seen, and its conditions can be observed to exist; and secondly, noumenon - things that exist in themselves and outside the human senses. Sartre placed an emphasis on phenomenon over noumenon, eventually developing beliefs that how humans exist

in the world is a function of their free decisions and self-awareness to create meaning out of the facts that confront them in real time (McBride, 1989; Sartre, 2003; Kaufmann, 2016).

Sartre’s engagement with politics

Sartre also applied phenomenology as a device to review and adjust his own philosophical thinking, and as a way of communicating his own socio-political interests to others outside the formal education academies and universities (Merkel, 2019). This attention to phenomenology brought him to the conclusion that he needed to develop a political attitude to realise and understand his own politics if he was to engage effectively with contemporary issues (Merkel, 2019). However, his philosophy did not develop during this time to the point of providing tools for individuals to apply to socio-political issues and deal with ethical concerns (Merkel, 2019). Merkel (2019) describes this state as Sartre’s ‘self-imposed incoherence’ (2019:23), an attempt to avoid giving his method a precise framework. Merkel (2019) also comments that Sartre’s apolitical anarchism, as communicated by de Beauvoir, left his work open to the conventional (bourgeois) interpretation he set out to challenge.

According to de Beauvoir (Merkel, 2019), Sartre displayed anarchistic tendencies, rejecting universal authority and generalisations. His was a philosophical anarchism of “pure mind and perfect freedom” (2019:22), not a political anarchism. Sartre’s philosophical anarchism in rejecting “established systems of ideas was not undertaken in the name of a rival system but rather in favour of no system at all” (2019:22). His lack of belief in generalisations meant that he “denied himself the right even of formulating his repudiation in generalized terms” (2019:21); instead, Sartre embraced several theoretical positions which were not necessarily compatible with each other. Notwithstanding, Merkel (2019) saw the development of Sartre’s philosophy as expeditionary, a disorganised journey where Sartre was “most receptive to ideas… which he came across in the 1930s and which seemed to offer a validation of his approach” (2019:23). For Sartre, *phenomenology,* and *existentialism,* were not ultimate destination points of his philosophical journey, but they were landmark features during his journey to understand human existence (2019).

Though predisposed to anti-capitalist protest, prior to his second world war experiences of living under Nazi occupation and violence, Sartre was apolitical in his writings (Solomon, 2005). Van den Hoven and Leak (2005) writes that Sartre's primary motive for political engagement came out of his experiences of his country's defeat and surrender to "the Nazis and their French henchman" (2005:ix) during the second world war. At that time, his focus was still on social phenomena and the challenge of being human, though he did write about the absurdity of war in his *War Diaries* (Sartre, 1984), but not the politics of war (Solomon, 2005; Merkel, 2019).

Sartre was interested in social and political matters, however he was more active in "arguing about political issues" (Merkel, 2019: 25) through his writing. This led Merkel (2019) to refer to Sartre as a "spectator… a superior figure" (2019: 25) looking down on the affairs of the rest of humanity. Indeed, de Beauvoir described Sartre as a solitary man on a mission to impart truths to society (de Beauvoir in Merkel, 2019). In his plays and novels, political ideas were subordinate to the motives of his characters who were frequently represented in idealistic terms rather than social change agents (Merkel, 2019). His characters' motives were displayed as psychological activities and interpreted by Sartre, for example, as reasons to avoid the individual taking responsibility for their decisions and actions. In his biographical works, such as Saint Genet (about the genius of the writer Jean Genet) (Sartre, 1971) and the psychological account of the flawed personality of poet Chares Pierre Baudelaire (Sartre, 1946), French historian Annie Cohen-Solal writes that we will find a disguised self portrait of Sartre (Cohen-Solal in Kimball, 1987).

Sartre held left wing views and was often described as a Communist and "a fellow-traveller of the French Communist Party (PCF) from 1952 to 1956" (Arthur, 2010:17). His decision to "become a 'critical fellow traveller' of the Communist Party" (van den Hoven, 2005: ix) in the early 1950s was driven by what he viewed as the distasteful behaviour "of his own class… the French bourgeoises" (2005: ix). However, like his philosophy, his politics were anything but systematic or coherent (Arthur, 2010; Merkel, 2019). In 1954, following a trip to Russia, Sartre misspoke claiming that the Russian people had full freedom of speech and opportunities to criticise the state (Arthur, 2010). However, he was critical of the USSR invasion of

Hungary and severed ties with the French Communist party in 1956 for denouncing the Algerian war of independence. More broadly, Sartre saw it as his responsibility to write about and criticise his country's imperialism by highlighting the parallel 'racism' given out by both the Nazis against the Jews during the second world war and the French against the Muslims of Algeria (2010).

In addition to his writing activities, Sartre also found salvation in his contributions to performing arts: "In my imagination, literary life was modelled on religious life. I dreamt only of ensuring my salvation" (Sartre, 2008:65). According to Merkel (2019), Sartre's plays had purpose to "convey certain political ideas about the necessity of revolt and liberation" (2019:5). His post second world war turn to political engagement did not diminish his interest in the phenomenology of consciousness, as laid out in *Being and Nothingness,* however it did shift Sartre's approach to a more questioning and aggressive posing of socio-political issues (Arthur, 2010). He displayed his sympathy for the underdog and outsider more frequently, leading him to become involved in the 'anti-colonial struggle' involving American expansionism and French imperialism (2010). His thinking on human freedom in the context of "colonialism, decolonization, and neo-colonialism supplied ambiguous concepts and a vocabulary for approaching what has come to be known as the "cultural" Other." (Arthur, 2010:27)

Colonialism

> *"Will we ask the Algerians to thank our country for allowing their children to be born into poverty, to live as slaves and to die of hunger?" (Sartre, 2001:133)*

Sartre (2001) saw colonialism as a system lead by politicians who were primarily interested in creating an economic system compliant to the needs of the colonisers at the expense of the indigenous people (Sartre, 2001). He saw this play out in Algeria where "there [was French] political predominance [and] economic predominance" (2001:140), enabling France to plunder indigenous resources and sequester land for European ownership. Practically this meant that the products of land were not consumed in the colonised country, the products were for the colonisers such as the growth of grape vines at the expense of cereals for local

trading and home consumption (2001). Indeed, all Algerian native rights were subsequently undermined by the application of a European civil code designed to ultimately destroy local collective and tribal property traditions by fragmenting land into smaller parcels for sale to land speculators. For Sartre, this form of capitalism was theft because it was imposed through a foreign code. In France, the code was promoted as a benefit of civilisation, however, he questioned how civilised Western nations actually were "for the colonist is fabricated like the native; he is made by his function and his interests" (Sartre, 2001:138). This sentiment echoed his 1946 essay *Anti-Semite and* Jew in which he highlighted the prejudice, hatred and complicity displayed by parts of his nation towards French Jews during and after the second world war.

Sartre (2001) writes that the colonial system is led by its own internal necessity to corrupt and demoralise the colonised, to impoverish them, to destroy their social structures and disrupt their social relationships. Consequently, Algerians are weakened by their lack of economic power, and without economic power, they attack the politicians and institutions that maintain their subservience at home and on mainland France, mainly through force. He also challenges the French to escape their own colonial cruelty that has served to limit their freedom (Arthur, 2010) by fighting alongside the colonised "to deliver both the Algerians *and* the French from colonial tyranny" (Sartre, 2001:140).

Sartre and violence

Sartre's view on violence evolved from one where he believed it achieved nothing and even labelled it an undertaking of "perpetual bad faith" (Birchall, 2005:256), to a strong view that violence was a powerful instrument of resistance and emancipation during the Algerian War of Independence. Sartre sanctioned and defended violence to force the resolution of a cause (Birchall, 2005). For him, conflict and violence on both sides, in the context of colonialism, can serve to enlighten individuals and serve as a catalyst for national independence (Sartre, 2008). He viewed those who believed that violence could be avoided in conflict situations as having a naïve view of a world that did not reflect the world he knew (Sartre, 2008). He did, however, acknowledge that there was a price to be paid for instigating violence: "it is the moment of the boomerang… it comes back on us and

strikes us… we do not recognise that it is ours" (Sartre in Birchall, 2005:257). For Sartre (2008), it was only those who wanted to protect their position and retain their bureaucratic structures – the oppressor – who advocated turning the other cheek. Individuals who did not acknowledge the power of the oppressor, he saw as being in a state of "self-deception".

Sartre and Marxism

Sartre did consider himself a Marxist, with a "rather strident adherence to [the orthodox Marxism of the early 1960s]" (Sartre, 2004:20). Marxism was the philosophy of his age and provided him with the structure for his own developing politics and theoretical choices (Merkel, 2019). In *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* (first published as Critique de la Raison Dialectique by Editions Gallimard, Paris 1960), Sartre (2004) sets out to renew aspects of the Marxist ethos using existential concepts to sharpen focus on the needs of the individual which were lacking in Marx's dialectic materialism (McBride, 2005). He believed that Marxism would mature when the collective acknowledged the freedom of the individual, and also when Marxist rules were relaxed to accommodate current times and conditions (Howells, 1992).

This orientation in existential theory for Sartre was not a clean and linear political journey; indeed, his interest in Marxism grew alongside his existentialist philosophy, and Merkel (2019) argues that there was no "single 'radical conversion'" (2019:272) from one to the other. Sartre (2008) writes that his outlook towards Marxism changed after World War II, at a point when he understood the "power of circumstances" (2008:82). For him, his circumstances became more complex than they were during the war where he had to contend with decisions around courage and risk, and like others of his time and setting he was straight out 'for' or 'against', e.g., occupation. Post-war politics he found involved a 'but', a third decision category, necessary to reflect a more intricate reality and condition of *being-in-the-world* (Sartre, 2008). For Sartre (2008), Marxism represented an important source of the knowledge he needed beyond his bourgeois upbringing, to find his place in the world, and it also complemented the psychoanalytical writing devices he used to portray his heroes and antiheroes in his novels and plays:

> *"Certain human sciences – marxism, sociology, psycho-analysis – provide me with the tools I need in order to know my place and the general lines of my development." (Sartre, 2008:753)*

This post war period also provided Sartre with new opportunities for political engagement, and confirmed for him that existential authenticity is also found in participating in mass movements (Birchall, 2005). Sartre's (2004) *The Critique of Dialectical Reason Volume One,* was an engagement with Marxism and intended to show the progressive features of both existentialism and Marxism, highlighting individual situations and opportunities for individual freedoms. However, what emerged was a creation that was neither existentialist nor Marxist, and put down to Sartre's misconceived notion of what Marxism was (Howells, 1992; McBride, 2005; Arthur 2010; Merkel, 2019). Notwithstanding, in Sartre's defence he saw the pursuit of existential freedom as unfinished, and, like the struggle for freedom in Marxism, it required an unconditional and ongoing commitment to action and praxis (Sartre, 2004). He argued that existence and the human condition does not have an answer; it is just how existence is (Sartre, 2003) and that "history has no predetermined end, and there is no guarantee that it will be a happy one" (Birchall, 2005:261).

The *determinism* and inevitability of Marxism's historical materialism was a paradox to Sartre. On one level Sartre (2003) did not believe that the individual could continue in a state of alienation once they engage with their freedom through consciousness (Baskin, 2010) and while acknowledging that contemporary society is alienating, Sartre believes that the individual can choose to exist in a way determined by others or determined by themself (Sartre in Aronson and van den Hoven, 2013). On another level, for Sartre, an existential reality reflects an irrational world not an orderly and coherent world represented in Marxism. In addition, for Sartre, circumstances do not prevent choice. McBride (2005) is unconvinced that this tension with different interpretations of *determinism* was a significant reason for Sartre to lose confidence in Marxism, because Sartre had shown that he was always able to work through contradictory political and social issues in his theories and writings and Sartre could always justify his position in terms of *being* in an absurd world.

The enduring conflict between Sartre's existentialism and Marxism lies in both philosophies relationship with the activities and results of science. Sartre's philosophical anarchism and rejection of established systems of ideas and authority included a suspicion of the universal truths of science (Merkel, 2019). Marxists, however, view the outcomes of science as expressions of reason and include explanations of Sartre's absurdity. Where Sartre's existentialism accommodates ambiguity in existence and considers life as accidental, perhaps a gamble; Marxism intends something more concrete to ensure the class struggle is organised and able to sustain change. Paradox and ambiguity are present in Marxism; however, its practitioners look for patterns to existence and consistent arguments so they can anticipate events and ensure the class struggle ends in victory. Sartre (2008) maintains that consciousness "is only born in struggle" (2008:298); however, class struggles are ubiquitous in the capitalist system, but class consciousness only arises "where the struggle is actually being carried out" (2008:298).

Sartre's existentialism and Marxism also have a distinct relationship with the foundations of human consciousness and human transformation. In existentialism, the dynamic interplay between the objective *being-in-itself* and the subjective *being-for-itself* and *for-others* enables an urgent and immediate opportunity for individual transformation. In Marxism, human existence is part of nature and personal growth is about rising above one's given human nature. In each of the above modes of being, the individual is exposed to different human conditions which serve to either support or hinder the individual's existence. Arguably, an intense, existential mode of being creates the conditions for struggle and presents opportunities for the individual to experience both existential anxiety and consciousness.

A key concept that informs this research is existential freedom, not an individual's relationship with the modes of production or class. To include Sartre's interpretation of Marxism, this research would potentially narrow down and distort the lens with which lived experiences of constituency activists could be examined. In particular, including a Marxist lens in this research may limit the range of motives and conditions that individuals claim as reasons for their political engagement and participation. It is, however, important to note the influence of

Marxism and the tensions Sartre grappled with, and above, I offer Marxism as an illustration of his evolving existential philosophy. However, Sartre's interpretation of Marxism is not a feature of this research.

Sartre on existential anxiety

As stated earlier in this chapter anxiety is a common thread throughout existentialism, and the theme of anxiety is continued with Sartre. In existentialism, anxiety and anguish appear in response to the unknown world and out of these anxieties come passions and desires, such as anger and ambition. It is worth noting that Heidegger's notion of "angst" and Sartre's "anxiety" are often used interchangeably in translations of existentialism (Cooper, 1996; Solomon, 2005). Anxiety or angst are principal existential experiences that indicate the intensity of an individual's self-awareness and provide important emotional events that stimulate reflexivity and possibilities (Sartre, 1946; Solomon, 1974; Judaken and Bernasconi, 2012; Kaufmann, 2016). Anxiety is "the source of both our torment and grandeur" writes Sartre (in Aronson and van den Hoven, 2013:91). These experiences of unease stimulate a vital level of individual self-awareness and an accompanying environmental alertness. It is in this state of self-awareness that the individual recognises the full extent of their freedoms and their responsibilities (Sartre, 1994; Cox, 2008).

Experiences of anxiety involving freedom and responsibility are commonly attached to periods of crisis and significant decision points in people's lives. These feelings of crisis are consistently personal, involving moods where one feels superfluous, undefined and in the way (Sartre, 2003, Moyn, 2012). However, this characterisation of existential feelings as instability and confusion diminishes some of the potential gifts and personal developments to come out of the existential experience. Sartre (2003) explains these gifts and personal growth as consistent with his 'vertigo of possibility' concept. This 'vertigo of possibility' consists of choices to either confront and engage with freedom and responsibility or reject freedom by avoiding the anxiety of deciding (Sartre, 2003; Cumming, 2003). In rejecting freedom, Sartre regards this as deceiving oneself about the true structure of one's existence and leading to acts of bad faith (Cumming, 2003). Sartre (2003) acknowledges that bad faith and emotions are important coping strategies for some

people and that the constraints of a situation should not be underestimated. Notwithstanding, he compels the individual to push through with a favourable outcome by seeking a fit between the limitations of the situation and the individual's self-awareness.

Sartre writes about individual freedom corresponding to individual responsibility (Sartre, 2003; Cumming, 2003). When experienced together, freedom and responsibility advance an individual consciousness that produces a sense of solidarity and intention to support others in collective action (Solomon, 2005). This existential consciousness and responsibilities extend beyond the individual 'being' to actively influence the quality of life for self and others. This includes undertaking individual projects and collective actions on a range of issues, for example supporting the needs of vulnerable individuals and groups. In exercising their freedoms and responsibilities through the projects they choose, individuals find different viewpoints to imagine their world and to understand their individual role within it (Sartre, 2003, Solomon 2005).

Sartre on *being* in the world: "Existence precedes essence"

Sartre writes that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre 1946 in Solomon, 2005:207) and the human being first exists, and then "encounters themselves, surges up in the world and defines themselves afterwards" (Solomon, 2005:207). In short, they first exist, then experience life and then out of *nothingness* they produce their human nature (Sartre, 1946; Solomon, 2005).

The term *essence* is often viewed as equivalent to human nature, however in a Sartrean context *essence* signifies something beyond human traits to include the freedom of self to choose, individual possibilities and projects to be undertaken in the world, and a subjective sensemaking process internal and unique to the individual. When human beings have more insight into how to make sense of the lived experience, they are better placed to understand their sense of self in the world and anticipate the structures and boundaries of their freedoms and choices.

Existence before essence is Sartre's central idea about taking responsibility for one's consciousness and being in the world, discussed in greater depth below. By focusing on *existence before essence* (Sartre, 1946) and studying how human

beings live and deal with *being in the world,* Sartre presents a distinct perspective on the realities of the lived experience and offers approaches for making sense of an individual's relationship with reality, their relationship with themselves and with others.

> *"... man primarily exists – that man is, before all else, something which propels itself towards a future and is aware that it is doing so." (Sartre in Langiulli, 1997:395)*

In *Existentialism is a Humanism* lecture, Sartre (1946) states that the individual is in control of their human condition and in realising the weight of this responsibility – *towards a future* – they will experience intense emotions of anxiety. When the individual recognises, accepts voluntarily, and works through their responsibilities in good faith their experiences and emotions have the potential to become ones of freedom and consciousness, and a more satisfactory and subjective relationship with the world that includes respect for the freedom of others (Sartre, 2003). In *Being and Nothingness,* (written before his 1946 lecture) Sartre (2003) expands further on the details of freedom and consciousness and authenticity as features of the human condition. In Sartrean existentialism, the human condition begins with the subjective human being and develops out of their experience in the world and the perceptions they attach to their reality (Sartre, 2003). There are human conditions common to all, such as the inevitability of death and being in the world with other human beings (Cox, 2008). However, outside these conditions, and additional demands and limitations placed on the individual by their society and the wider world, the individual is free to choose how to *be* in the world. In existential terms, the focus of *being-in-the-world* is about making sense of their subjective consciousness and agency, "not their social world" (Sherman, 2020:58). According to Sartre, an individual's growing awareness of their subjective freedoms and responsibilities, their *authenticity*, are paired with inevitable moments of personal anxiety and anguish (Cox, 2008).

Sartre's ontology can be understood in the context of the interaction between three modes of *being*: 1) the pre-reflective *being-in-itself;* 2) the *being* of consciousness and intentionality, *being-for-itself*; and 3) the *being* in rapport with others in the world, the *being-for-others.* Sartre uses the relationship between these three modes

of *being* to describe and explain an individual's engagement with the world, for example, their expressions of consciousness, their actions of freedom and their relationship with others (Cooper, 1999; Hatzimoysis, 2011). The three modes of being (Table 1) are available to the individual and interact in a way that informs the individual about the potential for their existence.

Table 1: The main features of each of the three modes of being (Sartre, 2003)

Being-in-itself	**Being-for-itself**	**Being-for-others**
– A fixed and undifferentiated *being* of facticity (e.g., age, height) – A *being* represented by a physical self and identity – A pre-reflective *being* of non-consciousness – An immanent *being* who functions in the instant – A physical, inert and transactional *being* – The basis for the fundamental project	– A *being* of consciousness and intentionality transcending the being-in itself – A *being* of insecurity and anxiety – A self-aware *being* that defines itself by making choices and taking action – A dynamic *being* that looks to the future and considers possibilities – A temporary and transformational *being*, reaching out to a future self, becoming what it is not – A location for bad faith	– A *being* in an intersubjective world – A *being* that is vulnerable and defensive and in conflict with others – A *being* where individual freedom is challenged by the freedom of others. – A *being* experiencing loss of subjectivity and self-definition – A place of embarrassment and shame – A *being* necessary for authenticity
⟷	– A *being* in negotiation with the being-in-itself and the being-for-others – A sensitive *being,* in conflict with the being-in-itself – A place of questioning, 'being-by-being'	⟷ – A *being* aware of being noticed and judged by others

Being in-itself and *being-for-itself* are important modes of *being* and fundamental to Sartre's work; it is the foundation on which all his critique is based. For example,

how the individual engages and exists in the world is a function of their free decisions to create meaning out of the facts with which they are confronted in each of these modes of *being* (Sartre, 2003). As an individual's consciousness and freedoms grow so does their self-awareness to include an understanding of the value of individual experiences of disunity and conflict (Baugh, 2020). For Sartre, *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself* are present in the individual but are not active at the same time.

The mode of *being-for-others,* what others think of us, is a powerful determinant of how the individual sees themselves (Sartre, 2003; Cox, 2008). The subjective meaning of their existence is found in the relationship they have with themselves – *being-for-itself-in-itself* – and the relationship they have with other people – *being-for-others* (Sartre, 2003).

The three beings interact with each other; the relationship between *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself* is a transitionary one where conflict is inherent in the temporary relationship between the fixed being and the transcendental being as they negotiate meaning in the world. A further tension exists between the *being-for-itself* and the *being-for-others* as the individual recognises the freedom and consciousness of others and how this impact on their authenticity. However, experiences of disunity within the self and conflict with others can produce a deeper acknowledgement of the different aspects of the self, their future possibilities and provide for a more celebrated level of the lived experience of being in the world.

Furthermore, in the interaction of *beings* there is a "questioning of being-by-being" (Guignon, 2004:Ch8, p22) where the individual defines their fundamental project and themselves. In the state of *being-for-itself*, the individual is propelled towards being their own originator, an unachievable superhuman God-like condition of *being-for-itself-in-itself* (Sartre, 2003; Cox, 2008; Cumming, 2013). However, the being-as-a-whole, remains aspirational and stimulates a constant shift in tactics as the *being* attempts to get closer to the out of reach goal of being the creator (God) to the self.

Sartre's Fundamental Project

> *"Sartre defined an individual's life as the manifestation of a single fundamental project. Whatever changes—no matter how radical—occur in a person's goals, attitudes, or beliefs, they simply become incorporated into a single, continually modified fundamental project." (Charmé, 2020:259)*

> *"A person's fundamental project is their life history viewed as a ceaseless effort to overcome their own particular lack of being as defined by their fundamental choice of themself." (Cox, 2008: 89)*

A central feature of Sartre's existentialism is the *fundamental project* (Sartre, 2003). The fundamental project explains an individual's desire to be the self-creator of their own being and, as exemplified in Cox's (2008) quote above, to describe the fundamental project of a person is "to tell the story of their life in a particular way" (Charmé, 2020:259). The fundamental project is intended as a long-term, individual, voluntary commitment to shape the individual's total being in the world (Sartre, 2003; Blomme and Bornebroek te-Lintelo, 2012). As a project of being, it is regarded as a unique and individual undertaking to make meaning out of one's experiences, responsibilities and possibilities in the world (Charmé, 2020). The fundamental project is different for all individuals and is a means for discovering their world and informing how the individual lives in the world. As such, the fundamental project represents a grand ambition to *be* and exist in the world as a whole person absorbed in (and fixated on) an attitude of existential freedom.

In Sartrean tradition, the *fundamental project* can only be known retrospectively because it involves choices informed by ongoing experiences and actions that are forever (until one's death) in transit. In this context, Sartre encourages the individual to view their *fundamental project* as a "choice in the making" (Charmé 2020:259). Choices are inevitable in life and are accompanied with attached responsibilities and consequences and it is in these responsibilities and consequences where the individual finds meaning and freedom in life (Sartre, 2003). An individual's choice is displayed in their actions and their actions also give meaning to subsequent actions (Sartre, 2003), hence the transitional nature of

the fundamental project. The unity of free-choice and action represents the individual's total being in the world (Sartre, 2003).

It is also through the conscious being-for-itself where the individual recognises their incompleteness, their *lack* of being. The *lack* represents the being's subjective desire for some future fulfilment; the *fundamental project* therefore exists as a negation of the existing situation and gives meaning to the actions and desires that follow the individual's choices (Morris, 2020; Poellner, 2020).

Sartre's *fundamental project* has also been understood as a gesture to the self and others that the individual chooses themself, not a deity or an authoritarian leader, to interpret and guide them through their world (Onof, 2011). Sartre directs the individual to be an active author of their own events by setting purposes and goals in life instead of seeking a perfect resolution to questions about existence and being (Sartre, 2003). In choosing to take control, the individual experiences personal freedoms and agency. Affiliated to freedom is a growing self-awareness and understanding about their relationship with the world and the detail of their circumstances in the world. This self-awareness represents a shared consciousness with others, and a vital connection with the world and its environment (Sartre, 2004). Through this connection with the world, and others, the individual is alerted to the phenomenon and experience of *scarcity*, where the individual or their group detects "the contingent impossibility of satisfying all the needs of an ensemble" (Sartre, 2004:829). This experience may drive the individual, and the group, towards a better condition, or it may involve the individual in an 'existential crisis' where the individual rejects their (original) fundamental project and selects another course of action in their life.

A *fundamental project* is propelled by the individual's consciousness, a consciousness nourished by both cognition and affect (Charmé, 2020). In Sartrean terms, consciousness is found in the state of being-for-itself, an interrogative and reflective *being,* that reawakens the experience and feeling of being-in-the-world. This inquisitive and reflective situation includes a determined recognition of the individual's subjectivity and individualism, what Kaufmann (2016) terms a *volatile* individuality. Existentialists, including Sartre, respect the wide range of values and beliefs held by different people as they shape their own subjective lives; however,

they view individuality, a disposition favourable for the fundamental project of self-creation, as volatile (Kaufmann, 2016). In a state of volatility and struggle, emotions function as an opportunity to transform the individual's situation and conditions. This volatility, a sensation of existential non-being and an experience of Sartrean *nothingness*, presents as an assembly and launch point for a *fundamental project*. The individual's *fundamental project* evolves through decisions and choices, interaction with their environment, relations with others and moments of crisis, and may involve several allied activities. Such undertakings will depend on the needs and interests of the individual and may include political engagement, commitment to change, shared responsibilities, non-conformity, and also acts of bad faith.

A *fundamental project*, and allied activities, are "an orientation toward a goal" (Webber, 2020:111). The goal is to individualise the world by being authentic in one's free choices and actions, and to accept responsibility for the consequences of these freedoms (Cumming, 2003). Additionally, a goal is a work in progress and requires individuals to apply their imagination, found in the *being-for-itself*, to take stock of their life and envision their possibilities for the self (Webber, 2020).

Individualising involves personal identity, independence, and responsibility. It is a responsibility for the self and responsibility to appreciate the human condition and its possibilities in the world (Sartre, 2003). In this context, individuality does not mean passive self-reliance. The individual is challenged to live and experience their fundamental project and create allied projects that are designed to explore what is possible in the world (Goldthorpe, 1992). These experiences and projects can be framed as *praxis:* the freedom to act and care in the world (Veneklasen and Miller, 2013). The *fundamental project* also exhibits choices made in anxiety and undertaken in bad faith (Sartre 2003).

Sartre (2003) notes that an individual can reject their fundamental project at any time and select another course of action. He observes that the individual will periodically attempt to escape from the burden of their freedom and responsibility and pursue a project of bad faith over projects of freedom and authenticity (Sartre, 2003; Detmer, 2007, 2020; Cox, 2008). It is possible to loosen "the hold of bad faith" (Gardner, 2009:191), and respond to opportunities to choose other ends for

oneself with a “radical conversion” (Charmé, 2020: 259) to authenticity and responsibility (Sartre, 2003).

Freedom and consciousness

For Sartre, existentialism sheds light on individual experiences of navigating an undetermined world (Sartre, 2003; Cumming, 2003; Gardner, 2009). In Sartre’s existential principle that “existence precedes essence” (Sartre 1946 in Solomon, 2005:207) an individual can be whatever they choose to be. To ‘be’ includes the individual’s physical entity, their facticity, their choices and the range of actions and interactions they undertake while being in the world. These experiences are considered in the context of individual actions, decision-making and the application of individual beliefs and values. Interdependently, these actions and attitudes offer the potential for individual freedoms. These existential freedoms are self-produced by the individual, not given, and are constantly tested as part of the human condition (Sartre 1946, 2003). Sartre writes that we are more than our condition and we are “condemned to be free” (Kaufmann, 2016: Ch 9, p177). In accepting responsibility and the burden of one’s own existential freedom, freedom rises and falls in self-awareness, authenticity, and experiences of bad faith (Sartre, 2003). Sartre’s ‘authenticity’ is relational, and somewhat Kantian in its intention to care for the self and interact with others as neither means/ends, nor as possessions, but as co-existing beings (Solomon 2005). Sartre’s existentialism also views individual freedoms as a foundation for ‘solidarity’ and an acceptance of responsibility to engage in a collective world; we are self-conscious because of others (Sartre, 1946; Solomon, 2005). We see here the connection between individual and collective actions, and how they manifest as ‘solidarity’ in existing political activism research (Clark, 2000; Miller, 2002; Elad-Strenger, 2016).

For Sartre, only personal experience is meaningful, and truth is found in one’s sense of oneself, a non-being not a God. This is a reality where human beings take responsibility for setting their principles to live by (Sartre, 2003; Kaufmann, 2016). This reality is also connected to one’s choices, commitments, and responsibilities.

Sartre notes that consciousness has two dimensions. First, a non-positional dimension where one is conscious of oneself and not self-aware (Cox, 2008), and

second, a positional dimension, where "to know is to be conscious of knowing… to know is to know that one knows" (Sartre, 2003:8). There is also an interesting dynamic between consciousness and knowledge here, because Sartre states that not all consciousness is knowledge (Sartre, 2003). Consciousness will also be the outcome of feelings and moods. Although these feelings may surface in pre-reflective conditions, Sartre views emotions as strategies (Solomon, 1993), not just bodily reactions and sensations because "pleasure cannot exist 'before' consciousness of pleasure" (Sartre, 2003:10).

Nothingness and negation

Sartre writes about the role of consciousness in creating *nothingness*. One example of this occurrence is when Sartre considers *nothingness* as an element of the self; a dimension of the self that is created when one attempts to objectify oneself (Sartre, 2003). For Sartre there is literally *nothing* there in this objectification because one cannot distance oneself from the self. On this level the *nothingness* concept is a perplexing one, however it is more accessible when understood as a consciousness stimulated state of *non-being*, a condition of *being-for-itself* and a place of questioning and reflection, it is not therefore an empty place (Sartre 2003; Cox, 2008). Another example of *nothingness* for Sartre is found in his experience of looking for a friend in a café. The friend is not there. In his scanning and scoping of the café premises, Sartre experiences a profound sensation of *nothingness*. In his search for his friend, the intentional object of his search (Cox, 2008), he is drawn to what is missing in the café, ignoring what is present. This sensation of nothingness is the product of Sartre's perception of the non-existent friend. These experiences of *nothingness* are physical and objective facts for Sartre (2003).

For Sartre, *nothingness* as *non-being* is a lucid human condition where the individual is overcome with the reality of their existence and is situated in the space between *in-itself* and *for-itself*. This space is what Sartre calls *non-being*. It is useful to summarise *non-being* and *nothingness* as a condition of self-reflection, an inward turn culminating in a will to change the human situation and propel the being towards an authentic future (Sartre, 2003; Kaufmann, 2016). *Nothingness/non-being* is therefore an emotional construct where the individual is alert to their objective and subjective beings, while consciously and conspicuously relating their

anxiety and imagination to realise existential freedoms within the boundaries of their physical and social conditions. As an atheist, Sartre made a significant case for *nothingness* as serving as the chrysalis for the *being-for-itself*. In addition, Sartre believes that consciousness enters the world through the transcendence of *being-for-itself* (Sartre, 2003; Cumming, 2003).

Negation is a feature of consciousness and *nothingness*, and as a feature of consciousness, it is a skill and an aptitude. The skill lies in the ability to reflect on the individual's state of consciousness and identify the point at which consciousness negates and overcomes pre-consciousness. The aptitude element refers to the individual's capacity to deal with the 'passive' and 'active' states of existential consciousness, and this can be viewed as a form of denial (Sartre, 2003).

The 'Look'

Sartre (2003) writes that to be conscious and aware we need to be seen and in being seen individuals engage at a conscious level. The *look* of the other is integral to our self-consciousness because in the moment of the look we are instantly challenged to reflect upon our actions and motives. Here Sartre introduces another dimension of 'being-for-itself', a *being-for-others* that captures and communicates *being's* existential relationship with *others* (Sartre, 2003; Flynn 2006). This *being-for-others* accommodates the objectification encountered in human relations and the awareness of other people and their effects on us through their judgments and looks. Along with situations, other human beings – *others* – provide parameters to our existence, Sartre writes in *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 2003). Sartre considers whether the 'Look' from *others*, similar to situations, enriches or diminishes individual freedoms and self-knowing (Sartre, 2003; Cumming, 2003). Ordinarily the *other* encourages the individual to realise the organisation of their own *being* and the configuration of other objects in their situation.

Sartre (2003) considers the *look* from *others* as representing a unique relationship between human beings:

> *"What then am I aware of when I am aware that I am seen? I am aware of the Other and that the Other sees me, but I am also, and first of all, aware of myself as seen by the Other" (Due, 2000:79)*

In *Being and Nothingness,* Sartre (2003) gives an example of the *look* where a voyeur is interrupted by the sound of footsteps behind him: “I shudder as a wave of shame sweeps over me. Somebody has seen me” (Sartre, 2003:300). In the interruption the voyeur experiences embarrassment, “he experiences his body ‘objectified’ by another consciousness” (Flynn 2006:21; Sartre 2003; Cumming, 2003). In broad terms this relationship involves individuals in either a mode of the watched or the watcher. It is a relationship based on a display of vulnerability communicated by individuals during moments of intense activity and actions that take individuals outside themselves (Catalano, 2005; Flynn, 2006). During this phase of unreflective consciousness, the individual is intensely focused on an object or activity, and in doing so creates distance from the reflective self, in effect, an absence of ‘I’ as a being (Sartre, 2003; Cumming, 2003). In creating this distance, the individual is also revisiting relations with their self and the objects that define their existence (Sartre in Aronson and van den Hoven, 2013).

The *look* is a jarring experience where the individual loses what control they felt before the *look*. Sartre has likened it to the shock of someone facing a loaded gun pointed at them (Sartre in Cumming, 2003). It is an experience where the individual is no longer master of their situation, a moment when ‘the situation *escapes* the individual*’* (Sartre, 2003; Cumming, 2003). For the watched, the *look* can be a real and actual event, and also an imagined and inferred one. The *look* may mean a glance from others; however, it can also include the sound of nearby footsteps and a feeling of being watched while doing something. The *look* is a moment of distraction and unpredictability intensifying self-awareness in the individual. An awareness that may bring pride and pleasure in discovering oneself “in the fraternal look of others” (Sartre in Aronson and van den Hoven, 2013:199). Notwithstanding, the sense of discovery can often be a reminder of an individual’s indiscretions and responsibilities, an *unhappy consciousness* (Cumming, 2003; Fondane, 2016), leading to a feeling of fear and shame (Sartre, 2003; Cumming, 2003; Flynn, 2006). Either way, the individual is objectified by the incident and objectified by the watcher.

Objectification is internalised and influences an individual’s self-worth and authenticity such as the way the self exercises its choices, uses its freedoms and

how it views its responsibilities to others (Catalano, 2005). Over time, for Sartre, being an 'object' or 'thing' causes alienation and strips the self of freedom, further embedding an individual's *unhappy consciousness* (Cumming, 2003; Fondane, 2016). This involves a detachment in an individual's consciousness and their self-belief in future possibilities, leading to the creation of barriers in recovering their "alienated being… to return to itself" (Baugh, 2020:26). In Sartre's commentary on the deep prejudice towards Jews in France during World War Two he offers a powerful example of a nation's *look* and how some ordinary French people existed in relation to their Jewish countrymen and women. In Sartre's analysis of this situation, he considers how the "anti-Semite exists in relation to the Jew he hates, and the Jew exists in relation to the anti-Semite who hates him" (Cox, 2008:13). For Sartre, this illustrates a dimension of *being-for-others* and how individual's exist in relation to *others*. Here the anti-Semite creates the Jew, and the Jew creates the anti-Semite; existentially it is the *look* that creates the other and in the *look* the individual realises their limitations. We are *other* to the *other,* and experience the *other* by experiencing ourselves, and in objectifying the *other* we objectify ourselves (Flynn, 2006; Cox, 2008).

Sartre's existentialism is acutely attentive to moments when the world reveals itself to the individual. The concept and feasibility of the *look* is an important theme for Sartre, and this research is interested in whether a *look* from *others* influenced individuals into their constituency activism and what this *look* meant to the activist. For example, was their political engagement influenced by a certain perception or affirmation for the activist (Duncan, 2007); a vulnerability resulting from trauma and severance with their past (Marratto in Beith, 2015); a recognition of responsibility and opportunities for cooperation (Sartre, 2003); an expression of freedom and authenticity (Sartre, 2003; Cumming, 2003; Flynn, 2006); or an event or experience, neither happy nor unhappy, that took the individual outside them self and into their constituency activism?

The existential moment

The existential moment is an experience of clarity and more significantly a place of 'expectation', and it is located in existential *nothingness*, an instance of non-being (Cox, 2008). Cox (2008) elaborates that "expectation is not simply a feeling, but a

way in which a person encounters his world as presently lacking something for him" (Cox, 2008:71). The encounter with the self strips away preconceived notions of the world. In this encounter, one moves from something familiar to something unfamiliar, creating an emptiness. In the state of emptiness, the self has no purpose and no meaning. In this emptiness the self feels non-existent; there is just the existential moment and a sense of feeling of surplus and superfluous-ness; a *nothingness*, an intuition. An Husserlian intuition seen as "a special faculty that enables us to grasp essences and other abstract ideas" (Hintikka, 2003:188). In the state of intuition as an existential moment, one is transcending facticity. In this transcendence, one starts both planning for the future and reflecting on the past, and there is personal development to be found.

Human condition and existential needs

The back-and-forth tension as part of the existential moment was identified by Sartre (1946) as part of the *human condition*. The *human condition* is considered in the context of the ongoing opportunities it presents for the individual (activist) to choose to emerge from any existential discomfort and exist in either a state of authenticity and freedom, or in bad faith and self-deception in their socio-political world. Sartre's existentialist concept of the 'human condition' also recognises the wide range of structural forces and social situations that surround and shape the individual (Sartre 2003, Cumming, 2003).

Sartre's vision of the human condition was quite tragic and shaped by his experience of war and colonialism, occupation and P.O.W. experiences (Kramer, 2002). Wartenburg (2011) writes that there are three issues at the root of Sartre's tragedy: freedom, abandonment, and responsibility. It was Sartre's view that recognition of tragedy in life need not mean despair. By recognising the tragedy of life, we are spared the despair.

> *"The one who realises in anguish his condition as being thrown into a responsibility which extends to his very abandonment has no longer either remorse or regret or excuse; he is no longer anything but a freedom which perfectly reveals itself and whose being resides in this revelation." (Sartre, 2003:577)*

However, despite his own experiences, he defends himself against the charge of being a nihilist and philosopher of the ‘absurd’ (Cumming, 2003). Indeed, this concept of the ‘human condition’ strengthens Sartre’s standpoint that the individual is always a free agent equipped to find and experience freedom in between the fractures (and anxieties) of their social circumstances and their awareness of themself. These are Sartre’s acknowledgements of his three issues of freedom, his abandonment, and his responsibility. Sartre also notes the constraints of individual situations and human conditions, and as noted earlier in this chapter, he advocated the use of *nothingness* – a space between circumstances and self-confidence – to find freedom. For Sartre, therefore, “freedom is what you do with what's been done to you” (Sartre, 2012:11).

The phenomenologist philosopher Mariam Thalos (2016) concurs with Sartre that individuals do negotiate for and with themselves within their social context, and then exercise freedom to the extent that they act against the constraints placed on them by their material and social circumstances. Thalos (2016) frames this aspect of the human condition as “the ability to conceive of oneself as having a fitting set of options” (Thalos, 2016:105). However, Sartre emphatically claims that individuals deceive themselves about the true structure of their existence and that freedom is found in the constraints of the human condition, not in human nature (Webber, 2009).

Merleau-Ponty (Matthews, 2006) notes that we humans live in a world alongside other humans and in this world, and individuals relate and share objects. These objects are not necessarily physical objects because they include shared meaning, common language and collective purpose (Matthews, 2006). This research positions itself in agreement with Merleau-Ponty in the view that individuals do have a human nature that shows itself in its relationship with its environment and other individuals (Matthews, 2006). However, it is important to point out that Sartre (1946) makes a compelling case in *Existentialism is a Humanism* that issues of ‘choice’ and ‘freedom’, specifically ‘unlimited freedom’ to choose, are features of the *human condition* not human nature (Cox, 2008). In *Existentialism is a Humanism* Sartre (1946) writes:

> *"If values are uncertain, if they are still too abstract to determine the particular, concrete case under consideration, nothing remains but to trust in our instincts." (Kaufman, 2016: Ch9,181)*

The humanistic philosopher Erich Fromm (2013) offers an insight into aspects of existential human nature in his writings about the anxiety of isolation. For Fromm (Fromm, 2016; Carveth, 2017) anxiety is experienced in the pursuit of *freedom* and *belonging* in the individual's cultural and interpersonal environment. In this environment Fromm (2013) observes that the individual can find the anxiety of isolation so overpowering that the individual would consider giving up their freedom and satisfy themselves with novel and ultimately unsatisfactory conditions for a sense of belonging. Equally, the experience of anxiety, what he also referred to as fear (Fromm, 2013), presents an opportunity for individual change and progress. Fromm (2016) also notes that a myopic pursuit 'to have' freedom and happiness through consumption and hedonism, will not produce a satisfactory level of well-being. He does challenge the illusion of constant progress and consumption but tempers his conclusions by stating that a 'to have' need must be softened by a 'to be' desire to belong (Fromm, 2016). Together these two approaches to life – *to have* and *to be* – afford the individual opportunities for productive living. The anxiety will not disappear, but relief can be found in connecting and sharing with others.

In contrast to Fromm (2013, 2016) and his belief that *freedom* and *belonging* are core existential needs, Irvin Yalom (1980), an existential psychiatrist, believes that it is anxiety and fear that are the existential needs that drive us. For Yalom (1980) the tension manifests in an internal struggle between an individual's conscious and unconscious self. Existential fears or 'ultimate concerns' for Yalom (1980) are *death, freedom, existential isolation* and *meaninglessness*. It is in one's 'awareness' of these fears, i.e., their ultimate concerns, that individuals show the depth of their existential desires and needs.

Bad faith

Sartre's theme of *bad faith* extends Kierkegaard's concept of *despair*. Where Kierkegaard defines *despair* in the context of an individual's relationship with a

Christian God, and discusses *despair* as a consequence of individuals disassociating themselves from God's plan for them, Sartre's *bad faith* manifests when the individual fails to acknowledge their own responsibility for their own plans (Solomon, 2005; Cerbone, 2015). Where Kierkegaard views *despair* as a vital component of becoming a self (Solomon, 2005), Sartre interprets bad faith as a tactic to relinquishing responsibility for self (Sartre, 2003). For Sartre, bad faith is not accepting the anguish and despair of freedom, it is also avoiding the responsibility to choose actions and opportunities to enhance freedoms (Warnock, 1965). Avoiding responsibility is also an exercise in self-sabotage for Sartre. In choosing to deny individual responsibility an individual has also contrived, through negative choice, to stunt their own freedom (Cox, 2008). For Sartre *bad faith* is a mode of consciousness and in this mode the individual identifies their facticity, the situation of their *in-itself*. However, in bad faith the individual delays the transcendence of *in-itself* to a *for-itself* situation. In doing so, the individual is in suspension as neither a facticity nor a transcendence, what Heidegger called an 'inadequate self', or 'inauthentic existence' (Cerbone, 2015). For Heidegger, to exist authentically is to exist "as-a-whole" (Cooper, 1996:38); without the mode of *for-itself* there is neither freedom nor consciousness (Sartre, 2003; Cumming, 2003).

Self-deception

Sartre (2003) takes the view that *bad faith* is about 'self-deception'; specifically, where the individual deceives and lies to themself about their nature and responsibilities. In avoiding transcendence (to freedom) and prolonging instability between *in-itself* and *for-itself*, Sartre notes that the individual engages in another aspect of *bad faith* (Sartre, 2003; Cumming, 2003). In this protracted instability, Sartre warns that the individual is objectified and defined by others and, if unchecked, this existence (e.g., the *look* of others) will solidify an individual's claim that they have no free-will. Sartre calls this 'self-deception' (Sartre, 2003). This mode of existing in the world as an object afflicts the individual with an artificial sense of determinism, thereby providing further opportunities to evade and disown their facticity and transcendence (Sartre, 2003; Cumming, 2003).

Moldoveanu and Nohria (2002) identified Sartre as a philosopher of 'self-deception'. In their discussions on self-deception, they write about "the inner work of deception… and small mindedness" (2002:143) in avoiding the *for-itself* state of choice and action. Moldoveanu and Nohria's (2002) 'small mindedness' suitably captures the passive and narrow appeals often made to defend actions and inactions such as: *'what can I do about it, I'm only one person?'* This "inner work of deception" (Moldoveanu and Nohria, 2002:143) also captures a range of justifications individuals use to deceive themselves: 'I had no other choice' (helplessness); 'I couldn't help myself' (an emotional appeal); and 'everyone else does it' (a herd mentality).

Sartre (2003) says we can live in bad faith, but it does lead to a meaningless life because the *in-itself* state, like instinct, is not *truth*, it simply 'is' (Sartre 2003). An existential meaningless life is an individual life lacking in commitment and significance, a life swayed by the choices of others and impeded by conformity. In Sartre's existentialism, *truth* is the freedom to choose. In the situation 'is', the (*being-in-itself*) individual is stagnating and accepting of a 'slave' morality (Sartre, 2003). In the mode of bad faith, the individual will present as an impediment to self-awareness and consciousness of their own transcendence (Cumming, 2003). Bad faith is also a barrier to progress towards the creative outlet that is 'nothingness' because as the individual inhabits bad faith, they ignore opportunities to choose for themself freedom and consciousness. Here the individual is objectified as a possession, an object lacking the possibility of *being-for-itself* (Sartre, 2003). The individual can escape bad faith if their *beings* of facticity *(being in-itself*) and transcendence (*being for-itself*) are coordinated. Sartre (2003) writes that an *authentic* individual understands that these two dimensions need to co-exist. For Sartre (2003), this coexistence is achieved by the individual acknowledging that their purpose and goal is to exercise their freedom and master consciousness. There may be an explanation to human existence, according to Sartre, but bad faith will arise when the individual fixates on an explanation of human existence, rather than act to positively choose to pursue freedom in the world. To do this, the individual must free themself of self-deception and engage with the world as it really is. Solomon (2005) supports Sartre's concept and proposes that the central function of existentialism is to provoke the individual into examining their life for indications

of bad faith. In addition to finding meaning in *how* life is lived, the individual also intensifies their sensitivity to the broader experiences of others including episodes of oppression and exploitation.

Authenticity

> *"Authenticity is more than candour and informality. It is more than the representation of 'unaffected affability'" (Hind, 2010:205)*

The existential theme of *authenticity* considered in the first wave of existentialism is interpreted through Kierkegaard's concept of *anxiety.* For Kierkegaard, to feel anguish is to be *authentic* (Kierkegaard, 1985). In the second wave of existentialism there is agreement that leading an authentic life is full of *anxiety*. However, in wave two, *anxiety* is attached to consciousness and the awareness that individual freedom is driven by contingency (Sartre, 2003) and random factors in the world. For Sartre (2003), to be authentic is to be human, and to embrace the challenge of ambiguity in life is to live authentically. This ambiguity requires the individual to accommodate what life spontaneously provides, including periods of alienation and independence, obligations and dependence, and other outcomes of an imprecise human condition (Solomon, 2005). Sartre views constructive actions to these moments and conditions as commitments to future possibilities and regards individual responses that incorporates the freedom of others as an existential virtue. For Sartre, an individual's pursuit of *authenticity* can also lead to *bad faith* and *self-deception.*

In existentialism, to be an authentic individual is to celebrate freedom as the antithesis of bad faith (Cox, 2008). Authenticity rejects a 'no choice' position and negates facticity without blame, regret or excuse (Sartre, 2003). As discussed above, there are at least two ways one can fail to be authentic and in bad faith, one way is to remain as an object in the world and deny subjectivity and the possibility of transcendence through *nothingness* and *freedom*; and the second way is to claim transcendence without facticity (Cumming, 2003).

In engaging with behaviour one, Sartre writes about the bad faith of 'play acting' and uses his observations of the inauthentic behaviour of a waiter. In *Being and Nothingness* (2003), Sartre observes a waiter undertaking his duties the way an

actor plays a role in a performance. The waiter over commits to his role and as such is ‘absent from the performance’, and the waiter’s “condition is wholly one of ceremony” (Solomon, 2005:229). This absence means a mechanistic performance and non-attendance to the self. This non-attendance to self is replaced by an over reliance on the approval of others and a total immersion in the waiter role, to the detriment of exploring the waiter’s own possibilities beyond the role. In other works, Sartre writes of ‘sincerity’ as a contender for bad faith (Santoni, 1997; Cumming, 2003). Here sincerity debilitates the *in-itself* to the point where the individual cannot see themselves being anything more, in this example, than a waiter. For Sartre (2003) this means denying continuous growth and development, of the self yet to be.

With the second category of behaviour – transcendence without facticity – the individual engages in a conscious mode of behaviour where the individual pretends to be something they are not. For example, a local councillor may denounce domestic violence in the chamber and other public settings, then return home to beat their partner while justifying their behaviour on the grounds of stress, anger issues or addictions. The bad faith here is obvious, but the more disturbing dimension to this is when the councillor admits their behaviour to a confessor and receives absolution, and then returns to their violent routines feeling renewed and unburdened. By denying their history, their facticity, they are in bad faith. Another way of avoiding ‘bad faith’ is through what Sartre calls totalisation (Gorz, 1966). For Sartre every historical moment is a product of and contains traces of all the moments leading up to it (Cox, 2008). This totalisation involves an interaction between consciousness and the lived experience.

Both these categories are important aspects of the study and there are direct linkages to activist behaviours. The study will draw on the modes of freedom, consciousness, and bad faith in the lived experiences of activists. In addition, it is important to trace how bad faith plays out in political activism, because if it supports an individual in rejecting the burden of responsibility and denying their freedom it may signal an ‘immediate permanent threat to every project’ of the individual, because their projects are based on falsehoods (Cumming, 2003).

Emotions

> *"We can now conceive what an emotion is. It is a transformation of the world. When the paths before us become too difficult, or when we cannot see our away, we can no longer put up with such an exacting and difficult world. All ways are barred and nevertheless we must act. So then we try to change the world; that is, to live it as though the relations between things and their potentialities were not governed by deterministic processes but by magic." (Sartre, 1994:39–40)*

Our responsibility to ourselves is emphasised by Sartre when he describes putting ourselves into a state of inferiority by accepting things as 'good enough', and also by using emotions as 'tricks' so as not to have to say anything or make a decision (Sartre, 1994). Sartre views 'tricks', such as crying or using silence because something is too hard to do, as "behaviours of defeat" (1994:21) that reduce emotions to an inferior mode of consciousness. In an inferior state, according to Sartre (2003), "we become less critical of ourselves in moments of frustration and therefore we are prepared to make use of means which normally we should reject" (2003:viii). Functioning on an inferior level and abandoning responsibility requires an element of escape and "magical play acting" (Sartre, 1994:45). Magical play acting can lead to emotions that arise out of 'false states of mind' and are often driven by 'duty' rather than reality (Sartre,1994). We can see elements of false emotions evident in the accounts of Indira Gandhi's life (Frank, 2001), who was a reluctant Prime Minister, as was her son, as they were driven solely by duty to their family (Frank, 2001).

Furthermore, emotions that support behaviours that are based on anger, or 'false joy', and serve our own self-interests, undermine real emotions driven by substance and what Sartre calls 'real beliefs' (Sartre, 1994). Real emotions can be viewed as moral emotions that support a common purpose and demonstrate our selflessness, and these emotions are underpinned by superior consciousness, such as empathy and compassion (Solomon, 1993). There is something very appealing about the purity of an emotion and the desire for a strong congruence between one's principled thinking and honourable doing. However, there is a real danger here that

by articulating such a distinction between false and real emotions in the manner Sartre does, he is setting hypercritical ambitions for those among us who are still trying to master their emotions and learn from the outcomes of being candid in all situations.

In moving beyond a mechanistic application of emotions, Sartre argues that we should view emotions as conscious choices and strategies for coping with a difficult world. In this world, emotions are decision-points where we chose either positive or negative emotions, such as tolerance, or intolerance, respectively. The choices we make can lead to superior and authentic, or inferior life experiences.

The magical power of our emotions to transform how we see the world is a significant feature of Sartre's theory of the emotions. To appreciate the 'magic', we need to look for evidence of transformations in our powers of perception and affinity, not in the physical world. The transformation, a moment of conscious disquiet and unease (Sartre, 1994), may include dramatic changes to a "whole framework of experience—perceptions, feelings, and agency" (Achim, 2012:158). This transformation and conversion of perceptions requires the individual to be aware of themselves and be committed to the unfolding knowledge and belief in the transformative process. Like false states of mind, negative behaviour prevents transformation, and the atmosphere of disquiet and unease remains magical but with no purpose and end. For the magic to dissipate and the transformation to occur, the emotion must transcend itself to become "an intuition of the absolute" (Sartre, 1994:54).

Chapter summary

> *"We are both political beings, as citizens of social unhappiness,*
> *and metaphysical beings, as citizens of human unhappiness."*
> *(Fondane, 2016:34)*

This chapter considered a range of existential themes that overlap with constituency activism and can be used to better understand the lived experiences of constituency activists. As a framework for making sense of being in the world, existentialism has evolved from an institutional doctrine of the first wave (the commitment to an inherited essence and human nature as passed on from God), through to the political

and secular phase of wave two (where the individual is trusted and respected to make their own subjective choices and obligations to the self and others), and finally to wave three (representing an ongoing phase of existentialism driven by neuroscience that challenges a long-held belief in the uniqueness of human behaviour and free will). Across the waves, a common thread exists whereby existentialism is connected to either the anxiety of living under ecclesiastical guidance or contingency and human choices. For this research, anxiety also holds as a foundational concept, and in particular the anxiety of freedom and responsibility, the concepts of the second wave and the work of Sartre will further inform this research.

This research will apply the philosophical themes and existential concepts of Jean-Paul Sartre to analyse the motives and drives of constituency activist. Sartre's central concepts include that individuals are free to choose how they act in the world, and that human life that has no inherent meaning until it is lived. However, there are responsibilities attached to these freedoms. Crucial to this is Sartre's (2003) *fundamental project*, which is a choice in the making. The fundamental project is a project of 'being', driven by the *being-for-itself* towards consciousness and freedom (Sartre, 2003). The thread of consciousness runs through existentialism, and its importance rests on how consciousness can create possibilities for self-awareness and meaning in life. Consciousness also enhances the anxiety and pressure to choose for oneself and be heroic enough to stand apart from the crowd (Camus 1991; Sartre, 2003). This anxiety can be relieved by setting a purpose or project in life designed to accommodate the situation one finds oneself. A project can involve pursuing the freedom of *others* and a provides a means to uncover one's authentic self. An authentic self that responds to its situation and changing human condition.

The *fundamental project* can only be known retrospectively, as it requires conceptualisation through a process of reflection on individual actions and responsibilities in a person's life up until that point. Meaning is found in an individual's engagement with freedom and consciousness and a self-awareness, and in avoiding a life lived in bad faith. In a situation of existentialist consciousness, the

individual opens a portal to personal development and private discomfort through engagement with one's anxieties, self-deception and the *look* of others.

In this chapter we see that when these anxieties are engaged, they present opportunities to create moments of *nothingness*. It is in these moments of *nothingness* – transcendence and consciousness – where the individual is at the height of their subjectivity and able to set out and choose the future they want. In making sense of their *nothingness*, they find freedom and meaning. In addition, Sartre reminds the individual to comprehend that in one's actions one also acts for others in solidarity (Aronson and van den Hoven, 2013).

We also see an existential attitude (Tillich, 1952 in Solomon, 2005) materialise across the existential waves. This is an attitude that drives an individual's response to the anxieties (Sartre, 2003) and the absurdities of living (Camus, 1991) and one where individuals engaging with these absurdities and their anxieties by choosing to take responsibility for their decisions and following through with actions. These actions are demonstrations of *engagement* as well as of *freedom* and *authenticity* and may also involve human qualities of *bad faith*, and *self-deception*.

Existentialism is a philosophy of engagement and action, and as such, it lends itself to the exploration of political interests and motivations at an individual, subjective level (Sartre, 2004; Heter, 2006b). This research will use Sartrean concepts to frame the engagements and actions, and the existential needs of a diverse group of constituency activists. By using existentialism as a method of analysis, Sartrean existentialism offers a framework for analysing the lived experiences of constituency activists. Furthermore, constituency activism lends itself to being analysed through the lens of existentialism as it has potential to draw out existential concepts such as the *freedoms*, *responsibilities*, and *authenticity* of constituency activists. In this research, an existential lens is therefore applied to gain unique insights into political activism at constituency level, specifically how existential experiences manifest in the lived experiences of activists.

In addition, prior studies into activism have broadly missed the opportunity to acknowledge an existential interpretation. As stated in the previous chapter, existing research considers causes and content of activism and participation in politics (Norris, 2009), and rarely on *how* activism and activist are is influenced by

individual existential events, contingency, anxiety and the look of others . Arguably, constituency political activism has yet to be viewed through an existential lens. The second wave of existentialism therefore offers useful concepts with which to examine the lived experience of constituency activists. In doing so, this research moves beyond understanding political activism via motivations such as ideology, altruism, and incentivising the individual. Aligning Sartrean existentialism alongside constituency activism therefore provides new dimensions with which to view political activism via empirical evidence.

Chapter 3: Methodological foundations for this research

Introduction

The methodological approach was firstly, to respect and do no harm to individuals (Alammar *et al.*, 2019) kind enough to share their wisdom and experiences of constituency activism; and secondly, to identify and capture worthwhile knowledge that contributes to understanding the lived experiences and the work of constituency activists. With these two initial conditions identified, a variety of factors became obvious very early in my research design:

- This will be a qualitative research project designed to collect insights and lived experiences directly from constituency activists (Reid, Flowers and Larkin, 2005).
- Activists would be asked to share their "singular" (Petitmengin, Remillieux and Valenzuela-Moguillansky, 2019) insights and lived experiences during one-to-one interviews in neutral locations and places of their choosing.
- I may only get one chance to interview an activist, so the interview format needs to be flexible enough to have them share as much as they were willing to and structured enough to ensure I leave interviews with useful and relevant information.
- I will be recording a wide range of conversations and will need a data analysis system that helps categorise and code conversations so that I can highlight themes and concepts associated with substantial data collection of activists' existential experiences (Weston *et al.*, 2001; Gibbs, 2018).
- The data analysis method will be inductive and interpretative (Thomas, 2006).

In the *Introduction* chapter, I detailed how existing research uses the existential lens to examine the lived experiences, choices, and decision-making of a range of communities of practice; this research will use the existential lens to examine the lived experiences of a community of practice of local constituency activists in Leeds City region. Prior research shows that use of an existential lens as a method allows for a deeper understanding of themes such as freedom, choice, and

responsibility and how they underpin everyday experiences such as suffering (Arman, 2007), the anxiety of doing (Gorodetsky & Barak, 2016; Orland-Barak, 2016), choice and conflict (Wallace, 2009), authenticity (Fraternali, 1998), and fallibility (West, 2008)

Chapter 2 sets out an historical overview of existentialism and considered its underpinning themes with particular attention to Sartre's existential concepts. In this chapter, some of Sartre's relevant concepts are further discussed in the context of ontological and epistemological theories, and how they inform the methodological foundations of this research.

In the first part of this chapter, I discuss the composite philosophical ontological and epistemological foundations of this research that combine to provide the methodological foundation and structure for this research into the existential experiences of 26 constituency activists. Based on its ontological and epistemological foundations discussed below, this research uses an interpretivist approach as this is a study into the social world of constituency activists (Chowdhury, 2014). In this social world setting, unlike the natural scientific world, the activist's reality is subjectively created and the meaning of their actions and reasons are interpreted (Halperin and Heath, 2012; Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). Furthermore, activism is not just about action, but also about identity, belonging, struggle and resistance, all of which is experienced subjectively (Charmaz, 1999; Brown and Pickerill, 2009; Isin, 2009). In the second part of the chapter, I focus on the qualitative research paradigm and the organisation of the methods used in this research. For this research, activist experiences are recorded through audio taped, semi-structured interviews and data from the interview is analysed using a grounded inquiry approach (Fendt and Sachs, 2008; Hussein *et al.*, 2014).

All research is built upon a paradigm based on "a set of beliefs based on ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions" (Guba and Lincoln, 1994:107). My research paradigm consisted of an interpretative ontology (Altheide and Johnson, 1994; Krauss, 2005), a subjectivist epistemology (Norton, 1999) sometimes called "interpretivist" (Walliman, 2011, 2016), and with a grounded inquiry approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Annells, 1996; Fendt and Sachs, 2008). Arguably, this could be viewed as a multi-paradigm research approach because I

combine a grounded inquiry method – originally presented as a positivist research approach for measuring an external objective reality by Glaser and Strauss (1967) – with an interpretative ontology and subjectivist epistemology. However, these "links between ontology, epistemology, methodology and method" (Norton, 1999:31) combine to complement the research's intention to understand activism and activists through their lived experiences.

Ontology

Ontology is a philosophical term that refers to the theory of 'being'; it frames our beliefs and guides how we see reality (Marsh and Stoker, 2002). It is the investigation into the nature of reality through both a social scientific and social philosophical mode of study. A social scientific study looks at what exists in the social realm; and a philosophical study looks into how social phenomena exists, including their modes of existence (Rawnsley, 1998) and the connections between social existents (Furlong and Marsh, 2010). The ontological foundation of this research – a study into the existential moments experienced by constituency activists – is therefore important to establish, as ontology examines 'being' and the question of existence and what it means to be a conscious being, for example, how we see the world around us and how the world presents itself to us (Sartre, 2003; Cumming, 2003). Ontology is not a static condition; it involves asking questions of the world and of the self. These questions range from seeking answers to existence, how to measure the quality of life and, depending on the individual, whether one looks for harmony within the world or the randomness and the absurdity of life (Solomon, 2005).

Jacquette (2014) classified ontology into 'pure' and 'applied' ontology. Pure ontology focused on what is meant by the concept of 'being' and why there exists one logically contingent actual world. Applied ontology organised the domains of being or 'entities' in the world (Jacquette, 2014). These domains include actual objects in the world and the situations or state of affairs surrounding the objects. Together, pure and applied ontology frames our beliefs and guides how we see reality (Marsh and Stoker, 2002). This research sits upon an applied ontological foundation because the premise of the research is that our beliefs stimulate our

reality, and our thoughts create a picture of the world to us. These beliefs and thoughts are often not made explicit in language and daily life; they may be hidden or unconscious or innate, for example, a prejudice. Nevertheless, they shape our understanding of the world, and it is in this shaping and sensemaking that we can begin to understand existential emotions, feelings and fears that drive us.

Epistemology

Epistemology is the study into the nature and sources of knowledge, and refers to the beliefs, types and limits of knowledge (Goertz and Mahoney, 2012) found within 'being' and reality (Norton, 1999; Krauss, 2005). Epistemology is knowledge of the external world and, in existentialism, a creative process. It requires the *being* to know their world and understand the history of their situation by remembering and learning from the sensations of the past (Beith, 2015). The *being's* knowledge and fundamental project (of being-in-the-world) are lived rather than passively known (Goldthorpe, 1992). Knowledge is central to personal change and as praxis it presents as the promise of potential growth and transformation. For Sartre, engaging with knowledge is not enough, it requires the individual to apply their knowledge to generate sites of existential *nothingness*, *consciousness*, *choice* and *freedom* (Aronson and van den Hoven, 2013). Understanding how experience generates a form of implicit knowledge (e.g., recognising the objective self) and how this knowledge gives rise to an explicit understanding of being (e.g., the *authentic being*) can fundamentally shift how the being thinks of itself and makes sense of encounters with *nothingness*.

Sartre's ontology and epistemology

Jean-Paul Sartre regarded himself as a philosopher who investigated human experiences. He was a phenomenologist interested in the inner life of people and how objects of experience revealed themselves in human consciousness (Cumming, 2003; Kaufmann, 2016). For Sartre, human reality is anchored in the understanding that human nature is neither spirit nor matter; it is non-existent, and human freedom originates in self-determination, not in God's revelations (Sartre, 2003; Duncan, 2007; Cox, 2008).

Sartre was interested in experiences that present as opportunities for transformation, self-awareness, action and, to some extent, redemption. He noted that it was the subjective choice of individuals to take up or reject those opportunities and freedoms (Sartre, 2003; Flynn, 2006).

As detailed in Table 1 (Chapter 2), Sartre had three ontological modes: 'being-in-itself, 'being-for-itself' and 'being-for-others' (Sartre, 2003; Catalano, 2005). Sartre's theory of reality – his ontology – as set out in *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 2003) involves an analysis of an individual existing on three existential modes. Mode one is a 'being-in-itself', a physical *being* of facticity; mode two conveys the being existing as a 'being-for-itself' (a *being* of consciousness); and mode three, a 'being-for-others', which is a social *being* of consciousness engaging with the *look* of others. These three modes sketch out a relatively complex and subtle notion of existential existence and reality. For example, Sartre would recognise mode two – 'being-for-itself' – as a manifestation of a *being* in a state of *consciousness* and *freedom*, as well as always in flux and indivisible with its facticity and human situations (Sartre, 2003). Sartre preferred to view 'being-for-itself 'as a state of negation, what he refers to as a condition of existential *nothingness* (Sartre, 2003; Solomon 2005; Cox, 2008). Where the 'being-for-itself' is in the world and finds its subjectivity and existential *freedom* through its consciousness and facticity, the freedom of the 'being-for-others' is found in consciousness and a recognition that it is an *object* to *Others*. Existing as an *object* to *Others* presents inherent challenges for the individual, not least taking on the emotions that are attached to the expectations of the other (e.g., love/hate), and also experiencing the emotions one feels when one underperforms in their obligation to the other (e.g., shame).

Ontology for Sartre was a 'logical structure of existence' and a description of reality and *being* (Cox, 2008; Sass and Claramonte, 2020). Sartre's *being* was a subjective mode of living where life is measured and judged on the use of freedoms and experiences. Furthermore, *being* is demonstrated by one's lived experiences and actions, a key focus of this research. For Sartre, an existential life occurs in the dynamic between 'reality' and 'being' (Sass and Claramonte, 2020), a subjective mode of living where life is considered and defined in terms of individual

freedoms, choices and experiences. At this subjective level, finding existential meaning and purpose in life involves the individual engaging with their reality and committing to their *choices*, *freedoms* and *responsibilities* (Sartre, 2003).

Sartre therefore placed emphasis on *consciousness* and how phenomena appear to consciousness (Cox, 2008); his focus on the phenomenological indicates that his ontology was interpretivist. For example, he interprets phenomena, such as experiences, as revealing structures of *being* and a manifestation of consciousness and reality. Sartre does not describe consciousness as distinct from *being*, but as 'a form' of being. For Sartre there are no distinct modes of inside and outside consciousness; it is all one where 'being conscious' is a way of 'being-in-the-world' (Flynn, 2006).

Another dimension of Sartre's 'phenomenological' ontology is a distinction between consciousness and the natural and social world, as discussed in *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 2003). This distinction is the basis for his 'absolute freedom' proposition, namely that human beings are *always* free to choose (Sartre, 2003; Cumming, 2003; Catalano, 2005; Solomon, 2005). This distinction demonstrates Sartre's rationalist view that if the phenomena or concept is shaped 'outside' of the individual then it is incongruent with their beliefs and values; a situation where the *being* is inauthentic (Sartre, 2003).

Sartre's ontology is therefore based on the premise that a human being's condition and individual qualities are shaped by their lived experiences, not *a priori* assumptions about human nature. For Sartre, human beings have no predetermined pattern of existence and are responsible for their circumstances, and what they do in those circumstances defines who they are and how they choose to exist. He communicates his vision of a human reality, where the individual exists first then finds their essence, in the refrain that 'existence precedes essence' (Langiulli, 1997; Solomon, 2005). This *essence* is revealed in the choices and actions the individual takes independently of and interdependently with other human beings. Sartre acknowledges the complexity of human existence and the tensions and constraints characteristic of the various systems experienced by individuals. However, he emphasises that it is the choice of the individual how far they should go to accommodate the complexity and challenges faced.

There are two foundation principles orientating Sartre's theory of reality and political philosophy. The first principle is that existence and human relations are based on *conflict*. He believes that conflict is the basis of interpersonal relationships, and it propels the individual towards change and social progress, and towards existential *freedom* (Solomon, 2005; Sartre in Aronson and van den Hoven, 2013). The second principle is that human beings have become accustomed to the message that the systems they engage with must accommodate *scarcity*, an abstract and often unquestioned concept: "For we live in a world of scarcity in which every expenditure shows up somewhere else as a waste" (Sartre, 2008:578-579). He found that an acceptance of *scarcity* of both material and intellectual (e.g., imagination) resources was ubiquitous and as such this has led to dulled discussions and blunted displays of conflict between individuals, collectives and those making systemic decisions about what needs to be done to accommodate scarcity. For Sartre, *scarcity* allows for social utility to become "a utility for the minority at the expense of the majority." (Sartre, 2008:608)

There is very little written about the epistemology of Sartrean existentialism outside how the relationship between *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself* creates knowledge through reflection and consciousness (Solomon, 2005; Sartre in Aronson and van den Hoven, 2013). Knowing by reflection is knowledge one achieves merely by thinking about the matter at hand, what is referred to as direct knowing (Pappas and Zalta, 2017). Sartre does consider knowledge and learning in the context of these two modes of *being in-itself* and *being for-itself*, however he is interested in what knowledge *is*, rather than how knowledge is gathered and qualified. This means that Sartre's insight into knowledge is closer to ontology than epistemology (Gardner, 2009). As an ontology, Sartre focuses on the cognition of 'knowledge as consciousness', and as a means of distinguishing the self in *being-in-itself*, and its co-dependent, 'co-present' *being-for-itself* (Gardner, 2009). Parallel to this, Sartre's approach to epistemology is not whether we have knowledge, it is in understanding the structure of knowledge when negating and surpassing *being-in-itself*. An example includes the fundamental project of finding self-meaning and affirming the possibilities of the 'for-itself' to achieve a sturdier embodiment of the 'self-in-situation'.

Sartre's existentialism and political practice

Sartre wrote about individuals in existential situations and framed the existential situation as one where the practical demands of living were either one of absurdity or one of tragedy and suffering. Sartre's existential perspective was one of suffering. For Sartre, life was not absurd and without meaning, it was, however, tragic and full of conflict; and as such it offered a unique opportunity for the individual to better understand themself through the experiences of their struggles (Baskin, 2010). These struggles were not only experiences of despair, but they also included moments of hope and joy (Solomon 2005). Significantly, Sartre was a product of his lived experiences which included living under Nazi occupation and violence during WWII. He expressed left wing views and he found salvation in his writing and through his contribution to performing arts: "In my imagination, literary life was modelled on religious life. I dreamt only of ensuring my salvation" (Sartre, 2008:65). He also saw writing as a form of activism and his relationship with other philosophers was described by Arthur (2010) as 'activist' in spirit:

> *"What I would like to show is how a man comes to politics, how he is caught by them, and how he is remade other by them; because you must remember that I was not made for politics, and yet I was remade by politics so that I eventually had to enter them." (Sartre, 2008:147-148)*

For Sartre, his activist (in spirit) writings were an opportunity to create a relationship and pact with the reader (van den Hoven and Leak, 2005) and "use his own freedom to modify the shape of the world" (Baskin, 2010:11). He committed himself to engaging with the important issues of his day, often appealing "to the freedom of other men" (Arthur, 2010:66). He justified this approach on the grounds that the only way to avoid passivity and bad faith was to take responsibility and resist; for Sartre there is no excuse for not taking responsibility and for not resisting (Solomon, 2005). Sartre's praxis included challenging those who were complicit and were beneficiaries of the oppression of others (Aronson and van den Hoven, 2013). However, he strongly believed that he had "to earn the right to influence human beings in struggle" (Aronson and van den Hoven, 2013:xvii), by himself engaging in their fight and struggles against the resistances of the world (Arthur, 2010).

Sartre’s existentialism as a method for examining the lived experience

Sartre’s existential philosophy is primarily a philosophy for human existence, a device for expressing the human condition as both a solitary and a group experience, and a mechanism for communicating the options individuals have when it comes to engaging with objects and subjects in the world. His work has been described in terms of an ‘appeal to human life’ and summarised in the concept of the ‘complete human’ (Flynn, 2007a). However, Sartre’s writing does not settle on a clear and concise description of his theoretical techniques and processes. He was influenced by Husserl’s phenomenology, however, at no time does he refer to his work as phenomenological, preferring to present his work as a philosophy of life (Merkel, 2019). His early writings and ideas came out of a French realist tradition (circa 1930s) though he rejected the practice of writing to produce “realistic consequences from realist methods” (Merkel, 2019: Ch2, p30). For Sartre, a ‘realist method’ must produce social and political ideas that give voice to the human in the world and consider issues that have significance to human reality. His concern was that ideas such as scarcity of choices and conditions of suffering and conflict would be diluted and grouped into an ideology or a sociology. Sartre would be criticised at this point because, instead of addressing political and social issues, he strengthened his commitment to his existential philosophy, producing *Being and Nothingness*, (Sartre, 2003), a book that failed “to confront contemporary issues” (Merkel, 2019: Ch4, p74).

Sartre’s political intentions were initially modest, where he used his writings to form a relationship with his readers. He saw his writings as first and foremost a creative act and thereafter his intention was to influence the reader to question their understanding of their own lived experiences. The outcome of this writer/reader relationship was his own sense of fulfilment and mutual support for his developing ideas, specifically his existential concept of *freedom*. His existential *freedom* evolved from an abstract notion of ‘consciousness as freedom’ through ‘responsibility’ (as considered in his 1938 book, *Nausea*), and ‘conflict’ (in *Being and Nothingness*, 2003), to a more holistic process to include the human condition and the individual’s social setting. The evolution of existential *freedom* is also

illustrated in his plays about the pursuit of revenge (in *The Flies*, 1989c) and losing one's political ideology through political activism (in *Dirty Hands*, 1989a). This led Sartre to broaden his concept of existential *freedom* further, and to consider *freedom* as the *means* to *becoming* a complete human and *freedom* as *ends*, a moment of liberation. He defined this pairing of *means* and *ends* as a state of *committed freedom* (Merkel, 2019).

His concept of 'existential freedom' now involved addressing real-world experiences and incorporated a concern for supporting others to achieve their freedoms. To progress his own social and political responsibilities he engaged with Marxism to advance "concrete relations with the other" (Jameson in Sartre, 2004: xvi). This engagement was also an attempt to bring alongside Marxist systems and institutions, which he viewed as impersonal and inflexible, his vision of *committed freedom*. His intention was to shape a more flexible philosophical Marxism. This proved problematic, as discussed in the section *Sartre and Marxism* above. The experience, however, confirmed to Sartre that his understanding of 'individual action and freedom' was transferrable to understanding 'collective action and freedom'. He also found himself better informed to recognise human needs in the context of *scarcity* (and the challenge of satisfying all needs) and the mediocre quality of choices that individuals face. In addition, he was able to identify the inert obstacles, e.g., low quality technology and organisational cultures, that diminish individual actions and collective ambitions (Sartre, 2004, 2008).

Sartre's initial existential theory of *being* and existence was shaped by concepts he adopted and adapted from other writers and theories. For example, he used the concepts of *alienation*, *anguish* and *herd mentality* from Kierkegaard (Solomon, 2005; Baskin, 2010; Judaken and Bernasconi, 2012); and his modelling of the two states of *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself,* and the function of *choice* and *individual freedom* to activate human consciousness was an extension of Hegel's thesis on 'subjective and objective mind' (Cox, 2008; Baskin, 2010). Sartre's attention to *purposeful action* and *praxis* was informed by his interest in Marxism (Baskin, 2010), and his fascination with Husserl and phenomenology (Cox, 2008) provided him with the structure to examine and describe "nature of phenomena as they appear to consciousness" (2008:159). He rejects any notion of *a priori* human

nature, instead promoting a vision of individuality as the outcome of encounters with *nothingness.* This *nothingness*, a transcendent *being-for-itself*, involves the *being* in a state of authenticity and a condition of alienation (Sartre, 2003). Paradoxically, it is in this *nothingness* where the individual locates their 'consciousness'. Sartre has referred to *consciousness* as a place of knowledge located in the 'mind' (Baskin, 2010) and for Sartre, it is through *consciousness* where the individual finds the tools to live and the meaning of their existence. The activist temperament in Sartre also encouraged him to go beyond making sense of the structures of individuality and patterns of lived experiences to also consider group actions and the systems human beings had to navigate to achieve *existential freedom*.

> *"Existentialism must be lived to be really sincere. To live as an existentialist means to be ready to pay for this view and not merely to lay it down in books." (Kaufmann, 2016: Ch1, p90)*

Sartre primarily grounded his ideas in his own experiences and his own feeling of personal freedom. Merkel (2019) writes that de Beauvoir observed in her book about her formative years, *The Prime of Life,* that she and Sartre, as "young petit bourgeois intellectuals" (de Beauvoir in Merkel, 2019:28) believed that they were "free of all conditioning whatsoever" (de Beauvoir in Merkel, 2019:28). Sartre used this carefreeness to cultivate his fledgling theory "that he was absolutely free" (Merkel, 2019:28).

Sartre was concerned with personal freedom including political freedom and free will (Sartre, 2003; Solomon, 2005; Cox, 2008). As a central and distinct concept of his existentialism Sartre defines *freedom* in the following terms:

> *"… the definition I would give today of freedom: the little movement that makes of a totally conditioned social being a person who does not reproduce in its entirety what he received from his conditioning." (Howells, 1992:340)*

Sartre's existentialism is based on a philosophical belief that people are free agents, and as such they are in control of their choices and actions, and it is through their choices and actions where they find the momentum to realise their *individuality*

(Sartre, 2016). In their pursuit of individuality – their subjective projects of *being* – the individual is presented with opportunities for self-discovery, future possibilities, and creative moments (Howells, 1992). The individual is free to determine what motives and projects they will follow and how they identify with the world through their emotions (Solomon, 2005). For Sartre, these individual projects are engagements with reality, a *being* existing through both their physical body (their facticity) and their consciousness (their freedom).

Like Heidegger, Sartre believed that individuals are thrown into a world of freedoms, and that such freedoms serve to both alienate and elevate the individual to their consciousness and bring about an awareness and commitment to their freedom and the freedom of others (Baskin, 2010). He argued that human beings are absolutely free, while acknowledging that choices may be limited, but are however always available (Sartre, 1946). Contentiously, he held the view that individuals are responsible for their situation and whatever the situation, the individual can choose to be resigned to, defiant of, or an escapee from their situation (Solomon, 2005). For Sartre, *freedom* is not a being; it is the *being of man* (Sartre in Aronson and van den Hoven, 2013).

This *being of man* is driven by Sartre's belief that 'existence precedes essence' (Langiulli, 1997; Solomon, 2005), a consistent feature of his existentialism. Indeed, Sartre is noted for making no *a priori* assumptions about human nature, unlike Kierkegaard's belief that the essence of human nature is god-given, or Nietzsche's belief in the innate power/powerlessness of the *übermensch* and the *last man.* The belief that existence precedes essence is a paradigm of renewal and transformation, a system of personal responsibility, purposefulness and progress that can be aptly applied to those seeking to engage and participate in activism. The process can be scaled up from individual ambitions to social and political objectives and involves steps to overcome individual and social contingencies. For example, to achieve a just and inclusive society, individuals are invited to take responsibility and choose to forge for themselves and others the life they want and need. In accepting the belief that existence precedes essence, we are challenged to stretch our own boundaries of freedom through a commitment to our choices and engagement with our responsibilities. In short, one can make something of oneself in spite of what's

been made of one (Solomon, 2005). Under Sartrean conditions where existence is seen as prior to essence, the individual is profoundly responsible for what they are in the world. Therefore, the foundation of existentialism is that it puts every individual in possession of themselves, and as such, it places the weight of responsibility for their existence directly upon their own shoulders. When Sartre (1946) writes that the individual is responsible for themself, he also means that the individual is responsible for his own individuality, and the individuality of all others. These features of freedom as *choices*, *actions* and *responsibilities* echo the motives and behaviours of the activists discussed in *Chapter 1*. An overlap such as this makes the Sartrean lens as a method for examining the lived experience of constituency activists additionally relevant to this research.

Ontological and epistemological foundation for this research

Ontology and epistemology together combine to inform the qualitative methodological foundation of my research, thereby strengthening my research. Sartre promoted the view that the world was qualitatively rich and by extension human existence and beings were also qualitatively rich (Catalano, 2005). Catalano (2005) interpreted this view to include the quality of the relationship between the subjects and objects in the world and he expanded Sartre's view of human reality as an 'adventure with nature' (one's existence) and an "adventure with others" (creating history) (Catalano 2005:25). The qualitative nature of Sartre's existential 'being' is a vital ontological foundation for this study, and as such the philosophical foundation on which this study is based leads to a rejection of the positivist ontology. Given Sartre's existential disposition, it is logical that this study would embed itself in the same interpretivist ontology and subjectivist epistemology.

Although Sartre had phenomenological roots, this research does not however follow Sartre's lead and adopt a phenomenological study of political activists' existential experiences. Firstly, phenomenology requires a longer-term research relationship with interviewees, which was not possible to establish effectively within the timeframe for this study. Grounded inquiry was therefore more compatible with one-off participation of constituency activists. Secondly, the

potential for flexible data generation and the development of emerging themes as suggested by grounded inquiry (Fendt and Sachs 2008) was more in keeping with my aims for this research to reveal the existential themes that sustain constituency activism. Thirdly, the phenomenological methodological emphasis on 'bracketing' (Tufford and Newman, 2012) the researcher's views and judgement would be difficult to maintain because of the study's intention to capture the relationship between existential experiences and activism. Finally, phenomenology is more concerned with testing theories and hypotheses, whereas grounded inquiry "aims to enquire and state how to interpret reality, rather than testing hypotheses" (Reiter, Stewart and Brice, 2011:40). As this research does not rely on a predetermined hypothesis, a phenomenological approach would therefore not be suitable.

The ontological foundations of this research are interpretivist. A research design based on a positivist ontology was dismissed as the subjectivity that is part of interpretivism stresses that "objectivity in any research [involving humans] is a myth" (Bowden and Green, 2010:105): I could not be distant and completely objective in the research process. Seeking an objective 'truth' would not be in keeping with an interpretivist ontology, nor Sartre's phenomenological ontology. There was also an early rejection of an objectivist epistemology, because using theories that quantify and measure independent facts about reality in the physical world tells us little about the subjective experiences of individuals' motivations and desires (Norton, 1999; Krauss, 2005; Fendt and Sachs, 2008; Reiter, Stewart and Brice, 2011; Vromen, 2018). An objectivist epistemology is also unsuitable because the researcher and research participants are interdependent (Cohen and Manion, 1994; Norris, 2005). The epistemological foundations of this study are therefore subjectivist.

As a theory, epistemology captures the relationship between truth, knowledge and belief and refers to how we know what we know and whether what we know has any value (Norris, 2005). Epistemology is a mental state where people construct and create their own knowledge through reason, non-empirical knowledge, as well as knowledge gained through experiences, empirical knowledge (Norris, 2005; Bereiter and Scardamalia, 2014). Epistemology attends to conceptual issues such as: the location of knowledge, is it collectively and or individually situated; whether

knowledge is transitive, i.e., changes over time, and or intransitive, i.e., exists whether or not people experience it; and how much knowledge is based on facts and sound reasoning (Norris 2005). However, there is also a concrete dimension to epistemology because it captures the association between the 'knower' and what may be 'known'(Willig, 2013).

Epistemology considers how I can know this reality and how this knowledge about knowledge shapes my methods for gathering and analysing data about constituency activists' experiences. In the context of this research, my ontological and epistemological views on the nature of being and knowledge generation will influence the methodology and methods. In setting out the epistemological parameters of this study, I address three epistemological questions, adapted from Willig (2013:79-80):

1. **What kind of knowledge do I aim to generate through this study?** The knowledge shared by activists during interviews are likely to be their beliefs, and as such is 'true for them' because it matches their reality and the way the world is for them (Norris, 2005). Some activists will share their knowledge cut from 'the full cloth'; they are *coherantists* who share their knowledge based on a coherent set of beliefs (Murphy, 2006). Others, the *foundationalists*, will communicate their knowledge in an organic manner, justifying and sharing their beliefs because of the success of those beliefs in other activities and situations (Poston, 2014). For both, knowledge arises out of their perceptions, introspection (unique to that person and difficult to challenge), memory (knowledge from the past), reason, and testimony (Norris, 2005).
2. **What assumptions am I making about activists and their relationship with knowledge?** Epistemology also involves a critical appraisal of knowledge claims and the explanations on which such claims are based. For example, for true beliefs to count as knowledge, it is necessary that they originate in sources we have good reason to consider reliable, such as knowledge through the personal channels and social networks that made this study possible. According to Kusch (2009), most of what we know we know through others and what we believe is based on what we've been told. Therefore, it is important that I trust in the knowledge being shared by activists. However, it is important to exercise

judgment on the quality of the shared knowledge. In this research, activists' knowledge comes through in their sensemaking and storytelling and it is important to acknowledge the possibility that memories are experiences in the mind and not necessarily accurate representations of past events, because our memories and perceptions are fallible (Weick, 1979). Their storytelling will communicate propositional knowledge – knowledge that a certain thing is true – and know-how knowledge that is innate to the individual.

3. **What is my role in the process of knowledge construction?** In this qualitative study where knowledge is subjective and personal, knowledge is established through an interpretivist mode where activists and the researcher create meaning out of the activist's experiences. Although the emphasis is on the activist's self-awareness and experiences, the researcher has a significant role in obtaining and analysing data. Indeed Krauss (2005) takes the position that the researcher and the activist, through face-to-face interaction, co-create meaning during the study. In co-creating meaning, inductive and abductive reasoning is applied through the constant comparison method built into co-creation, and also through approaches such as grounded theory (Norton, 1999; Heath and Cowley, 2004). Inductive reasoning is therefore well suited to this research because it accommodates a level of co-creation in gathered data. The discipline of constant comparison of the data analysis as seen in the use of grounded theory is well suited to this study (Charmaz, 2006, 2008, 2017a; Bryant and Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz and Belgrave, 2019).

Having discussed the nature and sources of knowledge, and epistemology's relationship with ontological 'being' and reality, I have established that the epistemological foundation of this study is a subjectivist one. This is in keeping with the foundational principles of the second wave of existentialism and accommodates the type of lived experience insight and knowledge I aim to gather and interpret through this research. As mentioned above, the use of a *grounded inquiry* approach will be valuable to how this knowledge is gathered and analysed. Below, I expand the discussion to consider the use of a *grounded inquiry* approach for this research, beginning with an overview of grounded theory.

Research methodologies and methods

The three foundations of ontology, epistemology and methodology are related, in that epistemology is defined by ontology, and methodology is influenced by both ontology and epistemology (Norton, 1999). There must therefore be coherence between these concepts and the methods that a researcher chooses to use to collect and analyse research data (Smith, 2003; Alvesson and Svensson, 2008; Fendt and Sachs, 2008). Research methodologies are a set of principles applied to shape the research strategy and inform the methods for implementing the research; research methods are therefore the practical instruments and techniques for gathering and analysing the data provided by, in this case, constituency activists (Norton, 1999). In addition, a deeper understanding of methodology ensured that I remained critically aware of my assumptions and researcher values (Cohen and Manion, 1994; Alvesson and Svensson, 2008).

For these reasons, grounded theory offered the best fit for this research, as it presented a robust approach for the systematic analysis of interview data and a structure that would dissuade me from fitting predetermined interview themes and concepts based on my own experiences and prejudices during data collection (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1999). Grounded theory also appealed to me because as an 'adopt-and-adapt' research method (Glaser, 1999) it is compatible with this study into how the motivations and desires of constituency activists and their activism is influenced by personal existential events, and it allows for an iterative approach to data analysis.

The method can also accommodate a research question *in-progress* as the researcher "waits for the conceptual sense making to emerge from the data" (Glaser, 1999:838). Significantly, grounded theory is designed to ensure that the research participants involved in the research are central to the study's theoretical framework and that their voice and experiences dominate research outputs and outcomes (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1999; Heath and Cowley, 2004; Redman-MacLaren and Mills, 2015). In addition, grounded theory specialists note that the grounded theory method is accessible and practical in its application *in-situation,* as well as *to a situation* for researchers and practitioners, such as

constituency activists, who seek explanations to their activism (Glaser, 2002; Starks and Trinidad, 2007).

Overview of grounded theory

> *"A grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis and theory stand in reciprocal relationship to one another."* (Strauss and Corbin, 1990:23 in Egan, 2002)

Three approaches to grounded theory

There are three main approaches to grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Charmaz, 2006, 2017a; Bryant and Charmaz, 2007; Olson, 2018):

1. **Classic Grounded Theory influenced by Barney Glaser and Anslem Strauss's partnership.** At its establishment, this was a research method designed to challenge positivist quantitative methodologies (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1999). Classic grounded theory introduced research processes and practices to include the constant comparative method, theoretical sampling, coding and memoing. Following a split in the Grounded Theory partnership of Glaser and Strauss, the classic approach became known as Glaserian Grounded Theory. At this point Glaser made it clear that his approach was the standard approach and in some review articles and keynote speeches he devalued the virtue of other approaches (Glaser, 1999; Glaser, 2002). He also reinforced some of his earlier concepts and practices, such as challenging the boundary between positivist and interpretivist research paradigms, noting that grounded theory is neutral and as "issues free as research can get – conceptually abstract of issues and subject to modification by constant comparison" (Glaser, 2003:115 in Olson, 2018).

2. **Straussian Grounded Theory by Anslem Strauss and Juliet Corbin.** The goal of Strauss and Corbin was to provide a more detailed description of how to analyse data in studies that used a grounded theory design (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Their method encouraged general reading when going into the study and extended the data analysis to include assessments of the properties of categories (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Strauss and Corbin, 1994, 1998). A significant difference to Glaserian grounded theory was that Strauss and Corbin revised and extended the coding model to three steps and considered context and other situational conditions in the analysis process. Glaser viewed this as unnecessary, and he criticised the Strauss and Corbin linear and prescriptive approach to data analysis on the grounds that it forced the analysis and undermined the discovery feature of Classic Grounded Theory (Holton, 2001). Strauss notes that he and Glaser had underplayed the influence of the 'sensitised researcher' (Olson, 2018), where the researcher, in mastering their skills and knowledge through reflection and practice, offers a more extensive input into the grounded theory 'discovery' process. For Strauss, this more balanced input does not undercut the ethical standards of researchers and their craft. It does, however, acknowledge the potential for the researcher to offer insight into past theories and disclose 'intuition' about theory development, as well as their technical systematic approaches to data gathering and analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1994).
3. **Constructivist Grounded Theory.** Kathy Charmaz (Charmaz, 2006, 2008, 2017a, 2017b; Bryant and Charmaz, 2007) viewed her work as a revision to classical grounded theory, though a *constructed* rather than discovered grounded theory method. Central to Charmaz's method was the assertion that knowledge was influenced by multiple standpoints of both the participants and the researcher, and by the importance of the researcher's reflexive approach (Olson, 2018). Glaser is circumspect of the Constructivist Grounded Theory approach advocated by Charmaz (2006), primarily on the grounds that Glaser believes it is the researcher's role to interpret and analyse data with the purpose of discovering theoretical ideas, not constructing data (Glaser, 1999; Glaser, 2002). For Glaser, the researcher should rely on the research participants alone to generate ideas and concepts and the researcher should remain apart from the

process; it is only through coding and analysis that the researcher should become involved. Indeed, to ensure thoroughness, the constant comparative method of data collection and analysis takes place simultaneously to create 'conceptual density' (Glaser, 1994), whereas for Charmaz the researcher should take a "deeply reflexive stance…and scrutinise their data and actions" (Charmaz, 2017b:34) through listening and 'intuition'.

Table 2 below provides an overview of the three approaches, focusing on the distinguishing features, benefits/strengths and drawbacks/weaknesses of each for researchers.

Table 2: Overview of the three approaches to grounded theory

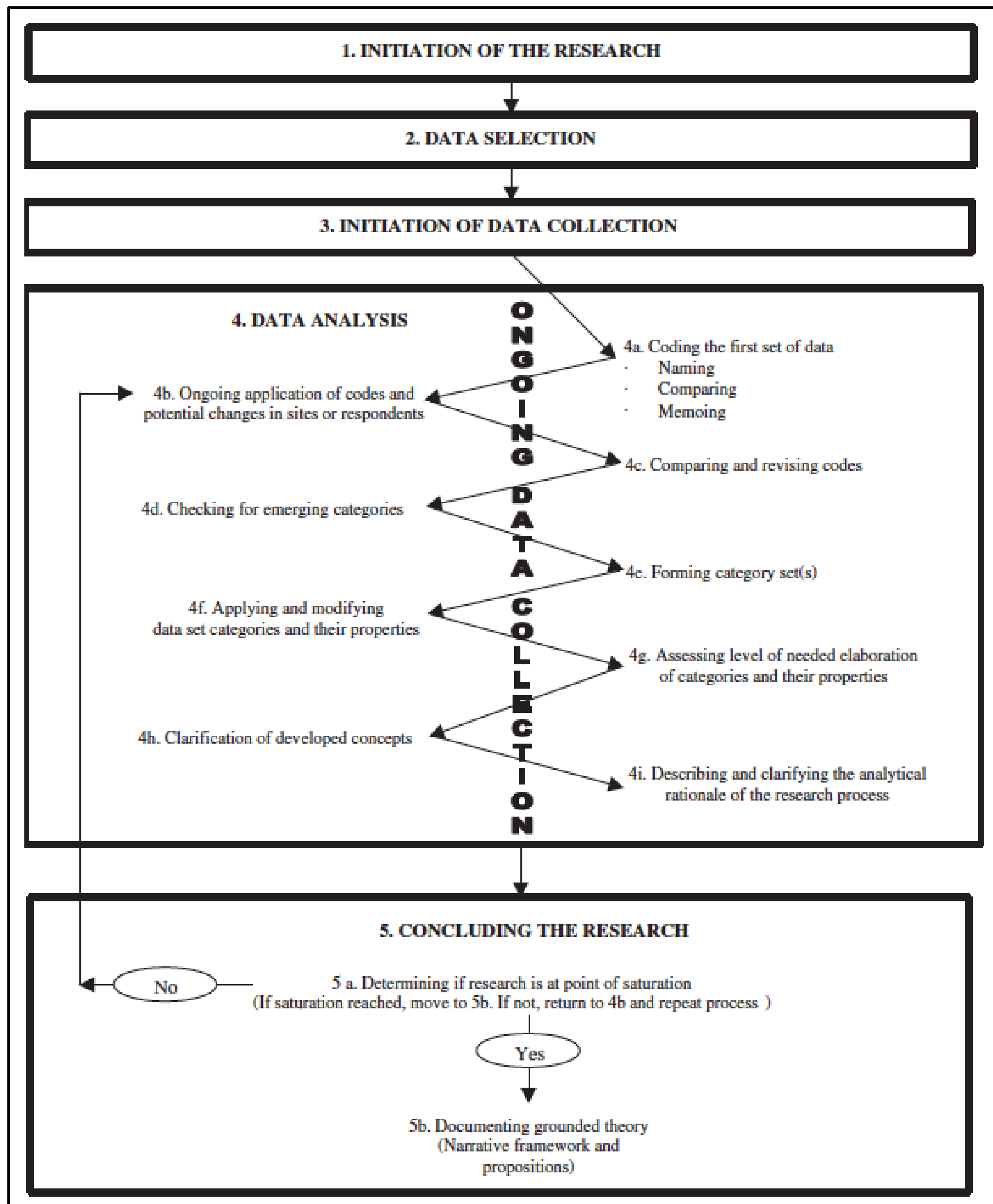
Type of grounded theory	Distinguishing features	Benefits/strengths for researchers	Drawbacks/weaknesses for researchers
Classic Grounded Theory/Glaser's Traditional Grounded theory *'The Discovery of Grounded Theory'* By Glaser and Strauss (1967)	• Hear the participant's story, without prior hypothesis • Begins with purposive sample • Emergent and interpretative theory fitting the situation being researched • Objectivist epistemology	• What is actually happening, through the participant's own words • Detached observer • Flexible and pragmatic inquiry • Heightened sense of theoretical sensitivity	• Needs time to get detailed descriptions of the participant's experiences • May not answer researcher's questions • Confidence to start with loosely defined research question • Initially ignore related literature
Straussian Grounded Theory *'Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and procedures for Developing Grounded Theory'* By Strauss and Corbin (1998)	• The researcher is shaped by the data • Structure over insight • Look for the story in the data • Pragmatic, deductive and inductive • Multiple perspectives acknowledged	• Focus on analysis of participant's experiences • The researcher is allowed a 'voice' in research outputs • Establishing new viewpoints and perspectives	• Experience of the area of study • Analysis-led; technique over knowledge and concepts • Challenge to recruit participants prepared to fully describe their experiences under study
Constructivist Grounded Theory *'Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis'* By Charmaz (2006)	• Researcher led; develop the story constructed from the data • Meaning found in the interactions between the participant and the researcher • Researcher assumptions are explicit • Constructivist epistemology	• Researcher is part of the research process • Deeply reflexive • Review and analyse situational contexts • Use of accurate field notes, memos and journal entries	• Prior knowledge and bias can take root in the research • Ongoing challenge to uncover researcher's perceptions • Preserve participants' anonymity and confidentiality and their voice and story

The application of a grounded theory methodology

> *"Grounded theory tells us what is going on, tells us how to account for the participants' main concerns, and reveals access variables that allow for incremental change. Grounded theory is what is, not what should, could, or ought to be." (Glaser, 1999)*

Grounded theory is a research method relevant to both positivist and interpretive philosophical positions and applicable to quantitative and qualitative researchers (Glaser, 1999). An important component of grounded theory is the systematic collection and analysis of data. Data collection and analysis happens simultaneously, and codes and concepts are constructed from the gathered data, not from a preconceived hypothesis (Annells, 1996). Figure 1 below by Egan (2002) outlines the steps and processes involved in grounded theory research:

Figure 1: The Process of Grounded Theory-Building Research (Egan, 2002:281)



Sampling during data collection

In grounded theory there are two stages of sampling during data collection. The first stage of sampling – purposive sampling – facilitates the initial collection of data. Stage two – theoretical sampling – functions as an important activity to recruit additional participants to the study and to extend and test new concepts and emerging categories. At stage two of sampling, the researcher may actively seek out

negative incidents to further test interim theories and the emerging relationships between concepts and core categories (Pandit, 1996). Sampling stops at the point of theoretical saturation where new data offers no or very limited additional codes and concepts (Egan, 2002). There are other qualitative research techniques that involve similar approaches to coding and analysis, such as qualitative phenomenology (Starks and Trinidad, 2007). However grounded theory stands out in its unique use of 'constant comparison' and 'theoretical sampling' methods (Thorpe and Holt, 2008).

Naming

Codes and concepts emerge from the data and the researcher identifies patterns and core categories of concepts (Strauss and Corbin, 1998); they name these categories. These concepts are then constantly modified through a process of comparative and constant analysis to create (and rename) core categories, which is an iterative process.

Comparing

> *"Constant comparison, then, is the process that supports researcher discovery of important categories, our identifying of properties of those categories and relations between categories, the extension of discovered categories to higher levels of conceptualization or abstraction, and the arrangement of those categories in relation to each other." (Locke, 2001:54 in Egan, 2002:287)*

This stage of analysis is important because "grounded theory shows that all data, no matter what their quality, can constantly modify the theory through comparisons" (Glaser, 1999: 841). Additional data may be gathered and systematically developed using constant comparison until a data saturation point is reached and no new concepts and categories emerge.

Memoing

As part of field work activities and reflexivity, memos became a feature of grounded theory practice. These memos included code memos (e.g., consideration of open codes and their labels), theoretical memos (e.g., links to literature and

developing categories), and operational memos (e.g., reflections on the research design and research effectiveness) (Pandit, 1996). In line with grounded theory methodology, I used memos to record and reflect on knowledge and concepts being produced in the study and to alert me to the need for revisions to my interview technique and theoretical knowledge.

Grounded Inquiry not Grounded Theory

> *"[The] aim is not to discover the theory, but a theory that aids understanding and action in the area under investigation."*
> (Annells, 1996)

Fendt and Sachs (2008) considered a very interesting dimension into the process and outputs of grounded theory. They advanced a case as to why 'grounded inquiry' is a more appropriate and accurate description for grounded theory methodology, because grounded theory aims to "enquire and state how actors interpret reality, rather than testing hypotheses" (Reiter, Stewart and Brice, 2011:40). Thompson (2006) endorsed this view by pointing out that social sciences' hypotheses driven methodology does not result in the development of theory. This does not invalidate grounded theory's post-positivist credentials – i.e., remaining distant from the method and its procedures – where the purpose of a theory is to predict relations between a set of defined concepts and variables through a process of data mining (Thompson, 2006). However, according to Thompson (2006), grounded theory as an interpretative enquiry into subjective experiences may present a statement of relationships, for example between constructs such as activism and existentialism, but this statement defines the parameters of the relationship, "not a theory" (2006:18). Grounded theory may therefore validate theory by following specific observations through a logical process of induction "and the imagination of the researcher" (2006:19), but it does not develop a theory. Norton (1999) too offers a cautionary note on the use of grounded theory as an instrument to confirm and validate existing theory; "… grounded theory stands on its own, it is not a sophisticated verificational process, honouring some extant theory that does not work or is not relevant in the first place" (Norton 1999:40).

Grounded inquiry also accommodates inductive and abductive reasoning as a recognised research process for using existing knowledge to draw conclusions and construct explanations of people's reality and being. Grounded inquiry therefore gives me permission to 'discover' and 'construct' relationships in the data between activism and existentialism through structured analytical steps and coding. These 'discover', and 'construct' features are contested by Glaser; he questions whether constructing theory is a legitimate research outcome and whether it is possible for theory to 'emerge' naturally and be discovered by the researcher placing some meaning onto the data (Charmaz, 2006). Nevertheless, understanding the relationships between activism and existentialism rests on my being able to discover and construct freely from the data available, and as stated above, the aim of grounded theory is not to construct theory.

Another reason for using grounded inquiry is how grounded inquiry values the influence of the external world on the individual and its suitability for capturing an individual's experiences of that world. Strauss and Corbin (1998) stress that the researcher maintains responsibility for interpreting what is said and heard during data gathering and "must include the perspectives and voices" (1998:274) of the interviewed. These experiences are characterised as 'inside-out', looking at how an individual's beliefs and values generate emotions that inform their choices, and 'outside-in' where relationships and networks explain their social world. It is possible to start from either the 'inside' or 'outside' to gain a full understanding of their activist and existential experiences (Norton 1999).

Grounded inquiry was therefore considered suitable for this research as its originators, Glaser and Strauss (1967), recommend that researchers use it as a set of general principles and procedures rather than as a prescribed instruction, thereby signaling permission to be faithful to the phenomena, perspectives and voices (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Fendt and Sachs, 2008; Vromen, 2018).

The application of grounded inquiry approach for this research

In this research, I therefore applied grounded theory as a *method of inquiry* instead of a methodology for theory reinforcement and theory creation (Fendt and Sachs,

2008; Urquhart, 2013; Alammar *et al.*, 2019). For this research, grounded inquiry has five significant appeals over and above each of the three main approaches outlined above in Table 2 and Figure 1, thereby resulting the flexible approach needed for this study. In using a grounded inquiry approach, I was: 1) able to draw on the structured stages of Straussian grounded theory methods (Corbin and Strauss, 1990: Strauss and Corbin, 1998). These stages are helpful to any researcher who is new to the approach and provides a useful aide memoire when using the grounded theory process; 2) able to use creativity and imagination when using grounded theory methods to engage with research data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998); 3) able to learn that grounded theory "requires adaption to the circumstances of their own research thought processes" (Strauss and Corbin, 1994); 4) enable the 'emergence' of a potential relationship between activism and existentialism directly from interviewees, without forcing the data and pre-imposing patterns and relationships between activism and existentialism (Holton, 2001); and 5) apply Strauss and Corbin's (1998) coding paradigm, which provides a useful framework for classifying existential incidents and events emerging from the interview data and the interview data grew.

Data collection

Using semi-structured interviews

Rabionet (2011) suggests structuring an interview with initial, intermediate, and ending questions. This includes "'crafting' an interview protocol [and] establishing the ethical guidelines" (Rabionet, 2011:564). Rabionet's (2011) guidance provided valuable tips to ensure I remained focused on each activist and their unique story about engaging with constituency activism.

Interview questions

A semi-structured interview approach requires planning and structure (Kvale, 2008; Wengraf, 2011; Roulston and Choi, 2018). I therefore designed a set of open questions (see Appendix 1) with a view to exploring the following themes during the one-to-one interviews:

1. The activist's knowledge of self; establishing whether the activist was aware of experiencing an existential or boundary moment. This included discussing whether they recognised a growing political consciousness involving displays of e.g., moral attitudes and integrity.
2. The activist's political vision; whether they actively looked for political solutions to their growing political consciousness. This included whether the activist saw themselves e.g., in a type of humanity represented by a spirit of open-mindedness and frankness without prejudice in communications with others.
3. The activist's change strategy; e.g., the individual's response to a sense of alienation where their uniqueness was lost in a depersonalised mode of thinking and doing. This included demonstrable evidence of transcending individual alienation through participation in public political actions that challenged, for example, injustice and inequality.
4. The activist's political commitment; the level of their commitment to constituency activism and higher dimensions of political values. This involved exploring the individual's political consciousness and actions, from wearing a political slogan through to participation in political demonstrations, as examples of seeing, caring and acting in the world (Veneklasen and Miller, 2013).

The benefits of interviews

Interviews are vital settings for the co-production of ideas and theories in social research (Wengraf, 2011). Whether the research interview process is based on a structured, semi-structured or a loose arrangement, the researcher needs to plan and design the activity with the same care and attention to detail and objectives (Wengraf, 2011). For this study, qualitative interviews have five main benefits, namely that:

1. Interviews are a rich form of data collection as they can elicit multiple meanings from interviewees and explore experiences that cannot be observed (McGrath, *et al.,* 2019);
2. The semi-structured interview format will allow me to approach the interview process with open-ended questions and provide the flexibility to consider

unanticipated interviewee experiences that may surface during discussions (King, *et al.,* 2018);

3. They are confidential, which is important, as information shared may be intense, deeply personal and unfiltered. The confidentiality offered by interviews is not always guaranteed, for example, in a focus group, and so interviews will therefore be important as participants may talk about how moments of choice and anxiety that have influenced their political consciousness;
4. The one-to-one interview format will allow for immediate clarification and follow-up and probing (King, *et al.,* 2018; McGrath, *et al.,* 2019) of ideas and discussions with participants on other topics that arise throughout the interview; and
5. As conversations, interviews allow for storytelling and personal narratives in a natural setting (Van Maanen and Maanen, 1979; Kvale, 2008). This will be invaluable as the study relies on the telling of activists' lived experiences of becoming politically active, in their own words (Seidman, 2006).

Limitations of interviews

There are complexities to using interviews which should be acknowledged by the researcher. Firstly, there are practical complexities, such as recognising that human relations are 'artificial' and complex. Secondly, there are representational complexities, such as being alert to the fact that the production of meaning is dependent on 'linguistic, discursive and cultural elements' (Walliman, 2016). Finally, there are imaginative complexities, such as being aware that imagination can simplify 'impressions' and 'perceptions' for both the researcher and participant (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Strauss and Corbin, 1994). These points are important because, as a qualitative researcher, I must represent interview participants' empirical world with integrity (Norton, 1999).

Additionally, interviews can be time consuming to set up and transcribe, and interviewees could have decided at the last minute to postpone or cancel meetings. This meant that I had to be prepared to set out a tentative interview schedule and have it altered to accommodate the availability of interviewees. For this research, I

was very fortunate that out of 26 interviews, I had to reschedule only three interviews and follow up on only two interview dates missed by two interviewees.

There can be an idealistic view of face-to-face interviews as an opportunity to get close to the subject under study, and in doing this the researcher is able to experience a true meeting of minds and undiluted communications (Sims, 2008). However, there is always a level of stress and anxiety around an interview, indeed the title ‘interview’ suggests a level of power imbalance between the parties involved (Sims, 2008). Many individuals have experienced job interviews, health interviews, housing and banking interviews and a range of bureaucratic conversations based on interview formats. It may be the case that these events do not always leave the individual empowered, particularly where societal ‘asymmetries’ are perpetuated (Sims, 2008). This does not mean that the interviewer always has the upper hand because the interviewer could be inexperienced in the method, in awe of the person they are interviewing, or they may not function well in face-to-face situations no matter the amount of training taken (Goffman, 1959; Sims, 2008). Not only should the interviewer reduce their own vulnerabilities, but they should also avoid passing on any stress to their potentially vulnerable interviewee (Wengraf, 2011). With such experiences in mind, it is important that the researcher considers the interview event from the perspective of the interviewee. It is in the process of sharing information the participant may perceive that they are being assessed and evaluated by some interviewers, resulting in a ‘theatrical performance’ by the participant (Cohen and Manion, 1994).

The one-on-one research interview, a ‘two-person conversation’ on research-relevant information initiated by the interviewer often relies on the memory and recall of the interviewee, and the interviewer on occasion. Though recall is a valid process of sensemaking (Weick, 1979), and the act of bringing to the conscious mind memories stored from our past is everyday practice, there are questions about accuracy, comprehensiveness and reliability (Robson, 2002; Heppner, *et al.,* 2008). The interview process may link the present to the past, it can also create forward movement not just in the interviewer, also with the interviewee (Robson, 2002; Heppner, *et al.,* 2008). For the interviewee, this forward movement of new

thinking, new goals and possible memories of unexpected and emotionally significant events may require some additional support after the interview.

In addition to the challenge of remembered events and the potential for confusion in the re-imagining of past events, it would also be unrealistic for the interviewer to expect the interviewee to disclose some of their hidden dimensions to someone they may have just met (Robson, 2002; Heppner, *et al.,* 2008). The two-person conversation may take place in an ambiance of openness and truthfulness; however, it is likely that individuals will offer information that puts them in good light and avoids portraying them as prejudice, anxious and weak (Goffman, 1959; Smith, 2003). With all these caveats, the 26 participants were given the space and time they needed to share their lived experiences of constituency activism becoming politically active. For this research, the benefits of the interview process outweighed the limitations, as interviews provided rich data from constituency activists in their own words and allowed for co-creation of meaning.

Recruitment of participants and sample size

Access to participants is a factor of research design that applies not just to ethnography and organisational studies, but to all types of research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Walliman, 2016). I used a purposive and theoretical sampling method (Woodhams and Danieli, 2008). This involved seeking out research participants who were likely to have differing experiences of political activism, so that I was able to explore and draw upon a range of lived experiences to uncover the existential experiences of constituency activists.

The recruitment of constituency activists was undertaken using three publicly available lists: 1) a 2018 election list of prospective City councillors; 2) a 2018 list of sitting Town Councillors; and 3) an MP's constituency secretaries list. By identifying people from these three lists, I was able to compile a list of 70 constituency activists from Labour, Conservative, Green, Liberal Democrat, Yorkshire Party and Independent parties. Once I had established the list of potential participants, I drafted a letter and accompanying information sheet (Appendix 2) that detailed:

- the purpose of the research;

- what is involved in participating in the research;
- the benefits and risks of participating in the research;
- the procedures for withdrawing from the research and how to file a complaint;
- the procedures for safeguarding personal information, maintaining confidentiality and anonymising data, usage of the data during research, dissemination storage, publishing and archiving; and
- the details of the research: title of project, contact details of the researcher and supervisors.

I sent letters or emails to all 70 people on the list. This initial invitation resulted in 17 positive responses and three declines. Once the individual agreed to be interviewed, I followed this up with a telephone call to further reiterate the details of the research and to answer any questions they had. Either during or after the telephone call, we agreed a location and time to meet. On their confirmation of the time and date I sent them a consent form and asked them to bring a signed copy to the interview. I also brought spare copies of the consent form to the interviews in case they had forgotten to bring a signed copy of the consent form with them and asked participants to sign the consent form before the interview started. They were given a copy of the consent form for their own records.

In a study about the lived experiences of any one group, it is always unclear as to the number of people who would need to be interviewed in order for data saturation to occur. For this reason, I interviewed everyone who responded to my initial interview request and used ‘snowballing’ (theoretical sampling in grounded theory) to locate and approach more participants until data saturation had been reached. By the end of the interview stage, I had interviewed 26 constituency activists, all but two activists were affiliated and members of a political party. The political party membership breakdown of the 26 participants was: Labour 13; Green Party 4; Liberal Democrats 4; Conversative Party 2; Independent 2; Yorkshire Party 1. Although saturation was reached at 22 participants, I was committed to interviewing 26 people before saturation was reached. The voices of all 26 participants are included in the findings and analysis in Chapters 4 and 5.

In getting access to constituency activists, I was mindful of “not just ‘getting in’ but ‘getting on’” (Woodhams and Danieli, 2008:13) with interview participants. This

'getting on' meant expanding on my initial communications with some research participants. For example, in addition to receiving an individually addressed formal letter of invitation, a participant and research study information leaflet, and a participant consent form, two activists wanted their constituency secretary to authorise their participation, another activist required email confirmation from my primary supervisor that my intentions were as stated in the invitation letter, and a further two wanted reassurance that their interview transcripts would not be used outside the needs of the study. Some constituency activists offered their local election leaflets to be read before face-to-face interviews.

All interviews took place at locations of the interviewees choosing. 25 interviews were conducted in a café, which was a neutral location, and provided a level of informality that positively influenced the tone and pace of the interview process. One interview took place at the home of the interviewee at their request.

Interviewees were anonymised and interview data was stored according to University of Leeds ethical guidelines. Personal data gathered during the study was controlled in line with current data protection legislation. Four people waived their right to anonymity, and this was noted on their signed consent form.

By undertaking a qualitative study to draw attention to the original voices of constituency activists, I am communicating that I believe their voices and views are not heard often enough and consequently their wisdom and experiences are underdeveloped opportunities to improve local politics. In using semi-structured interviews and a grounded inquiry approach to gather and analyse data, I am taking steps to ensure that research participants retain important control of the research process and project (Olson, 2018). Notwithstanding, I know that I retain overall power and influence in the study, but I wish to show that I am prepared to open up the possibility of the research study moving in an unanticipated direction that may challenge my experiences and preconceptions (Mason, 2002; Heppner, *et al.,* 2008; Walliman, 2011, 2016; Kara, 2018).

Ethical issues in this study

Undertaking an early self-assessment to anticipate and avoid ethical dilemmas in my research is a vital step towards maintaining the integrity of the study and

safeguarding the interests of all its stakeholders (Cupples and Gochnauer, 1985; Mason, 2002; Walliman, 2011). However, there is a core value in research to cause no harm and where possible produce some gain for the participants in the research project. In more complex research settings and research objectives it would also be important to consider whether some people's human rights are being diminished in the promise of extending knowledge. By way of illustration, in my study this would involve me taking notes from a vulnerable person who did not have the capacity and competence to fully comprehend the consent and confidentiality principles they had agreed, without first putting in place appropriate adjustments to accommodate their needs and unique voice. An adjustment may include the vulnerable person being accompanied by a support person or someone else who advocated on their behalf.

With regards to interviews, it is also important that I stay alert to the possibility that interviews may move into unintended territories that I am not equipped to support. For example, on three separate interviews, participants commented on having a therapeutic experience. On the first occasion when this was said, I left the interview with some sense of achievement that I may have connected on a level that would reveal some novel and deep insight into activism. However, on the second occasion of hearing this I became uncomfortable because I am not a trained therapist, and I became concerned that there was some conflict in my role of gathering and making sense of data. Still, it is relatively easy to undertake research training in techniques designed to prevent bias manifesting as poor research objectives and prejudice. It is also important to be open and honest about the 'ground rules' and assumptions for the research study that cover my behaviours and actions (Oliver, 2003; Kara, 2018).

When interviewing activists from a range of local political parties, some constituency activists wanted to know my agenda for this study, i.e., *what did I want to do with this study?* This was an important point about the importance of being clear on the purposes of the research and conveying a response that was honest and did not devalue the research or their participation in it (Mason, 2002; Oliver, 2003; Walliman, 2016; Olson, 2018). Before interviews, I checked again whether interview participants had any questions about confidentiality and consent issues, including making it clear that there is no pressure and obligation to

participate in my study, and there will be no diminishing of their reputation and standing as a constituency activist if they do participate, as well as also ground rules, including a complaints procedure (Mason, 2002; Oliver, 2003; Walliman, 2016; Olson, 2018), all of which I emphasised when I initially contacted individuals, and both during and after the interview. I was mindful of power relations in interview interactions and therefore safe and appropriate interview settings were used as interview venues. On four occasions I held interviews on local university campuses; this also helped reinforce the integrity of the study and my reputation and legitimacy as a researcher.

My responsibility and accountability extended to other stakeholders in the study, not just the participants. The guidelines agreed with the University's ethics committee and my supervisors were adhered to and any fundamental changes mutually agreed beforehand. I also had a responsibility to other researchers who had an interest in the broader outcomes of the research to be accurate in my study and ethical in my research practices (Oliver, 2003; Kara, 2018), and ensured that I represent the lived experiences and realities of constituency activists as *they* see them (Mason, 2002; Oliver, 2003; Walliman, 2016; Olson, 2018).

As mentioned above, a grounded inquiry approach may mean that the study takes a far different direction than anticipated, because the study starts from where the participant *is at,* and therefore additional participant needs and unanticipated lines of enquiry may be uncovered as the study progresses (Mason, 2002; Oliver, 2003; Walliman, 2016; Olson, 2018). For example, a significant number of research participants had considered the reasons for initially engaging in constituency activism, but had not had the space to make sense of why they remained so attached to the activity (Colville, 2008). This meant that I had to quicky assimilate to the research as being more than a collection of methods because it was an organic activity involving personalities, their life stories and a wide range of knowledge and information that did not mirror my lived experience. I was also mindful of Fendt and Sachs's (2008) observation that the researcher will always have their thumbprint on the research and that objectivity is the "myth of silent authorship [that] is false but reassuring" (2008:443).

Coding and analysing the data

> *"We should not suppose that there is any accord between the living of a life and the telling of it." (Marcus, 1995:45)*

Gibbs (2018) observes that the design of NVivo was influenced by grounded theory and provides effective support for grounded inquiry. NVivo software is therefore recognised as an appropriate and reliable qualitative data analysis programme in grounded theory and grounded inquiry studies (Gibbs, *et al.,* 2002). By using NVivo in my grounded inquiry, I was able to organise the range of unique events and revelations about individuals discovering their political purpose, about why individuals stay committed to their causes and political party, and discernible decision points in support of reasons why individuals do what they do in promoting one political view over another, all of which formed their lived experiences as constituency activists. In uncovering their stories of lived experience, I was able to reveal existential insights and commitments, drives and desires. The 'ordinariness' of their stories is significant because they communicate the impulse of local politics and individual endeavours to make a difference at local and national levels; this is their lived experience.

The interviews underwent a series of coding phases to form a coherent understanding of the elements and experiences that make up the political activism of the 26 constituency activists. Firstly, I used open coding (Lee, 1999)which involved working with the interview data – titled *cases* in NVivo – to create a range of codes, known as 'nodes' in NVivo terminology. In open coding, events, actions, and interactions are compared with others for similarities and differences. They are also given conceptual labels. In this way, conceptually similar events, actions, and interactions are grouped together to form categories and subcategories. The use of open coding and constant comparisons enables researchers to challenge their subjectivity and bias. This allowed for line-by-line coding and analysis of the interview data for this research. Fracturing the data forces preconceived notions and ideas to be examined against the data themselves. However, a researcher could inadvertently place data in a category where it does not analytically belong, but by means of systematic comparisons, the errors will eventually be located, and the data and concepts arranged in appropriate classifications (Corbin and Strauss, 1990).

Secondly, after generating the complete list of codes, and merging duplicate codes, the open coding phase was complete, and I then undertook axial coding (Lee, 1999). This involved organising and merging nodes and creating node hierarchies by highlighting and constructing relationships between the open coding categories. This procedure of interconnecting the open coding categories helped identify categories at a higher level of abstraction, allowing me to identify existential concepts and themes within the interview data.

Finally, I undertook selective coding as the third and final stage of coding. This procedure allowed for larger thematic narratives that connected the axial coding categories in a grounded inquiry approach (Corbin and Strauss, 1990).

The existential themes evident in activists' lived experiences

During the 3-stage coding process, the interview data revealed five recurring categories, or themes, as embedded in the lived experiences of local constituency activists. These categories interconnected and laid the existential foundations evident in the actions of local constituency activists. Furthermore, one theme – *the existential projects of action undertaken by individuals* – was more evident across all interviews, with the other four themes sustaining local constituency activists in using their activism as *an individual existential project of action*. The categories – the existential themes based on Sartrean philosophy of existence – that were evident through grounded inquiry were:

One primary theme:

1. *Individual existential projects of action,* which signifies the activist coming to consciousness (of their freedom to act) and the structure of their activist project. There was evidence of bad faith in this theme.

Four supporting themes:

1. *Consciousness,* which was shown to be a *unity of being*: the being in-itself and the being for-itself. In the dynamic between these *beings* there is *nothingness* and a subjective sense of *freedom* from which the *individual existential project of action* arises.

2. *Praxis,* which manifests as moments of clarity where the *individual existential project of action* is chosen and moves from intention to action and doing.
3. *Anxiety*, which displays as burdens of responsibility, and includes questions about the individual's aptitude and loyalty to a cause and confidence to bring about change. Anxiety was seen as important in the realisation of consciousness and the shaping and formation of *individual existential projects of action*.
4. *Authenticity*, which shows as an ongoing response to consciousness, freedom and praxis; and it is an attitude and gesture that both supports and regulates the *individual existential project of action*.

In the next two chapters, I explain and amplify each of these five concepts as existential themes found in constituency activism, making the case that *to appreciate constituency activism is to understand it as an individual existential project of action*, a project sustained by the themes of consciousness, praxis, anxiety, and authenticity. In making this case, this research offers another dimension to existing frameworks of analysis of constituency activism and the motives, drives and individual experiences of constituency activists.

Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have outlined the interpretivist ontological and subjectivist epistemological foundations of this study. These foundations were also shaped by Sartre's political and ontological inclinations and together have informed the assembly and application of research methodologies. The *Grounded Inquiry* method used in the study followed Strauss and Corbin's Grounded Theory approach. I have used semi-structured interviews as my primary data collection method, which has allowed me to collect rich, personal stories of the existential experiences of constituency activists. Important ethical issues attached to the research were also discussed. The findings from these interviews will be discussed in the following two chapters. In sharing extracts from the interviews, all names are anonymised, even those who gave permission to use their name. The third person,

plural pronoun is used to identify all research participants. Interview participants were given a participant number between 1 and 26 to protect their identities. All interview extracts are numbered for anonymity using the following style: ‘Participant 1’. Each interview extract is deconstructed sentence-by-sentence to identify key existential components.

Chapter 4: The individual existential projects of action

In *Chapter 1,* I outlined how existing research on constituency activism, by focusing on the influence of political parties (Webb, 2000; Rye, 2015) and incentives to participate (Bale et al., 2020), motivations such as political ambition (Scarrow, 2009; Allen and Cutts, 2018) and ideology (Kende, et al., 2017), shared experiences (Permut, 2016; Levy 2020) and altruism (Bekkers and Wiepking, 2011; Saito, 2015; Katz and Malul, 2015) as well as activist attitudes (Norris, 2009; Rodgers, 2010; Jasper and McGarry, 2015) and approaches (Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Battilana and Kimsey, 2017), gives us an incomplete picture of the motivations and lived experiences of local constituency activists, and specifically of their existential reasons and desires to engage in political activism. In this research, I propose that existentialism offers us greater insight into the lived experience of local constituency activists, and that by applying an existentialist lens we are able to examine the motivations and desires of constituency activists beyond the existing research on which we currently view the undertaking of constituency activism. By considering the central tenets of existentialism, we are better able to understand how constituency activism provides some individuals with political and social meaning and helps make sense of the exterior forces placed upon them in their activism. We are also better able to understand how and why activists take responsibility for the self and for others. Existentialism therefore has much to offer us in understanding the motivations, desires and lived experiences of constituency activists.

By applying the existentialist lens to constituency activism, this research has revealed that there are key existential themes that are evident in the lived experiences of constituency activists: the existence of *individual existential projects of action;* and the influence of consciousness, praxis, anxiety, and authenticity in sustaining the *individual existential projects of action*.

A principal theme, evident across all interviews, was the existence of the '*individual existential project of action'*, which gives us new insight into how activists make sense of, and structure their constituency activist project. In Sartrean

philosophy, we humans are our projects, and our freedom is found in the projects we inhabit (Sartre, 2003; Kaufmann, 2016). Existentially, projects of action not only give meaning to life, but they also function to *uncover one's being* (Cox, 2008). In the context of this study *individual existential projects of action* are displays of *one's being* as illustrated in individual responses to subjective questions of what is important and valued by the individual constituency activist. *Individual existential projects of action* also provide a context for the constituency activist to exercise their existential freedoms and support the freedoms of others.

Furthermore, the *individual existential projects of action* demonstrate two interdependent features. Firstly, the *individual existential project of action* is an expression of individuality and an activist's choice and freedom to express their voice, influence and power. This will include incidents of bad faith. Secondly, the *individual existential projects of action* are emotional responses to events and experiences that generate moments of self-awareness, questioning and clarity in the individual activist.

In their response to a question about the reasons and motivations for their constituency activism, Participant 23 reveals many of the existential themes considered here. There is a desire to take responsibility for improving the image of politics and politicians, there are insights into the emotions attached to their political consciousness, and their individual project of action is driven by a desire to experience authenticity and existential freedom through their actions:

> *"I am concerned that people in this country see politicians as being the dregs when actually I don't think they are, there are good politicians and bad politicians and obviously I want to be a good politician. So, when I knock on someone's door and they open the door… when someone shuts the door in your face because you support another party or because they don't like politicians, it's not me that made them react, it's something inside themselves, but it does, I do genuinely want to reach out to people who think all politicians are rubbish, but I don't know how to do it." (Participant 23)*

This is a reflective response from Participant 23 communicating a level of anxiety and a desire to be authentic and connect with others in a non-judgemental way. Their *individual existential project of action* is work-in-progress to the extent that Participant 23 has a dual objective: to be authentic, and to encourage others to see politicians as trustworthy. However, they "don't know how to do it", which emphasises the work-in-progress, and also suggests vulnerability and fear, particularly about being judged as the "dregs".

Understanding the individual existential project of action

> *"According to Sartre, every desire that a person has is an expression of his fundamental desire to be God, his fundamental desire to be at one with himself." (Cox, 2008:29)*

The *individual existential project of action* takes its origin from the fundamental project. The fundamental project is Sartre's principal project that aims to unite the physical *being-in-itself* with the *being-for-itself* to enable a being-of-consciousness and existential freedom (Sartre, 2003; Cumming, 2003; Solomon, 2005; Charmé, 2020). The unification of the *being-in-itself* with the *being-for-itself* frames Sartre's theory of *self-creation* (Sartre, 2003; Cumming, 2003; Solomon, 2005; Charmé, 2020). However, this unification of *beings*, a configuration of *being-for-itself-in-itself*, is unachievable because a human being is never in a fixed state; we are always in transcendence, in conflict with others and in transition within the self. Indeed, there is a constant tension between the *being-in-itself* and the *being-for-itself*. In this tension, the being-as-a-whole – *being-for-itself-in-itself* – remains aspirational and stimulates a constant examination of consciousness and freedom as the individual strives to get closer to the out-of-reach goal of being the creator (God) to the self. However, Sartre would argue that "man is a useless passion" (Sartre, 2003:639) because "no individual or group can attain the standpoint of the Whole" (Baugh, 2020:30) and experience complete satisfaction (Solomon 2005; Flynn 2006; Cox, 2008), i.e., creator to the self. Like Sartre's fundamental project, the *individual existential project of action* is a statement to the self and to others that the individual chooses their own resources and freedoms to interpret and guide them through their world (Onof, 2011).

There is a distinction between Sartre's fundamental project and the *individual existential project of action,* as revealed in this research. Sartre's fundamental project is embodied in the physical world of the being-in-itself (a *being-as-a-whole*), whereas the *individual existential project of action* is embedded in the 'social and political world'; the being-for itself and the being-for-others. In choosing *individual existential projects of action*, the constituency activist creates consciousness and space to analyse their various responsibilities and impassion their desires to experience existential freedoms; these existential freedoms are also projects of 'doing' (Onof, 2011). Existential freedom is an important theme in discussions on *individual existential projects of action* because *individual existential projects of action* are, in effect, expressions of existential freedom. In addition, existential freedom, and *individual existential projects of action* are both 'revealing activities' and in revealing they both express constituency activists' "desires, intentions, goals" (Rowland, 2020:163). These projects of freedom (and doing) are also an escape from the past, or a radical conversion, to choose and create something new that transcends the facticity of the *being-in-itself* (Sartre, 2003). In the existential consciousness mode of *being-for-itself* the individual finds and creates the conditions (a *nothingness*) to deliberate on their responsibilities and freedoms. These deliberations, consequently, sets in motion arrangements for an activist's *individual existential projects of action*.

Expressions of individuality, choices, and freedoms

As stated above, there are two interdependent dimensions to the *individual existential projects of action,* the first of which is that *individual existential projects of action* are expressions of individuality, choices and freedoms. The use and leverage of voice, influence and power is key to this dimension. For example, when questioned about the work of MPs, Participant 11 states: "You are representing, it's a very important position and you have to represent the people." Whilst this may indicate a desire to use voice, influence and power, Participant 11 also speaks of a reflective self where "people do it for personal reasons. They like being the centre of attention, position of importance."

For Participant 1, constituency activism was a "personal battle" of power to fight against local corruption and injustice, and for "fairness and transparency" in the use

of public funds. At the heart of this was them "feeling quite powerless" and using activism to get "a little power back". The movement from powerlessness to power represents a transcendence of their facticity, from *being-in-itself* to *being-for-itself*: a self-aware activist in action. In their transcendence, they were "learning skills, learning about, I guess a sense of power", reiterating that the being is always in progress and never in a fixed state. In existentialism, power is the freedom to choose, to engage and, by extension, to influence.

However, existentialism also tells us that there is a burden attached to this power and freedom and there is an obligation to choose. For Participant 1, the burden of choice reawakens their past where they experienced ethnic minority communities and the working class "being shat on one way or another, constantly and persistently by the establishment." Having witnessed this over a lifetime, they commit to an *individual existential project of action* to use their power to "challenge the system." Participant 12 shares Participant 1's *individual existential projects of action* to challenge the system to help others gain power and influence:

> *"… because at the moment there are large bits of people with very little power and very little influence who are disadvantaged by society and ignored or exploited. It goes back to valuing the people who are on the margins of society basically and valuing people who give to society… getting them the power and influence, which they don't have at the moment. And if you look at people who work in the NHS or carers, they tend to be exploited, they tend to be pushed around." (Participant 12)*

Their impulse to an *individual existential project of action* comes from a lifetime of challenging the system. Participant 1, in realising that the "system isn't immovable, it's movable if you push the right pressure point" extends their *individual existential projects of action* to include standing for parliament. They continue:

> *"I think [I] did have an impact. I got 300 votes, for an independent… This is a process which I found allows ordinary people to have a voice and a little bit of power against, kind of, entrenched establishment that controls all of those sorts of*

> *systems. Those levers and triggers that's supposed to be there for democracy don't work but actually standing for election, at the general election for £500, they can't fuck with that." (Participant 1)*

Their insight into the system and their conclusion broadens their options and choices to commit further to their *individual existential project of action* to challenge the system, admitting that, despite losses at a local election, theirs is "a continuing… fight against the corruption, and that's still ongoing".

Participant 1's *individual existential project of action* to seek public office as an independent candidate solely to challenge the system and knowing that they would not win presents a robust representation of Sartre's concept of existential freedom. Existential freedom communicates freedom on at least two levels. On one level it represents a public demonstration of an individual's *free will* to determine their own political choices and accept responsibility for their actions (Cox, 2008). On another, less public, though still important, existential level, in their project to seek public office Participant 1 is enacting their freedom through *self-consciousness.* A surge in self-consciousness (and freedom) is the result of an overwhelmed *being-in-itself* (Sartre, 2003). Participant 1 has become intentionally self-aware of their *being-in-itself,* including a sharp alertness to their own knowledge, skills and values. Together, this heightened awareness takes them beyond their present self to a future self, a *being-for-itself.* In this state of *being-for itself* their imagination gives them permission, and the will to action, to stand for parliament. Their *individual existential project of action* also represents an expression of their individuality and their uniqueness in understanding the system and accepting responsibility to contribute towards others gaining power themselves. Their individuality is continuously refreshed in each encounter with their *being-for-itself* because it is in this state that the activist identifies and selects their unique *individual existential projects of actio*n goals.

The complex project to stand for parliament, and extensive surge in consciousness and freedom is not done in one leap forward for Participant 1. They have, over time, moved towards this specific *individual existential project of action* through experience and feedback (for example, a *look*) from others.

> *"I got a good reputation stopping people from being made homeless. You know, I was getting people thousands of pounds in benefits and making a difference in people's lives. I really enjoyed it, that's what drew me back into kind of community work, community engagement work, community involvement." (Participant 1)*

Occurring alongside their positivity they show anxiety in "using [the] system against them [the establishment] as much as possible" because for Participant 1 being an activist "is about being cursed…a thorn in the side" of the establishment. There is a mixture of passions and emotions on display here. There is the laser focused desire to make a difference, driven by the curse and unease of the expectations they have of themselves, and the inner strength and resilience to meet the demands of an ever-present struggle defending the powerless from a powerful "machine". In juggling the ups and downs of constituency activism while standing for parliament outside of mainstream party political support networks, and in dealing with the temperament of bureaucracy and government as an outsider, Participant 1 could arguably represent Nietzsche's *overman* or *übermensch* (Solomon and Higgins, 2000; Nietzsche, 2003; Solomon, 2005).

Having a voice is an important element of constituency activism. It expresses one's individuality, such as an authentic voice, a confident voice, or a voice in opposition. *Individual existential projects of action* often come out of an activist's desire to be heard and to protect the voice of others:

> *"On the doorstep people want to be heard. I found with politics sometime the best thing is to just listen to people. Because generally, when people are listened to, they feel better, you've got it out of your system, and you can breathe a bit more." (Participant 8)*

In recognising that constituents "breathe a bit more" after being heard, Participant 8 recognises a process they themself undertake. Though they may not be aware, what Participant 8 returns to when 'taking a breath' is an existential mode of *being-in-itself*, a self-contained and fixed being of familiarity; nevertheless, existentially it is

an unchanging and undifferentiated being (Sartre, 2003). This *being-in-itself*, however, contains the illusion of freedom and consciousness and forgoes the ability to change and enact *individual existential projects of action*. To change, the individual needs to find their individuality by giving themself over to the disorder and anxiety attached to the consciousness and self-awareness of the *being-for-itself* (Sartre, 2003).

Despite the turbulence and anxiety experienced by activists when embracing consciousness and freedom, they continue to emphasise the importance of inclusivity in their *individual existential projects of action* for themselves and so as not to exclude the voice of other individuals from the political process:

> *"I don't think you can exclude people from having a voice or making a contribution because they haven't lived through something that they care about or they're talking about it. But I think at the same time it would be churlish not to acknowledge that people who have lived through that have got a personal experience that helped shape the discussion around it if you like." (Participant 16)*

Potentially, the "people who have lived through" the political and social issues under discussion such as the NHS worker and the carer, may find themselves in a position to present an authentic voice to any proceedings because their self-awareness was piqued through first-hand experiences. This notion is not supported by all constituency activists as Participant 3 comments:

> *"I find my eyes rolling every time somebody stands up in the meeting and makes a speech and says, you know, 'I come from a working-class background… well I've experienced this…' 'cause I think it's a, to me I think 'so what?' It doesn't cut any ice with me." (Participant 3)*

The confident voice of Participant 3 equates to objectifying those who speak from "working-class" experience and thereby diminishing others of their individuality, weakening those spontaneous voices, and narrowing the power of some to influence others. Here, Participant 3 highlights how *individual existential projects of action*

are also subject to bad faith, because they can deny others their lived experiences and opportunities to further develop individual freedoms and consciousness. In short, Participant 3 is viewing others as being fixed, thereby stunting their individuality.

The *individual existential projects of action* provide opportunities to satisfy the duality of one's individuality (Sartre, 2003). This is a duality of existing as both a physical being (-in-itself, and in facticity) and a social being (-for-itself and -for-others) (Hirschberger et al., 2016). Participant 16 presents an experience of this duality:

> *"I totally am an activist and I think I'm an activist politically, I think I'm an activist in the law [profession], in my job relationship, my personal involvement with trade unions. I'm an activist, so yeah, I think I'd be very happy with that [activist title], if that were on my gravestone, very happy." (Participant 16)*

The duality of being both in facticity and a social being is expressed with passion by Participant 16 when they speak of their activist credentials (law profession, trade union links and constituency activism) and their satisfaction in being labelled as an activist in their social, political and professional settings ("I think I'd be very happy with that, if that were on my gravestone, very happy"); the facticity here reflects Participant 16's activist identity when it is written (and fixed) on a gravestone. For this constituency activist, there was also a sense that they acknowledge that they have enjoyed lasting returns for their activist efforts. For example, when communicating their enthusiasm for the possibility of being remembered as a longstanding activist, Participant 16's posture expanded with pride and their speech softened to share a preview of contentment with their life's contribution to their constituency activism.

It is not only projecting forward into the future that helps shape an activist's contribution. For Participant 17, thoughts on the shaping of their constituency activist *being* takes them back to earlier lived experiences:

> *"[I] think I've been an activist all my life in a funny sort of sense, but not maybe in the traditional way, I think. My dad was a miner*

> *in Scotland, he was a coal miner, and we're brought up working class and so forth… I'm active, I'm an activist in that sense I want to find out more, and I'm an activist in terms of wanting to present that to people at a time, if you like, when people are really negative about Islam and wanting to change that balance a wee bit in a funny sort of way but in a very positive way of looking at things, as opposed to the negative things which we get through the media and stuff like that… it's about activist in the way that I want to know about life so I want to involve myself with different cultures, because that's what I grew up with." (Participant 17)*

In existential terms this is an enduring narrative because Participant 17 recognises that they have an *individual existential project of action*, a desire and motivation to challenge "the negative things which we get [about Islam] through the media and stuff like that", but they believe they navigate this using non- traditional approaches in that they consider themselves an activist "but not maybe in the traditional way". Their *individual existential projects of (trans)action* offers them the potential to amplify life on their own subjective terms (Cumming, 2003; Solomon, 2005). They also identify as a life-long activist initiated through their working-class roots and mining community heritage: "My dad was a miner in Scotland, he was a coal miner, and we're brought up working class and so forth". This comment communicates a strong sense of identity and a distinctiveness that provides a robust platform for Participant 17 to act on their *individual existential projects of action*.

Sartre would contest the way Participant 17 describes the beginnings of their activism and the way they have internalised their position as one of the working-class, as it is a category fixed by society and other people. In existential terms, Participant 17's working classness is an example of self-deception because it is counter to Sartre's idea that "one is always responsible for what is made of one…a man can always make something out of what is made of him." (Sartre, 2008:73). To evade this possibility, to live without pursuing existential freedom, is to be in bad faith (Cox, 2008; Solomon, 2005; Sartre, 2003), though one can argue that Participant 17 is committed to creating their own situation and outlook in life "in

the way that I want to know more… to involve myself with different cultures". Furthermore, in this quote there is a sense of an embodied and self-aware activist very keen to have a range of experiences.

Participant 17 also use their life experience (working class, dad was a miner, growing up with different cultures) to inform their dealings and collaborations with others. They regard curiosity ("I want to find out more") and autonomy ("I want to know about life so I want to involve myself with different cultures") to be important values in choosing the direction of their activism and activist interests.

In the case of Participant 16 their *individual existential projects of action* are closely aligned to a sense of place and political vision for their community and country:

> *"I wanted to be a member of Parliament particularly here where we're sat because this is my home. And I wanted to be the representative for the place I was born, brought up and all the rest of it. But in addition to that I also want to be a member of Parliament because I wanted to help change things and that doesn't go away when you lose. That doesn't, you don't stop wanting to change things… I still, I really enjoy being active as an activist and play my part." (Participant 16)*

Participant 16's life history indicates that activism has been an *individual existential project of action* from a young age and as a result it is how they identify themselves. Elsewhere in the interview, they mention that one of their parents "had been a trade union official" and was a former town and city councillor and city Alderman; they came from "quite a political family"; they had "protested against a couple of things and written to [their] then MP"; and stood as a prospective parliamentary candidate more than once. Their *individual existential projects of action* as illustrated in the above interview extract communicates a strong commitment to political engagement and action. There is also a motivational aspect to their *individual existential projects of action* in that they "don't stop wanting to change things", and there is also a sense that they discovered their political self and their ambition to be a politician in the *look* of *others*, such as their family members.

All these conditions reinforced their *individual existential projects* of action as projects of political activism.

Moments of self-awareness, questioning and clarity

> *"Questioning occurs in experiences of disruption." (Rolfe et al., 2016:51)*

In addition to *individual existential projects of action* being expressions of individuality, choices and freedoms, they are also the locations of existential disruptions. In experiencing these disruptions – when everyday activities no longer make sense (Cooper, 1996) – the constituency activist is exposed to the second dimension: moments of self-awareness, questioning and opportunities to clarify their existential freedoms and responsibilities. These moments of self-awareness are generated by emotional responses to external events and by intrinsic experiences of consciousness. For example, Participant 13 is clear that their constituency activism was an outlet for their needs and *being*. Their "catalytic moment" (Bale et al, 2020), questioning and clarity came about when they reflected on their lifestyle:

> *"I was just going out on a Saturday night and getting pissed…all that kind of stuff, it didn't seem a good enough as far as I was concerned and I wanted to get whole, more adult, so that's why I got involved" (Participant 13)*

Participant 13 describes a renewed awareness of their subjective self and the potential for new possibilities. Intrinsic experiences of consciousness such as these, are what Sartre regards as coexistent with existential freedom. These freedoms are found in the dynamic and disruption that occurs between the being-in-facticity (an in-active and passive being) and the being-in-transcendence (a pro-active being). In the collision of these two *beings* there is a *nothingness,* a condition where the activist finds themself in a state of *non-being*. The *non-being* is a negated *being-in-itself,* a stage where the individual is primed to progress towards a level of existential consciousness. This encounter with *nothingness* brings about self-awareness, which is a state of being that is driven by the individual's imagination and anticipation of change and new possibilities. In the state of *nothingness*, the

individual deliberates on what is lacking in their being and in their lived experiences. *Nothingness* is therefore an assembly point for *individual existential projects of action.*

In questioning their *lack,* the individual's desires and actions arise. These desires and actions are deliberated and clarified by the individual through a process of reflective consciousness – the *being-for-itself* – into *individual existential projects of action.* Not only does *nothingness* expose the *being-for-itself* to its non-being, and to the anxiety around its prospects (what it lacks), it also creates a crucible of possibilities and freedoms, thereby creating *individual existential projects of action*. Participant 24 provides an example of this process in action:

> *"First started when I were at our local carnival, yeah, we used to take local children out and watch the parade come around the corner. And it came around and they were about 2 floats. And I said to my wife is that it? You brought me out to look at this parade and it were nothing and she goes, "well do something about it", I said yeah I will, I'll join the committee. So, I joined the committee that day, on Carnival Day. And my energy and my passion brought people together. So, it were from there, you knew you could make a difference. And that's the biggest thing to me." (Participant 24)*

The quote contains disruption in the form of disappointment ("is that it?"), a questioning in response to the challenge, "well do something about it" and clarity of thought and action to "join the committee". There are also moments of self-awareness communicated in their description of taking control of the Carnival, "[the] Chairman left the week before the [following] carnival. So, I were like, thrown into as a chairman, and I loved it because we made a difference". Participant 24 is self-aware and alert to their ability and capacity to respond positively to an urgent situation, to leading others and to being in control of the event.

There are additional existential features brought out in Participant 24's carnival experiences. In their description of watching the parade, Participant 24 experiences

an existential *look* from the *Other* (their wife). The *look* disrupts Participant 24's inert being (-in-itself) stimulating their consciousness of *being-for-itself* and *being-for-others.* This consciousness reveals a *nothingness*, a mode of non-being, where they ask themself *'what's to be done?'* and *'what can I do?'*. Their non-beingness alerts Participant 24 to their choices and produces a decisive response from Participant 24 who scans what is lacking in the event and recognises a sense of responsibility to improve the carnival. In this process of consciousness and decision taking, resides the catalyst to *their existential project of action*. Over time their *individual existential projects of action* recycle and renew as their experience of carnival arrangements grow. Together, the *look* of the *Other* and their experience of making sense (and decision-taking out) of *nothingness* results in a burden of freedom and consciousness, or as Sartre puts it, they are "condemned to be free" (Sartre in Langiulli, 1997:399). This burden empowers Participant 24 to enact *their existential project of action* to improve the carnival for their community. Participant 24 also displays an activist trait of civic duty (Clark, 2000) by wanting to "make a difference" and by providing strong community leadership to produce the carnival (Clark, 2000).

Across the lived experiences of constituency activists interviewed, *individual existential projects of action* started with constituency activists experiencing the phenomenon of *lack*. Constituency activists experienced *lack* differently, however, each constituency activist processed the sensation in a similar way. Their *lack,* in the form of individual consciousness and desires, pressed-upon their sense of responsibility and freedom, and in doing so propelled each constituency activist towards their *individual existential projects of action,* resulting in a sense of "look, we've got to do something" (Participant 25). Similar to Participant 24, Participant 5 offers a good example of an *individual existential project of action* emanating from *lack:*

> *"[T]he thing that really triggered it for me was the 2015 general election. I was so annoyed, you know when the result, I saw the exit poll and when the result came in and I stayed up all night, and watching the results come in was a waste of my time I should have just gone to bed. And it was so frustrating because I hadn't*

> *been involved, I hadn't done any campaigning, haven't knocked on any doors, wasn't a member of the Labour party. And I just sat there wishing I'd done something… So that's why I joined the Labour Party… I don't want to be in that situation ever again, where I'd think I'd wished I'd done something." (Participant 5)*

Participant 5's call to action came from their frustration that they had missed the opportunity to contribute to a political outcome that was more in keeping with their values. They were reflecting on their inactivity, their passive freedoms, and a future (a *nothingness*) they imagine to be less supportive of their world view. In Participant 5's emotions – "so annoyed", "waste of my time", "so frustrating" and "wishing I'd done something" – are found in the moments of conversion from *being-in-itself* to *being-for-itself* (and for-others). These existential moments culminate in Participant 5 joining a political party. It is important to note that an *individual existential project of action* is not a destination, it is an attitude underpinned by the individual's application of their freedoms and responsibilities when engaging with others in the world.

Individual existential projects of action also function to clarify the world for the activist and provide structure for them to review the freedoms and choices available to them. This growing self-awareness (an epistemological feature of existentialism) is accessed by the individual in the modes of *being-for-itself* and *being-for others*. Activists reported a growing self-awareness as emerging after they were given opportunities and conditions to reflect, study and spend time considering alternative ideas and opinions. For Participant 2, political ideas and discussions were present in their formative years through the influence of a grandparent, however, the ideas and clarity of meaning only came to them later at university:

> *"I signed up with no intention of going to meetings or playing an active role in campaigning. Going from 2010 becoming a Labour Party member, not really having any ideas formed, [having a] very important discussion with my grandad, and then I went to university in 2012. When studying more, that's when… ideas become more formed." (Participant 2)*

For Participant 2, university experiences presented existential moments of clarity in their political thinking and action. There was also a recalibration of their activist focus and political values on the passing of their grandfather:

> *"It was weird, just as my interest in the Labour Party increased my grandads decreased. He'd become a bit disillusioned during the Blair years. He'd been active, he'd done leafleting and campaigning. But I do think he's a big reason I got into… certainly into left-wing politics. He passed away in 2010, and he had cancer and the last conversation I had with him, he said don't, never forget what the unions did for us… So, I thought it was quite a pivotal part of my life, that conversation."*
> *(Participant 2)*

Individual existential projects of action involve the activist in the antecedent activities of self-awareness of *nothingness* and *non-being*. This process also involves a level of introspection, as displayed by Participant 2 during their university experiences and at the death of their grandfather. Introspection is a subjective exercise involving 'noticing', 'making-sense' and 'making-meaning' of an experience through reflection and self-awareness suggests learning (Moon, 1999). However, without an outward display of new habits and ideas, the introspection has had a superficial effect on the activist's situation and plan for the future. Noticing, making-sense and making-meaning are important features of introspection, for they provide the foundation moments for freedom and responsibility. The transformation is deep and existential when the activist works with the 'new' (made) meaning brought up in their reflections and applies it to a task and to the *individual existential projects of action.* The transformation is existential in that the self-examination involves self-awareness of freedoms and responsibility. To sustain the transformation the activist should take feedback on their *individual existential projects of action* and revisit their own perspectives on their lived experiences.

In the example below, Participant 7 reflects on what they have learnt in being a constituency activist, and in doing so, they are revisiting their past perspective on politics and activism:

> *"I lived a very sheltered childhood; you know stereotypical middle-class person living on a middle-class estate not being surrounded by anything different from themselves… and I didn't notice. I didn't notice what's going on in the world and I didn't care about politics because there wasn't any politics to care about in my sheltered little world. So, I'd love to go back to the little me and say, 'pay more attention, notice more where the world is different from the one you inhabit." (Participant 7)*

This is a powerful reflection by Participant 7, for there is intense disappointment in their observation that "I didn't notice. I didn't notice what's going on in the world and I didn't care about politics because there wasn't any politics to care about in my sheltered little world". Following this self-observation, they go on to describe themself as "a reluctant activist… I do this [constituency activism] because it's important". Their latter comment shows some of the anxiety attached to *individual existential projects of action.* Participant 7's words convey a burden of freedom, as they cope with the weight of self-expectation and responsibility. Nevertheless, it is this dynamic of freedom and responsibility that sustains their individual existential project of constituency activism.

For Participant 9, the transformation to constituency activist is solidified by the expectations of others:

> *"Well, people will often call you an activist before you call yourself it. So, if they've put that label on you, and it's a label that you're happy to accept, that's fair enough. You'll discover that people have put lots of labels on you, so it doesn't really… you know, and after a while you'll say, 'well I'm not that'. But they might insist on, you know, placing you with that label but you know, as with everything, people have got to get to know you to know really what makes you tick… there's no way of getting away from the fact that you are an activist." (Participant 9)*

Participant 9's comment that "people will often call you an activist before you call yourself it" is an example of how activist qualities are given to the individual before

they themselves exist and identify as an activist. This is an anti-Sartrean principle because for Sartre (an activist's) existence precedes (an activist's) essence (Langiulli, 1997; Solomon, 2005). Participant 9's observations are also an exemplar of the presence and influence of *others,* specifically the relationship between the *being-in-itself* and the *being-for-other*s.

For Participant 9, this relationship involves a consciousness, built on the satisfaction and pride that constituents "know… what makes [them, the activist] tick". As a *being-for-others*, Participant 9 is initially grappling with the possibilities and preferences of *Others* and others' expectations of them. This is an example of the *look* of the other where *others* have reduced Participant 9 to an object with a "label". Participant 9 initially appears to be indifferent – "that's fair enough" – or even passive to the extent of being in bad faith. Eventually, they come round to accepting the label by conceding that "there's no way of getting away from the fact that you are an activist" and in doing so, they reclaim their subjectivity; they recover their *being-for-itself*, an authentic self, a *being* in unity with their *being-for-others*.

Like many of the research participants quoted above, Participant 9's comments are full of emotion. "[T]he people will often call you an activist before you call yourself it" was a self-reflection of the pleasure, pride and satisfaction felt by Participant 9 on being recognised as an activist. The act of being labelled as an activist served as an invitation by others and was the motivation for Participant 9 to 'be' an activist. In Sartrean existentialism, *emotions* are acts of consciousness and valued as direct engagements with the world, as illustrated by Participant 9's experience of being an activist. Similar calls to action can develop from an activist's early self-reflections. For example, Participant 3 states that they were "involved in various political organisations, particularly environmental ones, I've always been strong on the environment, and kind of anti-nuclear groups and occupation marches".

Where emotions act as calls to action, they are acts of existential consciousness. As acts of existential consciousness, *emotions* also provide structure to constituency activists' lived experiences and are therefore central to their *individual existential*

projects of action. Participant 3 continues their self-reflection about their environmental concerns:

> *"I do remember, when the kids were young, getting really annoyed, that's probably the wrong way to put it, but, really conscious of pollution and thinking of young kids, and thinking 'what are they breathing?' Also, traffic pollution, people driving their cars everywhere when they don't need to, public transport, that sort of thing, road safety where people are speeding, that kind of threat to your kids." (Participant 3)*

In displaying that they are "really annoyed", Participant 3 shows intentionality through their emotional response: they are annoyed at *something*. In this instance, their annoyance is aimed at the "threat to your kids" of "traffic pollution" and speeding motorists. Participant 3 makes sense of their emotional response by framing it as a *responsibility* to protect "kids" from these threats. Their existential responsibility is driven by their self-awareness and the formation of an *individual existential project of action.* Additionally, their emotional responses to their lived experiences of other environmental projects throughout their life suggests an attachment to something other than themselves. In this case, Participant 3's exposure and commitment to environmental projects have helped them form an existential attachment with their surrounding community in order to protect others.

Emotions tell a story of the *individual existential projects of action* through the objects of our emotions, such as responsibility to campaign against pollution and speeding cars, and through (the objects of) the sensations of our emotions and moods. Participant 7 gives an interesting insight into how their mood and temperament engages with emotions in constituency activism:

> *"I think emotions get in the way, when members had grievances against each other I'd be the one to mediate that… hugely emotionally tiring, and… I'd love, I'd love to disconnect all that emotional stuff from it altogether. I'm not in it for the emotional stuff. I'm not in it for the positive emotions that I get… and*

> *definitely on election night I get very powerful emotions. But, not in it for them I don't think." (Participant 7)*

Participant 7 sees emotions as lived experiences and personal responsibility to be controlled. It does appear that Participant 7 is able to separate their emotions from the event and remain at an emotional distance. They do however regularly experience emotions through mediating "grievances" and give themselves over to the emotions when mediating. This ability to remain at a distance does not dimmish their *individual existential projects of action*; indeed, it shows their commitment to it in other ways. Theirs is an *individual existential project of action* that is sustained by their dedication to their politics and loyalty to their members, whilst being able to 'tap in to' their emotions when needed; a tempered, controlled response.

It is important to note that emotions are not the mechanical reactions Participant 7 may be suggesting by stating "I'd love to disconnect all that emotional stuff from it altogether". For many activists, emotions are central to the concept of self and act as purposive desires that give meaning to their constituency activism and *individual existential projects of action*. Participant 6 provides a good example of how they make meaning and *individual existential projects of action* from their emotions:

> *"I was already in the Labour Party when Thatcher became prime minister, that was an enormous catalyst because my loathing of Thatcher, Thatcherism and neo-liberalism as we've come to term it over the years has been a real driving force and has helped sustain me at times when I kind of got a little bit disenchanted with the leadership of the party." (Participant 6)*

For Participant 6, their loathing of Thatcher is transformative. As "an enormous catalyst", the emotion of "loathing" reflects Sartre's (1994) certainty that emotions (and imagination) are "magical" (1994:45) and they are "transformations of the world" (1994:39). Here, Participant 6 is rejuvenated in their opposition to "Thatcherism and neo-liberalism" and maintain their followership even when they are "a little bit disenchanted with the leadership of the party".

Emotions can therefore be viewed as strategies for coping in the world and arise, though not always, in situations of conflict and disenchantment within activism.

Participant 1 finds themself in "circumstances [that] have left me to be in direct confrontation", resulting in them fighting against the "establishment for a large part of [their] life" (Participant 1). Participant 1's conflict with those they see as supporting corruption has been a significant part of their activism:

> *"I spent 12 years fighting the local authority… in race equality and I was exhausted… I thought I'd done my fighting, the hard fight. But nothing could be further from the truth, this was [another fight] the hardest fight I've ever had and I've had a few, I've had quite a few fights for justice… against injustice… And still continuing my fight against the corruption, and that's still ongoing." (Participant 1)*

Participant 1 displays both anger and resignation and that they will continue their fight until some end, but the end is not defined. Their calculation to fight is a long-term strategy to cope with the world, and their emotional attachment to the fight suggests that a process of intellectual reasoning has occurred for Participant 1 as they "continue my fight against the corruption". This is an example of how emotions can be misunderstood and can lead to obsessive behaviours in *individual existential projects of action*. In this case, Participant 1 mentioned many instances of corruptions and injustice, appearing to continually experience the emotion of resentment. In existentialism, resentment is an avoidance strategy to avoid coping with the world and to avoid self-awareness. Participant 1's emotional response could therefore be interpreted as them prolonging their fight to avoid coming to a resolution of their battles against corruption and injustice.

At the other end of the emotional spectrum, Participant 14, views their *individual existential projects of action* in terms of "joining in with other people… I really enjoy [canvassing], the camaraderie"; an example of a constituency activist experiencing emotions at the other end of the continuum to Participant 1. Their experience of happiness also has the capacity to provide a transformative and uplifting effect, impacting on their mood and enthusiasm for their *individual existential projects of action*.

It is worth noting that constituency activists do not need to experience only intense emotions such as anger and happiness to modify their *individual existential projects of action* or to motivate them. Conditions that stifle the *creativity* of the being-for-itself and serve the facticity of being-in-itself, such as boredom and stagnation, provide equivalent catalysts for moments of self-awareness, questioning and clarity. An example of this seen in Participant 4's acknowledgement that "I don't think there was any moment of anger. It was a moment of ennui if you like, I just thought it was pointless", which subsequently forced their departure from a constituency political party.

The inescapable presence of bad faith in constituency activism

> *"Bad Faith: A lie to oneself within the unity of a single consciousness. Through bad faith a person seeks to escape the responsible freedom of Being-for-itself. Bad faith rests on a vacillation between transcendence and facticity which refuses to recognise either one for what it really is or to synthesise them." (Sartre, 2003:649-650)*

In addition to existential freedom being integral to constituency activism, this thesis contends that bad faith has an inescapable presence in constituency activism. Not only is bad faith and self-deception inevitable in the lived experiences of constituency activists, but it is also part of the freedom experienced by them (Sartre, 2003). Participant 10 offers an interesting example of the trials of Sartrean bad faith in this interview extract:

> *"There're people in my own family, like my uncle, just a classic… he's like, 'you'll never become an MP, people like us from our community, you know, from council estates and the rest of it, don't become MPs'. And such a negativity of writing me off, and even at 18 he was saying this." (Participant 10)*

Had Participant 10 allowed themself to be influenced by their uncle to the point where they deceived themself into accepting the view that "people like us from our

community… from council estates… don't become MPs", and had they believed that it was not possible for them to become an MP, they would be living in bad faith. In bad faith they would have deprive themself of their existential freedom to explore help and options to become an MP and justified it by coming from a council estate to deny their political ambition. Sartre is not saying that the activist's past does not affect who they are (Sartre, 2003); what he is saying is that Participant 10 *cannot escape the burden of freedom* to choose for themselves. Indeed, Participant 10's authenticity is found in them taking responsibility for their choices and actions. Participant 10 also shared another experience, this time at one of their branch meetings: "I said I wanted to stand for internal positions and given the advice not to. If I'd just been myself [and] put myself forward". On this occasion they did allow the choice to be made for them, and in doing so they escaped the responsibility of choosing for themselves. In short, they choose to limit their options and in doing so they were in bad faith. A further example of bad faith can be seen with Participant 21, who was immersed in politics having come from a family of "very political activists, all of them trade union members, active organisers". However, Participant 21 chose to step away from political activism opportunities and a career in politics, describing themselves "as a dormant activist…passively involved", and ultimately sharing that "it's not an identity I'm particularly interested in". In Sartrean existential terms this illustrates *bad faith* as a rejection of the possibility to transcend one's fixed *being*. It serves as an example of *bad faith* in denying one's *being-for-itself* and *being-for-others*.

In recalling their lived experiences, there were many instances of bad faith underlying the actions and motivations of constituency activists. Most notable are instances where the activist disempowered themself by holding onto fixed ideas and habits, thereby containing their own activist potential and closing down moments of praxis and opportunities to transcend their fixed being. For Levy (2020) this is "to exist in the paradoxical position of bad faith—to be aware of their freedom and at the same time hide freedom from themselves" (Levy 2020: 193). In hiding from freedom, the activist disempowers themself and forgoes valuable and worthwhile lived experiences involving emotions and imagination that enhance choices and freedoms.

Earlier in this chapter I shared three examples of Sartrean bad faith. Bad faith is implicit in Participant 17's acceptance of a given working-class position and Participant 9's apparent indifference to being labelled by others before they themselves identify as an activist. Participant 3's behaviour of "rolling their eyes" when someone refers to their own working-class experiences is an explicit example of Sartrean bad faith. Participant 17's and 9's behaviours could be interpreted as them "forcing [themselves] to believe in the illusion of [their] own determinacy" (Cox, 2008:38). On the other hand, Participant 3 is in effect denying the authenticity of another person, by objectifying the other's lived experiences and by presenting themself as an intransigent listener and an unchanging being.

> *"How then can we blame another for not being sincere or rejoice in our own sincerity since this sincerity appears to us at the same time to be impossible?" (Sartre, 2003:156)*

Unquestionably, it is difficult to sustain *authenticity* even for the sincerest person because the individual is always responding to the burden of freedom, their shifting responsibilities, and choosing projects that propel them towards the person they are still to become. Any competition between *authenticity* and *bad faith* concludes as a zero-sum game or as Wahl (in Baugh, 2020) states, we are "in the presence of a game of 'loser wins', where consciousness ceaselessly ends up with the opposite of what it sought" (2020:27).

Constituency activism involves creative and often radical individuals who respond to a challenging range of issues including campaigns against injustice, racism, fracking and failures in environmental protection, arguably, situations and conditions disposed to bad faith. Experiences of bad faith occur regularly in social settings that are often driven by big personalities, and where there are a range of social pressures placed on activists to take sides. In taking sides, all activists are prone to making missteps (acting in bad faith) along the way.

Undertaking an *existential project of action* and praxis alongside others exposes the constituency activist to situations where they have to contend with the ever-present outcome of finding themselves functioning in bad faith. Sartre characterises one's relationships with other beings as fundamentally in conflict and observes that their

influence can be so strong that through their *look* alone (Sartre, 2003; Solomon 2005), others can positively and negatively affect one's sense of self-worth.

Returning briefly to Participant 9 accepting "that label" of an activist; a label that represents and also communicates the influence of the *look* of others, can indicate an unconditional acceptance of the wants of others, meaning that the activist is existing in bad faith. In examining the acceptance of the *look* of others, Sartre would say that an activist's essence is never fixed, it is unstable, forever in flux, thereby permitting and welcoming activists such as Participant 9 to change their objectives and situations away from bad faith, and over time grow to accept their self-determined and self-aware roles (Sartre, 1946; Langiulli, 1997; Cumming, 2003).

As the activist engages in the pursuit of their *authenticity* in the constant give and take of politics, they face decisions to engage with or withdraw from trivial and intense moments of conflict. To protect themselves from difficult conversations that undermine their political beliefs, they may refuse to entertain new thinking and hold on to fixed beliefs that have got them where they are. Here, they remain in facticity, the *being-in-itself*. The activist may take another route out of conflict and demonstrate a flexibility, an objectivity, to the point that their values and beliefs no longer hold substantial principles and disintegrate over time. This situation is one where they remain in transcendence, a *being-for-itself* and *for-others* neither solidifying physically or intellectually, continuously bending in the wind (Sartre, 2003; Cumming, 2003). This fixed state of transcendence and bad faith leads to a weakening of the activist's self-awareness and confuses their interpretation of sincerity in their attitudes and actions.

Remaining fixed to either facticity or transcendence is to be in bad faith. In intentionally suspending themself in one of these modes of being the activist will use reason and emotion to justify their choice to escape their responsibilities by delaying decisions and avoiding actions. In Participant 7 there is an example of the activist denying their future *being* through their sincerity of being honest. Sincerity becomes an act of bad faith when the activist holds onto the person they are, denying who they could be. There are similarities here with Sartre's observation of the inauthentic waiter discussed in *Chapter 2*.

> *"I definitely look up to, you know, people who have, who do things in their life. It's the actions rather than the people, I think that's the thing, I admire the actions…I'm not, I'm not interested, have any interest in walking around neighbourhoods knocking on doors, putting leaflets through people's doors and so on. I don't have much interest in the long process of getting everybody onto your side." (Participant 7)*

For Participant 7, actions are an important measure of an activist, however they described themself as a fixed being "I'm not, I'm not interested, have any interest in walking around neighbourhoods knocking on doors, putting leaflets through people's doors…". In Sartrean terms, Participant 7 has made their mind up that they are fixed in their past actions – "a [person] who is a No" (Sartre in Cumming, 2003:137) – and not prepared to explore other experiences and freedoms in their constituency activism. They are denigrating their being and denying themselves "a future transcendence" (Sartre, 2003:70) and conveying a consciousness "I am what I have been*"* (Sartre in Solomon, 2005:228). Participant 7 would have communicated authenticity had they expressed a preparedness to reconsider how they could become interested in leafleting and getting people on side. Here, Participant 7 is locked into their past and unprepared to envision another outcome from trying new approaches to their constituency activism (Sartre, 2003). It is difficult to recognise and comprehend bad faith (Sartre, 2003); however, there are more nuanced behaviours such as those illustrated by Participant 26 as they rise to the challenge of speaking at a meeting.

> *"He stood and talked, and he mumbles, he's a dreadful speaker. And everyone's going, can't hear you, shout up shout up, and he's going mumble, mumble, mumble. And the next one to speak someone talking about stopping more air travel. And she read from a piece of paper that she had brought with her and everyone politely, listened, listened to her, and clapped her at the end. And I've got my notes, and I thought, God, that was dreadful. So, I stood at the pulpit as you do, and I just did it off the top of my head. I got people laughing I got people … clapping. A couple of*

> *years ago, all I was bothered about was dancing. And then I heard about fracking. And my life's changed." (Participant 26)*

Participant 26 communicates a reawakening of their possibilities and an extension to their freedoms. Their awakening came from their agitation with other speakers' performances, "I was damn well sure I was going to be better than the other two speakers I'd heard before". This awakening, a creative and intentional moment, presented them with the existential freedom to *act on* the world as opposed to submissively *be in* the world. In speaking at the meeting, they also experience an intensity and connection with others in the room. Participant 26's *individual existential projects of action* include spreading the message that "a slight change could make an enormous difference" and addressing their discomfort that "there's still a little part of me that thinks that you know people like MPs are something special".

There are processes that enable the constituency activist to remain in bad faith and to exist in the *being-in-itself* (Sartre, 2003). For example, the activist can act to rely on their facticity by deceiving themselves and perpetuating a situation of dependence when autonomy is within reach. In the situation described above by Participant 26, had they continued to ridicule the incompetence of the speakers at their fracking event they would have been in bad faith. Instead, they stepped up and spoke to the meeting without using their notes, illustrating: 'I'm not what I have been' (Sartre, 2003). Another practise is denying that *existential projects of action* are ongoing, often unstable and ambiguous (Sartre, 2003). In this situation, the activist, in their forthrightness, creates a *being* stuck in the present. A number of participants, when asked whether their constituency activism had changed them in any way responded in a similar manner to Participant 24, "I'll never change… I'm still, still me". Participant 22 was of the same opinion that being a constituency activist had not changed them, though they were more reflective and expansive in their view that they had not changed:

> *"I don't think it's changed me. If you are on the local council, then I suppose that there is more respect for you. Because of the amount of local work that you do, or you do for the local*

> *community. But I don't think that changes me. I'm not conscious of a change in any relationships that I've had bearing in mind I've lived in this village for over [number] years. I don't think it's changed me… but yeah, I don't think I've changed at all.” (Participant 22)*

This response displays Participant 22 as a fixed *being-in-itself*. A being whose constituency activist identity is restricted to their present actions and past achievements. Like Participant 7 and Participant 24, Participant 22 avoids the potential of a future transcendence. Notwithstanding, Participant 7’s and Participant 22’s situation of being in-itself offers an ‘apparent stability’ of consciousness (Cox, 2008). This ‘stability’ means the two constituency activists can avoid any expectation to change and evade any the necessity for reflection on their politics or actions. Participant 22’s *individual existential projects of action*, is “helping out within your local community quite a lot, you get telephone calls, people come in to see you in surgery with all sorts of problems that you help to solve. So, I would never say that I was a heavy political person. Never was.” This metastability (Sartre, 2003; Cox, 2008), where an activist’s *being* is mistakenly stable, is actually a false consciousness. Indeed, they are in bad faith. Here the activist avoids the consciousness of the *being-for-itself* and *for-others*, and escapes engaging with existential states of *nothingness* and *anxiety.* This impedes their existential freedoms from being habituated and “continually reassumed with each choice” (Cox, 2008:16) leading to underdeveloped *individual existential projects of action*.

To further contextualise bad faith, it is notable that Sartre maintains that choices are not voluntary acts nor direct outcomes of a formal process of deliberation (Sartre, 1994; Cumming, 2003). They are, however, expressions of an individual’s subjective value judgements and expansions of their desires and needs justified in retrospect when a choice is already made (Sartre, 2003). This arrangement better accommodates the individual with their episodic experiences of *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself*, and their contingent conditions of life. Significantly, these conditions also give permission for the constituency activist to articulate their incursions into bad faith as nothing unusual and to be expected in certain circumstances. This interaction between bad faith and existential reality (the

negation of being-in-itself), also offers the constituency activist the opportunity to resolutely deliberate on the quality of their activism and their developing political consciousness and, in Sartrean terms, to know not what they are, but what they can become (Erhard, 2020; Eshleman and Mui, 2020; Sherman, 2020).

In summary, to exist is to be capable of bad faith; and conceptually, bad faith resides in the fundamental project of making oneself into a for-itself-in-itself, a state of being Sartre labels the "project of being God" (Sherman, 2020:60). In the context of *individual existential projects of action*, there are many sources of bad faith, for example, for the constituency activist to think and act as if they have a fixed nature would contradict Sartre's 'existence precedes essence' refrain (Langiulli, 1997; Solomon 2005). Bad faith is principally an outlook in life and attitude in favour of avoiding existential freedom, and escaping existential anxieties and responsibilities (Heter, 2020). Bad faith and authenticity arise in response to the constituency activist's consciousness and awareness that they are free to choose what to do with their life. Both conditions persist alongside the anxiety that surrounds the knowledge that the constituency activist creates themself (Sartre, 2003). More specifically, an individual's bad faith is founded on being inactive in safeguarding their existential freedom and avoiding the anxiety of having to choose novel behaviours and experiences.

For Sartre (2003), existential freedom is anxiety – a core feature of human existence (Levy, 2020) – and to deny anxiety is to exist in bad faith (Levy, 2020). Levy (2020) notes that exploring and maintaining existential freedom can be overwhelming and exhilarating for the individual, and it is in the ambiguity of this condition where anxiety and angst resides. For Levy, anguish is "intrinsic to the human condition" (Levy, 2020:187), however on its own it is not enough to sustain bad faith. The additional resource comes from one's social relations who serve to bolster one's disposition towards bad faith. In addressing head-on their own absolute responsibility for choosing bad faith, the constituency activist can contain and mitigate their bad faith.

The existential project of action enhances individual experiences of constituency activism

Individual existential projects of action are a core finding emanating from this research. The positioning of the motivations and the work of constituency activists as *individual existential projects of action* emphasises the significance of individuality, existential freedoms, and self-awareness to constituency activists. The *individual existential project of action* premise is modelled on Sartre's fundamental project. The fundamental project is an individual's overall endeavour to create for themself lived experiences that are based on their own choices, driven by their own freedoms and responsibilities, and ultimately valued by subjective measures of authenticity and bad faith. *Individual existential projects of action* are cut from the same cloth. They are scaled-down projects formed to accommodate and give attention to aspects of an individual's lived experience. In the context of this research *individual existential projects of action* comprise constituency activist activities.

These activities include the *doing* of activism, experiencing different existential modes of existing when *being* a constituency activist, realising existential freedoms and choices in the activist role, and applying authenticity and accommodating bad faith in their activism. By engaging with these components of the i*ndividual existential projects of action* the individual is presented with the opportunity to make unique meaning of their constituency activism. Over time, a constituency activist enacting an *individual existential projects of action* paradigm and attitude will have the opportunity to be free of the conditions set by others, free of their facticity and free to make something of themselves on their terms and through their own choices.

The *individual existential projects of action* are different for all individuals, and it is a means for discovering their world and reporting how the individual lives in the world. It also provides an understanding of the structure of action: identifying what is missing, structuring a response to *lack*, and acknowledging the *look* and influence of others in choices made. This involves a progression of choices and actions taken by the individual in response to their *lack* of being (Cox, 2008). This *lack* is identified in a state of *being-for-itself*, a mode of (borrowed) *being* that negates its

facticity (*being-in-itself*) and involves a range of projects (choices and actions) to overcome their lack of being. The *lack* represents the individual constituency activist's subjective desire for some future fulfilment (Eshleman and Mui, 2020; Morris, 2020; Poellner 2020); the *individual existential projects of action,* therefore, exists as a negation of an existing situation and gives meaning to the desires and actions that follow the individual's choices. This research shows that *individual existential projects of action* reveal as an objective to, for example, be an MP, overcome injustice, campaign, and advocate, and protest – such *projects* are also undertakings to remove barriers that distract the activist from discovering the world around them and incentives to refresh their existential freedoms to be the political self they desire.

Individual existential projects of action are constantly revised by the activist as they adjust to additional freedoms and moments of self-awareness. This adjustment involves the constituency activist once again objectifying themself and encountering a state of non-being and nothingness. Here the individual reviews their desires and motives and reforms their *individual existential projects of action*. This may mean discarding some *individual existential projects of action,* resurrecting past projects, and starting some all over again. As well as projects designed to resolve a situation and address gaps in the lived experience*, individual existential projects of action* can also deny and delay decision-taking and action. These *individual existential projects of action* are projects of bad faith (Sartre, 2003).

In summary, undertaking an *individual existential project of action* reveals richer dimensions of *being-in-the-world* to the activist, including the existential meaning or essence of their various projects of *doing* (e.g., political campaigning), and how their constituency activist actions provide depth to their lived experiences and existential freedoms (Rowlands, 2020). This includes opportunities to find purpose and meaning in a range of social and political engagements, experience authenticity of being, and to experience moments to turn away in bad faith and remain attached to the past and to an unreflective, unchanging self.

Chapter 5: Existential themes that sustain the individual existential projects of action

In this research, *individual existential projects of action* are viewed as a phenomenon of constituency activism. *Individual existential projects of action* also involve existential attitudes that empowers the activist to take action to engage with their existential freedoms, responsibilities, and aspirations. Furthermore, this research finds that *individual existential projects of action* are developed and maintained by four key existential concepts of *consciousness*, *praxis*, *anxiety*, and *authenticity*. In this chapter, these four key concepts are considered as mutual arrangements for sustaining constituency activists' *individual existential projects of action.*

Before considering these four existential concepts in the context of the research interviews, I offer an ontological dimension, an epistemological dimension and an autobiographical dimension to the *individual existential projects of action.* These three dimensions also function as different entry points for the constituency activist to engage with their unique *individual existential projects of action*. There is an ontological underpinning to the *individual existential projects of action* enabling constituency activists to develop their projects at a point that is suited to their situation and attitude. There is also an epistemological dimension to support and make sense of the learning and emotions encountered in the *individual existential projects of action.* Lastly, there is an autobiographical dimension which serves to record and realise the lived experience of the constituency activist, their contributions to their activism including their actions to pursue existential freedom and deal with the inevitability of bad faith.

The 'individual existential project of action' functions on ontological, epistemological, and autobiographical dimensions

The ontological dimension

The *existential project of action* is essentially a project of existence and being in the world. It is a means for engaging with the world and includes obstacles and difficulties on subjective and objective terms. To overcome the obstacles that prevent the individual from determining themselves, the constituency activist attempts to unify their *being-for-itself* with their *being in-itself* to create a situation of *nothingness* and the conditions for consciousness, choices and existential freedoms. In a state of reflective consciousness, the constituency activist identifies the influence and needs of others and considers, for example, reciprocity as a possible activism strategy. In considering reciprocity and freedom, the activist recognises that their responsibility in the world extends to a responsibility for all in the world (Sartre, 1946). Significantly, this is the dimension that makes the constituency activist experience possible through the ontological relationship between the *being-in-itself* and the *being-for-itself*. This is a dimension that creates possibilities and opportunities through engaging with one's existential anxieties and the needs of others.

The epistemological dimension

> *"Life is nothing until it is lived; but it is yours to make sense of, and the value of it is nothing else but the sense that you choose."*
> *(Sartre in Kaufmann, 2016: Ch 9, p79)*

Sartre has little to say about a theory of knowledge, however he was interested in how the individual consciously and knowingly engaged with the world. For Sartre, this engagement in the world involved a commitment to the doing of tasks, projects and activities that explore an authentic subjective meaning of life and one's existential freedoms. The knowledge, attitudes and values developed by the

constituency activist from doing these tasks, projects and activities contribute to their broader empirical knowledge and social learning.

The epistemological dimension therefore provides the conditions for the constituency activist to make meaning from their experiences and their *existential projects of action.* In this dimension, the constituency activist is invited to expand their consciousness by considering the quality of their attachment and their detachment to their political world. This involves intentionally distinguishing between a subjective self and an objective self. By identifying and applying these modes of self, the constituency activist is going deeper into exploring their existential aspirations and freedoms and curating their *individual existential projects of action*. Additionally, by distinguishing their subjective and objective self they have the power to relate more effectively with others and be sensitised to the influence of the *Other.*

This dimension also supports the constituency activist in making meaning and sense of the emotional aspects of constituency activism. This includes a range of emotions that arise in the *doing* of constituency activism and the friendships that comes out of shared agendas and socio-political activities. In this dimension, there is a sub-phenomenon of emotions, where the passions attached to constituency activism are unencumbered and recognised as displays of commitment and individuality. For example, feelings of *anxiety* are treated as crucial to the existential experience of freedom and viewed as an authentic experienced in being a constituency activist.

In addition, Sartre would argue that learning and knowledge starts from a place of emptiness; in the *nothingness* that appears in the friction between of the *being-in-itself* and the *being-for-itself* and *for-others*. The *being-for-itself* seeks out new and enhanced experiences using the individual's commitment to personal change, their emergent consciousness, and freedoms. These experiences – pre-reflective and reflective – include a range of activities that impact on the constituency activist's understanding, ability, and attitude towards their activism. These growing capabilities include finding meaning in doing activism, setting individual and collective goals, addressing moments of anxiety and conflict, committing to a range

of secondary tasks and activities, and dealing constructively with the high and low energy periods of constituency activism.

The autobiographical dimension

The constituency activist is invited to reflect on and chronicle their constituency activist lived experiences through whatever means appropriate to them. This could be in the form of their political journals and biographies, any one of a range of storytelling formats, indeed any media that enables the activist to record and recite their growing consciousness and self-awareness. These reflections can include their activism ideas, their political obsessions, their political relationships with others and how they choose to act in their constituency activist role, among a range of other themes personal to the constituency activist. These reflections on lived experiences are representative of their journey towards existential freedoms and responsibilities through their own *individual existential projects of action*. This dimension is a voluntary commitment and gives another platform for the constituency activist's lived experiences to be seen and heard, and it captures additional evidence to illuminate their *individual existential projects of action*. This dimension also provides for the meditation of experiences of bad faith, additional actions to extend existential freedoms, rejuvenate commitment to their cause, and review the influence of others. In addition to, and as an extension of their everyday reflections-in-action, the autobiographical dimension enables constituency activists to make and understand their own history and record the formation of their own political identity.

In the Sartrean analysis of interview data using a grounded inquiry approach, *individual existential projects of action* emerged as the principal concept for understanding the lived experiences of constituency activists. However, this single concept does not express the full range of existential experiences had by the 26 constituency activists interviewed for the research. During the grounded inquiry analysis, it was evident that there were four additional and central existential concepts defining the constituency activist's *individual existential projects of action.* These four existential concepts are: consciousness, praxis, anxiety, and authenticity. These concepts are mutual arrangements for sustaining constituency activists' *individual existential projects of action,* and independently the four

concepts provide additional and subtle inputs for developing *individual existential projects of action.*

Consciousness

> *"The goal of consciousness is to recover its alienated being, or to return to itself, by incorporating into itself those aspects of its own being that consciousness had projected outside itself." (Baugh, 2020:26)*

In Sartre's existentialism there is a concept called 'relation' (Cox, 2008). This concept includes both internal and external relations and refers to conditions where one phenomenon cannot exist independently of another phenomenon. An example of an internal relation is the connection between the *being-in-itself* and the *being-for-itself*. In this relation, the *being-for-itself* is a manifestation of *being-in-itself*. In brief, the non-being of *being-for-itself* cannot exist without the factual being (the facticity) of the *being-in-itself*. It is in this mode of non-being – *nothingness* – where the activist locates their consciousness. An external relation occurs when the consciousness of *being-for-itself* engages with objects and others in the world outside the self.

It is in the dynamic of an internal relation between the *being-in-itself* and the *being-for-itself* where the activist experiences self-awareness, including moments of questioning and clarity. From these episodes of self-awareness surfaces the constituency activist's thoughts about actions and attitudes to realise their activist aspirations and objectives. These thoughts and actions are appropriated as *individual existential projects of action.* As *individual existential projects of action,* they identify and confirm for the constituency activist a revised audit of their individual freedoms and responsibilities and a fuller comprehension of their own unique existence. The *individual existential projects of action* benefits from the constituency activists intentional and self-aware examination of their past and present experiences, and their present and future intentions. Below, Participant 7 considers their growing political consciousness through reflecting on their journey and their change in beliefs and values. Here their political consciousness develops and is clarified in the internal back-and-forth of knowledge, experience and understanding:

> *"I think my path is quite a common one, where you start with a sort of vague idea of what you believe in, and then over time you get more information, more understanding of the concept. It becomes clearer, so for me, my views… I've not changed. It's not that I've not changed, I've not changed direction. You know, I still belong in the same part of the political compass that I always have done, it's just that I understand it more than I used to. So, I think that, yeah, that my consciousness has been clarified. I definitely feel that happens, and I feel that happens to a lot of people. And I think a lot of people, I've met people who, when they go through that process, they actually shift their mindset… I was just lucky I picked the right one to start with… not the right one, but the one I match with." (Participant 7)*

It is interesting that Participant 7 talks in terms of political consciousness as a destination beginning from "a vague idea of what you believe in" as a starting point. Moreover, their circular journey clarifies their beliefs and values and returns them to the same point on their political compass, for them, a point they are meant to be at. Progression and consciousness for Participant 7 has been in the form of an *individual existential project of action* creating a deeper impression of their individuality and a sharper outline of their constituency activism. In Sartrean terms, this renewal by returning to the same point time and again mirrors the creation of a 'substantial' *being-in-itself*. In this situation the *being-in-itself* is enhanced and strengthened through its ongoing internal relation with the conscious *being-for-itself*. Participant 7 observes that their consciousness and self-awareness has been the clarification of their instinct and "vague idea" of what they believe in politically and they feel fortunate to have made 'the right' choice.

As activists experience a deeper insight into their unique situation and the lives of others, they will reject the notion that their choices and actions are fixed and determined for them, thereby, affirming their existential freedom (Sartre, 2003; Cumming, 2003). Sartre (2003) contends that individuals have no fixed nature, and if they have no fixed nature their emotions and attitudes are their own intentions (Cumming, 2003). The extent of these freedoms and choices are the product of

consciousness, i.e., *the being-for-itself*. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (2003) refers to *being-for-itself* as the 'being-of-consciousness' and a 'being-of-possibilities'. As a 'being-of-possibilities', consciousness can provide a profound awareness of the self and the world inhabited by the self. There are, however, nuances within existential consciousness. These nuances are illustrated in the modes of positional and non-positional consciousness, and self-consciousness (Sartre, 2003; Cox, 2008). Each mode of consciousness and associated *individual existential projects of action* are initiated on either a pre-reflective conscious state or a reflective conscious state.

A pre-reflective state of consciousness is an implied mode of consciousness because it is devoid of self-reflection. It is primarily a state of *being*, urged on by emotions and instinct alone; as exemplified by Participant 7's comment, "start with… vague idea of what you believe in". The *individual existential projects of action* to emerge from this pre-reflective state are driven by feelings that something directed towards the general situation needs to be done (or ignored). A reflective state of consciousness is an explicit mode of consciousness that involves self-awareness and intentionality towards a project of action. In this mode of consciousness, the constituency activist will have a perspective on, and knowledge of, the activism and socio-political issues under consideration. The *individual existential projects of action* to emerge from this reflective and positional state are focused on specific aspects of the constituency activist's objectives, such as to canvas for or against a specific issue, become an MP, prevent green-belt developments, and get their preferred political party into power. *Individual existential projects of action* that emerge from the introspective turn of self-consciousness can be profound because they involve the constituency activist in the intentional objectification of their own existence. It is here where the existential burden of freedom and responsibility is acute and where the constituency activist confronts their unique anxieties and fears, and their limitations and possibilities. The *individual existential projects of action* that come out of introspection and self-consciousness function effectively in the realm of everyday constituency activism and they also contribute directly to the constituency activist's fundamental project. This overlap occurs because the quality of introspection and reflection at this point

takes the individual beyond issues of constituency activist into broader considerations of their subjectivity, existence, and being-in-the-world.

Pre-reflective consciousness

In Sartre's existentialism the human being chooses how to function. To function primarily from a fixed mode of *facticity*, the being is transacting within their situation only. This is what Sartre recognises as a pre-reflective state, basically reacting to what is in front of the self, existing but not being present as an 'I' in the situation. The following interview extract from participant 15 shows an activist engaging from a position of unreflective consciousness:

> *"I was politically active, but I wouldn't have classed it as politically active. So, from a very young age I was into animal rights and green issues, but I don't think I ever consciously knew that that was politics. This is going to make me sound terrible but up to I went to university to do my first degree I don't think I could've told you who the three main parties were. I didn't vote the first time I was eligible to vote, it didn't seem relevant to me. I genuinely had no knowledge at all of what politics was in terms of party politics." (Participant 15)*

Participant 15 is unreflective in their consciousness on a number of fronts: they didn't understand that animal rights and green issues were related to politics; they couldn't name the main three political parties; and they "genuinely had no knowledge at all" of party politics. It could be argued that whilst they believed they had no knowledge "of what politics was", the level of commitment to animal rights and green causes requires some level of consciousness, whether reflective or unreflective. However, this first-hand quote does make the point that it is possible that there are a number of activists who react to their political causes with little connection and interest for wider policies and legislation attached to the focus of their immediate activism and campaigning.

Reflective consciousness

Being conscious of being a constituency activist is vital to being self-aware. This

level of consciousness also provides a platform for the constituency activist to extend their freedoms and choices by committing to their *individual existential projects of action.* Reflective consciousness in existential terms means the individual is functioning in a *being-for-itself* mode. This level of consciousness is reached through intentional acts of self-awareness, such as reflections on the activist's situation and/or an intentional reflection on their being in the mode of *being-for-itself*. In this mode of *being-for-itself*, the individual experiences *nothingness,* a condition that encourages self-awareness and ruminations on an individual's future self. This is achieved by placing the 'I' at centre of their reflections and in the interior of the conditions and situations the activist occupies. Here Participant 9 places themself at the centre of their consciousness: "I was conscious of who I was". This suggests a high level of self-awareness:

> *"Yeah, I suppose, I was conscious of who I was. To just give you a bit of background on that then. My parents are West Indian, and like many to do with the Windrush generation, came over here in the early 60s, that I think was from Windrush's 48… let's say late 50s early 60s. And I was born, I'm the last child, there's six of us, I'm the last one in that. So, of course there's a consciousness that has to be reached, I say 'has to be', it's not necessarily that everybody does, but I think when you wake up at some point in your life then you're looking for answers, and that's what it was, that's what happened. So… there was a consciousness." (Participant 9)*

In this quote Participant 9 states that "there's a consciousness that has to be reached", echoing Sartre's (2003) refrain that we are 'condemned to be free'. However, there is also a suggestion of the potential for some individuals to experience self-deception and bad faith in the comment "it's not necessarily that everybody does" reach consciousness. There is also a sense that for participant 9, freedom is found in "looking for answers" which give them knowledge.

Sartre writes that with freedom comes responsibility (Sartre, 2003; Solomon 2005), and for Participant 9 the responsibility is focused on knowing more about their West Indian heritage, and, as "the last child" of their parents, knowing more about

the Windrush generation. This suggests that for some people freedom can be found in their ‘existential project of knowledge’ (Onof, 2011) of their historical family context, in the same way that Participant 17 attaches their ‘existential projects of action’ to their Scottish mining roots.

Reflective consciousness involves intentional actions to direct the *being-for-itself* at the *being-in-itself*. This includes a phase of transcendence (a calculated act of consciousness) to bring the *being-for-itself* alongside the being of *facticity*. As mentioned earlier this leads to a heightened and revised awareness for the activist of the extent of their choices and freedoms, and their possibilities and limitations. The activist can of course step back from entertaining new freedoms and choices after engaging with the reflective self, or not engage with the reflective self at all. Such actions are ultimately done in bad faith and serve to deny the activist of their authentic self and allow the world to act upon them instead of taking responsibility to act on the world (Sartre, 1994).

We also reach consciousness in the presence of others and find reflective consciousness through the being and consciousness of the *Other* (Sartre, 2003; Cumming, 2003). This means that other people can influence the constituency activist through their presence alone, and also through the activist’s ‘imagination’ of what the *Other* may (or may not) be thinking about them. These scenarios are prone to insecurity and as such are also part of the broader experiences of anxiety felt by the activist. There is evidence in participant 1’s interview of the influence of others, and there are moments when they question their own motivations:

> *“When I left school, my first involvement in politics, I joined Militant when I was about 15 16, on the back of the miners’ strike, but I wasn’t a kind of committed Marxist or Trotskyist, I had an inert sense of social justice and there was a lot of anger about mines closing, so a lot of people joined Militant. At that time, 15 16, I saw the commitment that Militant demanded, and I was unable to give and so I actually drifted away from politics… I didn’t maintain my membership of Militant, and I was never a committed Trotskyist… you know was completely alien to me. Had no meaning to me, I was just being involved kicking back*

> *against the fucking Thatcherite, agenda… to try and get a sense of, to maintain a sense of power or something." (Participant 1)*

There is an element of followership, a response to the *Other*, i.e., Militant because "a lot of people joined", and there is also an element of community expectation from living in a mining community. This expectation can be considered another aspect of the *Other*. Furthermore, Participant 1 is looking to "maintain a sense of power" and arguably joins Militant for expediency. In the existential world, Participant 1's action feels inauthentic on the grounds that membership of Militant was a means to an end and was "completely alien to me…had no meaning to me". What is evident is that Participant 1 made a choice to step back from Militant, and in doing so they demonstrate their freedom in a situation of *nothingness* (what they termed as an "inert sense of social justice") following a period of reflection and consciousness on what they are prepared to commit to and what is beyond their interests and resources.

As an existential experience, consciousness is an essential phenomenon that allows constituency activists to reflect in on themselves. In these reflections the constituency activist comprehends themselves as either an *object* caught up in their circumstances and functioning as a fixed being-in-itself, or as a *subject* – existing as a being in freedom – functioning with intentionality and responsibility to meet their activist aspirations. As a *being-for-itself*, an activist will therefore form *existential projects of action* (and existential projects of knowledge) to make sense of their world and pursue their responsibilities and freedoms. However, an *existential project of action* remains a project of consciousness, a project of intention, lacking presence in the material world. Locating the consciousness provides the constituency activist with a project of action out of *nothingness;* however, it is through praxis, engagement, and commitment that thoughts of action are transformed into deeds and lived experiences of the constituency activist (Wild, 2011).

Praxis

In Sartrean existentialism, *praxis* is "the moment of assessment of the field of possibilities before it" (Sartre, 2008:502). This moment of assessment involves the

constituency activist in an accord of self-awareness and context, where their reflective consciousness fuses their actions to their understanding of the world, and vice versa. Praxis also has a transformative impact on the constituency activist and their *individual existential projects of action.* As an activity, praxis functions 'to produce and be produced' (Cox, 2008) and it achieves this through its power to generate *individual existential projects of action* and transform the constituency activist in the creation and doing of their *individual existential projects of action*.

As Sartre (2016) explains in his 'Rome Lecture', *praxis* is a volatile activity because "in our praxis – which is knowledge and action together, action that engenders its own understanding… how can we claim to state any truths about it?" (Sartre, 2016:44). The contribution and gift of *praxis* is its sensitive and subjective conditions because it challenges the constituency activist to find their own meaning in their lived experiences and actions.

Participant 2, demonstrates a "moment of assessment" (Sartre, 2008) that problematises an experience and creates an *individual existential project of action* to confront what they see as the exploitation of a colleague:

> *"That was a real tipping-point when I realised that while I was doing this to earn money, spare money, beer money, and other people were doing this, this was their livelihood, to put food on the table. I thought, this is not right. So, then I was very against zero-hours contracts. I know people might say that they're helpful for students, but I think it is exploitative." (Participant 2)*

Below, Participant 4 addresses the issue of injustice and weighs the need to challenge the Tory councillors and MP in their area through party politics.

> *"It had at that time a Tory MP, and three Tory councillors. I couldn't believe it, it just seemed to just compound injustice I saw all around me. Also, there was some riots in [location] just before that, and I thought there's something going on here which I'm not very comfortable with. That got me more interested in politics. I joined with friends, the Labour Party at the time, the local Labour Party branch, and because it's partly to be honest, I think*

> *it's partly social, sociability and partly motivated by injustice." (Participant 4)*

Participant 4's *individual existential projects of action* include dealing with their discomfort of seeing injustice by joining the Labour Party. In taking action to join a political party, the constituency activist distinguishes and transforms their *individual existential projects of action* from an inert intention into direct action towards political objectives. Their goals include replacing Conservatives with Labour councillors to relieving their discomfort and anxiety and applying their existential freedoms to become 'what they are' (Sartre, 2003). "We managed to get the first Labour councillor in…it was a big breakthrough. It felt fantastic. It felt we were changing things".

No matter how spontaneous the activist is in moving forward with *doing* the *existential project of action*, there remains "a synthesis of purposive consciousness and matter" (Baugh, 2020:25). This means that through praxis the activist is self-aware of their situation and the context for their *existential project of action*, as seen with Participant 4 above. In this unity of self-awareness and political context, praxis provides for a freely chosen *existential project of action* (Baugh, 2020).

> *"Eventually it came to the point where I wrote a blog post, about what political parties I really want to exist. And I kind of imagined a political party that's focused around human rights and wrote a very quick manifesto for that imagined political party. And then one person, a sort of a friend of a friend commented on my blog post, saying… 'it sounds like you're describing the Green Party'… that was the point I looked into the [Green Party] policies in more detail." (Participant 7)*

Participant 7's praxis, and actions following a blog post, illustrates that they have moved from a state of aspiration (what they need from a political party) to a state of belongingness ("I joined them [the Green Party]. Because they actually ticked all of the boxes on my list of my ideal political party"). There was also a transformation in Participant 7's choices in that they were better equipped to comprehend opportunities for local engagement, political teamwork, solidarity and the co-

production of environmental and political change with others (Mui, 2020).

The measure of *individual existential projects of actions* are whether they are worthwhile, not whether they are successful or whether they fail (Sartre 2003; Solomon, 2005). This is shown in the comments of Participant 14 about election results:

> *"It's not the main thing, the main thing is working towards having better policies. Like now… I really feel excited if that manifesto came into being… that was put out last year. I mean, it would be absolutely amazing, it would be wonderful. I feel really excited about that." (Participant 14)*

For Sartre, *existential projects of action* should be worthwhile and the individual must be to be alert to and avoid the 'spirit of seriousness' (Sartre, 2003; Levy, 2020). The 'spirit of seriousness' is a form of bad faith that beguiles the activist into accepting without reflection the values of *others*. If the 'spirit of seriousness' is neglected, the constituency activist will remain in facticity and deny themself opportunities to experience additional existential freedoms. To counter the 'spirit of seriousness' Sartre advocates that the activist immerses themself in the *anxiety of praxis,* because in doing so the activist returns to a situation of reflective consciousness and an authentic condition. Another aspect of Participant 4's lived experience illustrates this 'anxiety-in-action':

> *"At first, I thought Blair was fantastic and then I got less and less impressed by him and a lot of Labour people left the Labour Party because of Iraq. I left before then, about 2000-ish when Blair began to send his children to, not local schools in London, but some posh school where they had to travel to, so I thought, 'this can't be right'. So, I fell out of love with Blair about 2000." (Participant 4)*

To have remained with the Labour Party would have been in the 'spirit of seriousness' for Participant 4. Instead, Participant 4 reviews their involvement and commitment to the Labour Party without losing their compassion for the needs of others as suggested in their concern for the status of local schools. Following a

break from constituency activism, Participant 4 became a city councillor after joining the Green Party.

Sartre also writes about the *anxiety of praxis* as an adventure where the activist discovers themselves in the “gift [they] make to other[s]” (Aronson and van den Hoven, 2013: 201). For Participant 8, their gift is helping others get elected, and in return they grew in confidence and capabilities:

> *“I was basically a one-man army. There are other targets to win seats and stuff, I travelled around and helped them as well but, it was brilliant, ’cause I managed to grow as a person, learn how to quantify things that other people would think are really complicated. Like a 302-page council document, I could read those and make sense of it.” (Participant 8)*

The adventure for this participant is palpable; the personal development they experienced “was brilliant” and they learned to handle “really complicated” things. They identified as “a one-man army” with a real sense of pride having supported others through their gift of time and skills. The reference to making sense of a 302-page report is also significant here because throughout the interview this participant spoke about difficult school and college experiences and a recent learning disability diagnosis.

Participant 16 communicates the range of, and settings for, their existential adventures and freedoms here:

> *“I'm an activist yeah. Just because I've been a candidate, I don't think that really puts you on a higher plane than anybody else. I totally am an activist and I think I'm an activist politically, I think I'm an activist in the law… in my job relationships, in my personal involvement with trade unions. I'm an activist so yeah, I think I'd be very happy with that, if that were on my gravestone, very happy.” (Participant 16)*

Participant 16 shows a ‘happy’ consciousness, a consciousness with an activist ‘identity’ (Sartre, 2003). In addition, Participant 16’s activist adventures, their *individual existential projects of action,* are significant on many levels because they

let themselves be acknowledged by *others* (Onof, 2011), abandoning any 'spirit of seriousness' and unconditionally accept their existential freedoms (Aronson and van den Hoven, 2013). Participant 16's praxis involves them reflecting on the practicalities of their *individual existential project of action* "in the law… involvement with trade unions" and then deliberating on the *essence* of their activist identity as an *ideal being* or 'totality of being' (Sartre, 2003; Gardner, 2009).

The 'totality of being' concept is an anathema for Sartre because, for him, the individual is always in progress. Notwithstanding, there can be 'praxis as totalising' as long as it excludes a conscious individual in totality (Flynn, 2010). The application of *totalisation* also serves to invigorate the constituency activist's *individual existential projects of action* through episodic and reflective encounters with *lack* in their constituency activism. Totality, as a reflective process, also encourages the constituency activist to imagine their future with the purpose of substantiating their existential freedoms and responsibilities. Praxis is therefore an important feature because it presents the constituency activist with the capacity to move their aspirations into *individual existential projects of action*, and have their aspirations established by the processes and products of their *individual existential projects of action.*

Anxiety

> *"… man is responsible for his passion." (Kaufmann, 2016: Ch9, p178)*

In addition to the anxiety of responsibility and freedom, being conscious of the self and engaging in the world involves the activist experiencing emotional moments from their internal relations with themself and external relations with others.

> *"I think you have to [have emotions in activism], you can't just stand and read out some facts… it's got to have humanity. It's got to have some passion in it." (Participant 26)*

Existential emotions are moments of pre-reflective consciousness and responses to the conditions and situation surrounding the activist (Solomon, 1993; Sartre, 1994). Under the burden of freedom and choice, the activist is exposed to the anxiety of

planning for an undetermined future, the anxiety attached to entering into either conflict or cooperative arrangements with other human beings, and that they may be forced to contemplate the shame of failure as well as success in their projects of action. For example, *Will I support new housing developments, or will I save the greenbelt? Will I support local airport expansion plans, or will I campaign for less aircraft pollution and noise?* Whether one views these options with dread or anticipation, what is clear is that existentially engaging in the world is an intense and emotional experience. Notwithstanding, it is clear in Sartre's existentialism that emotions have "transformative powers" (Sartre, 1994:39). The transformative powers of their emotions can undermine as well as strengthen an activist's resolve and resource to create the self.

> *"It's an ongoing story of my activism. I consider myself an activist, the political activism was one thing. The political activism was a useful mechanism at that time, it was a personal thing, it's about a sense of, for me activism is about being cursed, being a thorn in the side, being and having the power… able to say to the machinery fuck off. However, having the power to do that, using their systems against them as much as possible. So that's what activism is for me. And it's so, I see it as a lifelong struggle." (Participant 1)*

Participant 1 shows these transformative powers in action; for there is a willingness to agitate in pursuit of their activism and there is also a sense that Participant 1 is not prepared to curb their anger in their dealings with others. When they talk about political activism as "a useful mechanism" there is also an appreciation that anger is deployed as both a strategic and tactical instrument in their activist struggle.

Participant 1's use of the words "cursed", and "struggle" signifies a rawness and anxiety in their activism. This also suggests some turmoil in the state of their own wellbeing. Elsewhere in the interview, Participant 1 shares "I'd been fighting a personal battle [for 7 years]. It's about injustice, fairness and transparency. It's about stuffing their own filthy pockets". Whatever, the reality is for Participant 1, their "battle" could leave a neutral observer with either admiration for Participant 1's uncompromising relationship with those in power, or ambiguity over Participant

1’s use of their emotions in agitating for their socio-political objectives. Notwithstanding, there is authenticity in Participant 1’s admission of the use of their emotions in their activism:

> *“I was battling the council, so I know how marginalized communities are misused and abused and exploited for political gain and tick box exercises… you know they get money allocated for this community or that community…You often get money sort of allocated to these communities and it’s often misused… consultants come in and take their cut with no actual benefits… it allows politicians to claim benefits with nothing done in reality. I find it personally offensive that kind of abuse and misuse of public money.” (Participant 1)*

Here, Participant 1 shows an allegiance and empathy with the communities they are employed to serve, and a loathing for those who exploit marginalised communities such as the “consultants [who] come in and take their cut with no actual benefits”. During the interview, Participant 1 does not mask their anger, nor reduce the pitch of their consternation with their former employer in how their employer allocated and diverted, what Participant 1 viewed as, dedicated money. As part of their strategy to have their experiences shared wider and expose what they perceived as corruption, and “born out of frustration… It gave me a little power back”, they stood as an independent candidate in city elections. On face value, Sartre would say that Participant 1 is in bad faith because their approach has created barriers to achieving cooperation and collaboration, and more pointedly, the activist seems intent on attending to their own anger and other emotions at the expense of their service users or community. Arguably, in putting their emotional needs before those of the community, they are also exploiting the community they claim to serve.

> *“I was never going to win, but I very nearly achieve my aim of being difference between the first and second place, that’s what I wanted, so I could say I stopped Labour candidate getting in here. Both Conservative and Labour have questions to answer about corruption that I exposed but locally it’s Labour. If I could*

> *have said the corruption that Labour party had been involved [name]… they're bringing dirty money has cost them, almost cost them the whole election." (Participant 1)*

There is a place for emotions in Sartre's existentialism and he views them as human conditions to be self-regulated, otherwise the emotions push consciousness into the background (Sartre, 1994). In terms of creating self from *nothingness* (the existence preceding essence principle), Participant 1's emotions pull things from the past into the present and thereby distort the full range of choices and freedoms recognised by them, the activist. As seen in Participant 1's lived experience of constituency activism, these emotions become distractions and barriers to creating the self and making meaning of the world. It is clear from the interview that for Participant 1, political activism is a site of conflict, irritation, control and dominance, the source of which is their past experiences of dealing with underperforming, local authority run community development projects.

> *"The grant was specifically to increase participation by marginalized groups… instead they wanted me to just kind of demand artefacts from them, so they could, the professionals could include them in the artefacts and claim to be doing community engagement and community participation with my… I'm not doing that." (Participant 1)*

For Sartre (1994), emotions apprehend consciousness and construct the *being* and its existence on foundations of captivity to their emotions. This undermines the *being's* authenticity and individuality. As we see from Participant 1, creating self from a situation of anger and guilt is unstable and in bad faith. Synonymous with bad faith is false consciousness because it undermines and fails to recognise the facticity and other factual aspects of an individual's experience. For example, in the case of Participant 1, they have made their "battle" personal to the exclusion of the community they serve.

In extreme conditions, emotions can acquire a determination, a will to power that provide a 'magical' escape from one's freedom (Sartre, 1994). This *magic* transforms a situation to an emotional state where the individual gets distracted by

these conditions that deceive them and further weaken their existential responsibilities and freedoms.

In the dynamic between responsibility and freedom, Sartre considers *anxiety* (what might happen to the individual) and *fear* (what the individual might do), as necessary stages to understanding what it is to be a human being (Sartre, 2003; Solomon, 2005). The existential principles of responsibility and freedom are considered by Sartre to be calls to action, a dynamism that propels the individual, initially in the mode of *being-for-itself*, to engage with the *being-in-self*, and thereafter other beings and objects in the world (Sartre, 2003). From the outset, these engagements are not grand gestures but subtle and even understated activities where the individual activist transcends their embodied self through consciousness and self-awareness. In the transcendent state of *being-for-itself*, the activist looks beyond the self, to the future and to the needs of others.

To Sartre (2003) one is free because one is not a *being in-itself*; one is a *being-for-itself* and a *being-for-others*. In the following extract, Participant 8 talks about experiences that take them out of themself (in attending to the needs of others) and bring them back to themself (through motives to improve things for the next generation). Participant 8 presents an emotional account of the anxiety of responsibility, personal choice and self-determination:

> *"I did realise that through this story, parts of it were… could have been avoided if I wasn't so stubborn, but at the same time the reason I was being stubborn was because I didn't want my brother to go through the same thing. It's like, my mum was struggling to look after my brother and I didn't want him to struggle more because I asked for more, so I asked for less and that's pretty much what happened. So, its left me with some issues but like I said I didn't want to make my brother worse off if I asked for more even if I was totally in my rights to do so… I knew my mum was struggling but I didn't want to make it worse." (Participant 8)*

In their interview, Participant 8 communicates a strong inner sense of responsibility grounded in their experiences of poverty, which then brings about sensations of anxiety and fear when these lived experiences are recalled ("the reason I was being stubborn was because I didn't want my brother to go through the same thing"). Their experiences of anxiety ("I knew my mum was struggling but I didn't want to make it worse"), and anxiety in Sartrean terms is an essential experience because it brings into focus an individual's conscious self and in doing so attaches various responsibilities and freedoms to their being.

Sartre would argue that anxiety and fear alerts the individual to their existential needs and concerns, such as self-awareness and prospective freedoms (Solomon, 2005). Anxiety is a key emotion for Sartre because in existentialism the attached sensations of discomfort and unease objectifies the self to the self, and also brings into view a range of choices and actions available to the self to remove their anxiety. For Sartre, choice is a fundamental expression of freedom and as such is a route to authentic existence. Authentic existence is found in the activist's actions taken and the *individual existential projects of action* pursued. A recurring state of anxiety, of being the other to the self, produces continuous sequences of responsibility and obligations to choose. In enacting the choices made by the self, the activist is also raising their levels of awareness that includes the realisation that they are also responsible for others in the world. These emotional faculties, among a range of other anxieties such as ambition and envy (Moldoveanu and Nohria, 2002), are at the heart of the human experience and according to Sartre should be interpreted, 'not as fate', but as part of the burden of responsibility (Solomon, 2005).

Existentialists are not alone in encouraging human beings to take control and set the direction of their lives; however, one of existentialism's unique inputs is found in its use of personal anxiety as a system for engaging in the world and exploiting anxiety as a resource to both cultivate one's self-awareness and refine one's interactions with others (Flynn, 2006; Cox, 2008). Sartre acknowledged that human beings experience destructive objectification and alienation in life, however he argued that these experiences were also opportunities to take responsibility for their life. He writes that the individual becomes the product of their past choices,

meaning that they have no fixed nature and rely on their consciousness and self-awareness to navigate and authentically experience their subjective world (Cumming 2003). Participant 8's interview above, is a good example of the activist taking responsibility to shape their own life and making choices that prevent others having to accommodate Participant 8's burden of responsibilities. Later in the interview they say, "I get up at 6am to get out the door for 7, to get to college on the train for 9, and I don't get home till about six or seven and I did this for an entire year [saving their Mum the burden of looking after Participant 8's needs in addition to the needs of a brother]. So, its left me with some issues".

Existential choices arise in the anxiety of acknowledging one's responsibility to others (Sartre, 2003; Cumming, 2003; Solomon, 2005), as illustrated in Participant 8's comments on their responsibilities to a brother and mother. The manifestations of these existential anxieties transcend a stoic tolerance of determinism and the often-silent endurance of hardship to experience and embrace an existential attitude that views life in terms of possibilities, and drives situations where existential and personal freedoms thrive.

For Participant 8, anxiety is found in the constant tension between the enduring *being-in-itself* and the intense reflexivity of the *being-for-itself*. As discussed above, these two modes of being are also integral to Sartre's third mode of being, *being-for-others*. For Sartre this tension is a critical part of being human and a powerful determinant of who we are (Sartre, 2003; Cumming, 2003; Solomon, 2005). There is evidence elsewhere in participant 8's interview of their anxiety around their stubbornness and character:

> *"I like to leave an impression I suppose. Might not always make the best impression … I'm great at giving bad impressions but I'm good at challenging people's first impressions of me." (Participant 8)*

This self-criticism indicates a level of sensitivity towards the needs of others and the close attention given to their own level of self-awareness about their activism. It is in their anxiety that they ask questions of themself and shape their actions to meet their responsibilities, as illustrated in this interview extract:

"What do you want to see happen? Do you want your family, your brothers and sisters, etcetera, to grow up around nothing, or do you actually want them to be something, for them to enjoy and cherish?... I'm always active and that's something that helps you, I suppose, get known… and gives you a sense of purpose, I think a bit of confidence that you're actually achieving something, that little encouragement… you have to become an activist to make change happen. As I say, sometimes it's footprints for other people or, em, planting ideas. But it needs to be done." (Participant 8)

Participant 8's anxiety to create a sense of purpose extends to being remembered as authentic and sensitive to the needs of others, not the stubborn and uncooperative person characterised in earlier interview extracts. They also want to engage with their anxiety by using their constituency activism to bring about changes to mental health and wellbeing in men:

"It's only recently that we've really started to realise how much of an issue mental health is. Especially in men, the male suicide rates, the male mental health statistics are painful to say the least. Yeah, compassion is a big thing we need more of." (Participant 8)

Not all participants presented anxiety and disappointment as motives for their activism. In response to a follow-up question on the effect on their activism of attending "quite a privileged school" and taking a gap year before university, Participant 20 responded:

"Maybe to some degree and it certainly got me perhaps that initially interested in politics of a sort of an awareness an awakening of a sense of injustice and the like, and perhaps there was that sense of not duty or obligation but a case of well actually let's turn this into a positive, I've got you know I've been fortunate to have a good education. I'm in a comfortable position that actually I can give some time, I can donate or whatever it

> *happens to be, to give something back effectively." (Participant 20)*

Participant 20 reinforces Inglehart and Norris's (2003) observations that education is an effective predictor of participation in political activism and that higher educational attainment provides a strong sense of efficacy (Clark, 2000). In this extract Participant 20 considers, briefly, duty and obligation though retreats from this description of their reason for their constituency activism to offer what could be viewed as an authentic response of "let's turn this [experience] into a positive". It can be regarded as an authentic response because Participant 20 takes action based on both their unique situation and their level of self-awareness (Sartre, 2003). Here there are parallels with one of Sartre's case studies into the dilemma of a young Frenchman who had to make a decision about leaving his frail mother to join the resistance movement during World War II. Sartre's point was that the young man's decision came out of a thoughtful and honest assessment of what he wanted to do, his burden of choice, and not what others expected of him (Sartre, 1946). (He remained at home to look after his mother.)

It is also worth noting that in existentialism to not choose is to make a choice, and that indecision is a decision (Sartre, 2003). Sartre also notes that because an individual is continually confronted by choice, it is acceptable to choose another course of action (Sartre, 1946), and not all choices are conscious choices, as many are made by default (Cumming, 2003). This is suggested by Participant 20 stating "I'm perhaps as not even that suddenly self-conscious of it [education] that it probably was a, a contributing factor". Another second wave existentialist, Albert Camus, viewed duty and obligation (alongside guilt and shame) as consequences of one's developing self-awareness, however, he viewed them as relatively unremarkable human conditions, conditions that are subordinate to the existential themes of one's responsibility and freedom (Solomon, 2005). For Sartre, responsibility equates to an awareness that the individual being is the author of their own situation (Solomon 2005). It is important to note that Sartre does not envisage everyone existing in the same situation, not least because there are environmental and physical limitations to lived experiences, particular lifestyles and freedoms. Instead, he challenges us to have a fuller understanding of our own unique situation

and in doing so, we gain the opportunity to become aware of the scale and scope of our freedoms. To experience this insight requires the activist to indulge in the self-centred discipline of reflexivity, which may include an inner dialogue and concentrated relationship with the self. This reflexivity and related moments of self-awareness and consciousness also enables the individual to transcend their facticity and explore deeper meaning to extra-ordinary daily events and explore other possibilities in their future.

In existential terms, these moments are excursions into a state of *being-for-itself*, where the activist perceives, imagines, and deliberates on the depth of their freedoms and the breadth of their responsibilities. On returning to their state of facticity, the *being-in-itself*, the individual's expression of their *being* and responsibilities, and their impression on the world has altered. The philosopher Derek Parfit (1942-2017) provides a quote that captures what is possible from regular excursions into the consciousness of *being-for-itself*, words that could be claimed for the constituency activist:

> *"When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air. There is still a difference between my life and the lives of other people. But the difference is less. Other people are closer. I am less concerned about the rest of my own life, and more concerned about the lives of others."*
> *(Parfit in Srinivasan, 2017)*

One could also present Parfit's quote as portraying a life lived in existential authenticity.

Authenticity

> *"To live authentically means taking control of one's life and choosing in accordance with internal values rather than external influences." (Fratenali, 1998:64)*

Authenticity has specific existential characteristics: it is in response to an informed choice; it is time bound and experienced first-hand in the present (Cox, 2008); it occurs in the dynamic between the facticity of *being in-itself* and the transcendent

being-for itself (Flynn, 2006); it can be found in the state of non-being or *nothingness* where there is no *one being* (of facticity or transcendence) in ascendance (Solomon, 2005); to occur, the individual needs to be engaged in the world and understand the ambiguity of their 'situation' in the world (Flynn, 2006); it is voluntarily choosing to take on life's responsibilities and work with their situation (Cumming, 2003); when engaging with others it is sensitive and responsive to conflict (for Sartre (2003), this is the basis of every human-relationship); it marks a "de-corruption of consciousness [and a] recovery of being" (Gardner, 2009:191); and it is not intentionally moralising, however it can turn to moralising by being self-obsessed, flipping it into an expression of bad faith (Solomon, 2005).

Second wave existentialists developed a description of authenticity to include 'self-creation' as an aspect of authenticity (Solomon, 2005; Flynn, 2006). One of Sartre's contributions to the 'self-creation' narrative is on the theme of existential anxiety. As stated earlier in this chapter, he acknowledges the power of *anxiety* to sabotage a being's authenticity, however, he reframes *anxiety* as a 'passion for potential', thereby undermining anxiety's conventional role in 'quietism', resisting change and narrowing choices and possibilities (Marcus, 1995; Solomon, 2005). In this 'anxiety' paradigm shift from an instinct of resistance to an energy for possibility (O'Shiel, 2013), the function of the *being-for-itself* intensifies. This facilitates an expanded space (of *nothingness*) for further expressions of freedom of thought and freedom of action and presents recurring reflective moments for respite from the pressures of activism (Cumming, 2003: Solomon, 2005). The outcome for the activist is that they have more opportunities to experience the freedom, creativity and instability of *nothingness* and investigate the depth of their potential for authenticity. As Boileau (2004) states, "It is this very instability and possibility for change that provides a space for the freedom of each individual" (2004:81). It is in this space of freedom where the activist confronts their individual needs as common needs, and where some activists define their authenticity in the context of a "common individual" (2004:78).

> *"[Authenticity,] it's hard to define… When I was at university I used to think that, and I guess this comes from a kind of lack of*

> *confidence, I used to think the people who quoted political theory were clever and I didn't understand that… and political theory was prevalent. It was as science to me, and if it's a science almost by definition it's complex, the likes of me can't understand it. So, I was very reluctant to actually say anything in political meetings. It was only through experience that I realised that most people who were saying things didn't know what the hell they were talking about but they had the confidence to stand-up and say it. I can't do that; I still can't do it because I hate, even if you've got the strongest convictions about right and wrong you find your faith being strained a bit. It's like, I still think I'm right but I'm struggling to convince myself when people actually give you the alternative view in a very articulate down to earth way, that's, that's authentic to me. People like Tony Benn's the obvious example, you know, where he can just demolish all these arguments with simple kind of phrases. And there are people like that, so it's hard to define, isn't it, authenticity…. But that sort of ability to break down all of the crap that we're taught, that's authenticity to me." (Participant 3)*

In this interview extract, Participant 3 offers an interpretation of *authenticity* as a range of competencies. These competencies include the ability to display confidence with scientific concepts, "by definition it's complex"; to make knowledge accessible, "to break down all the crap that we're taught", and to be "very articulate in a down to earth way". For Participant 3 these abilities and aptitudes are things to be admired and the mark of authenticity in others, like Tony Benn. Participant 3 is authentic too, because they are moving from their fixed being "the likes of me…I still can't do it" to a transcendent self by acknowledging the experience of realising "that most people who were saying things didn't know what the hell they were talking about". This suggests that authenticity, for them, is found in one's experiences, the application of knowledge and emotions. Additionally, Participant 3 communicates a striving to be conscious of the person they are ("I'm still struggling to convince myself") and the person they would like to be. Participant 10 also has a vision of what they would like to be:

> *"I just think, actually, over time just be yourself, be authentic. Don't try to please everyone all the time because I think if you do that, that does hinder your chance… It's a test, tougher times, when you lose elections, when you lose campaigns, when things are not going your way politically, Yeah, it's tough and sometimes you just want to give up, but just keep going, have fun. Don't take yourself too seriously and yeah if you can stay true to yourself and your beliefs and can be authentic as we mentioned. And you can express your own viewpoint in a relatable way and be true to yourself. People see that and actually don't agree with everything that person said and don't agree with all their viewpoints, but I can see that they're honest and genuine, and sincere about their beliefs. If you can stick with those principles, then I think, yeah… for me personally it makes me… I mean I would like to become an MP one day, whether that happens because not many people from council estates get that opportunity. But if it does, I'm going to take it with both hands, I'm not ashamed of it. I don't think you should be. But, yeah, being authentic is absolutely essential." (Participant 10).*

There are some interesting dimensions of authenticity offered here. For example, Participant 10 considers authenticity as showing willingness to stay the course, and where authenticity – staying "true to yourself and your beliefs" – is a foundation for endurance and optimism through "tougher times" and how authenticity also demonstrates sincerity. Presentation of the self as authentic is "absolutely essential" for Participant 10 in their current role and in any future political positions they may have. Participant 10 shows a level of authenticity in understanding their situation – coming from a council estate – which is reflected on and presented as a condition of their lived experiences; this does not equate to accepting their situation, merely understanding it. Their experience is that not many politicians come from council estates to become MPs, and once they acknowledge that, they revise their *existential project of action* to adjust to the situation and to create an opportunity that will allow them to "take it with both hands".

As authenticity is ultimately unobtainable, one can only occasionally achieve an authentic state; authenticity cannot be achieved “once and for all” (Cox, 2008:16). Nevertheless, it is an ideal to aim for in activism, as the authentic state makes an activist open to an engagement in a free exchange of ideas. Participant 19’s commitment to their political party affords them “huge degrees of freedom so [they and others] can be authentic within it… because you are part of the party you're allowed that independence, that authenticity.”

However, the search for authenticity can be a burden and possibly a destructive force for some constituency activists; something that Participant 19 believes “could be to your own detriment.” Participant 12 asks: “look at yourself in the mirror when you decide what you want to do, does the mirror tell you, you are on course? Or can you not face yourself.” Participant 12 also considers whether authenticity can be found in spaces and experiences of abundance and contentment or is it something experienced in situations of sacrifice and guilt:

> *“I mean, I live in quite a large house, I’m much better off than a lot of other people and I’ve have a comfortable lifestyle. On occasion I’m not so happy with that... that’s part of the problem. I can’t think of sacrificing very much... it goes back to that authenticity.” (Participant 12)*

Similarly, Participant 18 questions the meaning of authenticity in the same way as Participant 12. In the extract below, Participant 18 reflects whether the pursuit of authenticity is a distraction and a hollow objective:

> *“I wouldn't know what that is because I wouldn't be able to define to you on a piece of paper or in my mind what your authenticism is measured against. I mean we all have ideas about the way that we should be, and we all have morals and we try and work to those morals and achieve those morals but I don't actually sit down ever and sit back and say yes today I achieved you know morals, One two three and four. Tick tick tick. What I actually do in my day is to say to myself I have dealt with that piece of casework today and the outcome of it is good for the person I was dealing with… and that makes me personally feel*

> *good there is nothing at the end of the day for me better than having a row of wins that really motivates me." (Participant 18)*

In the above interview extract, authenticity is understood as morals that underpin an activist's behaviour. For Participant 18, their moral principles are unique to them, embedded in their daily life but are not central to their existence. There may be contentment for Participant 18 in living morally. However, problem solving and "a row of wins" at the end of the day is their motivation and measure of their authenticity. Indeed, Participant 18 presents an interesting existential perspective on authenticity. In focusing on their actions and in embracing their responsibility to problem-solving issues for their constituency, they are accessing their *being-for-others* and transcending their facticity (Cumming, 2003). In committing to their activist project and addressing each constituency need as if viewed for the first time, every time, there is a suggestion that they are functioning at a pre-reflective level, a state of consciousness where their needs are secondary to the presented needs of others including "that piece of casework". Yes, Participant 18 needs to win, but they recognise that "the outcome of it is good for the person I was dealing with… and that makes me personally feel good".

Participant 14 notices that to be authentic, one may need to pretend to be authentic, to present a persona or to perform (Goffman, 1959):

> *"Talking on the doorstep, that's a bit of an act isn't it… I've learned how to do it and it is a bit of an act… so I am acting on the doorstep, yeah, making sure I'm saying the right thing to the right person, or trying to. Whether that's acting or whether that's just being myself, I'm not sure." (Participant 14)*

Participant 14 reiterates Participant 18's observation that authenticity is difficult to define, and as a phenomenon it may not be as prevalent in the functioning of an effective constituency activist as anticipated.

When navigating authenticity in constituency activism, one can argue that it is possible to break down its features and suggest that activists *either* lead with one preferred aspect of their own authenticity over another, *or* some do not give it much thought, and others pretend to be authentic. On the other hand, Participant 16's

comments below convey sentiments expressed by other constituency activists who perceive their behaviour in relations with others as neither play acting, nor strategic, but creative and legitimate adjustments to their activist style, the activism setting and the needs of others.

> *"My observation is that the people who in the end are the most trusted, the best perceived, the winners, are the ones that people see are authentic… you need to be able to communicate, you have to be able to adapt to different situations and scenarios and if that means acting in that sense, I totally accept that. But I think people who try and be something and they're not, get found out and I think that is increasingly the case as the nature of our media, you know, there is no place to hide now, is there? I remember times where I've stood in front of a hall of primary school kids, well it, not saying you're not authentic but you wouldn't present yourself in the same way to that audience as you might do if you were sat in a meeting with an NHS Trust talking about the challenges for our local area of health funding, so of course you present yourself in a different way in different scenarios and situations and I do, but I don't, I don't think that means acting." (Participant 16)*

Participant 16 actively acknowledges the 'acting' involved in their activism ("I totally accept that") but it is a strategy for engaging with different scenarios and by extension the people they meet in those scenarios. This play acting is a paradox as they are attempting to be accessible by altering their behaviour and language. Nonetheless, they know that they are being the *Other* to the *Other* and objectifying their 'authentic' self (Sartre, 2003). On face value, this is self-deception, however Participant 16 does not recognise the self-deception in existential terms. Indeed, they speak of "winners" which suggests that this is a game, and as a game, authenticity is a strategy to be used to "win". This points to the absurdity of some constituency activists being inauthentically in good faith, as opposed to being authentically in bad faith.

Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have elaborated on how *individual existential projects of action* are sustained by existential practices of *consciousness*, *praxis*, *anxiety*, and *authenticity*. What these practices demonstrate is that in undertaking an *individual existential projects of action*, the constituency activist is also contributing to *a project of self-creation (*their ‘fundamental project’). This self-creation involves developing consciousness, including an insight into their potential and possibilities; recognising the moments of praxis that propel them towards their choices and freedoms; grappling with the power and creativity of their anxiety; and responding to opportunities to present (or mask) their authentic self.

Consciousness gives rise to freedom and responsibility. As a pre-reflective state, it creates self-awareness through intentionality. In addition to identifying ambition and improvements in one’s life, it brings to the fore anxiety and fear. In Sartrean existential terms, consciousness equals freedom, which in turn generates choice. Anxiety is a product of consciousness and a subjective disposition to engaging in the world. As an intense emotion it can give rise to loathing, anger, and disappointment amongst activists. It is ever-present in the dynamic between the subjective *being-in-itself* and the objective *being-for-itself* and *for-others*, Anxiety draws out the constituency activist’s political concerns and their individual needs. Authenticity is a contested concept with some activists because it relies on their subjective interpretation of their own behaviours and assumptions about the capability and needs of others. Authenticity in its existential form is a recovery of *being*. It returns us to our non-being, our *nothingness*, and as such it revitalises our potential and our possibilities. The mutual support these four practices offer the constituency activist’s *individual existential projects of action* are that they: create the *individual existential projects of action* (through consciousness); they bring the *individual existential projects of action* into the world (through praxis); they shape and form the *individual existential projects of action* (through anxiety); and they evaluate the *individual existential projects of action* (through authenticity).

In the concluding chapter, I highlight how, in drawing attention to these existential themes and in applying the existential lens, this research adds to existing academic research on constituency activism, going beyond our current understanding of

constituency activism and activists being led by motivations such as ideology and altruism, political ambition and the needs of their political party. I also discuss how this research adds to the understanding of activists' freedom and responsibility and offers a deeper understanding of activists' lived experiences.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to identify and analyse the existential experiences that shaped or triggered the individual motivations of local constituency activists to become politically active. Specifically, it aimed to:

1. identify the Sartrean existential themes and concepts that are present in the lived experiences of local constituency activists;
2. analyse how these existential themes and concepts frame their constituency activism and what this reveals about their lived experience as constituency activists; and
3. contribute to a deeper understanding of the lived experience of local constituency activists.

This research shows that there are ontological, epistemological, and autobiographical dimensions to understanding the lived experiences of constituency activists. On an ontological dimension, *individual existential projects of action* are essentially projects of being and existing in the world. The constituency activist is a *being* that engages with constituency activism to give meaning to their lives. For the individual utilising their activism to find purpose and meaning in their life, meaning can be found in the doing of activism. The constituency activist also finds meaning in the choices they make and freedoms they pursue, and in recognising that their responsibilities extend to supporting the needs of others. On an epistemological dimension, the constituency activist is invited to expand their consciousness (and freedoms) by considering the features and significance of their attachment and their detachment to their political world. This involves intentionally reflecting on both their subjective self and objective self. By reflecting on their subjective and objective selves, they develop the insight and knowledge to relate more effectively to others and recognise the influence and *look* of the *Other*. The autobiographical dimension enables constituency activists to create and comprehend their own lived experiences and evidence the formation of their own political identity. This autobiographical dimension is an extension of the

individual's ongoing reflections-in-action (an epistemological dimension) and provides for the meditation and mitigation of acts of bad faith, choices and actions to extend the individual's freedoms, revitalising commitment to their cause, and for anticipating the influence of others. These ontological, epistemological, and autobiographical dimensions also provided the initial parameters for this research within which we can realise the four contributions to knowledge set out below.

Contribution to existing knowledge on constituency activism

This thesis has shown that existing academic research into political activism focuses on approaches and attitudes towards activism (Jasper and McGarry, 2015) and the 'doing' of activism by categorising activists into certain roles (Ingelhart and Norris, 2003; Cortese, 2015; Battilana and Kimsey, 2017). What existing research shows is a shallow insight into the individual passions and existential experiences of local constituency activists in the UK. The under-representation of their voices means that we have limited knowledge of what motivates local constituency activists beyond what can incentivise them (Bekkers and Wiepking, 2011) as 'strategic assets' to a political cause, and what can strengthen their commitment to political parties (Scarrow, 2009). By contrast, through this research, Sartrean existentialism has shown to be a well-suited theory appropriate for examining constituency activism. By applying an existentialist lens to the previously unheard voices of constituency activists, this research answers the three aims above and contributes to the existing body of knowledge on constituency activism in four ways:

1. It frames constituency activism as *individual existential projects of action*;
2. It presents ontological freedoms as an outcome of *individual existential projects of action*. Constituency activists' ontological freedoms involve opportunities for self-creation and expressions of human dignity;
3. It evokes existential anxiety as a valuable and creative force in activism, a dynamism that sustains a constituency activist's *individual existential projects of action*; and

4. It brokers the notion of the inescapable presence of bad faith in a constituency activist's *individual existential projects of action*.

Sartre's philosophy of existence and existentialism shares a core principle with this research in that both existentialism and constituency activism are about the human experience, and a shared assumption that human beings create and express their values and beliefs in 'doing' something. 'Doing' in the form of political engagement and action through constituency activism, is enabled through individual choice, and in exercising existential freedoms and relations with other human beings.

Constituency activism can be framed as *individual existential projects of action*

> *"... every man is a project: he is a creator, because he invents what already exists, starting with what does not yet exist; he is a scientist, because he will never succeed in anything without first assessing exactly all the possibilities that will help him to realize his project; he is a researcher and a challenger, for since the end in view will indicate only schematically the means needed to attain it, in so far as it is itself abstract, he must seek concrete means which will in their turn delimit the end and sometimes enrich it by deflecting it." (Sartre, 2008:504-505)*

This research offers new insight and knowledge by revealing for the first time that local constituency activism can be understood as *individual existential projects of action*. The research concludes that constituency activists express their political engagement through *individual existential projects of action*, and that these *individual existential projects of action* are expressions of individuality, choices, and ontological freedoms. Freedoms and responsibilities are clarified for the constituency activist in incidents and moments of self-awareness, reflection and clarity. *Individual existential projects of action* are subjective expressions of an individual's freedoms and responsibilities and contribute to a broader fundamental project that expresses the constituency activist's influence and existence in the

world. Another aspect of *individual existential projects of action* are projects of bad faith and self-deception, which arise in treating others, and the self, as an object; objectifying the self and others diminishes lived experiences and isolates and alienates the self. Bad faith is inescapable in the lived experience of the constituency activist and their *individual existential projects of action* because of the involvedness of political engagement and the complexity of political settings and communications. This research also reveals that the existential themes and concepts that frame constituency activism are existential consciousness, praxis, anxiety, and authenticity. Furthermore, not only do these themes frame constituency activism, but the practical application of the themes also sustains *individual existential projects of action* on an individual level. The *individual existential projects of action* are different for all individuals and act as a means for discovering and creating their subjective world and conveying how the individual chooses to experience the world.

The constituency activist's existential consciousness and freedoms brings into focus the aspirations and emotions necessary to conceive *individual existential projects of action.* Through the constituency activist's political engagement and praxis, occasionally alongside others, their *projects* are brought to life. *Individual existential projects of action* are refined and revised through the constituency activist's anxiety. Anxiety provides a vitality of hopefulness and a sensitivity that the project is worthwhile and responsive to the needs of the individual and others. Anxiety also provides additional resilience as the individual grapples with their fears and takes steps to resolve threats to their long-term habits, perceptions, and beliefs. The constituency activist is concerned that their *individual existential projects of action* are authentic and communicate, with integrity, their values and activism to others. In the integration of these four themes, the benefit for the constituency activist is a heightened instinct for their constituency activism. This instinct involves an improved self-awareness of the conditions for bad faith and self-deception. Self-awareness thereby gives permission to the constituency activist to act out of self-interest in good faith and to cultivate an instinct or spontaneity for their political situation.

Experiencing existential freedom: a new focus on constituency activism

This research offers further new knowledge by showing that constituency activism as *individual existential projects of action* present the constituency activist with opportunities for deeper insight into their existential freedoms. This thesis contends that Sartre's concept of *existential freedom* is present in the activities of constituency activists and that the concept presents an important aspect in understanding the lived experiences of constituency activists. *Freedom* is an important starting point for existentialists because it provides both a conduit for self-expression and individuality, and it communicates an individual's capacity to create meaning for themselves. In creating the self, the constituency activist also experiences the burdens of choosing and the unconstrained freedoms that are released because of the choices made. These burdens represent the dividends of choice and the freedom; an empowerment to express their subjective voice, their influence, and their power. In exercising existential freedoms and undertaking responsibility for choosing, the constituency activist also drives forward and sustains their *individual existential projects of action*.

Existential freedom represents expressions of human dignity and opportunities for self-creation; what Sartre often refers to as *a passion for the self* (Sartre, 1994). In constituency activism, we see this *passion for the self,* embedded in individual lived experiences. *Existential freedom* embraces personal freedom and political freedom and provides the individual activist with the opportunity to transform themselves into their 'true-self'. This 'true-self' is realised through an activist's actions, thoughts and commitment to fearlessly imposing their freewill onto the local political landscape, a landscape that can often be unresponsive. For many, the unresponsive political landscape creates existential fears, such as anxiety; however, the existentialist would urge the activist to embrace these fears and stretch life to the fullest, as "dealing with anxiety means that human beings have to look for meaning within themselves" (Blomme and Bornebroek-Te Lintelo, 2012:413).

The value of anxiety

The third contribution to knowledge revealed through this research is that there is inherent value in the anxiety experienced by constituency activists. Blending constituency activism with Sartrean existentialism themes is also to invite individual constituency activists to voluntarily engage with the anxieties of *being* an activist. This attitude to anxiety requires the activist to consciously commit to a regime of self-awareness, decision-making and responsibility for making sense of their interactions with other human beings and objects in the world. In existentialism, this outlook in life promotes the notion that the being can be figuratively separated into two beings while remaining as one individual being in existence. When there is unity between these two beings there is freedom (Sartre, 2003). This existential condition of two beings also serves to reveal to the activist the depth and breadth of their freedoms and choices in their constituency activism through *nothingness*, and the negation of their being-in-itself.

This metaphorical split into two beings creates conditions for the activist to examine how their freedoms are given and shaped by their pre-reflective physical *being-in-the-world*, and how the freedoms are taken and used by their conscious *being-for-the-world*. One *being* is a physical being that uses its given body and its imperfections to transact in the world; it is a *being-in-itself*. The second *being* is a silhouette of the physical being, both a *being-for-itself* and *for-others;* these represent the activist engaging through *attention* to and being present in the world and engaging with *intention* to and for the world and others respectively.

For the activist this inner turbulence of anxiety presents as an opportunity to surpass their given past and go beyond the narrow limits of their subjectivity. This turbulence does not represent suffering; it embodies a process of reflection on what is lacking for the activist; and it demands that attention be given to the present situation. Existentially, these anxieties do not signal inadequacies and deficiencies in the activist; they indicate a realisation in the activist that they have the freedom "to be determined by one future rather than another one" (Wang, 2008:17).

The inescapable presence of bad faith

Finally, in addition to existential freedom being integral to constituency activism, this thesis contends that bad faith has an inescapable presence in constituency activism. Not only are states of bad faith and self-deception inevitable in the lived experiences of the constituency activist, but these states also shape the freedoms experienced by them. Significantly, to recognise and experience authenticity in their *individual existential projects of action,* the constituency activist will also have an unavoidable interaction with bad faith.

Constituency activism involves creative and often radical individuals who enjoy responding to challenging issues that may involve campaigns against oppression, racism and political ideologies, and this research shows that these circumstances are ripe for experiences of bad faith to flourish. Experiences of bad faith can occur in socio-political settings that are populated with big personalities and strong opinions, and when there are a range of group and political pressures placed on activists to take sides, such as voting for or against an issue at local constituency meetings. In taking sides, all activists are prone to making missteps (and acting in bad faith) along the way. In these situations, and because of bad faith, the activist may demonstrate a level of false consciousness based on self-deception, a genuine misunderstanding or an open distortion of facts.

In recalling their lived experiences, there were many instances of bad faith underlying the actions and motivations of constituency activists in this research. Most notable are instances where the activist objectify themself by holding onto fixed ideas and habits, thereby containing their own activist potential, and closing off moments of praxis and opportunities to transcend their fixed being. To be aware of their behaviour, and at the same time hide the potential for freedom from themselves, is to live in bad faith. To live in bad faith is to disempower themselves as they relinquish their choices that would otherwise be valuable and worthwhile to their future lived experience. Additionally, in constituency activism one's relationships with other beings is fundamentally in conflict (Sartre, 2003), and the influence of others can be so strong that their *look* alone can positively and negatively affect one's sense of self-worth. If unchecked, the existence of the *look* of others will solidify a constituency activists claim that they have no free-will,

which is a position of self-deception. This mode of existing in bad faith and self-deception during constituency activism will afflict the individual activist with an artificial sense of determinism and false consciousness, thereby providing them with additional routes to evade their freedoms and disown their individuality.

Contribution to the practice of constituency activism

As someone with long-standing experience of supporting a range of community activists and leaders represent their communities on many social issues, this research offers practitioners like myself new insight into the motivations of constituency activists. Activist motives and aspirations remain poorly defined at constituency level. Furthermore, in previous research, the activist is seen as an object or asset to be incentivised, whereas through the *individual existential projects of action* revealed in this research, they reclaim their individuality and subjectivity. The benefit of understanding local constituency activism as *individual existential projects of* action is that it gives additional depth to a constituency activist's motives and aspirations. By doing so, it can assist constituency activists and activist organisers make sense of their own motives and complex lived experiences that may get lost in the collective actions and common experiences of constituency activism. This research offers far greater awareness of the needs and motives of practicing constituency activists, including what is likely to appeal to and sustain new activists. By recognising individual motives and desires, as well as the range of lived experiences, activists and organisers can better identify and mitigate participation fatigue. This would allow them to better protect the health and well-being of their constituency activist members, including recognising and managing the anxiety that comes with being a constituency activist.

Understanding individual needs and motives is important because activists are often expected to communicate their behaviour and political interests in collective terms, thereby losing their individual voices to the collective voice, and sometimes the loudest voices. This research therefore places an emphasis on valuing the individual constituency activist and on appreciating their subjective lived experience. In practical terms, what this means is that activists and organisers are better able to engage, support and help realise the "needs or compulsions that the individual

carries around" (Payne and Woshinsky, 1972:520), as well as make more effective use of the range of skills that come with multiple lived experiences within constituency activism. As more individuals become valued for their range of lived experiences, this opens the potential for other pathways into constituency activism. This could make activism more accessible, more democratic and more transparent, as well as paying closer attention to the needs of local activists who engage in an often-hostile environment both outside and inside of their constituency network.

Finally, in given the opportunity to share our stories of activism with others at constituency level, activism may appeal to a wider population and to those who are interested in local politics but do not know how to access pathways to political engagement.

Areas for future research

Constituency political party activists in the UK are seldom the focus of empirical research, particularly research that offers a space for their lived experiences – their stories and life events – to be captured and analysed. In situating this research within a community of local constituency activists in Leeds City Region, this research has given voice to previously unrepresented, unheard and unrecorded testimonies of the lived experiences of local constituency activists. In doing so, this research also makes a contribution to the broader research practice of successfully applying an existential lens to a specific community of practice. This is in the same tradition as research that has applied an existentialist lens to the work of nurses, teachers and accountants. The application of an existentialist lens to other communities of practice therefore offers ample opportunity to examine the lived experiences of other under- and un-represented sections of society. In the world of political activism, future research could be applied to pressure groups, both formally constituted and informal groups, who perceive themselves to be activists, for example, those working in climate change or human rights. There is also value in further examining the theme of bad faith and how this reveals itself within different factions of political activism.

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Appendix 1: Guiding interview and probing questions

Initial questions:

1. Background and how long they have been members of a political party?
2. What brought you in to political activism?
   - Could you describe the events that led up to you becoming politically active/do you remember the incidents or events that brought you into activism?
   - If no, ask… In your activism when have you experienced strong feelings or emotions?
3. Tell me about your activism/how would you describe your activism?
   - How would you describe your activities at constituency level/branch level/party level?
   - What tasks do you undertake in political activism? For example, campaigner, councillor?
4. What are your thoughts and feelings about [the issues that you are campaigning on]?
5. How is the activism going?

Intermediate questions:

6. As you consider your approach to activism, are there any events that have shaped this approach?
7. What do you enjoy about what you do for the party?
   - Why is that? Why do you do it?
   - With all the experience you now have, do you have any advice for a younger you?
8. Has your activism helped you in daily life?
   - Have you changed in any way as a result of your political activism?
   - Have your values changed over the course of your political activism?
9. What drives your commitment to political activism (cause, ideology, plan)?
10. Has your activism changed over time?

Closing questions:

11. Is there anything else you would like to share about the events that brought you into activism/campaigning?
12. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Appendix 2: Recruitment and participant information sheet

Do you have a story to tell about what brought you into local politics?

Invitation to take part in a study into the lived experiences and motivations of constituency activists

I invite you to share your story about why you became politically active. There are many mainstream media sources providing insights into the motivations of prominent politicians and party leaders, via biographies and autobiographies. However, little is written about how and why local activists and constituency party members become engaged in local politics. This study will address this imbalance by revealing the lived experiences of constituency members and activists. In doing so, this study gives voice to their unique political experiences and motivations, which are often excluded from mainstream media coverage and biographies.

What would you have to do?

If you agree to take part, I will arrange to meet you at a time and place that is convenient for you (ideally in a café or other public place). Initially I will ask you questions about your activism and about what made you become politically active. I expect each interview to last one hour. However, I am interested in your unique life experiences so I hope you will be flexible on how long or short each interview will last. You will be given the opportunity to ask questions about the study at any point during the study. In addition, you will be asked to sign a consent form to confirm your voluntary involvement and your right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Interview process

The interview is designed to be a conversation about what brought you to political activism and will be recorded using an electronic voice recorder. Anonymised interview transcripts will be stored electronically by me at the University of Leeds, and will be accessible only to me and my two PhD supervisors. Parts of your transcript may be used in publications (e.g. the PhD thesis and subsequent academic articles) and presentations. In keeping with Research Councils UK guidelines, the transcripts will be stored for ten years and then destroyed.

Will your taking part be kept confidential?

Yes. If you agree to participate in the study your confidentiality will be protected, e.g., data will be anonymised and pseudonyms will be used. If you would like, I will send you a written transcript of the interview at a later date, and you will be able to check, amend or delete as much of it as you wish before I complete the fieldwork part of the study.

What are the benefits of being involved?

I hope by being involved in the study you will enjoy the opportunity to add your unique voice and distinct activist experiences to a generally unheard and unrecorded political phenomenon: constituency activism. Your contribution is invaluable. By focusing on the previously unheard voices of constituency activists and capturing your stories, this study will contribute to an important body of knowledge on political activism and political consciousness.

Research findings

My research findings will be published in the form of a PhD thesis in the first instance. I may also publish findings in academic journals, as well as relevant non-academic publications. I plan to deliver presentations about the findings, to which all participants will be invited.

About me

My name is Tommy McGrath and I am a resident of Leeds and have a strong personal interest in UK politics. I am a mature PhD student enrolled with the School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet. If you are interested in the study, or would like more information before deciding, please contact me at your earliest convenience:

[Mobile number]

[Email]