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'*Everything in Motion, Motion in Everything*'

The experience and process of negotiating developmental transitions

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of:

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Department of Psychology

City University, London

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Section A

Preface

"Life provides us with numerous transitions, some more stressful than others. Understanding such transitions and finding the knowledge necessary to navigate such transitions is the secret to a successful life" (Williams, 2009: 8)

It often feels to me that we race through life so quickly that it is only in looking back that any real perspective may be gained on the roads that we have travelled. From where I stand now, it seems therefore fitting that I take a reflective pause to introduce three pieces of work from different stages of my training as a counselling psychologist, each of which address what it is to experience and negotiate transition. I did not consciously set out to develop work around this theme, and yet I have come to recognise an undercurrent to my interests that have persistently pulled me towards the detailed exploration of the processes of negotiating periods of significant psychosocial change and development.

When I wrote the first piece of work in this portfolio, the critical literature review, much of the path through my training still lay before me. As a mature student, with two years voluntary experience of counselling and a decade of experience working in training and development, I had developed my own understanding of how to relate to people in a helping capacity. The first year training curriculum involved the acquisition of theory and the development of practice of a number of psychological perspectives, including humanistic, psychodynamic and cognitive-behavioural approaches. I found each approach fascinating, but I was not a blank slate, and each of these new ways of interpreting human experience challenged not only how I saw others, but also my own sense of identity. Kroger (2007: 21) has noted that a sense of stable identity is only possible if one receives "non-conflicting messages from significant others about who one is or should be in the world". However, the training in counselling psychology creates an environment where numerous ways of viewing the self and others are promoted, and one's identity is actively and profoundly challenged. My observation of the experiences of myself and other trainees at this time, supported by qualitative research by Hill, Sullivan, Knox and Schlosser (2007), is that while this is exciting, it can also be disorientating and a source of great anxiety.

In recognition of this time of challenging transition, the focus of the critical literature review in this portfolio is an attempt to evaluate what is known about how counselling psychologists integrate the skills and techniques acquired through training into therapeutic practice. The review highlights how, across therapeutic approaches, there is an enormous variety in what might be considered a skill or technique, ranging from didactic skills such as particular forms of questioning to the active use of self and the relationship as a means of facilitating client change. What interested me most about this process was how one assimilates new understandings and ideas into existing structures of self-

knowledge, and to what extent one reaches a coherent and meaningful sense of identity through the integration of new and transitional experiences.

The second piece of work presented, the client study and process report, was written over a year later while I was working in an NHS secondary care service which offered psychological therapy for clients who were HIV positive. Church (1998) describes how living with HIV can present a significant challenge to the identity of a person, involving a lifelong transition where a sequence of real and symbolic losses must be adjusted to. The client at the centre of the study had entered therapy in a state of considerable anxiety, for he was struggling to negotiate a number of difficult transitions including parental bereavement, becoming unemployed, starting antiretroviral therapy and moving cities to start a new relationship. Under immense pressure, my client had become fearful of being overwhelmed by the force of his own emotions, and had become psychologically 'stuck' in a state of emotional avoidance. The process segment that I have chosen to present contains a powerful moment of micro-transition, where after months of avoidance my client finally experiences his emotions, finding great relief in the realisation that they are survivable. What I find both moving and fascinating about this moment in therapy is how, when attempting to express his deepest level of felt experience, my client finds the means to do so through the use of vivid symbolic communication.

The largest and most recent body of work in this doctoral portfolio is the research component, which takes a qualitative approach to investigate how adults negotiate the experience of estrangement from close family members. Fifteen participants who had experienced an estrangement from a parent, child or sibling were interviewed, and the interviews were analysed using Corbin and Strauss's (2008) version of the grounded theory method. There are no current statistics available which measure the prevalence of family estrangement in society, though media stories, therapists' accounts, busy online support communities and popular self-help literature suggest that it is a common reason for people to experience psychological distress and seek therapeutic support. Surprisingly, existing qualitative research in this area is also sparse, and we know very little about what it means to people to be estranged, or how estrangement is experienced and negotiated.

The transition of an estranging family relationship is something both familiar and significant to me, for it is an experience that I have negotiated for most of my adult life. I never anticipated that I would research something so close to home, and it only occurred to me to consider it when I encountered a number of clients for whom family estrangement was a significant problem. At the time I was working in a female prison and a drop-in centre for homeless teenagers, and in both settings it was common for clients to be experiencing estrangement in their family relationships. Although I could notice similarities in the difficulties reported by estranged clients, I could find no literature to either explain this or help offer advice for best practice.

My motivations for conducting research into estrangement were therefore multiple. My principal interest was to work towards an account that might help family estranged individuals and those engaged in supporting them. I was also aware that the research project would be something that I would be committed to for a long time. Mindful of this, Corbin and Strauss (2008) suggest that researchers identify a topic that they are sure will hold their curiosity, and estrangement was so personally meaningful to me that I knew that it would be a source of sustained motivation. Nonetheless I hesitated, partly because I was concerned that choosing an area of such personal resonance might appear indulgent, but mainly because I saw my estrangement as a vulnerability that I was not used to revealing.

Martin (2011) suggests that as practitioners we often mask our wounds and vulnerabilities under a cloak of professionalism, arguing that in doing so we risk disassociating ourselves from the touchstones of our lived experiences, and thus our deepest sources of compassion. Regarding the choices we make in the pursuit of research, Martin (2011: 18) advises that "sometimes we must let the heart lead and proceed in a more or less orderly manner to the head, and then back again". Looking back at my experience of negotiating what Breen (2007) calls an insider/outsider position to a research phenomenon, I suppose that this is what I did, heading off from the touchstone of familiar experience towards the mystery of the lives of others.

The experience of conducting qualitative research was enormously satisfying. It was a long and demanding road, which thankfully became easier as I grew into the shoes of a researcher, learning to tie my methodological laces on the way. I must admit to stumbling rather blindly on more than a few occasions, especially at the start when my enthusiasm threw me at it as though it were a sprint rather than a marathon. I soon slowed down, and learning to embrace the intricacies of systematic coding and memoing instilled in me a discipline that I found reassuring, especially in counterpoint to the freedom and ambiguity inherent in attempting to capture something essential out of multiple realities. I hope that the resulting work is seen to demonstrate both my respect for methodological rigour as well as an open appreciation for pluralistic ideas, interpretations and perspectives.

Although I have arranged the portfolio around the theme of transition, there are a number of arterial themes that run throughout this body of this work. In particular, each piece of work highlights the themes of identity, meaning and symbolic interaction. I have selected the overarching theme of transition, however, for I believe that it connects, through the notion of *process*, the *formation* of identity, the *search* for meaning, and the *emergence* of shared symbolic understanding. If this portfolio of work can be seen as representing the current status of my own identity, then I clearly owe any present sense of stability to the legacy of George Herbert Mead (1934) who saw our sense of self as emerging through shared symbolic interactions in our relationships with each other and society.

As a counselling psychologist, a view of reality and the world which places relationships at the heart of meaningful existence is definitely one that I can live with. The last three years have taught me that it really is an extraordinary privilege to be let into the lives of others, and I hope that I may continue to nurture relationships in the way that they have nurtured me. I also hope that any reader of this work may find something here to relate to, as well as discover something new and rewarding.

Glancing back one final time, when I started my training I remember thinking that I would arrive at this moment with a sense of reaching the end of a road, but now that I have arrived I see that everything is still in motion and there is motion in everything. It appears that the end of the road was somewhat of an illusion, the line of a horizon maybe, for it turns out to be one more transition, a moment in time that I am just passing through.

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Section B

How do psychologists integrate techniques acquired through training into therapeutic practice?

A Critical Literature Review

Introduction and aims of the review

Therapist technical activity, at its most basic level, is behaviour. Carl Rogers (1951: 494) has said that "The best vantage point for understanding behaviour is from the internal frame of reference of the individual himself". Although Rogers was referring principally to client behaviour with this statement, it could equally be applied to understanding the therapeutic activity of the developing therapist. Upton and Asch (1999) note that, for trainee therapists, self-reflection and self-process lie at the heart of both personal and professional development and transition and yet, in research literature to date, the internal dynamics, conflicts, anxieties and achievements of trainees remain largely unexplored.

In contrast, the place of technique in the therapeutic relationship and the contribution of technique to therapeutic outcome have generated considerable research attention. Although it will be necessary to reflect upon some key findings in these areas, the primary aim of this review, however, is not to focus on what 'gets done' during therapy, or how effective it is, but to highlight aspects of the literature which shed some light on the internal experiencing of therapists, as they integrate theory based skills and techniques into their individual practice. This focus might be considered timely, for Boswell, Nelson, Nordberg, Mcaleavey and Castonguay (2010) observe that the growing trend in psychotherapy training and practice is towards integrative ways of working. Many of the studies reviewed here, including those most recent, call for more active and direct investigation in this area. Boswell, Castonguay and Wasserman (2010: 717) observe that "only a handful" studies address this issue, while Leitner (2007: 36) says clearly that "an important yet unexplored area is the ways that therapists grow to incorporate techniques so thoroughly that they are, in central ways, no longer techniques". Other authors investigating aspects of technical activity who reach a similar conclusion include Richert (2007), Hill and Lent (2006), Watson and McMullen (2005), and Williams, Hurley, O'Brian, and Degregorio (2003). The timing of such a review therefore would seem justified.

Boswell and Castonguay (2007) note that, although it is widely accepted that psychotherapy can be effective, little is known about which elements of therapist training contribute most or least to professional development. Recent qualitative research by Hill, Sullivan, Knox and Schlosser (2007) suggests that for the practicing counsellor or psychotherapist, the acquisition and mastery of therapeutic skills and techniques can be a centrally demanding and anxiety-inducing experience. The notion that anxiety may be experienced by trainees is hardly surprising, yet the majority of the

literature exploring trainee anxiety focuses on interpersonal rather than intrapersonal dynamics. With increasing pressure being placed upon training providers within the profession to provide regulated and competency driven training programs, the secondary aim of this review is to hopefully highlight to program designers the importance of including elements of trainee development that encourage systematic self-reflection and the enhancement of self-knowledge.

As will become evident, defining technical activity can be an elusive pursuit, particularly as this review is trans-theoretical in scope. In a study examining the impact of technical activity upon the therapeutic alliance, Kivlighan and Schmitz (1992: 33) define technical activity as "the way in which therapists interact with clients through interactions that are usually prescribed by or wedded to a theoretical position". For the purpose of this review, this definition has been accepted, for it proves usefully inclusive of the numerous and varied operationalized definitions of technical activity which inform and jostle for place within the literature substrata.

Review parameters and criteria

In reviewing the literature, a search was conducted using PsychINFO from 1990 to 2010. The following search terms were used: therapeutic activity, therapist techniques or skills, psychotherapy or therapist process, therapist self-awareness or self-knowledge, psychotherapy training, psychotherapy technique and skill integration. From the studies and articles which emerged, key references were also reviewed. In addition, key books which address therapist development were consulted. Across the literature the use of the terms counsellor, therapist or psychotherapist are used interchangeably and this practice is continued here. With regard to technical activity, the inclusion criteria for this review are that: a) Technique or skills be defined as interactions informed by psychological theory b) Technique be defined as activity which is performed with therapeutic intent. With few studies directly exploring the primary target of this review, several of the studies and articles have been selected for a specific element or elements which emerge from their findings.

Literature review

Definitions of technique and related studies

Before examining key studies in the area of technical activity, it is deemed necessary to present an overview of the myriad definitions of technique that exist in the literature. Such an overview may help the reader place each highlighted study in context.

Broadly speaking, operational definitions of technical activity can be seen as situated upon a spectrum ranging from techniques seen as external and acquired through instruction, to techniques seen as emergent from self and nurtured through self-awareness and experience.

At the external and acquired end of the spectrum, operational definitions of technique include: Micro-skills (Ivey, Normington, Miller, Morrill & Haase, 1968), Helping skills (Williams, Judge, Hill & Hoffman, 1997; Hill & Kellems, 2002; Hill & Lent, 2006; Hill, Sullivan, Knox & Schlosser 2007), Techniques as alliance building skills (Mallingkrockt & Nelson 1991), Learned skills (Hilsenroth, Ackerman, Clemence, Strassle & Handler, 2002), Tools which tone, shape and guide therapy, subdivided by type and content (Hill, 2005), Structured interventions based on therapeutic principles (Levitt, Butler & Hill, 2006), and Concrete operating procedures that afford opportunities (Bohart, 2007; Richert ,2007).

At the emergent and self-situated end of the spectrum, operational definitions of technique include: Acts of personal and professional allegiance (Zeddies, 1999), Acts that are translations of intention (Stiles, Startup, Hardy, Barkham, Rees, Shapiro & Reynolds, 1996), The relationship as technique in itself (Goldfried & Devila, 2005), Emergent activity unique to the person and their own theory of psychotherapy (Leitner, 2007), In-session use of Mindfullness (Bruce, Manber, Shapiro & Constantino, 2010), and Intuitive responses (Cross, 2007).

Toward the centre of the spectrum lie operational definitions of technique which combine self-properties with active behaviour including: Combined personal attributes and alliance building activity (Ackerman & Hilsenroth, 2001), Personal, eclectic and goal orientated activity (Cepeda & Davenport, 2006), and holistic activity including skills, knowledge, dispositions and self-perception (Kaslow, Rubin, Bebeau, Leigh, Lichtenberg, Nelson, Portnoy & Smith, 2007).

Techniques as external and acquired through instruction

Helping and learned skills

Clara Hill (1985, 1997, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2007) has been involved in considerable research which investigates technical activity at the level of helping skills. Egan (2006) suggests that helping skills are usually seen as verbal or non-verbal communication skills which facilitate client reflection and insight. In a study following 7 prepracticum trainees over an academic term, Williams, Judge, Hill and Hoffman (1997) used mixed methodology and triangulated analysis to explore how 'higher order' intrapersonal self-management skills related to the mastery of 'lower order' more basic, interpersonal helping skills. Trainee, client and supervisor data was collected using self-efficacy ratings, self-reported anxiety and trait inventories, trainee, client and supervisor post-session questionnaires and Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; Hill & Williams, 1997). CQR was used to examine trainee reactions to how they managed their interactions and enabled an intensive exploration, eliciting data from the participants' perspective.

This thorough battery of tests and methods found that all 7 trainees frequently struggled with in-session doubts, distraction and anxiety about their therapeutic skills and performance. In addition 4 out of 7 trainees struggled to be clear regarding role boundaries. The most anxious trainee reported the most concern about her skill use and supervisors reported that anxiety appeared to negatively influence technical activity. Although not addressed in the study, this appears to have led to contradictory interpretations – the supervisors' external interpretation was that anxiety led to decreased performance, but the trainees' internal interpretation was that concern over skill use increased anxiety.

The overall finding of this study was that, over a single term, training had a positive impact upon both skill level improvement and anxiety reduction. This finding supports the findings of a much earlier study by Ivey et al., (1968), who explored the difficulties that novice counsellors experienced balancing micro-counselling skills and attending behaviour. What makes the Williams et al., (1997) study a noteworthy place to start this review is its impressive methodological ambition. With such a complex design however there were a number of further limitations to be considered. As noted by the authors, the small homogeneous sample limits power and generalizability. The authors also note that trainees who appeared initially hesitant were not selected to participate. This raises doubts about accurate representation of a typical sample. Additionally, as later criticized by Hill, Sullivan, Knox and Schlosser (2007) the post-session questionnaires asked participants to recall emotive moments during session and were completed up to one week post-session. The design and use of this

questionnaire suggests that much of what occurred during session may have been forgotten or neglected.

Hill and Kellems (2002) split helping skills into 3 categorical stages; exploration, insight and action, and developed a Helping Skills Measure (HSM) which assessed client perceptions of the effectiveness of the 3 stage techniques used by novice trainees. In addition the HSM contained elements which aimed to measure the relative contributions of client-perceived helping skills and relationship quality to therapeutic outcome.

This study drew a large sample of 322 client and 109 trainee participants. Hill and Kellems (2002) reported finding a positive link between client-rated skill activity and therapeutic outcome which stood independent from the link between relationship and therapeutic outcome. Relationship quality accounted for 39% of variance, with skills activity independently accounting for an additional 11% of variance. The authors note that this contrasts with earlier findings by Orlinksky, Grawe and Parks (1994), which dispute any significant link between skills and outcome. Hill and Kellems interpreted their findings as supporting the argument that skill delivery is an important factor in therapeutic outcome, though an interesting counter-position was taken by Lambert and Barley (2001) over similar reported findings. In a review summary of research of over 100 studies on the contribution of the therapeutic relationship to outcome, Lambert and Barley reported that 30% of outcome variance was attributable to relationship quality and 15% of outcome variance attributable to technical activity. Although this finding bore a reasonable similarity to Hill and Kellem's findings, Lambert and Barley suggested that it indicated that technical delivery is of minor importance.

The Hill and Kellems (2002) study is included here because, in conclusion, the authors say that without an equivalent measure of trainee perceptions of their own skill use, their findings offer limited insight. They also suggested that different types of trainee may suit different styles of training and called for further research on internal trainee processes related to skill use. In addition to the authors noted limitations of their own study, a key challenge to the operationalized boundaries of 'relationship' and 'skills' emerges from closer inspection of the review by Lambert and Barley (2001). In the Lambert and Barley (2001: 357) review, the therapeutic relationship is defined as containing "common factors" that include "empathy, warmth" and "congruence". There is considerable debate, particularly in the person-centred field as to whether such 'factors' can be seen as trainable skills (Cooper et al., 2007), but nonetheless such 'qualities' frequently underpin the skills training across several modalities. It could be that the only way to effectively separate out acquired techniques from internal qualities is to investigate the intrapersonal motivations and intentional processes of the developing therapist.

In an academic paper, Hill (2005) directly attempted to address the complex intertwinement of technical activity and relationship variables. As a complimentary development to Hill and Kellem's (2002) 3-stage skill model, Hill proposed a pantheoretical therapeutic model which divided therapy into 4 stages, each with specific technical, interactional and client involvement characteristics. At the 'initial impression' stage, supportive and informational techniques are used to develop client trust. Next, at the 'beginning therapy' stage, exploratory techniques are used to engage the client in recounting their experience, thus deepening the relationship. The third stage, 'tasks of therapy', also helps deepen the relationship through client task involvement, and is where theory-specific techniques are used. Lastly, in the 'termination' stage, review and forward planning techniques are used to help the client consolidate personal and interpersonal gains.

Hill's (2005) 4-stage model provides a useful conceptual framework within which a developing therapist might reflect upon therapeutic progress. Hill suggested that the interrelated nature of technique and relationship means that affording one dominance over the other is futile. Hill's model nonetheless gives subtle primacy to technique, suggesting that stage appropriate interventions are required to encourage relationship depth and client involvement. Once again, Hill called for more research into therapist self-awareness relating to technical activity, and noted that when the therapist is engaged in technical activity, little is known of internal therapist processing and process interaction. Additionally Hill commented that current methods and measures ignore the manner and quality with which techniques are implemented. In response to Lambert and Barleys' (2001) findings, discussed earlier in this review, Hill argued that technical and relational interplay of the 4-stage model questions the reliability of research reporting to have separated relationship from technique in outcome studies.

Although proposed as pantheoretical, some theoretical models may not appear to map neatly onto Hill's 4-stage model. Examples include classical Person-Centred Therapy and psychodynamic therapy which could not be said to feature 'task stages'. Nonetheless the model provides a useful clarification and structure which, if empirically supported, would raise clear implications for training. If specific techniques are optimally assigned to progressive therapy stages, trainees may need to develop focused awareness of what skills they are using, when they are using them, and how. Furthermore if, as Hill (2005) suggests, techniques are embedded in the context of a developing relationship, therapists need to learn to be reflective enough to self-monitor the interplay between moments of relationship difficulty and technical activity. One final point to make is that if training were to follow a stage model such as Hill's, studies by Zeddies (1999), and Watson and McMullen (2005), have shown that therapist rigidity impacts negatively upon client-therapist alliance, therefore caution may be needed to ensure that trainees do not become over-rigid in their practice. For example, clients who find exploratory work challenging may benefit from earlier application of theory-specific techniques.

Focusing on helping skills training programs, Hill and Lent (2006) conducted an extensive narrative and meta-analytic cross literature review. The authors expressed concern that helping skills training is currently being devalued in favour of more supervisory based training methods. The authors also commented that there was a wealth of helping skills research in the 1970's and 1980's that used a variety of methods to study varied helping skills programs, but that the results were often contradictory and confusing. Hill and Lent caution that, by contemporary standards, the methodology used in the majority of the studies is poor and any conclusions drawn are therefore limited.

Mindful of this caution, Hill and Lent (2006) reviewed research on the three main empirically supported skills programs; Carkhuff's (1969) Human Relations Training (HRT), Ivey et al's. (1971) Micro-counselling (MC), and Kagan's (1984) Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR). Of the three programs, two are based on didactic teaching methods (MC and HRT), and one (IPR) is based on supervisory and retrospective-reflective teaching methods. Hill and Lent highlighted a meta-analysis conducted by Baker (1990) which on aggregate estimated the effect sizes of the three programs as (1.07) HRT, (.63) MC and (.20)IPR. Although Hill and Lent expressed caution regarding differing program lengths as a possible confounding variable, they broadly accepted Baker's results.

There are several issues raised by Hill and Lent's review (2006) which have direct relevance to the foci of this one. Although the authors themselves approach the literature from a pro-helping skills and didactic teaching perspective, they hypothesised that the retrospective-reflective discovery based IPR method may be a suitable and effective approach for trainees who have reached competence and confidence in their basic skills use. This may suggest that there are qualitatively different internal conflicting processes for trainees at different levels of technical mastery. Mayer (2004) advocates that constructivist teaching relationships, of which supervision is one, are best served by guidance which encourages structured cognitive activity, rather than behavioural reflection. An awareness then, by both instructors and supervisors of the types of internal conflict which trainees experience while integrating skills into practice, may enable trainers to best engage with trainee experiencing.

A final, and by now familiar, issue raised by Hill and Lent (2006) is the lack of empirical data on trainee self-awareness and self-process. They reported that only a few trainee variables have received research attention, and also commented that most skills studies are lab-based and low in ecological validity. In particular, they called for the application of modern, ecologically valid subjective measures investigating various trainee variables including anxiety, intentionality, motivation, self-efficacy and self-awareness.

Hill, Sullivan, Knox and Schlosser (2007) attempted, in small scale, to address this. Returning to the CQR methodology (Hill & Williams, 1997) they analysed the journals of 5 prepracticum counselling

psychology doctoral trainees over the course of an academic term. In their rationale, Hill et al., (2007) commented on the mixed findings in a review of leading theories of counsellor development by Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992). Skovholt and Ronnestad found that studies indicated that trainees showed considerable variety in their styles of skills acquisition. While some trainees readily absorbed new skills, others were reportedly over-dependent upon instruction and mimicked or imitated their supervisors, while a third sub-set demonstrated over-confidence in their abilities and absorbed little from supervision.

While the small sample size in the Hill et al., (2007) study limits the conclusions that can be drawn from it, there were a few indicators which emerged from the data which may suggest opportunities for further research. Qualitative analysis of the journals showed that all 5 trainees reported regular post-session anxiety regarding their technical performance, mirroring the in-session anxiety reported in the earlier study by Williams et al., (1997). Of particular interest to this review is the finding that, for individual trainees, different skills raised different interpersonal and intrapersonal difficulties. Reported difficulties included; learning new skills, managing skills in-session, self-criticism over skill use and responding skilfully to client reactions. Additional quantitative evidence which suggests considerable between-trainee variability in skill use difficulties comes from a study by Mallingkrodt and Nelson (1991), who used the Working Alliance Inventory (WAI; Horvath & Greenberg, 1986) to investigate the relationship between training level and alliance strength. Mallingkrodt and Nelson found widespread variation in the technical competence of trainees at all levels, and yet contrary to this variation, increased anxiety over skill use was commonly reported at the same period - half-way through training. A possible explanation for this is that it is not specific skills which cause the most difficulty at this period, but internal conflicts of skill integration at a critical period of growing self-awareness, which may be particularly prevalent amongst trainees mid-way through training. With regard to training, this encourages careful consideration. Firstly, it may be instructive to ask how manualized training programs can best be designed to accommodate individual trainee needs. Secondly, the role of the trainer may need to be redefined so that the supporting of internal processes is given equivalent attention as the teaching of skills and theory.

Additional reflection on the use of manualized training comes from Hilsenroth et al., (2002) who, with their study, attempted to resolve a disagreement between Henry, Strupp, Butler, Schact and Binder (1993) and Crits-Cristoph et al., (1997). Henry at al., reported that in time-limited psychodynamic therapy trainees receiving manualized training were frequently inflexible in approach, resulting in negative alliance effects. However, Crits-Cristoph et al., conducted a similar study on manualized training in a cocaine treatment program, and found no negative effects of training on alliance or rigidity problems. To resolve this, Hilsenroth et al., investigated the impact of Structured Clinical Training (SCT) upon early therapeutic alliance during Short Term Psychodynamic

Psychotherapy (STPP) and reported that advanced doctoral level trainees receiving SCT achieved stronger alliances with no significant negative effects. Hilsenroth et al., suggested that this finding supported the Crits Cristophe et al., position favouring manualized training. The use of advanced level trainees, however, casts doubt on this position. If, as discussed earlier (Mallingkrodt & Nelson, 1991), trainees most commonly experience skill acquisition conflict mid-way through training, the advanced level trainees the Hilsenroth et al., study may have already achieved a degree of internal conflict resolution with regard to global skill integration processes. If the disagreement between Henry et al., and Crits-Cristophe et al., remains unresolved, an obvious suggestion may be that manualized training may be better suited to more structured intervention programs such a Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. An aggregate interpretation of the studies of Hill et al., Mallingkrodt and Nelson, Hilsenroth et al., Henry et al., and Crits-Cristophe et al., raises an alternative possibility - that problems of skill acquisition conflict and potential rigidity need not necessarily be located in the training program, but rather the trainee. Yet again further research on trainee self-processing could further our understanding of this problem.

Techniques as emergent from self and nurtured through self-reflection and experience.

Acts of personal and professional meaning

In an article on technical integration in Experiential Constructive Therapy, Leitner (2007: 36) argued that "Although theory, technique and person are by definition distinct, in good psychotherapy they become so integrated that separating them feels arbitrary". With the 'good psychotherapist' in mind this may sound like a holistically attractive proposition, but what about the developing trainee? Leitner's phrase "become so integrated" hints at a process of transitional development that suggests that if the aim is to understand how integration is achieved, so that trainees may receive optimal support, an understanding of how the separate elements of theory, technique and person relate to each other may not be arbitrary at all.

Contrary to seeing therapeutic techniques as acquired or learned through didactic instruction, Zeddies (1999) argued that techniques are expressions of allegiance which carry personal and professional meaning. Zeddies expressed concern that when engaged in direct skill acquisition and learning, trainees are often so over-focused on 'getting it right' that they develop blind spots, become hesitant, rigid or emotionally unavailable for their clients. Zeddies (1999: 234) cautioned that the prescriptions of theories and techniques central to manualized teaching methods can lead to "many voices" that "clamour for attention in the student therapist's head during session". Zeddies therefore suggested that trainees should strive to "hold theory lightly" so that they may be fully present in the moment and develop the ability to empathically listen to their clients with what Bromberg (1984) has called the

'third ear'. Zeddies does not suggest that 'holding theory lightly' involves the abandonment of technique, but that technical activity during session is proportionate to other activities, such as reflection on self-process, and management of potential bias resulting from over-allegiance to personal or professional theories.

Zeddies (1999) offers an interesting and alternative angle on why trainee internal processes merit close attention, placing intrapersonal dynamics at the heart of his reflections, and his article highlights a number of potential research avenues and implications for training. Firstly, the nature of the 'many voices' which trainees may experience as conflicting and unhelpful might be explored. It might also be useful to understand more about the proportionate levels of technical activity and other activity during session. Finally, the notion of personal and professional allegiances is one that highlights potential individual differences between trainees and merits further enquiry. With regard to training, an implication of this is that it creates a challenge to training providers to offer learning environments which not only allow for individual development but also achieve professional cohesion amongst trainees.

Acts of intent and meta-intent

Whereas Zeddies (1999) and Leitner (2007) see techniques as carriers of meaning, Stiles et al., (1996) see techniques as translations of psychotherapeutic intent. Hill and O'Grady (1985) said that intentions are the therapist's rationale for technique selection. Stiles et al., proposed that their definition of the origin of technical activity is epistemologically private and as such could best be investigated by accessing the therapist's thoughts. Using the post-session Therapeutic Session Intentions (TSI) questionnaire, Stiles et el., attempted to classify the types of intentions therapists hold when engaged in technical activity using Cognitive Behavioural (CBT) and Psychodynamic-Interpersonal (PI) approaches. They then used external ratings of audiotape recordings to see how closely therapists' self-reported intentions matched observed technical activity. From the questionnaire data Stiles et al., were able to categorize 19 separate therapist intentions, and made the further observation that intentions tended to be organized into clusters or intentional themes. They also noted that there were between-approach differences in intentions and technique use which conformed to expectations regarding theoretical approach.

Unlike in the previously mentioned study by Williams et al., (1997), Stiles et al., (1996) advantageously collected questionnaire data immediately post-session, resulting in more immediate and detailed responses, which allowed for detailed categorization of intentions. A possible issue emerged from the external ratings data, however, with evidence suggesting that a considerable amount of technical activity occurred without the post-session reported conscious intent of the therapist. This

raises considerable challenges for researchers aiming to develop subjective measures which capture as much as possible of what happens on a moment by moment basis during session. A further limitation to this study is that it followed a small sample of 10 therapists who were experienced practitioners and may have therefore been more self-aware of their technical activity than practitioners in training.

A current check of British Psychological Society accredited training courses in counselling psychology (BPS, 2010) shows that many current training programs involve training in several therapeutic models over two to three years, and therefore Zeddies (1999) 'many voices' concern over theoretical allegiances may be particularly relevant here. The between-approach differences in intentional patterning between CBT and PI therapists suggest that, for the novice or developing trainee, intentions and technical activity may be subject to overlap and confusion. Future researchers might wish to replicate the study of Stiles et al., (1996), using trainees, to explore this issue further.

One final observation of Stiles's et al., (1996), which may benefit from further reflection, concerns the idea that technical activity can carry both direct intent and meta-intent simultaneously. Cross (1999: 86),who used Personal Construct (Kelly, 1955) methodology to explore trainees' experiences of training, offers a good example of why this may be an important distinction in understanding the internal processes of technical selection and use. Cross noted that a therapist who uses a technique which carries the intent of 'empathy' may simultaneously construe the technique as having the meta-intent of 'support'. A subsequent challenge for researchers in this area may therefore be to develop measures and methods which are able to distinguish between the two.

Technique as the relationship itself

Goldfried and Devila (2005) argued that technical activity is best studied not as a process in itself, but as level of activity that sits within the overall process of relationship. Here we return in part to Leitner's (2007) assertion that considering technical activity in isolation is 'arbitrary'. Here, however, Goldfried and Devila suggested that what is arbitrary is not trying to separate technical activity from self, but from the relationship. The founder of Person-Centred Therapy, Carl Rogers (1951), would no doubt agree that it is the therapeutic relationship which is the activity which may facilitate client growth, and yet within that relationship sit Rogers' core conditions of empathy, congruence and positive regard, which are both intentionally provided by the therapist and meaningful constructs at the personal and professional level.

As discussed earlier, there is some empirical evidence to support the claim that technical activity can have an impact upon therapeutic growth above and beyond the perceived boundaries of the relationship (Lambert & Barley, 2001; Hill & Kellems, 2002). Hill (2005) has also demonstrated that

technical activity can be seen as both intertwined within the therapeutic relationship and open to investigation as a separate component of it. The question then becomes not one of primacy or dominance but of interplay and integration, a point supported by Farber (2010) who proposes that it helpful to consider the relationship between technical and self factors when aiming to assess competencies within a humanistic-existential framework. The parameters of this review are not sufficiently broad to explore the notion of relationship as technique in any depth, but Goldfried and Devila's (2005) idea of technique as a level of activity that sits within a relationship process leads to an interesting question - might there in fact be two relationships to consider; one between the client and therapist and the other between the therapist and self?

Technique as unique to the person and their own theory of psychotherapy

All of the studies mentioned in this review have so far held true to the definition of technical activity by Kivlighan and Schmitz (1992: 33) as "interactions that are usually prescribed by or wedded to a theoretical position". There has throughout, however, been an assumption that the theoretical positions to which the interactions were wedded are external and professionally prescribed. Writing from an experiential constructivist perspective Leitner (2007) offers a different view on the process of technical integration. Leitner argues that trainees do not enter into training as 'blank slates', but already hold their own unique view of what being a psychotherapist is. There are echoes here of Zeddies (1991) idea that technical activity is informed by personal and professional allegiances, but whereas Zeddies concentrates on internal communication, Leitner offers an integrative perspective at the level of meaning.

Leitner (2007) expressed a reluctance to divide out technique from self and theory. His position could be understood as the view that each technique is a translation of theory spoken in the unique language of self. It is a language that carries the intent and meaning of what Rogers (1961) called 'being with' instead of 'doing to'. Nonetheless, one thing that emerges clearly from Leitner's positioning of technique is that it is at the heart of an integrative process. This emphasis on integration provides a useful conceptualization with which to review the definitions of technical acquisition and activity in the rest of the literature. That technical acquisition is seen a process that involves self-theory integration does not necessarily mean that it is a smooth process or can be taken for granted. It may be that certain self-theories are particularly well-matched to some theoretical approaches but not to others, and that as a result, trainees may experience technical acquisition as more or less congruent to their pre-existing central self-structures. Further research in this area might explore this possibility, and would depend upon appropriate qualitative methods of investigation. The implications for training are that opportunities for structured self-reflection be given prominence.

Techniques as a combination of self-properties and active behaviour

Combined personal attributes and alliance building activity

Ackerman and Hilsenroth (2001) comprehensively reviewed the literature that explored the relationship between the personal attributes of the therapist, technical activity and alliance strength, and found considerable evidence to suggest that some therapists may have fixed personality attributes which make it hard for them to respond flexibly in certain situations. Ackerman and Hilsenroth noted that, according to Sexton, Hembre and Kvarme (1996), this may leave therapists tense and uncertain, which Eaton, Abeles and Gutfreund (1993) say may in turn lead to unstructured, inflexible, superficial and possibly damaging technical activity. In the light of the Hilsenroth et al., (2001) review, it is instructive to return to the earlier discussed aggregate findings of Mallingkrodt and Nelson (1991), Henry et al., (1993), Crits-Cristoph et al., (1997), Hilsenroth at al., (2002) and Hill et al., (2007), concerning the potential difficulties of skills acquisition through manualized training. The present review suggested that difficulties and conflicts in skills acquisition might not be located in the structure and style of training programs, but rather in the trainee. The findings from the Ackerman and Hilsenroth et al., (2001) review could be interpreted as supporting this position.

Hilsenroth et al., (2002: 173) noted that "therapists often find it difficult to deal with interpersonal conflicts in which they are actively involved" and the present review notes that the views of Zeddies (1999) and Leitner (2007) suggest that this may equally be the case for intrapersonal conflicts. In terms of training and support, it may be concluded that trainee personal therapy, client work and supervision all may have a part to play in the resolution of conflicts between technical activity and therapist self-attributes. The present review additionally suggests that not only is further research needed to explore this, but that it may be useful for training programs to provide regular structured opportunities for trainees to consolidate and integrate their client-based and self-based learning.

Personal, eclectic and goal-orientated activity

Cepeda and Davenport (2006) reported that, over the last 30 years, most psychotherapists have identified as eclectic or integrative, a finding that has been recently confirmed by Thoma and Cecero (2009), Boswell Castonguay and Pincus (2009), and Cook, Biyanova, Elhai, Schnurr and Coyne (2010). Although Cepeda and Davenport support eclecticism and integration, a concern that this raises for them is that, through misjudged eclecticism or integration, the essential therapeutic properties of the original models may be diluted or lost. In response to this they attempted to show how Person-Centred (PC) and Solution-Focused (SF) techniques could be integrated into a worked case study, without compromising the essential qualities of the two models. Cepeda and Davenport offered a

convincingly effective 2 stage model using person-centred relationship and exploration techniques in stage 1 and then solution-focused techniques in stage 2, which though simpler, showed some similarity to Hill's (2005) 4 stage model.

The reason that Cepeda and Davenport's (2006) model may be useful to the aims of this review is that many of the preceding have studies drawn attention to the difficulties of integrating multiple theories and technical activity, whereas Cepeda and Davenport show that some integrations can be achieved with relative success. This has, however, been made possible because of a detailed understanding of both PC and SF theories. This begs the question - Could the demonstrated integration of PC and SF teach us anything about achieving integration of external theories and self-theories? This question could perhaps only be answered with a good understanding of the personal theories of each individual therapist. To gain this understanding, methods would have to be selected which enabled access to self-theories. The use of such methods might at least encourage therapist self-awareness and reflection, and bring to light areas of potential conflict and resolve.

Conclusions

From an aggregate of research findings in the area of helping and learned skills acquisition, a number of tentative conclusions can be drawn. Broadly speaking, research in this area demonstrates that it appears that much more is known about external skills-use outcome than internal skills-use process. It also appears that most manualized teaching programs are reasonably successful in facilitating technical development through didactic teaching methods (Crits-Cristoph 1997; Hilsenroth et al., 2002). This is, however, only part of the picture. For trainees passing through structured training programs, there is evidence to suggest that development of technical skills acquisition can be a more or less anxiety provoking experience, mediated by individual differences (Williams et al., 1997; Hill et al., 2007). It may be at the detriment to therapeutic success, trainee experience and the quality of client care, that the impact of trainee intrapersonal conflict upon technical activity and therapeutic outcome is not centrally evaluated and monitored throughout training. Hill and Lent's (2006) call for more empirical data on trainee self-awareness and self-process would seem both timely and responsible.

From the area of the literature which sees technical activity as self-emergent, it is also possible to identify patterns of thought and opinion which converge on a common point of agreement; that the process of integration between technique, theory and self-theory is a process with the potential to be conflicting and problematic. Zeddies (1999) 'many voices' and Stiles's (1996) 'personal translations of intent' highlight the communicative quality of intrapersonal development. This alerts us to potential concerns of internal miscommunication and maverick interpretations which might run the risk of resulting in technical activity which is unhelpful or unsound. Most of the literature in this area is theoretical or qualitative in nature, and yet potentially there is much to be gained from larger scale empirically supported studies into the acquisition and practice of technique as arising from self-integrative processes. Further research in this area could prove both useful and complimentary to the findings from research at the opposite end of the technical activity spectrum.

From the area of the literature that combines reflection on self-properties and technical integration, there are hints of both what might be done and also how it may be achieved. In response to the position of Leitner (2007), the studies in Hilsenroth et al's (2001) review do not intend to 'arbitrarily' separate out the components of technical activity, self-properties and relationship, but they do demonstrate that it is possible to define these components and evaluate how they relate to each other.

Cepeda and Davenport's (2006) convincing integration of Person-Centred and Solution Focused techniques through a case study design is one which could potentially be used as a template for intrapersonal integration. Papadopolous, Cross and Bor (2003) show that trainees commonly use both case studies and process reports as a professional learning and development tool. One possibility for consideration is that these tools have the potential to be synthesised, requiring trainees to present case-study length self-process evaluations which could be used in training, supervision and personal therapy to encourage integrative reflection of self-processes and technical activity.

One broad conclusion that could be drawn from this review is that in spite of individual and collective difficulties, trainees eventually grow from experience and 'get there eventually'. There are, however, a number of reasons why this is not a satisfactory assumption. Bohart (2007) who challenges the linear causal relationship between technique and outcome suggests that, regardless of the technique chosen by the therapist, it is the client who chooses to 'act upon' the intervention in his or her own unique way. The choices of intervention available to be 'acted upon' however could be severely restricted with an inflexible and limited level of therapist technical activity. Tallman and Bohart (1999) reported that if therapist technical activity is poor, then clients find a way of working around it. Not only do clients deserve better than this, but trainees may remain unaware that their interventions are not effective, leading to the unchallenged development of bad practice habits. Further to this, Castonguay, Boswell, Constantino, Goldfried and Hill (2010) highlight the potential risk of harmful effects to clients that may arise through the inappropriate use of technique, identifying training as a transitional time of heightened doubt and uncertainty which requires greater attention than it is currently being given.

In addition to these concerns, Leitner's (2007) suggestion that trainees hold 'hold theory lightly' is not one that sits well with the current movement in the UK towards regulation in counselling psychology (Robinson, 2008) or in response to clinical practice guidelines such as those proposed by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NHS, 2010; NICE Guidelines). As the demand in the NHS for 'talking therapies' increases, so does the pressure on the profession to provide empirically supported therapeutic techniques and interventions. Richert (2007) has noted that there is currently no clear picture of what developing practitioners are actually doing in session with regard to technical activity, and this may be a situation that needs to improve quickly. Kaslow (2007), who headed The American Psychological Association's Task Force on the Assessment of Competence, recommends that guiding principles for the future assessment of competence of developing practitioners include multi trait evaluations incorporating knowledge and skills demonstration, 360 degree assessments and training in self-assessment techniques that adopt a meta-cognitive approach. For training to be able to respond to these demands, the findings of this review would suggest that research in the area of technical acquisition, integration and delivery needs to respond too.

This review has attempted to explore how well we understand the processes by which counselling psychologists integrate techniques acquired through training into their therapeutic practice. This review began by stating that at its most basic level, therapist activity is behaviour. This may be the case, but one clear conclusion from a review of the literature in this area, is that to understand this behaviour, one needs to consider aspects of it which are far from observable. Behind the technical activity observed by researchers, trainers and clients often lies a complex and personal world of conflicting dynamics, anxieties, distractions, allegiances and meanings. In many respects the technical activity is just the tip of an iceberg of underlying activity, and yet this tip of activity can have an enormous impact upon the success of what occurs within the therapeutic space. There is an enormous breadth to the literature in this area, and with so many contrasting perspectives on the same phenomena it may prove particularly challenging for counselling psychology to reconcile so much knowledge and so many observations. This ought not mean, however, that we should not try.

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Section C

'*It's a head and heart thing*'

When a client fears emotion – Using the CBT relationship to support the tolerance of negative affect

Client Study and Process Report

My Reasons For Choosing This Work

Williams (2010) notes that we experience life as a series of transitions, many of which are stressful, requiring careful negotiation for us to move forward successfully. According to Scabini, Marta and Lanz (2006: xii), transitions are "often times of upheaval, effecting self-definition and interpersonal relationships". In times of particularly challenging transition, some clients may experience such anxiety that they feel immobilised by fear, and this fear can act as a barrier towards moving forward. Pierson and Hayes (2007: 224) suggest that a successful therapeutic relationship is one which fosters active change through removing barriers preventing a client from "moving forward in a personally meaningful life".

In order to develop a successful therapeutic relationship, Greenberg (2007) observes that it is essential for the therapist to create a validating emotional climate. Within cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), in the tradition of Beck (1976), however, attendance to cognitions is usually given primacy over emotional experiencing. Moloney and Kelly (2008) criticise CBT's emphasis on thought 'management' as devaluing the emotional and existential realities that define clients' lives. Responding to this challenge, Clarke (2008) highlights a 'new wave' of CBT approaches that place emotional validation and compassion at their core.

In the process segment of this report, my client Blake* and I meet for the fifth time. Blake is HIV+ and is struggling to negotiate a number of highly stressful transitions simultaneously. In a short space of time, both of his parents have died, he has lost his job, changed cities, moved away from his friends and started a new relationship. In addition, Blake has recently been told that his immune system is so weakened that he must start antiretroviral therapy. Understandably, this has led Blake to experience an almost overwhelming sense of loss, yet Blake's grief has triggered a metacognitive worry cycle that his feelings are abnormal and uncontrollable. In response Blake has become emotionally avoidant, and I experience a dilemma in this sequence, not wanting to push Blake, but sensing an opportunity to encourage him to experience his emotions so that he may find relief in learning that they are normal and survivable.

Interventions are rooted in choices, and choices are rooted in values. In presenting this excerpt I hope to show how as a developing practitioner, I strive to pursue values of compassion and acceptance that are grounded in the rich soil of the therapeutic relationship. In addition, this report has generated critical self-reflection in how well I currently negotiate aspects of power in the therapeutic relationship, helping me identify ongoing developmental needs in this area.

**Note: To safeguard anonymity my client's name and identifying details have been altered in this study.*

Therapeutic Approach – Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

Westbrook, Kennerley and Kirk (2007) describe CBT as an expanding field of cognitive and behavioural therapeutic approaches. From cognitive theory, Beck, Shaw, Rush and Emery (1979) suggest that through experience people learn habitual ways of making sense of the world, and that problematically rigid ways of thinking may promote maladaptive behaviours and emotional distress. Developed from CBT, Wells (2004, 2009) proposes a metacognitive model of problem generation and maintenance, emphasising how clients' beliefs about their thoughts and emotions impacts upon their sense of cognitive and emotional control.

Within the NHS, CBT is recommended by the National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE, 2007a, 2007b) to treat depression and anxiety, including generalised anxiety disorder (GAD). GAD is characterised by excessive and pervasive worry, which to meet DSM-IV-TR diagnostic criteria must be present for more than six months, feel uncontrollable, cause significant distress or social impairment, and must include other difficulties including restlessness, irritability, muscle tension, or the mind going blank (American Psychiatric Society [APA], 2000).

Newman et al (2008) note that although CBT has been empirically reported as cross-conditionally effective, it is less successful in treating GAD than other disorders. This they suggest is due to CBT's insufficient attendance to emotional avoidance and interpersonal issues, both of which are prevalent in clients with GAD. Borkovec and Newman (1998) found that people with GAD often attempt to avoid or overregulate emotions, fearing otherwise that they will be becoming emotionally engulfed. To counter this, Gilbert (2005, 2009) recommends that therapists encourage emotional awareness and expression in-session, with the aims of normalising and validating feelings, coaching the client in self-compassion, and reversing catastrophic meta-emotional beliefs.

Client Profile

Personal profile and background

Blake is a 40 year-old white British gay man who has been unemployed for six months. He has been diagnosed as HIV+ for two years, and although he has no current health complications, he has recently been advised to start antiretroviral therapy. He has known his partner Mark for ten months, and six months ago moved to London to live with him. Both of Blake's parents died in the year following his HIV diagnosis. He is an only child with few friends in close contact.

Referral and context of the work

I saw Blake within a NHS secondary care service for clients with HIV where he had self-referred. As a counselling psychologist-in-training, I work within a specialist multi-disciplinary team, receiving supervision fortnightly. The service offers flexible contracts using mainly CBT, with an emphasis on Wells' (2009) metacognitive approach. Additionally I am encouraged to integrate into my practice an awareness of psychodynamic and interpersonal processes.

The assessment and presenting problem

Content and process during assessment

For assessment I used cognitive, emotional, behavioural and historical exploration as advocated by Townend and Grant (2008). I additionally explored metacognitive beliefs as advocated by Wells (2009). A risk assessment did not highlight any current concerns, and although Blake seemed vulnerable, he said that he had not at any point felt suicidal.

On our first meeting Blake was tense, spoke rapidly, avoided eye contact, clenched his fists, and frequently fought back tears. On a number of occasions he lost his train of thought mid-sentence, and he particularly struggled to describe his emotional experiences. I noted that he was verbally hesitant often using the phrase "I don't know". He used this phrase sometimes at the start of a question, but more often as a means of closing a statement down, particularly if he was trying to describe his feelings. He seemed very dejected, and frequently expressed frustration with himself, through shaking his head and occasionally letting out a low growl.

I felt quite tense being in the room with Blake, as though his anxiety was affecting me. When checking in with myself, I noticed my own breathing had often accelerated slightly, so I made a conscious effort to calm my own breathing and pace my interventions. There were a number of moments where I felt that Blake was about to bolt from the room, and my response to this was to attempt to soothe, contain and reassure. Blake typically reacted to direct questioning as though I was putting him under pressure, so I tried where possible to make my interventions sound conversational, gentle and exploratory.

Blake's difficulties had reportedly started six months earlier, shortly after starting his relationship and becoming unemployed. Blake said that "all of a sudden" he had started feeling as though he wanted to cry, particularly when he was around other people. He said that these feelings would come "out of

nowhere" and that he had no explanation for them, as he was not someone who cried much normally. Blake had been an only child, and he said that when he was a boy his father had told him that only girls cry, and it was a sign of weakness for a man to show emotion. Blake said that his father would criticize him harshly if he ever appeared sensitive. Blake reported that he had experienced several recent losses concerning his relationships, health and security, but he said that he felt shame at having been so affected by them.

As Blake had begun to feel tearful across an expanding spread of situations he described anxiously thinking that "something was about to go wrong". As his worrying became more pervasive he increasingly avoided places and people, fearful of emotionally "losing the plot" around others. Blake was convinced that if he let go of his feelings he would become uncontrollably aggressive or weepy. To date, however, neither had actually happened.

Blake said that, like his mother and grandmother before him, he had "always been a worrier". Blake described his situation and anxiety as "a head and a heart thing", saying that his head told him that it made no sense, but he nonetheless felt something wrong. He said that he found it difficult to concentrate in many situations, because his head was full of thoughts about what might happen if he could not pull himself together. Blake said that he usually had a good memory, but recently he could forget what he had been doing hours before. Blake said that at first he was worried about a small number of things, but now he found that he could not think of anything that he was not worried about. He also worried that his anxiety was causing frequent arguments and endangering his relationship. Blake had been prescribed antidepressants by his GP but complained that they had not helped to 'stop' his feelings. Blake hoped that therapy would help him to 'feel less emotional'.

Formulation and treatment plan

Blake appeared caught in an expanding web of anxiety that was undermining his quality of life and sense of self-control. I suspected that multiple stressful life events had left Blake feeling intensely vulnerable, including his HIV diagnosis, his parents' deaths, becoming unemployed, starting a new relationship and moving to an unfamiliar city. It seemed that Blake had not allowed himself to properly grieve for the loss of his parents, and the trauma of his diagnosis and subsequent need to start lifelong drug treatment did not appear something that he had been given enough time or space to adjust to. In addition, the security of employment, friendships and a familiar environment had been lost, and these multiple transitions were proving extremely difficult for him to negotiate.

Beck (1976) notes that, through experience, people can develop rigid and central ways of seeing the world or interpreting their experiences, or 'core beliefs'. Due to his father's attitudes towards the

expression of emotion, it seemed that Blake had developed a core belief that feelings of sadness and loss were a sign of weakness. In consequence, I hypothesised that Blake found it particularly difficult to tolerate negative affect, and in reaction had attempted to predict the future threat of him being in situations where he might experience sadness, through ruminating excessively while suppressing his emotions. Blake's unsuccessful attempts to either avoid such situations or prevent his feelings of sadness had apparently created a vicious cognitive and emotional cycle, leaving him feeling increasingly out of control.

Although Blake exhibited signs of depression, his predominant issue seemed to be chronic, wide-ranging and uncontrollable worry, which Wells (1997) suggests is indicative of GAD. Blake met the diagnostic criteria for GAD, and his emotional avoidance and interpersonal problems were as Borkovec and Newman (1998) note, typical of the condition. His social and behavioural withdrawal seemed to be reinforcing and intensifying his difficulties.

Due to Blake's excessive and pervasive worrying, my supervisor and I agreed that taking a metacognitive approach with Blake would be appropriate. However, Blake's emotional avoidance alerted me to a high risk of him abandoning therapy should he find it overwhelming. I therefore decided to prioritise building a relationship in our early sessions, gently encouraging him to access his emotions.

Negotiating a contract and therapeutic aims

Following the assessment we initially agreed to contract for a further twelve sessions, with a review at session eight. Westbrook, Kennerley and Kirk (2007) describe how in CBT, the aim is towards collaborative working, and this includes encouraging the client to set his own agenda. Blake's main therapeutic goal was to "feel less emotional", however, so I shared my initial formulation with him, explaining that it would most probably be helpful for him to work towards exploring his feelings, rather than avoid them. This concerned Blake somewhat, but he said that he felt that would try to trust that working through his feelings would ultimately help him to experience relief.

Content and Process in Sessions 2-4

Following assessment, our next three sessions were extremely challenging for Blake, and he appeared highly anxious throughout. In the first session, after ten minutes, it appeared that Blake had not arrived, but I found him in the street outside battling his anxiety about entering the building. Blake had become highly fearful of taking public transport, and the journey to the hospital had been

experienced as traumatic for him. Grant, Townend, Mills and Cockx (2008) note the key role that psychoeducation plays in CBT, in helping clients understand their experience so that they can achieve a sense of mastery and control in situations which are troubling them. We therefore spent most of the first session helping Blake to understand the relationship between his cognitions, emotions and physiological experiencing.

In the therapy room, there was a clock which ticked audibly, and throughout the session Blake's eyes would frequently dart towards it as though he was desperate to leave, and I was concerned that Blake might not make it to our next session. I therefore prioritised exploring strategies that might help the journey easier the following week, hoping to reassure Blake that he would have the tools to make the experience less stressful. Wells (1997, 2004) shows that distraction can be a useful technique in specific situations that cause anxiety, so we identified ways that Blake could do this, including travelling with his partner and listening to music through headphones.

The following week, Blake had travelled alone, and although he was highly anxious he said that he had found the journey slightly easier. During the session, Blake's focus was still repeatedly drawn towards the clock and when I reflected this, he said that he found the sound stressful and asked if I could take it down. Wanting to make things as easy as possible for Blake I did so, though afterwards in supervision I wondered whether through removing a source of anxiety, I had potentially colluded with Blake in his broad pattern of avoidance. My supervisor said that the risk of Blake leaving therapy meant that it was an appropriately sensitive thing to do, and that we could work at putting the clock back at a later date as part of a structured intervention.

The content and process of sessions three and four were remarkably similar. I found both sessions very challenging because Blake's speech was extremely rapid, and he would cycle through describing the sources and content of his worries, leaving very little room for me to speak. When I did speak, Blake would frequently cut me off, and when I made an intervention directed towards Blake's emotional experience, he would act as though he had not heard me and carry on talking from where he had left off. I tried to reflect my experience of this, but Blake said that he did not feel that he could slow himself down, and he seemed dejected that I was suggesting that it would be more helpful for him to behave differently. I was reminded that Blake's father would be highly critical of him, so I was careful to demonstrate empathy and a sense of acceptance while trying to offer gentle encouragement for him to slow down and explore his emotions.

I was recording the sessions and played an excerpt to my supervisor who suggested that I help Blake to become more aware of his rapid pace of breathing, and take a more active role in encouraging in-the-moment experiential awareness. At the end of session four Blake said that for homework he wished to try and go swimming at his local pool and we discussed how he might maximise his chances of achieving this.

Lead in to the transcript

This was our 5th session together. Blake had arrived in a determined mood, reporting a good week. Beneath this determination however he described how he had not managed to complete his homework of going swimming, and I sensed that he was anxiously focused on maintaining a positive grip on progress for fear of exploring his doubts. In past sessions, Blake had rapidly swerved between topics, veering away from emotional material and my supervisor had advised me to slow and control our working pace. We had begun exploring how in control of his worries Blake felt, but when he became a little emotional he had pulled back strongly, reasserting a determination to focus on positive self-talk.

BL.1 My good times are when I'm in control.

JR.1 Right. It's, it's encouraging to hear that you are starting to get some control again because that really is very different from, from, from a few weeks ago when you felt that so much was out of your control. I mean I notice that one of the, one of the things that you said were fearful of... you had this belief that you wouldn't be able to control your emotions for example (BL. Mmm) I wonder where you are with regard to that belief. How much do you believe at the moment that your emotions are uncontrollable?

Comm.1 *As Blake continues to signal that he only wants to discuss 'good times' and being 'in control' I recall Leahy's (2001) warning that avoidance of negative material blocks therapeutic change. I am concerned that through avoidance we are in danger of climbing a ladder of false progress that will ultimately collapse. Under such circumstances, Beck et al., (2004) warn that avoidant clients often end therapy prematurely. Drawing from Wells' (2009) theory, here I revisit Blake's previously identified metacognitive belief that his emotions are uncontrollable.*

BL.2 (Inhales and exhales deeply) I suppose that I'm a bit more aware that I can control them...

JR.2 Um, have you got an example of a time when you've controlled your emotions?

Comm.2 *Blake breathes deeply as if calming himself for discussion of something difficult. This is unusual for Blake, who normally breathes rapidly when anxious. Mansell (2008) suggests that interpersonal process shifts mirror intrapersonal changes and I find this encouraging. Unconvinced however that Blake does feel in more control, I press for*

an example. Tightly attached to my own agenda I jump in prematurely, and I wonder in hindsight if this felt frustrating.

BL.3 I know that at the minute... and Mark's noticed it... I'm sighing a lot. Deep sighing. (Blake's upper body visibly collapses and releases tension) (JR. yeh). Out of the blue. Now I don't even notice that I'm doing it.

JR.3 And how does that feel to do that?

BL.4 Uh... I think it's... um... I think it's a way that I'm holding me emotions in (gives short laugh and relaxes further).

JR.4 Holding them in (looks surprised)?

Comm.4 *Blake's physiological example of emotional control surprises me. Gilbert and Leahy (2007) advocate paying attention to client posture and voice tone and as Blake speaks of his recent 'deep sighing' his voice deepens and his whole body releases tension. He then sounds worried again. Newman and Borkovec (2002) note that, for people with GAD, ordinary bodily sensations commonly trigger worries that something is wrong. I get a sudden hunch that Blake's sighing may imply emotional release rather than holding. Reacting impulsively, I inadvertently signal to Blake that I suspect he has incorrectly interpreted his own experience. In supervision I have identified an enthusiastic tendency towards impulsive interventions that I am working on.*

BL.5 Holding them in... for me stopping getting upset.

JR.5 That's interesting because... for me I guess the... the feeling I get as a person when I sigh... is that I'm almost letting out, maybe letting out some tension... But it...so when you sigh it's different is it? It's a different... is it...

Comm.5 *Townend and Grant (2008) note that a sense of being triumphantly 'rumbled' by the therapist can injure a client's self-esteem. Alerted to my suspicion that things may not be as he sees them, Blake becomes wary as if walking into a trap. Sensing this I try to sound increasingly tentative, encouraging Blake to explore his own experience while suggesting that my experience is personal rather than universal.*

BL.6 I think so. I, I, I don't know. All I know is I keep... have deep sighing... now and again, just like...um... I don't know.

JR.6 If you could describe the quality of the sigh what would it be like? Is it..

Comm.6 *Blake's slightly guarded reply gives little away, but instinct tells me that there is something valuable to learn here. I therefore aim to elicit a richer description of Blake's experience.*

BL.7 It's like... I don't know, it's a long... deep breath out... I don't know, it's just coz, I don't know whether it's because I'm feeling sad... and uh, uh... (exhales loudly) I exhale.

JR.7 I think... I think it's really interesting... um... what, remember we were talking about breathing weren't we? We were talking about the breathlessness and about how often Mark points out to you that you (BL. mmm hmm) that you sound incredibly breathless do you remember? (BL. yeh) We were talking about the fact that when you get very anxious and you're worrying a lot, you are holding on to your anxiety, your breathing is very short (BL. mmm hmm) and quick.. do you (yeh) do you remember? (JR. yeh). So I wonder what... how the fact that you're having these long breaths out... how they relate to that?

Comm.7 *Blake's response (BL.7) reinforces my idea that his sighing is connected to emotional release. I am so focused on the function of his sighing that I miss the important mention of Blake's sadness, neglecting an opportunity to explore it. In thinking ahead of Blake our therapeutic connection is weak, and he sounds pressured and confused. As I say "I think it's really interesting" I feel my distanced positioning, and shift from using "I" to "we", checking in with Blake as I make my thinking transparent. I link together material in a way that Gilbert and Leahy (2007) suggest is useful in ongoing collaborative formulation building. My question here could have been simpler, and it would have been more collaborative if I had slowed down and involved Blake more. Safran and Muran (2006) warn that surface collaboration may mask a dynamic of subtle compliance, and retrospectively I feel that this occurred here.*

BL.8 I don't know... I honestly don't know. It's only recently that he's mentioned it (JR. and would you say) and that I'm seeming to notice it.

JR.8 Would you say that your sigh is the sort of sigh that you hear other people doing?

Comm.8 *Blake frequently adopts an instinctive 'I don't know' stance that feels like self-handicapping. Leahy (2001) suggests that such repetitive script may indicate an underlying schematic bias towards seeing the self as helpless, and Verplanken et al., (2007) note how automatic negative self-thinking can interfere with metacognitive reflective ability. In supervision I had discussed how difficult it felt to empower Blake*

while working with this schema. Previously I had found this bias less activated during mental comparison then internal reflection so I shaped my intervention accordingly. Beutler, Moleiro and Talebi (2002) suggest that therapy is more effective when interventions are shaped to minimise resistance.

BL.9 I've never heard anybody do it (shakes head and laughs with frustration).

JR.9 I wonder, I wonder if I sighed um, I wonder of you could tell me how close it is to, to how you sigh. (BL. mmm hmm) Is that alright? (BL. mmm hmm) And then maybe we can kind of find out how, so I'd like to get an idea really of exactly what that's like for you. If I go... (JR sighs loudly and deeply).

Comm.9 *Still leading Blake, I am uneasy with our unbalanced power dynamic and I deliberately attempt to reverse it. Asking permission to continue, I signal that Blake is the expert of his experience and I am the one who is naive. In sighing I aim to effectively switch roles between us, making myself the subject and Blake the objective observer.*

BL.10 (Takes a deep breath in) ... It's um... It, I don't know. It feels like a little bit at the beginning... and then when you go out it's (BL sighs quietly but deliberately) That's how it feels like to me, but inside... but it (JR. and when you)... it's usually when I'm emotional.

JR.10 And when you just did that then was that an uncomfortable feeling or a comfortable feeling?

BL.11 I don't know.

JR.11 Yeh, try, try it again and this time think about whether it feels comfortable or uncomfortable. Have another go.

Comm.11 *The pressure of scrutiny is removed from Blake and he relaxes; engaging as an observer. I have never seen Blake as emotionally unguarded or as internally focused. He experiments with his own sigh, appearing for a moment both weary and sad. He then speaks with worry of an emotional connection and I sense he has connected to a sadness that is uncomfortable. Suspecting that is his avoidance of this sadness that is triggering his anxiety I coax him back toward it. In discussing the recent integration of Buddhist teachings into CBT approaches, Wang (2005) describes how tolerance of negative affect reduces apprehension and generates compassion for the self.*

BL.12 (sighs quietly but deliberately)... I don't know. It felt alright. Well I, I don't know... time I, I... it's like... deep... do you, do you know what I mean?

JR.12 Deep. Deep what?

BL.13 In, like inside me chest where um... I don't know.

JR.13 So there's something deep in there... so what, so is it like letting go of something deep or...?

BL.14 Might, might be. I don't know (sighs with frustration).

JR.14 Have, have another go. Have another go and see, this time try and, try and see whether you feel like you're letting go of something or whether you feel like you're holding on to something.

Comm.14 *Becoming increasingly hesitant, Blake edges deeper into his experiencing and closer to his emotions. He is moving out of his comfort zone, and might pull back at any time. My counter-response is to commit myself further to holding us in the moment. Beck (2004) notes that a CBT therapist adapts his interpersonal style in response to a client's needs and here I adopt a position of what Greenberg (2007) would call an emotional coach, coaxing Blake towards his feelings.*

BL.15 (closes his eyes and sighs quietly but deliberately)... I think... (opens eyes and looks at me) it's sadness. (JR. Right) I don't know... I think you're right, maybe it's like... I'm letting go of something but it must be...

JR.15 But you feel that, you're saying that although it feels like letting go of something there's a part of it... is quite emotionally difficult for you is that right?

Comm.15 *Blake's gaze meets mine with strength as he declares "it's sadness". He then says "I think you're right" and I worry about returning to a dynamic where I am the expert. I try to acknowledge but move away from the lesser issue of 'letting go' towards exploring his emotional difficulties. I could have directly reflected the word sadness here, but was too tentative. In hindsight this may have been more about my anxiety of upsetting Blake than his vulnerability.*

BL.16 I, I think it's definitely, it's just emotion, I, I don't whether it's when I do it, all I know is I've done it a couple of times... and I've noticed it... and I mean I've noticed it then and I don't know whether it's because... I'm trying to hide, and keep emotions in, or whether I am emotional when I do it... and I don't think it's like normal, regular

like, as if you were breathing. It, it's just... it maybe it does feel like... you're letting go but... I don't know (hangs head).

JR.16 Is... is it good to let go of emotions or is better do you think to hold on to them?

BL.17 I don't know. I don't know.

JR.17 What would happen to emotions when, difficult emotions when you hold on to them do you think?

Comm.17 *My cautious intervention (JR.15) steers Blake from directly addressing his sadness, but reveals an anxious worry that his sighing and emotions are perhaps abnormal. Blake indicates that he may be hiding his emotions, his body language suggesting that he may find them shameful. Gilbert and Proctor (2006) suggest that seeing feelings as shameful can maintain psychological distress, triggering heightened self-monitoring, self-criticism and emotional avoidance. Here I am to explore Blake's implicit rules about emotional expression.*

BL.18 I think it gets worse and worse and worse. I think it's like... if you don't cry then you would imagine your water, your eyes constantly filling up with water. So... if I analogyse that it's good to get your emotions out, but sometimes it's good to guard your emotions... because you give too much away about yourself. Um, and sometimes it's not the right situation or the right time or anything so sometimes you have to hold them in... So I don't think it's ever good to keep them totally in all the time. You've got to...

JR.18 Hmm... So it's situational. So in some situations though you think, for example when you're home with Mark for example (BL. mm hmm)... to maybe sigh, and to maybe just to release a little bit of emotion... is that a good thing or a bad thing would you say?

Comm.18 *Greenberg (2004) suggests that it is through constructing symbolic representations of experiences and finding new language to express them that clients learn to understand themselves and Blake does this powerfully here. His assertion that emotionally guarded behaviour is sometimes appropriate seems reasonable but I aim to highlight how it is maladaptive when applied universally.*

BL.19 I would.... mmm hmm (exhales through nostrils). I would say was a good thing, would be a good thing.

JR.19 Yeh. And yet I notice that what it's done almost is maybe triggered a worry for you.

BL.20 But I don't know I also think it's a bad thing because he will start asking questions of what's the matter? Are you alright? This that and the other... and then I'll start thinking oh what's the matter with us... which I probably have been doing... thinking why am I... sighing (rolls eyes, shakes head and smiles at self) (JR. right, so) and what's wrong.

JR.20 (Smiling back) So you've actually developed maybe a bit of a belief about, about maybe there's something about that... and, and started this kind of worry cycle again... this means there's something wrong with me, is that right?

Comm.20 *Blake and I are becoming increasingly synchronised in our thinking, arriving in unison at a clearer understanding of his emotions and worry cycle. With this clarity I feel a shared relief pass between us and a real sense of collaborative achievement. Beck et al. (1979) suggest that clients learn to see their fears not as realities but as beliefs so that they may be objectively challenged and I attempt to highlight this.*

BL.21 I think maybe I have (laughs). Maybe I have. I know that, I think I know in me heart of hearts, I know that there's nothing wrong, I know that, it's not a medical thing, no I'm, I'm fine, but I'm thinking why am I... why am I sighing? As if I'm holding in a sadness or something like that... I know that there I, where I have sad times and maybe that's... a reaction of what I'm doing when I feel sad.

JR.21 So there's different elements to this aren't there really? There's kind of, I think there's the worry about whether or not it's normal to be doing this, it's normal to just, it's normal to be experiencing sadness and... do you feel that it is normal to, to have some kind, to experience some sadness... at the moment with all the various...?

Comm.21 *Westbrook, Kennerley and Kirk (2007) describe how the goal in CBT it to gradually facilitate a process in the client where the challenge between therapist and client is gradually internalised. Since BL.18, Blake has adopted two opposing internal positions and continues this here. In wanting to strengthen the part that accepts his feelings I challenge the part that is critical.*

BL.22 I do... I um, I know it's... I know I find it hard... um, if you take me life as... if you look at it day by day, and this that and the other... I don't know. I know that... I know that I shouldn't be as... um... (exhales) oh I don't know...

JR.22 It's ok. Carry on... I should, you should, sometimes you think shouldn't be as...

Comm.22 *Church (1998) notes that following diagnosis, persons with HIV typically experience a lifelong sequence of real and symbolic losses that they must continually absorb and adjust to. Bereavement models such as Worden's (1983) highlight how in order to move beyond grief provoked by loss, a person must first experience and process it. Aware of the losses that Blake has endured I hear him struggle to find compassion for himself, challenging his inner critic. When he loses conviction I gently press him to continue.*

BL.23 Maybe, I... it's like... I know that... I know I'm having a hard time at the minute... so it should be... understandable that I'm having a hard time (exhales deeply) having sad emotions and that. So I know that that's the case. Um, but I also think that, well no, this is all normal. This is day to day stuff. And I can't handle it... Do you know what I mean?

JR.23 Hmm. I wonder if we reverse the situation now for example... Let's say that I was you... and you were, you were now sitting there, there as my friend, um... and if I said to you then I don't think I should feel sad. I should be able to cope with this. What would you say to me?

Comm.23 *Blake tentatively revisits the idea that his sadness is understandable but his language of self-compassion seems limited and underdeveloped. Gillath, Shaver and Mikulincer (2005) note the impact of parenting style on the development of self-compassion and I remember that Blake's father would often criticise him for 'being soft'. Describing self-compassion as a potent source of therapeutic healing, Gilbert (2005) suggests that where this ability is underdeveloped, it can be taught. Gilbert (2005:29) states that "the very sense of self is sculpted in interaction", noting Lock's (1999) observation that relationships encourage people to use existing psychological competencies in new ways. Having previously heard Blake talk compassionately about others, I hope to highlight his potential to be compassionate towards himself.*

BL.24 (Exhales deeply and smiles) It's a natural thing.

JR.24 (Smiles) Yeh (Nods head slowly and gently).

BL.25 (Over 12 seconds Blake's chest and shoulders suddenly release tension and tears fall quickly from his eyes then Blake gathers himself) I'm sorry (Blake clears throat).

JR.25 It's really, really hard for you isn't it at the moment isn't it? (Blake nods and continues crying) I know it's really hard.

Comm.25 *CBT is increasingly embracing the psychodynamic concept of transference as important to the therapeutic relationship (see Leahy 2001; Beck et al., 2004; Miranda & Andersen 2007). In 'role-playing' Blake for a moment I get an extraordinary sense of human connection, experiencing a profound sadness that weights my gaze. In reaction, Blake looks at me with deep kindness and a peaceful look crosses his face. As I nod, Blake tenses for a moment but then releases, his tears spilling quickly. I have a strong urge to comfort him, but fight it, knowing the importance, described by Leahy (2005) that Blake learns to experience his emotions, strengthening his ability to self-regulate and self-soothe. When Blake self-consciously apologises, I again fight the urge to reassure, validating instead the pain that he is in.*

BL.26 Oh no, it was when you said (clears throat as if trying to expel something while crying) about being me, I'm thinking... you don't want to be me, and I'm thinking I don't want to be me (Blake sobs for 12 seconds and reaches for a tissue that I hand to him. Blake takes it and after a second his face goes very red and his fists clench) Feeling me temperature rising (Takes long breath out).

JR.26 And what thoughts are going through your head at the moment?

Comm.26 *Blake reconnects to his feelings and when he says "I don't want to be me" I am deeply moved by this declaration of existential pain. Loewenthal (2008) suggests that CBT promotes the escapement of existential reality, though Kaye (2008) notes that new wave approaches such a mindfulness-based cognitive behaviour therapy and acceptance and commitment therapy show that this need not be the case. When Blake takes a tissue his face suddenly flushes and he speaks of his temperature rising. Andor, Gerlach and Rist (2008) note that for clients with GAD, awareness of physiological changes often trigger catastrophic metacognitions. Safran and Muran (2000) suggest that eliciting 'hot cognitions' or automatic thoughts in session can be immensely useful so I seize the opportunity.*

BL.27 Now I found it out, (exhales with a small laugh of relief) because I just wanted to get angry. It was like... getting meself upset and then I was angry I just (inhales and exhales) I don't know I... I, it's thoughts like that, like I'm getting upset, and then I'm thinking I want to walk out. I want to leave. I can't cope with this. It's too much (laughs and shakes head) (JR. Right). And I wanted to go through the door and I'm like... me head's saying to meself no you've got to stay. You've got to go through this. (JR. Mmm Hmm) You've got to sort this out.

JR.27 Right. So you've got part of your thoughts are that you can't cope, that you can't control this situation... you can't control what's happening to you... and then there's another side of your thoughts which are saying, no actually I can control them. Is, is that right?

BL.27 *As Blake's automatic thoughts spill from him, I glimpse the psychological and emotional storm that has just passed through his mind. I understand more clearly how his thoughts struggle against a rising wave of anxiety and yet also connect to a stronger part of him that has kept him anchored in the room. I feel that he has just made two highly significant steps. Firstly, he has managed to experience and survive the difficult emotions that he feared would overwhelm him. Secondly he has started to psychologically distance himself from his storm of thoughts and emotions, describing them as though they were a passing mental event rather than a fixed reality. This process, is described by Beck (1979) and Corcoran and Segal (2008) as the foundation of change within cognitive therapy. Having some sense of what Blake has just experienced I wish now that I had explicitly acknowledged his triumph here. Instead I aim to strengthen the recognition of the part of Blake that is in control so that we can build from the sense of mastery he has experienced.*

BL.28 No. It's (Inhales and exhales twice over 6 seconds)... Balloon and a man... holding a balloon... man holding a balloon... sometimes I'm the balloon... um... floating wherever... and I'm floating wherever because I'm, that... me emotions are taking us all over the place... everywhere... ups, downs, whatever have you... and my common sense is the man pulling on the string... so I'm... I know... that (exhales then voice strengthens) Reality... common sense... grounded... intuition, my brain is the man with the string, with the strength, that keeps me... keep on going... and then there's me that keeps floating around all over the place. I don't know (growls).

JR.28 Blake that's the most incredible description, I think what you're basically, I think you've just told me is that sometimes you feel like you're the balloon and sometimes you feel like you're the man in control.

Comm.28 *There are so many unexpected aspects to Blake's response that he almost takes my breath away. The strength, tone, pacing and structure of his speech is different, as if the hesitant, anxious Blake has been vanquished and a stronger, confident Blake has emerged. Within the ongoing dynamics of the CBT relationship Proctor (2008) notes sceptically that power is often described as being transferred from 'therapist-client' to 'client-within'. Proctor's scepticism is based on a lack of clarity in the model describing this process, but as Blake crafts this extraordinary symbolic account of his*

experiencing, I hear, see and feel the power that our encounter has generated in him. Beginning this segment I felt that I was ahead of Blake but now he has taken the lead and my simple summary, full of admiration, reflects this.

BL.29 Yeh well I mean, they're the two parts of me.

Evaluation and learning

Overall, I am satisfied with the movement in this sequence, though there are several moments where I feel I could have been more helpful. Our alliance at the start of this sequence is shaky, divided as we are by my agenda and Blake's apprehension. I should have perhaps worked more slowly, transparently and collaboratively but Blake's anxious resistance had previously dominated our sessions and I was working perhaps too hard at containment. This raises questions for me concerning power imbalance in the therapeutic relationship, and my developing skill in negotiating it, that I am currently taking to supervision. I additionally feel that I missed early opportunities to directly explore Blake's emotions, which is unfortunate as Blake often responds to 'feeling' enquiries with 'thinking' responses and finds cognitive rather than emotional expression more comfortable. This is something that we have been addressing recently.

I feel that I strike a fair balance between cognitive and experiential working, though I observe that Blake and I really begin to collaborate when his experience and not my theorising is foregrounded. This is an invaluable lesson that has impacted upon my recent work. Throughout the role-play elements I am glad that I held my nerve for I feel this demonstrates the mutual risk and commitment that is often needed in therapy to forge a real bond and arrive at somewhere meaningful. I am also pleased that when Blake faces his emotions, I resist the urge to rescue, for my restraint at this moment is key to unlocking Blake's experience of his own power. In terms of my ongoing development, this is hopefully somewhat of a transitional moment for me, for I have in the past tended to jump in and rescue clients when they struggle with emotionally difficult experiencing.

It can be profoundly difficult to share with others the deepest sense of our felt experience, and yet Blake manages to emerge through his cognitive and emotional confusion and share what he is going through via the power of symbolic communication. I am reminded here of Gilbert's (2005: 29) statement that "the very sense of self is sculpted in interaction", which echoes the symbolic interactionist understanding of human development proposed by Mead (1934). I see how the principles of interactionism apply to both the therapeutic relationship and our broader symbolic interactions with society, and I am gaining a deep respect for the relational power of negotiating shared understandings. As such, as I near the end of my training as a counselling psychologist

specialising in CBT, I hope that this work demonstrates not only my competency in the model, but my respect for the therapeutic relationship as a creative workspace for the art of therapeutic transition and transformation.

In writing this report, the competency that I hope to have most demonstrated is that of compassion. House and Loewenthal (2008) accuse CBT of mechanistically training clients into managing normal emotional reactions in a way that is intrinsically un-human. I hope that my work in this passage makes a strong case against this. The Dalai Lama (2002: 76) warns that "reason in itself is blind to the consideration of deeper moral questions; we need qualities of the heart to counterbalance the force of our intelligence". These words resonate quite poignantly with Blake's early description of his difficulties as "a head and a heart thing". As a developing practitioner of CBT I am increasingly mindful of the value of achieving a balance between these two powerful forces.

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Section D

Negotiating Adult Family Estrangement Through Time

A Grounded Theory of Personal, Interpersonal, Social and Symbolic Process

Doctoral Research Study

Estrangement

So, without overt breach, we fall apart,
Tacitly sunder—neither you nor I
Conscious of one intelligible Why,
And both, from severance, winning equal smart.
So, with resigned and acquiescent heart,
Whene'er your name on some chance lip may lie,
I seem to see an alien shade pass by,
A spirit wherein I have no lot or part.

William Watson
1858-1935

Abstract

This study seeks to understand how people experience and negotiate estrangement from nuclear family members during adulthood. The central research aim was to arrive at a theoretical account of how people psychologically experience and manage estrangement within the meaningful context of their lives. To date, this is a research area of psychological experience that has been largely unaccounted for, either statistically or through qualitative investigation.

From in-depth qualitative interview data, this study used grounded theory analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1990 Corbin and Strauss, 2008) to explore how adults experience and negotiate the process of family estrangement over time. The sample in this study consisted of 15 participants aged between 19 and 64 years old. Participants self-identified as having been estranged from a parent, child or sibling for at least one year during adulthood. Some were still estranged, while others were reconciled with previously estranged family members.

The findings suggest that family estrangement is experienced as a complex process of personal transition and continual adjusting, which involves *the negotiation of emotional and ideological distance* from family relationships. Distance must be negotiated intrapersonally, interpersonally, socially and symbolically, and the findings throw light upon each of these domains. The phenomenon of family estrangement is a broad one, but it is hoped that this study arrives at a balanced, integrative and informative account of its central concerns. Further to this study, recommendations are made for further academic investigation and the practice of counselling psychology.

Background and Rationale

Although much is known about how ruptures in family relationships impact upon children and adolescents, much less is known about how family estrangement in adulthood is experienced and negotiated. A current search of psychINFO database, for example, returns one specific study of adult family estrangement by Jerome in 1994. Despite a lack of academic literature in this area, historical, cultural and social narratives suggest that adult family estrangement can be experienced as a powerful and pervasive challenge to self development and social well-being.

One may not have to look far to find a person who is experiencing estrangement from a family member (in the process of recruiting for this study, over half of the people approached said that they 'knew someone'), and there is much to indicate that family estrangement is of both historical and cultural significance. There are numerous accounts of family estrangement in The Bible for example, such as the estrangement of Ishmael and Abraham (Genesis, 21:8-21, New International Version).

In terms of cross-cultural reflection, Kunesh (2007) notes that, in many tribal cultures, estrangement or banishment from one's tribe or 'family' is considered a particularly harsh form of punishment. Kunesh describes how, in Native American tribes, tribal banishment is still practiced and seen as akin to a spiritual death. Hostetler (1993) has observed how, in Amish communities, the practice of *Meidung* involves the temporary shunning of a person, by friends and family, as a taste of what might happen should the person continue to fail to meet social rules and expectations.

In terms of the representations of family estrangement in modern media, a Google search of the term 'family estrangement' instantly reveals a public fascination with the estrangements of a long list of popular celebrities and public figures. At the time of writing however, one particular news story with an apparent connection to family estrangement perhaps deserves special attention, the case of Raoul Moat. In the United Kingdom there was extensive media coverage of the story of Raoul Moat, who in July 2010, shot his ex-girlfriend, her new partner and a policeman. The shootings sparked a week long police manhunt, ending in a stand-off, where Raoul Moat killed himself.

Although we will never be sure of what drove Raoul Moat to such extreme behaviour, Raoul's brother Angus believed he knew. Angus Moat suggested, in a number of interviews, that Raoul's long estrangement from his father, mother, and brother had left him isolated, highly sensitive to rejection, and vulnerable to psychological breakdown. Moments before he killed himself Raoul reportedly told police marksmen "I have no Dad and nobody cares about me". Months before the killings, Raoul had reportedly requested psychological help to explore what he believed were 'underlying issues', but he was not seen as having 'a problem' (see Jones, 2010; Edemariam, 2010; and Taylor, 2010).

In the absence of available statistics, the prevalence of adult family estrangement remains unknown, yet therapists' accounts and popular self-help literature suggest that family estrangement is a common reason for clients to seek psychological help. There are currently three self-help books available on family estrangement, by LeBey (2001), Sichel (2004) and Richards (2008). The authors of these books express collective surprise that research on the phenomenon is so lacking. They also observe that, in their investigations in the area, family estrangement appears far more common than they had anticipated. Barbara LeBey (2001: 3) puts it thus:

> "What has struck me as extraordinary is the fact that family estrangement is a widespread problem that appears to be completely ignored. Is it one of those subjects that people don't talk about? Is a sense of shame involved...?"

When LeBey talks here of 'people' ignoring the problem of estrangement, she appears to be speaking of the general population. In terms of apparently turning a blind eye to the experience of family estrangement however, her words might equally be thought of as reflecting the gaze of the academic community. Arguably, one area of psychological research that might be expected to offer insight into the experience of estrangement is family therapy. Indeed, as the literature review will highlight, there is much to draw from this field, although surprisingly, family and systems therapy literature offers little in the way of direct insight into the experience of negotiating family estrangement.

My experience of working with family-estranged clients is that, when seeking therapeutic support, estranged family members may typically present individually. An additional observation is that estranged clients may arrive in therapy with a variety of presenting issues, but it is only as work unfolds that estrangement emerges as an issue that is experientially interwoven into other sources of client distress. Liem and Pressler (2005) raise the issue of clients with relationship issues typically entering psychotherapy alone, and recommend that therapists work with such clients using an integrated understanding of many perspectives and theories.

For counselling psychologists meeting estranged clients, there is currently no specific theory of estrangement from which to draw support, frame understanding and illuminate therapeutic process. Cooper (2009) notes that, in practice, counselling psychologists prefer to follow humanistic principles, prioritising each person's unique subjective experience over models or theories, although a balance must be found between the theoretical and the subjective, a point emphasised here by Corbin (2009: 40):

> "We can't have practitioners walking around doing things without having a body of theoretical knowledge, along with their experience, to guide their actions. Knowledge may not mirror reality but it does help to understand human response."

In the absence of a theory of adult estrangement, psychological therapists may of course draw from other models such as attachment, systems theory, rejection or bereavement. This however risks being a somewhat piecemeal and assumptive approach. No one model attempts to specifically embrace and understand the personal and social experiences (or address the particular challenges) of adult estrangement. Qualitative research into the experience of adult estrangement could therefore be considered both timely and useful.

Perspectives on Family

Scabini, Marta, and Lanz (2006) note that definitions of family should always be considered within the historical, cultural, and geographical contexts within which they are situated. This study is located early into the 21st Century in the United Kingdom, where the concept of the nuclear family is largely understood to mean a primary relationship group of parents and their first generation children. Both parent-child and sibling relationships occur within this constellation of relationships, and are the target of this study. [1]

Whatever one's definition, it would appear that 'families', as Lee (2010: 1) puts it, 'matter'. Lee refers to the United Nations (1989) definition of family, as the 'basic unit of society that must be protected and supported'. The implied need for protection is an interesting one, implying perhaps that the family is under threat. The perceived danger here is change, but, as Lee notes, families inevitably undergo continual transformations in their structures, functions and values, in keeping with the cultural shifts around them. The indivisible relationship between family and social transformation is highlighted in Cigoli and Scabini's (2006: 1) description of the family as a "complex living organism, a social entity and psychological subject that both mirrors and meshes with its environmental/social context and the cultural history it is steeped in."

The times, as ever, are shifting. Everything, it seems, is in motion. De Vaus (2004) suggests that over the past few decades traditional family structures have undergone rapid transformation, and yet Antonucci and Jackson (2007) report that close relationships, particularly those of family, continue to be fundamental to an individual's health and well-being. Ferring, Michels, Boll and Fillip (2009) observe that, in many Western countries, a combination of decreasing birth rates and increasing life expectancy means that families are getting smaller, while the members in them are living longer. They caution that, although individuals are surviving longer, old age is still a life phase marked by considerable physical and functional decline. As a result, many social care systems are struggling to

[1] A postmodern view of the nuclear family was adopted for this study (see Hertlein, Lambert-Shute and Benson, 2004, for an overview on postmodern family structural shifts). Therefore single-parent families, same-sex parents, remarried parents, and adopting parents were all considered as meeting eligibility criteria, although only members of two of these groups, single-parent and remarried parents, came forward for participation.

support their elderly populations. Strong intergenerational family support networks are becoming increasingly important to ensure that family members are cared for in their later years. This evolving situation is one with long term implications for the study of estranged family relations.

Another reason that families matter is that they are largely seen to provide the best environments for nurturing and scaffolding the personal and social development of future generations. Family therapy theorists support this idea so strongly that they take a largely systemic, organisational or structural view of the family. Minuchin (1974) describes the family as a matrix of psychosocial development that must accommodate social and cultural expectations. Bowen (1978), in developing the clinical practice of family therapy, thought it important not to focus on individual members of the family, but on the family as an interlocking unit of communication and intergenerational transmission.

To most people of course, the thing that really matters about families is not, perhaps, the fascinating complexities of how they operate, but what it means, or feels like, to be in one. The experience of self *in relation to* family is the perspective offered by this study, and those that speak within it suggest that family can be experienced as a relationship within which there are relationships that are deeply challenging. Perhaps this is because, as McGoldrick (1995: 22) says, "the notion of family is deeply tied to the sense of who we are in the world." If, therefore, we become estranged from our family relationships, we may be left to make sense of the experience through complex negotiations between personal identity and social meanings.

Our notions of family as conceptually boundaried, and in need of protecting, are not ideas without challenge. Carsten (2004) reminds us that our understandings of family sit globally within a number of alternative kinship systems, while Perlesz et al. (2006) note that that our ideas of what family is, or can be, are shaped by the predominant social discourse available to us. Daly (2001) notes that our expectations of family relationships are influenced by ideas of what family relationships *should be like*, or family ideology. Using grounded theory, Daly (2001) investigated family members' experiences of trying to live up to the idea of spending quality 'family time' with each other, and found that people experienced a dramatic and distressing discordance between ideological expectations of family relationships and lived reality.

In similar vein, Stryker (1980, 2007) notes that family relationships are also social relationships in which members assume roles that are imbued with symbolic meaning. Kradin (2009), meanwhile, speaks of the pressures of family members to live up to role expectations that are etched into the scripts of what he calls 'the family myth'. He calls for approaches that humanize individuals in families, while deconstructing dominant, limiting and pressurising discourses. Also highlighting such pressures, Miller (2005, 2010) has explored, through narrative analysis, what it may be like to find oneself ascribed to a family role such as 'mother', or 'father'. Miller has discovered that while there

are pressures and constraints, there may also be opportunities for new understandings to emerge. There is motion perhaps in everything.

In terms of mining for new understandings, there are still many veins of family experience that remain rich for exploration. Gower and Dowling (2008) observe that despite an enormous body of literature on child/parent relationships until children reach adulthood, there is very little known about the experience and process of family relationships after that. They also note that research into adult family relationships tends to focus on aspects of family relationships rather than the experience or process of relationships over time. Through in-depth qualitative research, Gower and Dowling are attempting to throw light upon what they describe as the 'marginalized discourse' (2008: 45) of the experiences of parents of adult children: Through work like this, the margins are perhaps widening.

This study also aims to pursue what might be considered a marginalized discourse; one currently relegated to the sidelines of the family research field. Whether we look at the family from the inside or out, with the aims of preservation, illumination or deconstruction, a central narrative to all perspectives is perhaps one of pressure. The bonds that tie us, to our experience of being in families, are relationships. As the voices in this study testify, sometimes the pressures on these bonds can feel too much, and our family relationships can feel untenable. This research suggests that the experience of family estrangement is clearly a story that is out there, waiting to be told. The subsequent account is therefore grounded in the lived realities of estranged family members, and it has attempted to capture the process of estrangement as it moves across time. It is a study of family relationships, and of relationships to family.

Everything is in motion, and there is motion in everything. Capturing human experience is therefore an inherently difficult, interpretative and some might say, elusive endeavour. It is nonetheless hoped that this study has succeeded in capturing some of the key concerns and core elements of the process of being in an estranging relationship. Hopefully this study offers a fresh and coherent perspective to the experience of estrangement, guided by participants' experiences. The aim was to produce a meaningful account of estrangement that would be of practical reference for estranged family members and those engaged in supporting them.

My personal relationship to the research

As a family member, researcher and reflective practitioner the experience of family estrangement is of keen interest to me, for I have experienced an estrangement from a close family member for many years. It has been quite a journey through both personal and professional territory, and my own experience resonates strongly with many of the experiences that were voiced in this work.

For my own part, I believe I understand why estrangement is often not spoken about, for until conducting this study, it was an experience that I rarely shared. It seems naive now, but I used to think that being estranged was highly unusual. My estrangement had developed over such a long time, and become so interwoven into my personal history, that I saw it as a unique identity. I entered this research process curious and open-minded, wondering how my own experience might compare to others**.**

During the interviews for this study, a number of participants described the feeling that being estranged from a family member was an experience that set them apart from other people. This is a feeling that I could connect with, though in the act of connecting of course, I have realised that being estranged need not be so strange after all.

I have tried very hard to understand and convey some of the meaning of each of the experiences of estrangement shared by participants in this study. I hope that the resulting account is one that preserves a sense of the individual voice, yet rigorously gathers that which is collective. I also hope that one day the contributions from the participants in this study may help others, who may feel apart, to find solace and understanding in the connection of shared experience.

Review of the literature

Note on background literature, insertion of theoretical material, and research methodology.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) conceived grounded theory as an emergent and inductive method of investigation. As such, it is recommended that existing literature is consulted in response to emerging findings. This is to minimise interpretative bias resulting from preconceived expectations of what will be found. Glaser (1978), and Birks and Mills (2011) acknowledge however, that it is considered practical to conduct a broad initial literature review of the field to be investigated, so that an area may be chosen where generated knowledge is likely to be significant, relevant and unique.

During initial literature review, only one specific study pertaining directly to the experience of adult estrangement was found. In response to emerging findings, a number of further theoretical sources were referenced. Presented in this review section, are the broad areas of reference that were initially consulted, and that were still found to have relevance following analysis. Some theoretical linkages were unanticipated. Therefore, to present them in the review section would perhaps detract from the sense of discovery generated through the findings. Where deemed optimal to creating an appropriately ordered account, some theoretical links have been woven instead into the discussion. It is recognised that each of the following review areas is so vast, that is only possible to present brief reviews of each field, highlighting literature of particular relevance.

Estrangement and attachment

Originally developed by Bowlby (1969), attachment theory offers a rich framework to help understand how primary family relationships can affect emotional and social development. Attachment theory proposes that from our early relationships, typically those of family, we form internal working models of self and others that act as prototypes for relationships to come.

Bowlby's (1969) original propositions have seen extensive development. Byng Hall (2008) notes that despite attachment theory's historic focus on early childhood attachments, the theory has been increasingly applied to a range of relationships throughout life. Contributions from Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall, (1978), Main (1986), Hazan and Shaver (1987), and Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991), have extended the theory of attachment to include relationships across the lifespan. This has led to the development of four widely supported attachment categories, three considered insecure and one secure, as seen in Table 1. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) propose that in close adult relationships, attachment types are distinguished by dimensional combinations of positive or negative views of the self and other, and types are considered to influence the way that people engage with each other across a range of relationships. Byng Hall (2008) has recently extended and applied these

categories to the concept of *lifelong family* attachment relationships, including those in adulthood, proposing four family attachment relationship types as shown in Table 1.

Childhood attachment types Bowlby (1969), Ainsworth et al., (1978), *Main (1986)	Adult attachment types Hazan& Shaver (1987), Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991)	Family attachment relationship types Byng Hall (2008)
Secure	Secure	Secure
Insecure/Ambivalent	Anxious/Preoccupied	Insecure/Ambivalent
Insecure/Avoidant	Dismissive/Avoidant	Insecure/Avoidant
Insecure/Disorganised*	Fearful/Avoidant	Insecure/Disorganised

Table 1. The historic development of categories of attachment.

Simonelli, Ray and Pincus (2004) note that in the practice of adult psychotherapy, attachment theory has taken centre stage in the understanding of relationships. Berghaus (2011) however, questions some of the claims of attachment theory and the scientific evidence supporting them. One particular issue for Berghaus is the frequently claimed idea that internal working models and attachment styles remain stable over time. Davila and Cobb (2004) note that there are growing number of studies investigating the stability of attachment over time, and increasingly these studies are focusing on the potential for attachment change during adulthood. Reviewing the field, Davila and Cobb report that results have been mixed, but conclude that under some circumstances, attachment change seems possible for some people. Most of the studies into adult attachment, however, have focused upon attachment change during late adolescence and early adulthood, and there is still currently very little known about the potential for attachment change after that.

Bretherton (1992: 771) has argued that, as it stands, attachment theory is probably too simplistic a concept to explain how people engage in adult relationships, and has recommended that attachment research should include the integrated consideration of the "dialogical or narrative self" and "the perspectives of theorists interested in the social construction of reality".

Main (1996) notes that in adulthood, friends or romantic partners can often replace primary attachment figures, but also comments that the process of redirection of attachment from family to others is still poorly understood. When offering therapeutic support to adults with relationship difficulties this can be problematic. Heard, Lake and McCluskey (2009) reflect that, at present, attachment theory offers little in the way of therapist guidance to assist people experiencing relationship conflict, and this they feel is largely due to the theory's neglect of the subjective experience of identity.

Observed attachment shifts from family relationships to other relationships during adulthood are interpreted by most literature as suggesting that such shifts are part of normal and desirable development. While this may be the case for individuals who experience this shift willingly, gradually and autonomously, the impact of enforced or untimely estrangement may potentially provoke considerable psychological disturbance, and therefore requires careful consideration. Johnson, Makinen and Milikin (2001) propose that that attachment ruptures can be a source of deep psychological injury, and suggest guidelines for assessing the severity of 'attachment injuries', including; monitoring client use of trauma language and life and death terms, listening for talk of isolation or abandonment, and noting when clients take a 'never-again' stance towards trust and vulnerability.

In terms of negotiating adult family estrangement, Byng Hall (2008) suggests that family attachment styles may endure across the lifespan. This raises an interesting question about whether family members with previously secure attachment relationships might experience estrangement differently those who become estranged from relationships that were already insecure. Research into family estrangement may throw some light upon this area.

In stressing the importance of early childhood attachment experiences, it could be argued that attachment theory neglects the difficulties that adult family conflict may present. Previously close family members may, in adulthood for example, hit unprecedented problems over diverging personal values and expectations of family relationships. It is therefore possible that ideological conflict could prove more significant to relationship quality in adulthood than issues of security or emotional reciprocity. This is a further issue that estrangement research might explore.

Estrangement and rejection

In his extensive account of research on interpersonal rejection, Mark Leary (2001: 3) writes that "Human beings are an exceptionally social species, with a strong need to belong and an even stronger aversion to being rejected." A central idea of Leary's (2001) is that the amount of hurt experienced through interpersonal rejection depends on two main factors: The first is a person's perceived value of the relationship, and the second is a person's perception of how valuable the relationship is to the other party. Leary observes that if a relationship is felt to be of high value or importance by a person, but a partner acts in a way that suggests that it is not, then the person may experience this imbalance as a rejection, not only of the relationship, but also of the self. Buckley, Winkle and Leary (2004) found that negative emotional and behavioural reactions were subjectively strongest when a person experiences, in a previously valued relationship, declining relationship evaluation, or *relational devaluation*. One might anticipate that a high proportion of estranging family relationships could fall into this categorization.

Leary, Koch and Hechenbleikner (2001), Buckley, Winkle and Leary (2004), and Leary, Twenge and Quinliven (2006) collectively report that typical emotional responses to rejection include sadness, loneliness, hurt feelings, jealousy, guilt, shame, embarrassment, anxiety and anger. These authors also note that rejection can also lead to range of defensive, aggressive, avoidant or remedial behaviours. Leary Koch and Hechenbleikner suggest that remedial behaviours can be short-lived however, and are likely to cease in the absence of a reciprocal stance to reconciliatory behaviours.

Leary Koch and Hechebleikner (2001) believe that the range of known emotional responses to rejection suggest that there is a likely link between rejection, relational devaluation, and suicidality, and the authors call for further investigation into this area. This possibility is supported by research by Osgood and Brant (1991), who reported that elderly hospital patients, rated by staff as more likely to commit suicide, commonly spoke of feelings of abandonment or rejection. It was also observed that this patient group were rarely, if ever, visited by family members. No research to date appears to have researched a direct link between interpersonal rejection and suicide, but if one were found then it might have implications for working with family estranged individuals.

We currently know very little of what role the experience of rejection may play in family estrangement, or how people in estranging relationships cope. Somner (2001: 167) writes that "there probably exists no greater threat to a person's self-esteem than to be the target of interpersonal rejection", while Stafford (2008: 359) suggests that "most individuals develop adaptive coping mechanisms for dealing with actual or perceived rejection, in which the experience is minimized or normalized (e.g., "You can't expect everyone to like you")". While perhaps it may be possible to normalize rejection in a range of social relationships, it is unclear how possible it might be 'normalize' rejection in close family relationships. It is also unclear how this type of rejection might impact upon a person's sense of self-worth.

Focusing on parent-child relationships, Rohner (2004) notes that research into parent-child rejection has a long and well-developed history. Rohner describes how research conducted since the 1960's has led to the development of parental acceptance-rejection theory (PARTheory), which offers a robust account of the effects of parental acceptance and rejection upon childhood development. Complimenting research in this area, Downey and Feldman (1996) have explored the issue of 'rejection sensitivity', noting how experiences of interpersonal rejection, particularly in close childhood relationships, may leave an individual particularly sensitive to rejection in later relationships. Downey, Freitas, Michaelis and Khouri (1998) outline how rejection sensitive people may act in ways that result in, and confirm, self-fulfilling prophecies of being rejected. There are parallels here with the proposed internal working models of attachment theory, and again there is a focus on childhood experiences, with little exploration around the theme of adult family rejection.

In Leary's (2001) book on interpersonal rejection, an emphasis is placed on rejection as experienced in social relationships. Areas which are discussed include social ostracism, peer rejection, individual differences in coping mechanisms, and the interplay between rejection and stigma. Although there is brief mention of family rejection, it is never really explored beyond a basic consideration of attachment literature. Leary amalgamates strong evidence to suggest that rejection in adulthood through many forms may have quite severe and debilitating consequences. Unfortunately, however, the experience of rejection within adult family estrangement seems to have eluded investigation. The combined research findings in this area suggest however, that rejection within adult family relationships may be a particularly potent source of distress.

Conflict and relationships

Although there is very little research upon the subjective experience of family estrangement, there is a large body of knowledge on the processes of family conflict. Birditt, Miller, Fingerman, and Lefkowitz (2009) note that it is normal for tensions and conflict to exist in adult parent-child relationships, but comment that sources of conflict and the long term impact of conflict upon relationship quality are poorly understood. It may be important for us to know more about such issues for as Lee (2010: 6) warns, patterns of "blame, criticism and conflict" within family relationships may have "toxic cumulative effects" both upon overall family cohesiveness, as well as upon individual members.

Stocker, Lanthia and Furman (1997) observe that research into family conflict tends to focus upon family relations during childhood, largely neglecting issues within adult relationships. In particular, Phares, Fields, Kamboukos and Lopez (2005) stress that research has focused on mother-child dyads, and as a result we know relatively little about father-child relationships. One phase of adult family relations that has received more attention than others is later life relations. Clarke, Preston, Raksin and Bengtson (1999) investigated the reasons for conflict between ageing parents and adult children, finding that the most common areas of conflict were communication style differences, lifestyle choices, child-rearing values, and ideological beliefs.

Cicerreli (1989) found a correlation between elderly persons' experience of depression and the quality of sibling relations. Cicerreli's study was correlational, so it was not possible to assume direction of causality, though Milevsky (2005) found that sibling support in *early* adulthood could compensate for a lack of support from peer and other family relationships, and that those receiving better sibling support tended to experience less loneliness and depression, and greater self-esteem and life satisfaction. These findings compliment the findings of Osgood and Brant (1991), suggesting that sibling estrangement in *later* life may have implications for psychological wellbeing. An important point to note is that studies into relationship quality, such as these, could be said to be investigating

the potential impact of family estrangement. None however, identify estrangement as a *meaningful* phenomenon to be investigated. This is unfortunate, for if estrangement is found to be a meaningful construct to individuals, then identification with such a construct may, in itself, affect psychological adjustment. The question of whether family estrangement is a meaningful construct is of considerable interest to the focus of the present study.

Focusing chiefly upon the domain of marital relationships, Gottman (1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1998) has used detailed observational research to conclude that relationship satisfaction and longevity are strongly linked to partners' styles of relating during conflict. Conflict styles are considered to include variations in the demonstration of emotional warmth and acceptance, communication quality and approach/avoidance behaviours. Holman and Jarvis (2003) tested Gottman's proposed conflict styles using a large sample and found them to be well supported.

Concerning conflict management, Gottman has identified two types of relationships; regulated and non-regulated. In regulated relationships, couples adopt one of three conflict styles; validating, avoidant or volatile. Each of these styles generally enable couples to manage conflict without it spiralling out of control. In non-regulated relationships, couples are seen to adopt hostile-engaged or hostile-detached conflict styles. Hostile conflict behaviour includes criticising, judging, blaming, and expressing contempt, as well as marked defensiveness, exhibited through periods of hostile withdrawal or stonewalling. Gottman (1994a: 111) has called the behaviours of criticism, contempt, stonewalling and defensiveness 'The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse', emphasising the destructive role they may play in relationships that are spiralling towards breakdown. Gottman's work has been highly informative. He suggests that it is the manner in which couples engage is conflict that is crucial and not the actual content or type of dispute. This finding implies that, with further research, his work may be usefully extended to other close relationships, including perhaps those at the heart of family estrangements.

In terms of conflict resolution strategies, Recchia, Ross and Vickar (2010) explored differences between parents and children, within and between generations. They note that until now, family research has tended to focus upon comparison of *between-family* systemic patterns of conflict management. Recchia, Ross and Vickar discovered that there was considerable variety in *within-family* dyadic conflict management, and recommend that further research in this area focus upon individual differences, rather than systemic cross-comparison.

Exploring individually different approaches to conflict resolution or reconciliation may be important, as Maltby and Day (2004) have reviewed research into people's ability for forgiveness, concluding that a large number of studies show that not being able to forgive can have negative health and mental

health consequences. In terms of understanding individual experiences of interpersonal conflict it may also be useful to consider the processes people experience when attributing blame or responsibility for interpersonal transgressions, and how such transgressions might be perceived in the meaningful context of family relations. One area that might be useful to draw from is the field of social cognition, where a number of ideas derived from Heider's (1958) attribution theory, such as Ross's (1977) fundamental attribution error, or Jones and Nesbitt's (1972) actor-observer effect, suggest that peoples' attributions of responsibility in situations of conflict are often explained by cognitive or discursive self-serving biases. One further key area that Recchia, Ross and Vickar (2010) identify is the experience of power in relational conflict, noting that research into parent-child dynamics often assumes that parents typically hold greater power. This may not be the case however in parent/adult child relations, and this too is an area where estrangement research may be useful.

Estrangement and loss or bereavement

There is an obvious distinction between estrangement and bereavement, yet elements of various grief and bereavement models highlight the psychological challenges that people might universally experience when experiencing the loss of a close relationship. Parkes (1996) and Worden (2003) identify a number of typical reactions to bereavement that include: anxiety, sadness, shock, relief, numbness, yearning, searching behaviour, and preoccupation with thoughts of the deceased.

Worden (2003) recommends a number of counselling principles for assisting with bereavement that include acceptance of loss, expression of painful feelings and adaptation to life without the deceased. Without available research one can only guess at how aspects of these models may relate to estrangement experience, and what complications may arise as a result of losing a family relationship with a person who is living.

When a person dies, they are gone forever, and yet Becker and Knudson (2003) talk of how psychology has recognized that people in mourning may continue to experience an attachment with the deceased. Using grouded theory, Dannenbaum and Kinnier (2009) discovered that one way that people adjust to bereavement is by maintaining an attachment through maintaining imaginal relationships. It was found that imaginal relationships with the deceased are generally experienced as comforting by mourners, and helpful in a number of areas such as loss adjustment, feeling cared for, and problem solving. It would be interesting to see if people experiencing estrangement also experienced imaginal relationships, and if they did, how they might be experienced differently when the imaginal other was still alive.

Parkes (1993, 1996) suggests that experiencing bereavement can present a significant challenge to one's identity, and describes how a major task for bereaved spouses is to reach psychosocial adjustment, through integrating into one's identity the symbolic role of widower or widow. Morgan

Carder and Neal (1997) found that that through connecting with other widowers and widows, spouses could gain both emotional support and identity adjustment. Stroebe, Zech, Stroebe and Abakoumkim (2005), and Benkel Wijk and Molander (2009) have suggested that social support during bereavement is crucial for adjustment, and cites the most common sources of support as being family and friends. If reactions to estrangement were found to be similar to bereavement, then two immediate problems arise. The first concerns the impact of having the reduced support of family, and the second concerns the potentially limited availability of family estrangement identities in society for one to connect with.

Baddely and Singer (2010) have recently challenged claims in traditional bereavement literature that sharing painful feelings is typically helpful, pointing out that the experience of receiving comfort and support for identity adjustment are largely influenced by the reactions of those listening. Regarding estrangement, this may be a particularly salient point, suggesting that the potential impact of sharing the experience of being estranged might depend upon the level of acceptance and validation received by those listening. It could be that the universality of the bereavement experience generates better empathic understanding from personal support networks than estrangement. Research into this issue could again be helpful.

Estrangement and systemic theory

Dallos and Draper (2010) remark that family systems therapy has accumulated an impressive amount of theoretical knowledge concerning family dynamics and processes. One might therefore expect this field to be the best source of knowledge concerning the experience of being estranged. Dallos and Draper note however that systemic approaches view families, and not individuals, as the basic unit of investigation, foregrounding interpersonal and systemic process explanations over experiential and existential concerns.

Lebey (2001) has said that family estrangement is a phenomenon that appears to have been "largely ignored". Technically however, this is perhaps not true. Two of the giants of family therapy research, Salvador Minuchin (1974), and Murray Bowen (1978), have contributed, for example, an enormous amount to our understanding of what can go wrong within family relations. The work of Minuchin, Bowen, and many others in the field can illuminate many of the psychological process leading to estranged relationships.

Minuchin (1974), who developed structural family therapy, described how a key challenge of individual family members is to to achieve a healthy balance between enmeshment and disengagement from family relationships, thereby promoting autonomy while maintaining mutuality. In similar vein, Bowen (1978) stressed the importance of clients achieving healthy levels of self-differentiation from family relationships. Bowen describes how one of the worst outcomes of family

conflict occurs when a member reactively withdraws from the system and experiences emotional cut-off. Bowen (1978: 382) describes emotional cut-off as "a process of separation, isolation, withdrawal, running away or denying the importance of the parental family." Emotional cut-off is not only seen to be debilitating to one's emotional functioning, but also as a process that may be intergenerationally transmitted via family relationships. Bowen suggests that differentiating one's self from family of origin relationships is akin to reaching emotional maturity.

The distinction between family therapy and individual therapy is perhaps clearest at the level of suggested therapeutic response to a client, entering therapy individually, with a problem of emotional cut-off. Brown (2007) describes how rather than focus upon the client's intra-psychic experience a family therapist will attempt to gather data on relational patterns and dynamics in the client's family. Using this data, McGoldrick and Carter (2001) recommends that the therapist should act as a coach, encouraging the client to go back into the family and work through emotional problems there, with skills acquired during session. This way, say McGoldrick and Carter (2001: 282) "Emotional issues and expression of feelings are steered toward the naturally evolving family relationships - where they belong."

Although family therapists no doubt work with clients in a sensitive and empathic manner, the idea that the exploration or validation of a client's experience, including emotions, should not be *central* to the therapeutic encounter is of course anathema to many psychologists, such as those who adopt humanistic, existential or psychodynamic approaches (see Dryden, 2007 for an overview). Additionally, Miller, Anderson and Keala (2004: 14) caution that "although there is emerging evidence validating some of Bowen's basic theoretical propositions, there is still a glaring lack of clinical process and outcome research that has tested the effectiveness of Bowen's model of therapy".

The systemic way of coaching individual clients who may present with estrangement difficulties to work through the problem *within* the family raises a number of other issues. Firstly, as McGoldrick and Carter (2001) acknowledge, the basis for the approach, Bowen's theory, does not show proper consideration for the power inequalities or issues of prejudice and intolerance that people may experience within their families-of-origin. Secondly, estranged family members may have been forcibly rejected by their families, and not feel that returning is an option. Thirdly as Medina (2010: 269) notes, the assumption that "the family is always better together" is based upon an ideological belief system that is open to challenge. Taking an existential perspective on systemic working with individuals, Medina (2010: 268) argues that "the conceptualisation of relatedness at all costs, at the heart of family therapy, misrepresents the most fundamental aspect of existential thought, namely that there is no need to choose relatedness".

On final issue raised by systemic approaches, is that asking estranged clients to return to their families to resolve issues may be asking a lot for someone who enters therapy with the primary hope of being heard, understood, validated and supported. Although it appears that family estrangement has not been 'ignored' by systemic theory, it has perhaps neglected to consider and therefore validate the experiential and phenomenological aspects of estrangement. Family therapy may therefore have failed at presenting what is known about estrangement in a language that translates to the experiences of estranged family members. This is perhaps because from a systemic focus, estrangement is largely seen as symptom of systemic dysfunction, rather than a valid problem in its own right.

Estrangement as transition across the lifespan

No current studies directly explore the impact of adult family estrangement over time. Research with couples however, into the effects of past relationships on remarrying individuals, indicates that separations in close adult relationships can have enduring consequences. Using grounded theory, Brimhall, Wampler and Kimball (2008) interviewed 16 couples in second marriages, finding that core themes of issues surrounding trust emerged, notably affecting future intimate relationships Also in this field, Scheinkman and Fishbane (2004) refer to a vulnerability cycle that can occur between the failure of one relationship and the start of a new one, while Ganong and Coleman (2004: 77) suggest that former partners can have " a psychological presence in the stepfamily household which can affect couple dynamics". Linking past dysfunctional family relationships to romantic relationships, Bowen (1978) suggests that insecurely attached individuals may have high levels of unmet emotional needs, which can result in demanding and dysfunctional projections onto romantic partners. This raises a question of how the experience of estrangement might potentially influence the experience of later relationships. Pertinently, Brimhall, Wampler and Kimball's (2008) study was a response to their observation that little was previously known about the processes remarried individuals face as they integrate past and future relationships, and the same could currently be said for estranged individuals.

Unlike Attachment and PARTheory, Erik Erikson's (1959) 8 stage theory of psychosocial development places emphasis not only on childhood, but throughout the lifespan. Within Erikson's model, there are 4 broad adult developmental phases within which a family estrangement crisis could present psychosocial difficulties. Overlapping the first and second of these, and covering the ages of 18-25, Arnett (2000) describes 'emerging adulthood' as a time of intense developmental transitions. Svoboda (2007) asks how young adults can at this time best manage conflicting desires for freedom and parental approval, a balancing act that Bowen (1978) says is both essential and high-risk, for unresolved conflicts at this time can have lifelong consequences. Studies by Thompson and Pollio (2006) on adolescent runaways and Mattanah, Hancock and Brand (2004) on college student adjustment both highlight the vulnerability of emerging adults to estrangement at this time, and they recommend that counsellors working with distressed students systematically assess their attachment

security. On the flip-side of this issue parents will characteristically be at the stage in their lives when Erikson (1959) suggests adults experience a developmental crisis of generativity versus stagnation, involving a need to feel that they are playing an important role in the nurturing of a younger generation. For both adult children and parents then, family estrangement at this time could, as Bowen (1978) puts it, leave both parties psychologically stuck at the last point of contact. This issue of developmental reciprocity is one that begs further enquiry.

Noack and Buhl (2004) suggest that it is usual for parents and adult children to experience strong and enduring emotional ties throughout the lifespan. In a review of literature on the quality and trajectory of nuclear family relationships across the lifespan, Buhl (2009) identifies a number of patterns considered to be normative. One is a pattern of mutual parent/child support over time, where support given by parents to young adults is reciprocated by children when their parents reach later life. Sibling relationships are reported to typically follow a different pattern, beginning with initial distancing and followed by increased closeness in later life, especially if ageing parents require the combined support of their children.

According to Kahn and Antonucci's (1980) 'Convoy Model' of relationships over the life-span, a unified family can form a particularly strong protective convoy or psychological base from which individual members can both view the world, and develop within it. If cut off from family, other social relationships may gain in importance to the security and identity of the individual, and the basis for viewing the world may undergo a transformation. Arguably then, to best understand estrangement, a methodology and focus should be selected that embraces the complexities of personal and social experience and meanings over time.

One further limitation of developmental theories with regards to addressing estrangement is that they pursue normative patterns of lifespan interactions, and do not attempt to address the issues of those who fall outside of developmental norms. Research into estrangement may offer insight into what happens if normative developmental patterns are disrupted.

Estrangement, mental health and vulnerable populations

There is ample evidence to suggest that estrangement may have a deleterious effect on mental health. Broadly speaking, Dohrewend (1973) has linked major life changes to depression. More specifically, in studies of gay and lesbian youths, Pachankis, Goldfried and Ramrattan (2008) note that have a lack of family support has been linked to depression and suicidality. Benjamin and Wonderlich (1994) found links between lifespan parental rejection and borderline personality disorder. In a cross-cultural meta-analysis of studies relating to childhood and adult parental rejection, Rohner (2004) reports associated psychological maladjustment in several areas. These include anger management, over-dependency on others, rejection sensitivity, impaired self-esteem, dissociation, feelings of inadequacy,

emotional instability and general depression. Rohner (2007) also notes that family rejected individuals are at increased risk of becoming substance dependent, and additionally reports that that rejected individuals can go on to develop a view of close relationships as untrustworthy and dangerous (a key cognitive component of avoidant personality disorder, APA 2000), and as a result may suffer specific or social anxiety.

A number of population groups may be prone to increased risk of family estrangement. These include: the elderly (Osgood and Brant, 1991), adolescents runaways (Thompson and Pollio, 2006), students (Mattanah, Hancock and Brand 2004), lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender individuals (Pachankis, Goldfried and Ramrattan 2008; Koken, Bimbi and Parsons 2009), substance abusers (Kim, 2006), people with physical illness such as HIV (Swendeman et al., 2006) mental health sufferers (Pompili, Mancinelli, Girardi and Tartinelli, 2004), and individuals in families with strong religious beliefs (Mahoney, 2005).

Some of these vulnerable groups suggest that issues of prejudice, fear and intolerance, which tend to raise conflict between members of the general population, can also be flashpoints of conflict leading to estrangement within family units. In the case of groups who suffer social as well as familial prejudice, the difficulties of family estrangement may be amplified.

Jerome's study of family estrangement (1994)

There is currently only one study by Jerome (1994) that directly explores family estrangement. Using a case study design, Jerome explored adult child/elderly parent estrangement from the parents' perspective. Jerome originally was conducting life history interviews with 27 families on the subject of families and ageing, but found that in 10 of the 27 families a significant parent/child or sibling estrangement was identified. Jerome then focused on 2 of the families for her case study.

Estrangement in Jerome's study ranged from total cut-off, reported as deeply distressing, to sporadic contact, reported as disturbing and disappointing. The estrangement was sometimes mutual and sometimes unilateral and she found evidence of family estrangement within and across generations. A key strength of Jerome's study are her observations and discussion that the complex interplay of personal, structural and societal factors has clear implication for therapy, and her recommendation that specific estrangement intervention and assessment criteria are developed. Unfortunately to date no one has picked up this mantle.

Jerome's aim was not to make general claims or theory, though she states that with a different research methodology this could be possible. For future research Jerome recommends that a methodology should be chosen that captures both cultural and personal meanings and perspectives and is able to illuminate the complex interplay between the two.

Methodology

Overview

From in-depth qualitative interview data, this study used grounded theory analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Corbin and Strauss, 2008) to explore how adults experience and negotiate the process of estrangement from nuclear family members.

Aiming to provide a full, fluid and transparent account, I first chart the development of the research question as it evolved through my work and life interactions.

I then discuss the interpretivist-constructivist research paradigm within which this study is situated, highlighting its associated philosophical assumptions and implications. This includes a clarification of my ontological, epistemological and methodological positioning, and a statement of my related values and motivations as a counselling psychologist and researcher.

The chosen method, Corbin and Strauss's (2008) version of grounded theory, is then discussed further and followed with a detailed description of the design of the study. This includes ethical considerations and procedural steps from recruitment through to data collection, analysis and quality control.

Context and development of the research question

According to Burck (2005), within research literature, the most crucial but frequently overlooked aspect of the research process is the development of the research question. This observation resonates strongly with my experience of an evolving engagement with the research dilemma that proved critical in guiding me toward my choice of methodology.

My interest in researching family estrangement grew during the first two years of training as a counselling psychologist. Over this time I worked with several clients in different settings who reported difficulties in coping with estranged family relations. To support my therapeutic work I turned to available literature, but was unable to find anything substantial that offered insight or guidance for experiential working with individual clients with estrangement difficulties. This puzzled me, for the number of cases I had encountered suggested that this was not an unusual phenomenon. I did manage to locate a large body of theoretical literature within the area of family systems theory, most notably drawing from the work of Bowen (1978), but this appeared too theoretical to offer clear guidance for interpersonal therapy, and not particularly transferable to non-systemic working with estranged individuals.

Via the internet at this time I paradoxically discovered a busy network of internet communities of estranged family members. I found personal websites, support groups and chatrooms that were virtually alive with the experiences of the family estranged; people reaching out and making contact through conversation, blogs, poetry and artwork. As I began to absorb, and tried to get some grasp of, these multiple realities, I increasingly wondered what motivated people to connect this way, and the research focus for this study began to materialise. I hypothesised that something significant was driving people toward these online communities; a powerful process that moved through the intimacy of individual lives, and yet made sense in the context of social connection.

The research aim of this study became a focused attempt to capture this process, both in its intimacy and in its contextual relationships. Within the field of estrangement there appeared to be scant understanding, let alone a theoretical account of how people *actually* manage and process the experience of estrangement within the meaningful contexts of their lives. I realised that such an account would need to be grounded in the lived realities of the people concerned and aim to capture the process of their experience as it moved across time. After a thorough exploration of available research methods, the one that seemed best suited to develop such an account was grounded theory.

My position as researcher towards the study target

Dwyer and Buckle (2009) note that qualitative researchers play a direct and intimate role in the research process, and that this raises different implications for the researcher dependent on his membership status with the group or area being studied. Breen (2007) highlights how numerous authors agree that the advantages and disadvantages of insider/outsider positioning cancel each other out, and argues that dichotomous views of insider/outsider positioning are overly simplistic and restrictive. Dwyer and Buckle concur and point out that being a member of a group does not imply sameness with other members. They instead advocate the usefulness of a 'space in between' where the researcher moves from being more or less inside or outside the phenomenon investigated. This is identical to the 'role in the middle' that Breen successfully adopts in her own research.

In part, I consider myself an insider to the area of family estrangement, having had minimal contact with a parent for a number of years. However, throughout this research process, and particularly during its early stages, I frequently aimed to stand outside the phenomenon of estrangement, bracketing off assumptions and expectations based on my own experience. Poonamalee (2009) notes that negotiating an insider/outsider position can add research value if the researcher both actively engages in the phenomenon, while objectively reflecting upon their own process and impact of engagement.

For three reasons I feel that I approached this study largely prepared to negotiate to my advantage the 'space in between' an inside and outside perspective. The first is that, as a counselling psychologist, my training equips me to engage in frequent self-reflection so that I may resist over-identification with the experiences people go through. Secondly, in grounded theory I chose a qualitative methodology that aims to be rigorous in its deconstructive and reconstructive approach to data analysis and verification. Lastly, from the outset of this study I have continuously engaged in systematic reflection and note-taking, and actively pursued standards of rigour and credibility.

Mason (1996) warns that that the reflexive challenge of being a non-neutral investigator cannot be underestimated, and I have heeded this warning from this start. At the same time, there have been moments where my own experience and instincts have proved useful, guiding me towards asking a particular question of a participant, or making a particular hypothesis of the data. Through the systematic use of a reflexive diary I have attempted to develop an instinctive nose for the experience of estrangement alongside a critical eye for bias that I hope has kept the emerging picture an honest one. There is a more detailed account of this reflexive process in the discussion, and excerpts from the reflexive diary are to be found in the appendices of this work.

The research paradigm, and my values as researcher

As Pontoretto (2005) notes, the research paradigm sets the context and provides the schematic framework within which the research may be guided by historic, scientific and philosophical principles. This qualitative study sits largely within an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, and is influenced by symbolic interactionist and pragmatist principles. My methodological use of Corbin and Strauss's (2008) version of grounded theory, however, includes procedural and analytical elements that could be considered to be drawn from a post-positivist perspective.

When conducting qualitative psychological research, Ellliot, Fischer and Rennie (1999: 221) stress the importance of the researcher 'owning one's perspective'. As a counselling psychologist I consider the core of my work to involve a dynamic engagement with the experience of others in an attempt to understand and affirm the meaning of their lives *as it feels to them*. This process is one that relies on a mutual language of meaning that is heavily dependent on shared symbolic understandings, a position notably developed by Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969).

Charon (2010) provides an excellent historic account of symbolic interactionism, highlighting what he sees as the perspective's main ideas about how a person may be viewed. Charon describes how the person is seen as a thinking being who is engaged in lifelong social interaction. Human beings are always active in relation to their current environment, not merely reacting through the senses but defining the situation they are in. In this sense, the person is in a constant state of emergent transformation, as she or he actively engages with the world. From this perspective, to understand a person, one must see him/her as primarily social, symbolic and mental and attempt to understand how she/he defines the situation being dealt with.

As a counselling psychologist I do not expect that my understanding of another person's experience will ever be exact, but I do hope that it will be close enough to be useful. In an attempt to get close enough, I frequently aim to take as naive a stance as possible, but I nonetheless accept that I enter each encounter as a product of my own personal history and theoretical beliefs. Indeed, I believe that it is this 'perspective of other' that I offer a client that acts as conductor for the electric charge of therapeutic transformation. If the goal of a practitioner is to affect transformation, then as a researcher I see a parallel in Corbin's (2009: 36) statement that qualitative research is about "reaching out to people, listening to what they have to say, and then using that knowledge to make a difference in their lives". I therefore see my dual identity as psychological practitioner and researcher as philosophically related.

As a novice researcher, I have reflected carefully on how my training as a counselling psychologist has influenced the choices I have made, and the assumptions I have held, with regard to this research. Due to its interpretative and interactionist elements, I feel that my practitioner role is one that aligns

itself naturally with the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm in qualitative research, and also with the qualitative research aim of effecting change through the charge of new perspective about a particular phenomenon. The first step in this process however is one of adequate capture, and as Morrow (2005) advises, in good qualitative research this requires careful and rigorous negotiation of the inevitable ambiguities that arise when one person tries to explain and another tries to understand.

Regarding that which may be captured, Pontoretto (2005) notes that interpretivist-constructivists hold the ontological belief that reality is subjective, contextual and arises out of interactions between the participant and their experience, the social environment, and the participant and the researcher. I would add to this by suggesting that the interaction between the researcher's pre-existing ideas and the participant's experience also affects what is captured; influencing, sculpting and potentially limiting available interpretations. Corbin (2009) describes how the result of this complexity is that there may be multiple meanings and interpretations that intertwine through interaction to produce multiple realities. This is not to say however that multiple realities are completely unique from one another, and therefore incomparable. Our experience of having a headache may be unique, but we can nonetheless typically arrive at a sympathetically conceptual agreement of what having a headache feels like.

My ambition to adequately capture the lived experiences of people who are estranged within families, and analyse those experiences for patterns of conceptual agreement led me to select grounded theory as an appropriate methodology. As Rennie (2002) notes, grounded theory applies both quantitatively and qualitatively inspired methods to personal or collective interpretations of meaningful experience, thereby embracing both phenomenology and hermeneutics, but in a systematic way. In doing so Rennie argues, grounded theorists endorse an epistemology that bridges realism and relativism. Rennie (2002: 15) has tentatively proposed a meta-methodological definition of this approach as 'methodical hermeneutics'. I find that this definition neatly encapsulates my methodological experience during this study.

Since its creation over forty years ago, Morse et al. (2009b) describe how grounded theory has gradually shifted from a more realist epistemology to a more relativist epistemology both in its procedures and applications. In following Corbin and Strauss's (2008) guidelines I see myself as placed somewhere between the two, with my aims of arriving at a theoretical account that is both of practical use and satisfactory relevance additionally stemming from the epistemological roots of pragmatism. Pragmatism was first articulated by James (1907), has a long history in the social sciences, and is built on the appreciation and evaluation of the practical and beneficial consequences of theorising. Mead (1934) was a notable pragmatist, developing pragmatist approaches to exploring the relations between the self and society, a tradition I have attempted to honour here. Throughout this

process, I have held in mind the belief that the study's worth would be decided by how helpful it would prove to its participants and others of similar experience.

The Chosen Method – Grounded Theory (GT)

Corbin and Strauss (2008) describe how instead of testing theories developed by other scientists, a GT researcher immerses himself in selected participants' data and attempts to code the data into meaningful units. The researcher then manipulates the data through constant cross-comparison and testing of hypothetical relationships between the units. Supported relationships, as they gradually emerge, may be organised into a hierarchal structure that help form a process level theory of the phenomenon being investigated. A detailed procedural account of this process is presented later.

When originally conceived by Glaser and Strauss (1967), GT was seen as partially rooted in the positivist paradigm in that it used systematic and ordered procedures for qualitative data handling to produce conceptual theories of social phenomena that aimed for both accuracy and generalizability. Glaser (2004) notes that from his 'classical' perspective GT distinguishes itself from most traditional qualitative research methods, in that it emphasises explaining a phenomenon over describing it. Much to his chagrin however Glaser also observes that newer relativist versions tend to reverse this emphasis.

Despite these advances McCallin (2004: 27) notes that a key remaining strength of grounded theory is that it "explains what is actually happening in real life rather than describing what should be going on". This grounded explanatory power is seen to have tremendous practical value in facilitating the building of mid-range theories within substantive areas of human experience that are more usually developed through experimental or hypothetico-deductive procedures.

Since its original conception, Morse et al. (2009b) describe the continuous evolution of GT, as it has been adopted and adapted by varied social science (and other) disciplines. Despite this evolution, my observation from the collective writings of Morse et al. is that if GT methodology is seen metaphorically as a vehicle for research, then its core engine components of inductive and systematic identification, categorization and theoretical organisation have remained largely intact. Over time however the vehicle has been remodelled to fit the shifting paradigmatic landscapes it has been steered through, with the principle customisations occurring in the coding orientations, foci and structures, and the emphasis on descriptive versus explanatory power.

Mccallin (2004) notes that GT has now become a constellation of varied methodologies each with a unique perspective, and goes on to observe how within this variation there are currently three main guiding versions: the Glaserian or 'classical' version (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978, 2004) with its positivist epistemology and focus on emergent 'unforced' categorisation and rigorous categorical cross-comparison; the Corbin and Strauss (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1998; Corbin and Strauss, 2008) version drawing more heavily from pragmatism and symbolic interactionism, and having a therefore more deliberate emphasis on the interplay between structure and process, and the

Charmaz (2006, 2008, 2009) post-modern or constructivist version with its emphasis on action orientation, researcher co-construction and thick thematic description. Despite these distinctions, Morse (2009a) observes that grounded theory is rarely 'performed' in exactly the same way, with researchers continually tailoring the approach to meet their unique and diverse needs. Nonetheless it may provide clarity to distinguish between these versions as highlighted below in Figure 1.

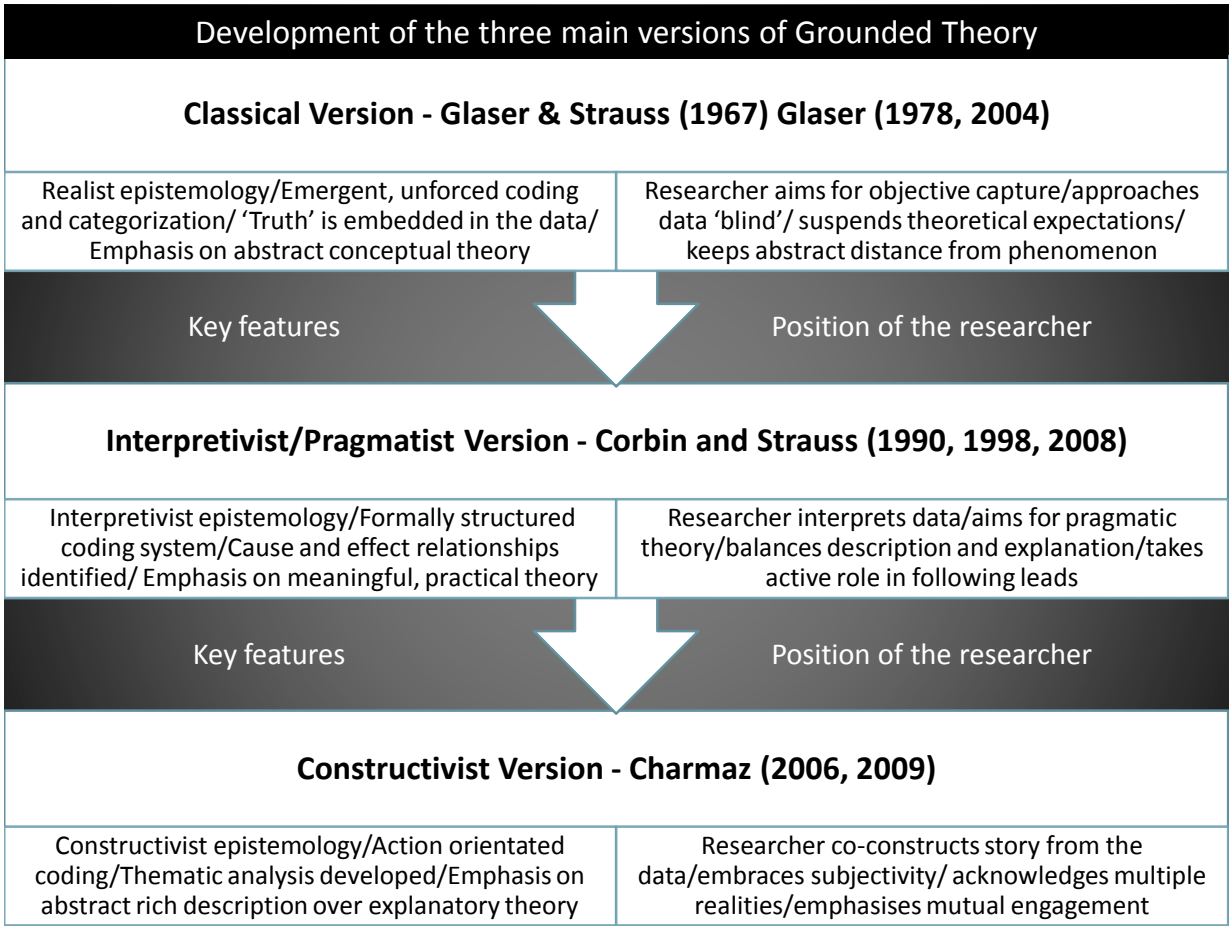

Figure 1. The development and distinctive features of the three main versions of grounded theory

This study aligns itself most closely with the version of GT developed by Corbin and Strauss (1990, 2008). In the early stages of planning this research the Glaser and Charmaz versions were also considered but rejected on the basis of that they did not appear to offer the 'best fit' for the specific research aims or my theoretical stance as either practitioner or researcher. Amongst other concerns, the Glaser version (Glaser 2002) demands that the researcher suspends all prior theoretical knowledge and expectation and approaches the data 'blind', unwedded to instinctive interpretations that risk distorting the 'reality' before him. This is a position that Charmaz (2006) notes has met considerable scepticism from across the grounded theory spectrum, and one that feels quite alien to me as a counselling psychologist, with my critical/interpretative ways of working.

Of greater initial appeal was the version of Charmaz (2006, 2009) for whom "the grounded theory emphasis on process enables psychologists to study how individual and interpersonal processes develop, are maintained or change" (2008: 85). As a counselling psychologist, intra- and interpersonal process is at the heart of what I do, and yet I see my position as one of scientist/reflexive practitioner and as such I have an equally deep appreciation for realist principles as I do for critical and social perspectives. In my work with clients for example I am required to frequently draw from theoretical perspectives that are underpinned by research findings from the positivist paradigm.

Above all else with this research I wanted to develop a theory that could equally define and describe the core processes of family estrangement as place them within a helpful explanatory framework. Glaser (2002) in a fierce critique of Charmaz, argues that in her paradigmatic slide towards constructivism she shifts from achieving explanatory to descriptive power, and additionally foregrounds her own co-constructivist interpretations thereby diluting the main concerns voiced by her participants. With far less ferocity, I nonetheless agree with these observations, and feel that had I aimed to follow an emphatically constructivist route, I would have arrived at a more descriptively weighted account, that would have left me dissatisfied in my aims to balance description with explanatory theory.

I arrive then to the version of GT that appeared a perfect fit for the aims of the research. I find that the most recent customisation of GT by Corbin and Strauss (2008) largely retains the sharp analytical edge of 'classic' GT's systematic data handling procedures, and yet gives more interpretative space, offers more descriptive balance and far better tolerates the relativist ambiguities that arise through qualitative psychological enquiry. This frees GT from its positivist restraints without completely jumping ship towards constructivism. What anchors it in-between is a pragmatic sensibility toward constructing useful theory. It appeared to offer a flexible and therefore valuable opportunity to mine the experience of family estrangement for rich and meaningful relationships within what is known as the 'Straussian' process and conditional matrix (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

In discussing the merits of using GT in family therapy studies Larossa (2005: 837) recognises that GT was originally designed to generate theory construction and that "family studies has become a field where methodologically based theorizing matters". This echoes Ambert et al's (1995) call for qualitative family research that expands upon existing theories, and creates new theories where none exist. In reviewing the literature for this proposal several insightful, process/contextual level studies using GT to pursue similar mid-range theoretical aims to this one were identified. These included: The effects of divorce on remarriage (Brimhall, Wampler and Kimball, 2008); Family transitions for lesbian parents (Perlesz et al. 2006), and Problem definition in marital and family therapy (Jankowski and Ivey, 2001). In considering my own aims, I found the success of using GT methodology in these studies encouraging, but could not uncover any GT studies in the area of family estrangement.

Participants

Sample

The sample consisted of 15 participants (9 females and 6 males) aged between 18 and 64 years old. All participants were UK residents and could be considered representative of a broad socioeconomic range. As recommended by Charmaz (2006), the sampling was both purposeful and theoretical. Initially participants were sought on the basis that they seemed likely to provide suitable data covering the research aims. Once analysis was underway, participants were sought with the aim of developing emerging theoretical categories. Mid-way through the study a theoretical category emerged concerning a possible trauma dimension to estrangement that I felt was underrepresented in the sample. At this point I actively sought participants who were likely to be able to help me develop this dimension until I felt it was adequately defined. Later in the study theoretical sampling directed me to recruit a young person in the early stages of estrangement, to explore a dimension that I wanted to develop further. Beyond this, I also sought to find a balance of parent/child/sibling estrangements as well as acquire a balanced representation estrangement of length and contact status.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria for the sample were as follows:

Inclusion criteria

- Adult family members who identify as having an experience of a family estrangement during adulthood from either a parent, child or sibling or a combination of the three.
- Individuals who have experienced an estrangement for a minimum period of six months.
- Individuals who have experienced a reconciled estrangement were included.
- Individuals who identify as estranged are included even if they are still in contact with the family member.

Exclusion criteria

- Rich qualitative data was sought and therefore only participants who spoke English fluently were included.
- The demographic details of all participants and their estrangement status at the time of interview are set out below in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic details of participants and their estrangement status at time of interview								
Participant	Gender	Age	Relationship status S/M/R	Country of origin	Estranged from F/M/S/D/B/S	Length of estrangement	Estrangement status	Contact status
1	Female	32	Married	Iraq	Father	2 years	Estranged	Non-existent
2	Male	39	Married	UK	Mother	10 years	Estranged	Occasional
					Brother	3 years	Estranged	Non-existent
3	Female	30	Single	UK	Brother	4 years	Estranged	Occasional
4	Female	31	Relationship	UK	Mother	18 months	Reconciled	Occasional
5	Female	64	Married	Australia	Mother	42 years	Estranged	Occasional
					Father	42 years	Estranged	Non-existent
					Brother	45 years	Estranged	Occasional
					Sister	40 years	Estranged	Occasional
6	Female	46	Single	UK	Father	10 months	Reconciled	Regular
7	Female	41	Married	UK	Mother	2 years	Reconciled	Occasional
8	Female	58	Married	UK	Son	2 years	Estranged	Non-existent
9	Male	49	Married	UK	Daughter	18 months	Estranged	Non-existent
10	Female	48	Married	UK	Daughter	18 months	Estranged	Non-existent
11	Male	23	Single	Ireland/	Father	3 years	Estranged	Occasional
				Portugal	Sister	7 months	Estranged	Occasional
12	Male	20	Single	UK	Mother	2 years	Estranged	Non-existent
					Brother	2 years	Estranged	Non-existent
					Sister	2 years	Estranged	Non-existent
					Sister	18 months	Reconciled	Occasional
13	Male	46	Relationship	UK	Mother	22 years	Estranged	Non-existent
					Brother	22 years	Estranged	Non-existent
14	Female	30	Relationship	UK	Mother	12 years	Estranged	Occasional
15	Female	42	Single	UK	Daughter	5 years	Estranged	Non-existent

*Interview data is presented chronologically in the order that interviews were conducted.

Recruitment

Recruitment for the study proved much easier than anticipated and was primarily through word of mouth and snowball sampling. Noy (2008: 330) describes snowball sampling as a particularly effective means of accessing 'hidden populations'. Simply informing colleagues and acquaintances that I was conducting the study and asking them to make enquiries yielded over half the participants through people with whom I was placed in contact. Mid-way through the study theoretical sampling led me to contact participants that I had identified through a national press article as experiencing a particularly traumatic estrangement, and I recruited 3 participants via this route. In seeking to develop an undeveloped category concerning early estrangement I recruited 1 participant from a youth centre where I was employed.

The ease with which I was able to find participants is I believe worthy of note. Richards (2008) notes that there are currently no statistics available to measure how many people experience adult estrangement from nuclear family members. My experience of the ease of recruiting via word of mouth has led me to conclude that the issue of family estrangement is far more widespread than I anticipated at the start of this study.

Ethics

Participant safety and care were a priority at all times during this study, and the British Psychological Society's (2004) 'Guidelines for minimum standards of ethical approval in psychological research' were adhered to. These included:

- Acquiring full and informed consent
- Ensuring minimised risk of psychological harm to participants
- Clearly articulating the right to withdraw without reason or consequence
- Rigorous protection of participant anonymity and confidentiality
- Offering a fully supportive briefing and debriefing
- Providing information for participants on how to raise concerns or express dissatisfaction
- Strict adherence to data protection guidelines
- Signposting if requested to further support services and support in accessing them

Additionally this research was conducted with the approval of the Senate Research Ethics Committee at City University.

A procedural account of ethical working is found in the following section.

Procedure

Initial and post contact, interview arrangements, acquiring consent and data protection

At initial contact, prospective participants were informed via email of the purpose and nature of the study and given detailed information about my level of experience, the aims of the study and what would be expected of involvement. Information was also given identifying the research supervisor for the study, and how to register dissatisfaction. (See appendix 1). Interviews were arranged at City University, London. Participants were reimbursed for travelling expenses on the day of the interview. Two participants lived outside London and so interviews were conducted in their homes. Mindful of personal safety, a colleague was aware of my location and was contacted immediately before and after interviewing outside of the university.

The right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence was made very clear at the start of each interview. Each participant gave written consent and copies were retained by each of us. (see appendix 2). Each participant also completed a pre-interview form which collected basic demographic and biographical data (see appendix 3).It was not anticipated that the interviews could cause psychological harm, though it was acknowledged that the research topic was potentially quite emotive, and participants were told that we could take a break, or stop the interview at any time they wished. Participants were also offered a 45 minute debrief session, that was not recorded, to discuss the impact of the interview should they wish. During this time participants were encouraged to ask any further questions, or contact me via email at any time. Participant and were also given information concerning a list of organisation that could offer further support (see appendix 4).

I was familiar with 1 participant whom I had recruited through a centre for homeless youth where I worked. This led to ethical consideration of my dual role as a researcher/practitioner which I discussed with my supervisor for this study. Due to the difficulty in building trust with this client group, it was thought advantageous that as a researcher I had an existing relationship with the participant, with whom a contract of confidentiality had already been established. In addition to my ongoing engagement, the participant was additionally seeing an alternative counsellor with whom he could receive further support.

During interviews it emerged that a number of participants had at times during their estrangement felt suicidal, and I was particularly careful to check with participants that the interview had not raised any concerns in this area. I had procedurally planned to contact participants immediately following the interview to thank them for participation and check that that there had been no adverse effects from participating. I amended this after a few interviews to include a second follow up contact a week later.

Participants were also asked if they would wish to see drafted results and be prepared to offer feedback. A number of participants said they would. Examples of feedback are found in the discussion. One participant mentioned that one of the things said during interview felt a little embarrassing to read, so I amended the transcript excerpt to remove it.

This study adhered to the principles of The Data Protection Act 1998. All participants were made aware of how information may be disseminated from this study, and that it would be used with the intent of furthering an understanding of family estrangement. All interviews were transcribed and fully anonymised. Audio recordings were destroyed as soon as copies of anonymised materials were secured. All audio and written materials were secured within a home safe, and consent information was kept separately in a locked drawer. Transcription data was secured on a password protected computer. Remaining data will only kept until this study has passed examination, and then will be safely destroyed.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews of 75 minutes duration including briefing were held with individual participants. The sessions were audio-recorded using two devices to ensure data would not be lost.

As recommended by Corbin and Strauss (2008) interviews were semi-structured, and designed to elicit rich descriptive data about the experience of family estrangement. An interview typically began with a broad non-leading question about the estrangement. An example of an opening question was:

- "Could you tell me how your estrangement began, and then developed from there?"

As the interview progressed, I used open-ended prompts and encouragers to facilitate deeper exploration of emerging themes, a process that was familiar to me in my role as a counselling psychologist. In early interviews I had compiled a list of prompt question that addressed the secondary research question targets or what Charmaz (2008: 85) calls 'sensitizing concepts'. Sensitizing concepts were areas that I had identified as potentially useful for accessing the broader experience of estrangement while conducting a broad literature review.

Four early concepts that I had identified were 'Self' 'Relationships' 'Time' and 'Reconciliation' as highlighted in Figure 2. In response to emerging findings, the interview agenda was amended to explore the themes of intrapersonal, interpersonal (estrangement relationship), social (other relationships) and symbolic (personal and social meaning) negotiations, as seen in figure 3. Typical questions developed for these concepts are found below in figure 4 and 5.

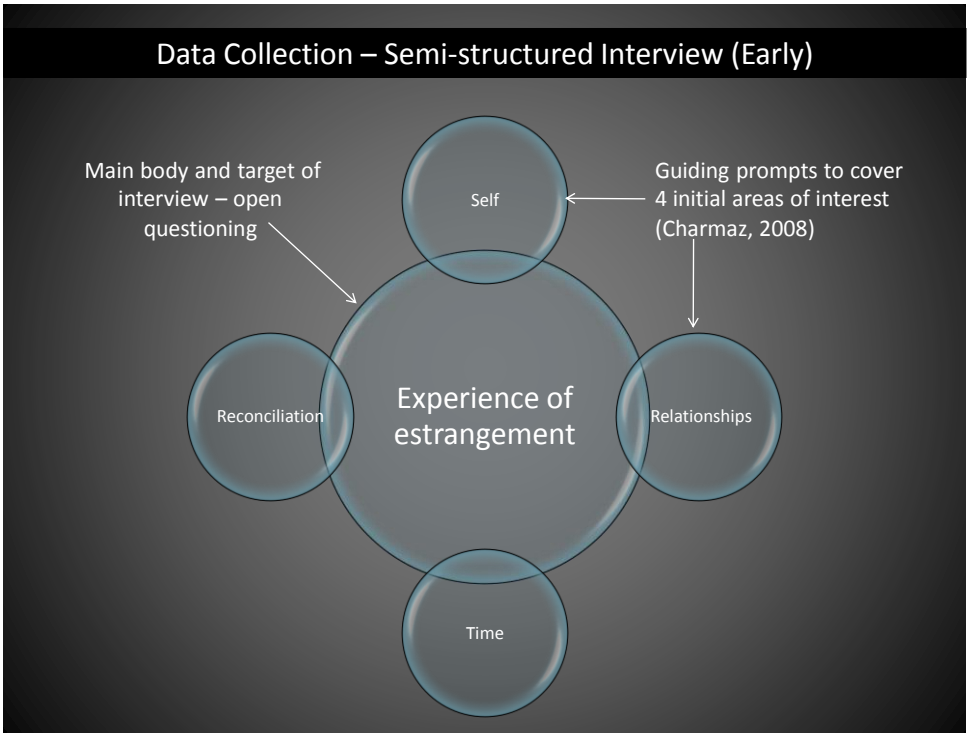

Figure 2. The areas of focus and enquiry in the early versions of the semi-structured interview.

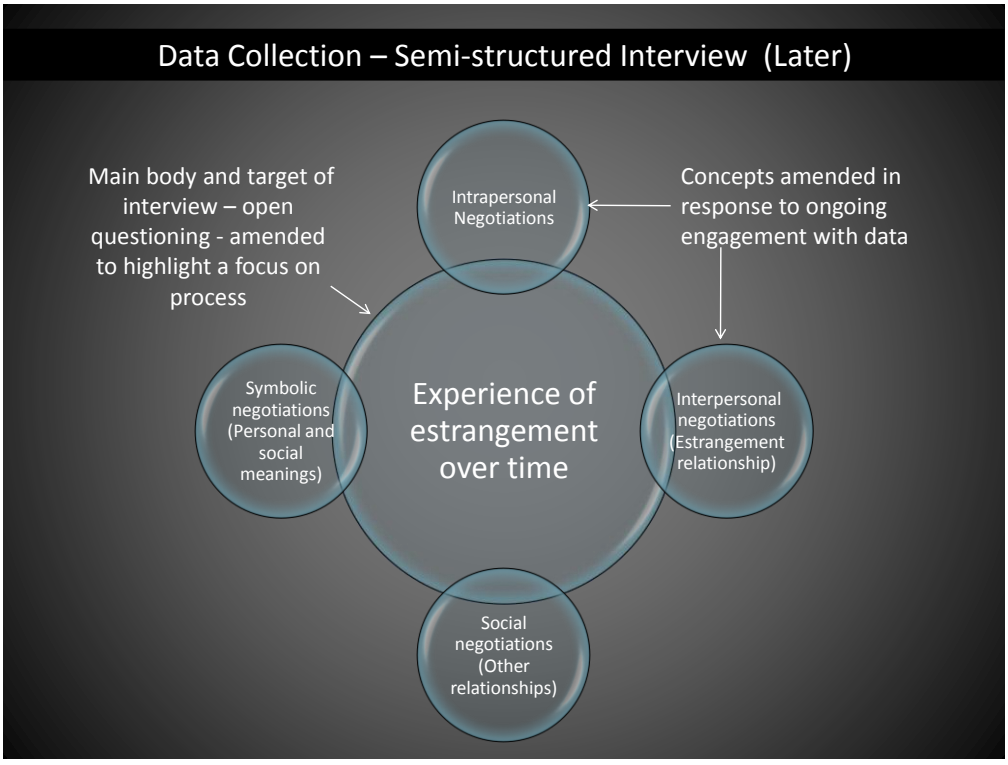

Figure 3. Later thematic development of the semi-structured interview.

Figure 4. Question development of the concepts of 'Intrapersonal' and 'Interpersonal' negotiations.

Figure 5. Question development of the concepts of 'Social' and 'Symbolic' negotiations'.

Analysis

Data Collection and Analysis

Data analysis followed the guidelines set by Corbin and Strauss (2008) and began immediately after the first interview was conducted. There was enough time scheduled between interviews to allow for a process of simultaneous analysis of data that ran parallel to additional data collection. Analysis therefore involved a bi-directional cyclical engagement between emerging findings that fed into interview development and selective sampling as highlighted below in figure 6.

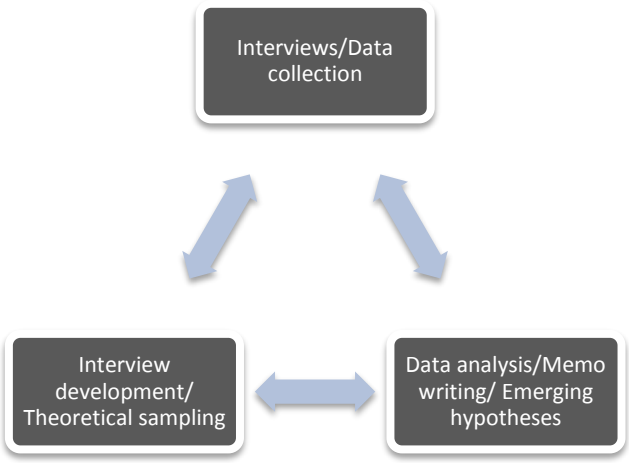

Figure 6. The relationship between data collection, analysis and interview development/ sampling.

Analysis tools

To assist the storage, organisation and analysis of data MAXQDA (2007 version) qualitative data analysis software was used. MAXQDA is recommended by Corbin and Strauss (2008) as an efficient way of handling GT data and proved to be a highly practical tool in working systematically with an expanding library of complex information. MAXQDA was used for data storage and retrieval and offered a practical interface for transcript coding. Basit (2003) notes that qualitative researchers using embracing electronic coding systems, report that they may facilitate depth and fluidity of analysis. The cyclical and evolving nature of data collection and analysis in GT meant that an advantage of using MAXQDA was that it made it easy to revisit and remodel codes and hierarchies while saving earlier versions for later cross-comparison. While working with the data, hunches could be quickly verified and corresponding data entries retrieved instantly which added both speed and fluidity to the process of analysis.

MAXQDA was also used to compile an expanding library of analytic memos and compare data incident frequencies for clues as to potentially interesting relationships between concepts. These

frequencies were not considered in a statistical sense but they did help to flag questions in the data and signpost links and relationships that were explored further. MAXQDA has a mapping feature that is designed to present categorical relationships in diagram format, but beyond a cursory glance this feature was not used. Diagramming, suggest Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) is not just a way of *presenting* data but a way of *interacting* with data that deepens the engagement between the researcher and the emerging findings. Corbin and Strauss (2008) suggest that diagramming encourages the researcher to engage in lean ways of thinking that help to reduce data segments to their essential qualities. As researcher, I worked manually with diagrams from the start of data collection and continued throughout all levels of analysis, finding them an invaluable part of the research process.

Initial open coding

Corbin and Strauss (2008) note that concepts are derived from data and represent the analyst's impression of what is being described by the participant. Concepts vary in their level of abstraction from the data, and the goal during initial coding is to remain as close to the data as possible. Interview transcripts were therefore broken down into line by line actions, reactions, interactions, problems, meanings, or events, and given a conceptual label that aimed to represent the essence of each unit Early checking of initial coding was conducted through checks with two participants and also two colleagues, and slight amendments were made where necessary.

In constructivist grounded theory Charmaz (2006) emphasises coding that is action orientated. The Corbin and Strauss (2008) version however aims to emphasise relationships between action, reaction, context and meaning and there is broader range of labels available to apply to concepts. One of the challenges in the initial open coding phase was that were numerous examples of units of data that were actions *within* context *that carried* meaning and I had to frequently decide whether to apply multiple, discrete labels or aim to synthesise the concepts into a single, more abstract concept. Corbin and Strauss note the extra value that is brought to early coding when data is as deconstructed as possible through tight conceptual labelling. Therefore, as a rule in such cases I would apply discrete labels but make margin notes for possible synthesis at a later stage of analysis. There is an example of open coding with such a margin note from an early interview transcript in figure 7 below, and a further example of early open coding found in appendix 5.

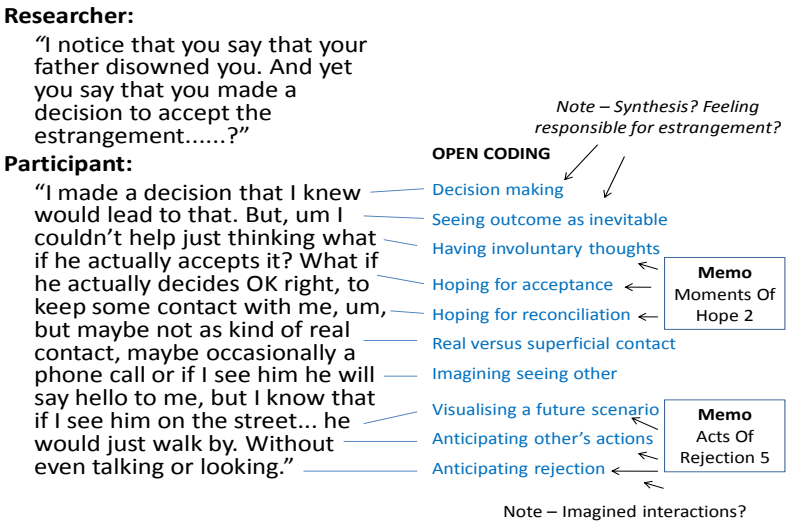

Figure 7. Example of initial open coding of a transcript excerpt.

Memo writing

Memo writing is an essential part of grounded theory analysis, and played a major role during the research process. Corbin and Strauss (2008: 108) describe memos as 'running logs of analytic thinking' used as 'storehouses of ideas generated from interacting with the data'. Memo writing began during coding of the first interview and developed into an ongoing record of observations, hypotheses, questions, and theoretical reflections.

On the right hand side of figure 6 above there are two examples of memos – 'Moments of Hope 2' and 'Acts of Rejection 5'. On MAXQDA these memo boxes contain the analytical commentary shown subsequently in figures 8 and 9.The memos are numbered '2' and '5', indicating that these memos were the second and fifth memos created within the categories 'Moments Of Hope' and 'Acts Of Rejection'. They formed part of an expanding memo-log on these themes. During the later stages, of analysis as key concepts emerged, the information from corresponding memos was synthesised to create thick dimensional accounts of each category.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) suggest that memos are structured in a way that the researcher finds most helpful. I therefore created my own organisational scheme which was as follows:

A/ Action	Action notes indicate action or interaction strategies taken by the participant. These may be explicitly articulated by the participant or implicitly implied by the participant's narrative.
CX / Context	Context notes indicate the context within which an action is performed.
CO / Consequence	Consequence notes indicate a potential consequence of an action strategy.
D / Dimension	Dimension notes indicated that the memo potentially highlighted a dimension of an existing category. When adding to rolling memos, I continually used cross-comparison with previous memos to identify new or supported dimensions. Dimensions may have been related to either context or action.

TH / Theory	Theory notes indicated possible links to existing theoretical literature. These became particularly important in the later stages of the analysis when I was working towards writing up the work and using literature to support findings.
P / Practice	Practice notes indicated possible implications for the practice of counselling psychology. These became particularly important in the later stages of the analysis when I was working towards writing recommendations for therapeutic practice.
R / Reflexive	Reflexive notes indicated reflexive observations concerning challenges and observations arising from previous assumptions I may have held around the category. Additionally, reflexive notes indicated moments where I felt that I sensed process dynamics that were not explicitly recognised by the participant.
? / Questions	Question notes indicated a record of the questions and ambiguities that arose from the data. As memos expanded, I used continual cross-comparison to attempt to respond to emerging questions.
> / Link	The linking symbol indicated possible links with other categories. These proved increasingly useful as analysis developed and I reached the axial coding stage. Axial coding sought to identify relationships between categories and sub-categories.

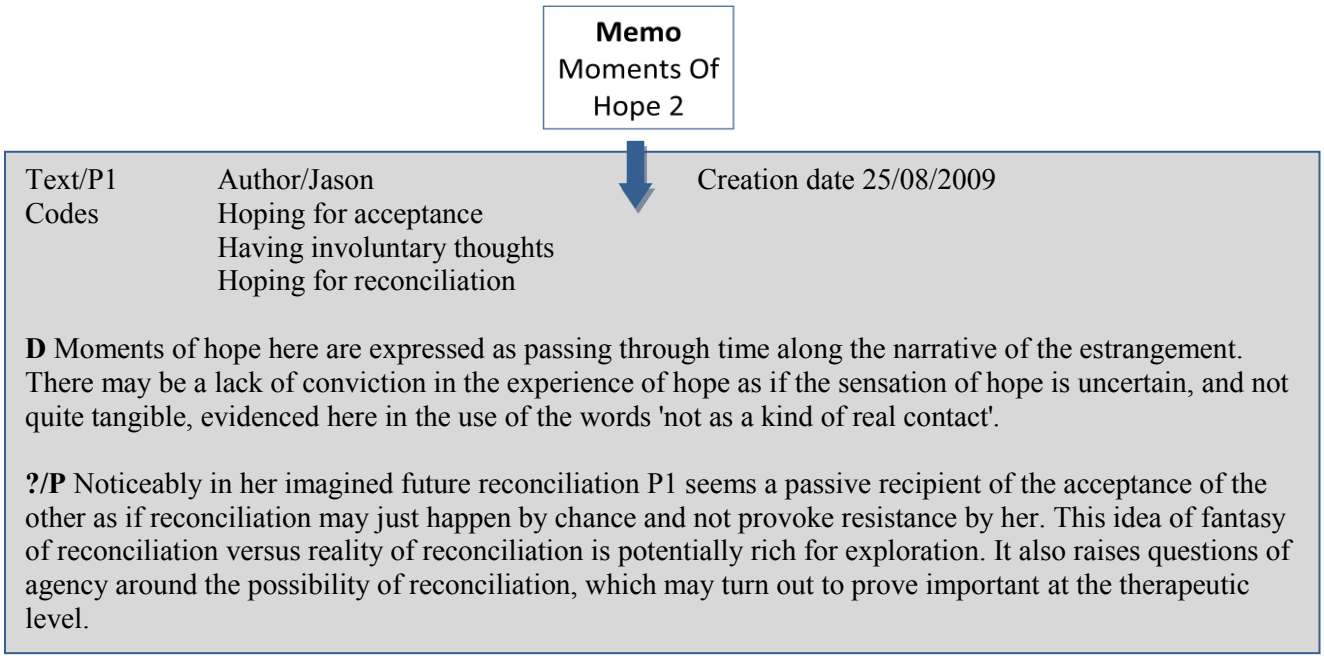

Figure 8. Example of a transcript memo – 'Moments Of Hope 2'

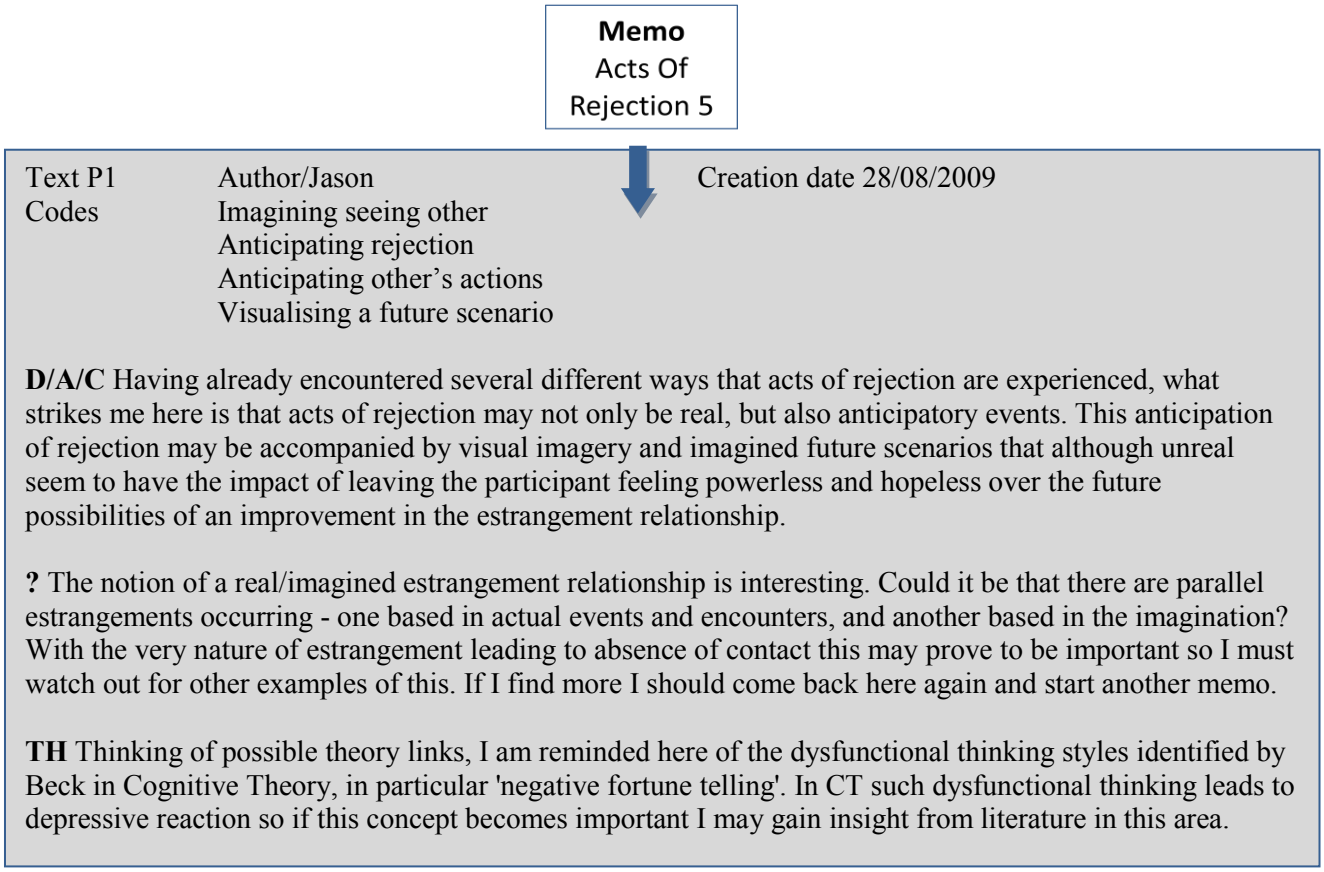

Figure 9. Example of a transcript memo – 'Acts Of Rejection 5'

In the memo 'Acts Of Rejection 5, a question emerged concerning the observation that the participant was engaging in imagined or anticipatory rejection – Developing an imagined relationship through imagining interactions was found to be a common experience, and a memo 'Imagined interactions/Relationships' was later started from this point in the data.

Constant comparisons and theoretical comparisons

In the memo 'Acts Of Rejection 5' shown in figure 9 the first memo note (labelled D/A/C for Dimension/Action/Consequence) contains my reflection:

"Having already encountered several different ways that acts of rejection are experienced, what strikes me here is that acts of rejection may not only be real, but also anticipatory events"

In arriving at this reflection the specific data incident that falls in the category "Acts Of Rejection" has been compared with previous examples of data with the same label. This is an example of the process of constant comparison that Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe as essential in differentiating and 'dimensionalising' categories or concepts. In this example, what I have discovered through constant comparison is that for someone who is estranged, an act of rejection may be something that

is *imagined* as compared to *real*, or *anticipated* as compared to *recalled*. Such within-data comparison allows a deepening dimensional development of the category 'Acts Of Rejection'.
Perhaps less obviously, the same memo additionally contains examples of what Corbin and Strauss (2008) call 'theoretical comparison' as highlighted in the following transcript excerpt and memo note:

Participant: *"...but I know that if I see him in the street he would just walk by, without even talking or looking"*

Memo note: *"This anticipation of rejection may be accompanied by visual imagery and imagined future scenarios"*

Although the participant has not explicitly mentioned the act of experiencing visual imagery or articulated the process of imagining future scenarios, I have compared the data to my theoretical understanding that if a person is talking about seeing something happening in the future then it is likely that they have a picture of the event in their mind. Such theoretical comparisons may be drawn from formal theories, but they are just as likely to be drawn from everyday theories of human experience acquired throughout the researcher's life.

In constant comparison the researcher asks of the data: "How does this relate to what has been said about this previously in the data?" In theoretical comparison, the researcher asks of the data: "How does this relate to my previous understanding about this data?" The analytic process of memo writing therefore involves both inductive and deductive reasoning to generate increasingly abstract ideas about emerging data-grounded concepts.

Focused coding

With initial coding complete, focused coding began. Corbin and Strauss (2008) note that focused coding involves the synthesis of selected initial codes over larger parts of data, aimed to produce a concept at a higher level of abstraction. These higher level concepts were then synthesised at a further level of abstraction to produce a hypothetical mid-level category. On some occasions initial codes were suitably distinct or abstract so as not to require further synthesis. An example of category development from raw transcript data through focused coding is shown below in Figure 10.

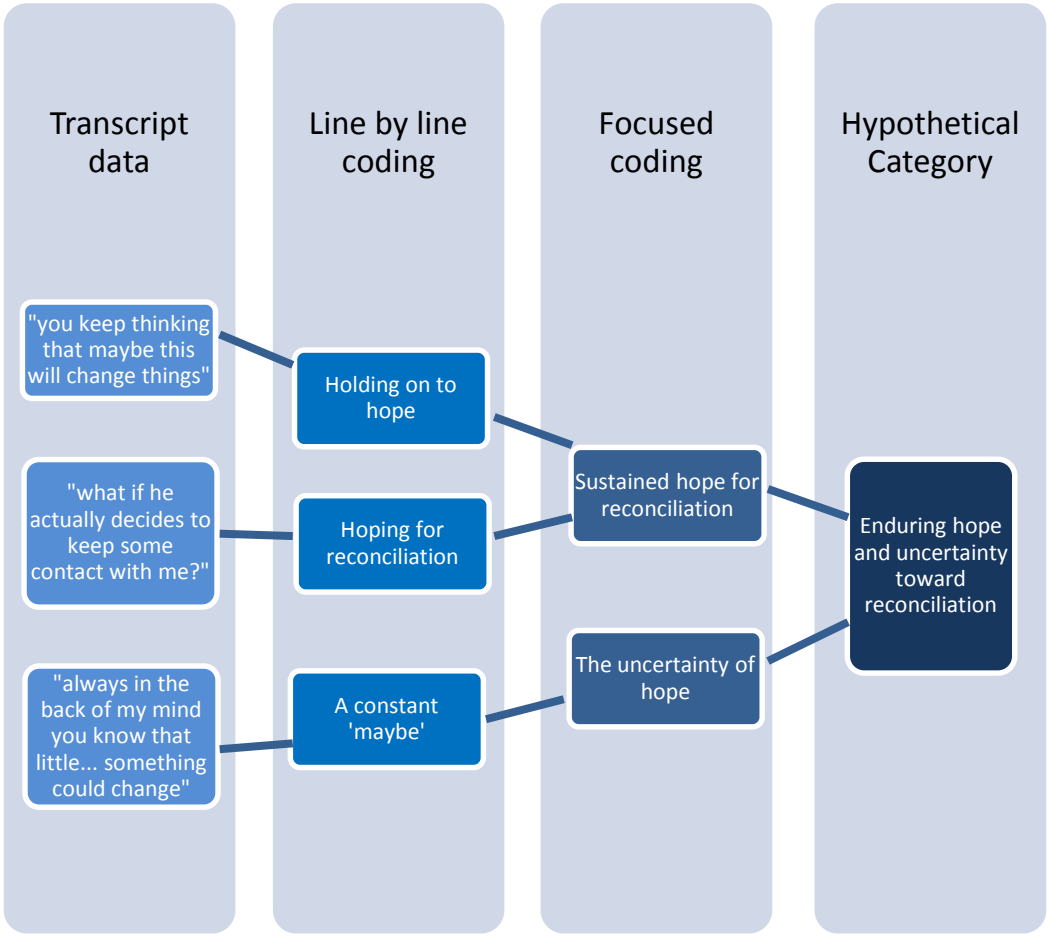

Figure 10. The development of a hypothetical category from raw transcript data through focused coding and synthesis.

In the example in figure 10, from three separate data units I have worked towards developing a hypothetical category that synthesises the essential properties of all three initial open coding categories. In this example codes have been synthesised twice at increasing levels of abstraction until the hypothetical category “Enduring hope and uncertainty toward reconciliation” has been created.

Categories at this level are initially tentative and remain hypothetical until a point in the analysis is reached where they are considered to fit into a hierarchal matrix of categories that form the framework for the emerging explanatory theory. Once again it is the interaction between cross comparison of categories and analytic memoing that identifies the emerging relationships between categories and enables the organisation of the hierarchal matrix. Once created it is typically not immediately clear at what level in the hierarchy the hypothetical category belongs and an axial system of organisation is used to determine this.

Axial coding

Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe axial coding as organising categories in relationship to each other along dimensional axis. In figure 11 below, during axial coding the hypothetical category "Enduring hope and uncertainty toward reconciliation" was identified as a medium level dimensional category of a more abstracted category "Taking a hopeful/attempting stance towards reconciliation ". "Taking a hopeful attempting/attempting stance towards reconciliation" was in turn identified as a dimensional category of a higher order category "Wrestling with the dilemma of reconciliation". "Experiencing uncertainty" was found to be common to all four dimensional positions towards reconciliation, so its axial position reflects this.

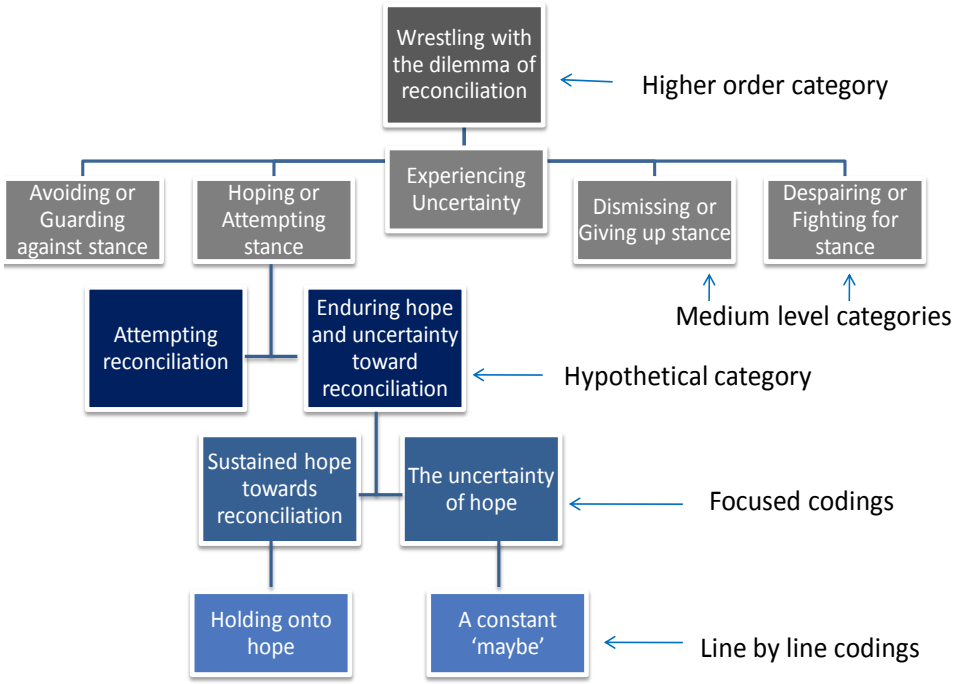

Figure 11. A segment of axial coding within a hierarchal coding matrix.

The axial coding system is seen as particularly important for the development of theory in the Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) versions of GT. Corbin and Strauss (2009) however note that the processes of axial coding and that open/focused coding are essentially the same in that they require hierarchal synthesis of data at increasing levels of abstraction.

Selective coding, saturation and integration toward theory

Corbin (2009) notes that not all researchers using GT wish to develop structured theory, and aim instead to provide thick, rich description. The pragmatic aim of this study was however to provide a useful explanatory framework or model that might help estranged individuals contextually reference and understand their experience, or assist those engaged in supporting them.

With this aim in mind, following an extensive axial coding phase I was able to identify a core theoretical category and a small number of sub-categories at the highest hierarchal levels. Glaser and Strauss's (1967) dictum that theory *emerges* from the data resonates strongly with my experience of 'assembling' the hierarchy, in that I had the sensation of pulling together the emergent parts of a puzzle that lay before me. In doing this I engaged in what Corbin and Strauss (2008) describe as a selective coding process, whereby I selected what I felt were the most abstract and useful high-level categories within which all other concepts could dimensionally fit. These higher order categories may be seen as the principal gateways to the theory that one opens to access the dimensional matrix within. In constructing the matrix a theoretical blueprint emerged that allowed me to integrate the elements of the theory into a narrative whole, and this blueprint and narrative are presented in the results section.

With regard to the range and scope of the research focus, the area of family estrangement casts a very large net. Within the sample, there were considerable variations in the experiences of estrangement, and therefore a very high number of low and mid-level categories emerged. Corbin and Strauss recommend that theoretical sampling continues until all categories are 'saturated', and no new dimensions or properties emerge. There is evaluation of whether this criteria was met in the discussion section.

Findings

Introduction and Overview of findings

Four main categories emerged from the analysis and were identified as representing key estrangement dimensions as experienced by participants over time. A core connecting category of 'Negotiating emotional and ideological distance', applying to all estrangement dimensions, was also identified.

The four main categories and the core category are seen below in Figure 1:

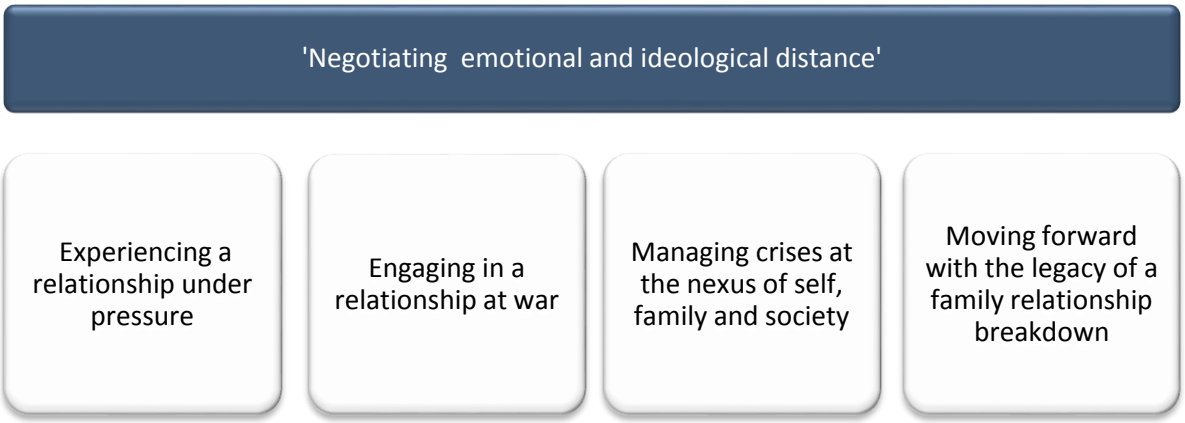

Figure 1. The four main categories and core connecting category 'Negotiating emotional and ideological distance'.

The Core Connecting Category: Negotiating emotional and ideological distance

The findings suggested that family estrangement is experienced as a complex and continual process of personal transition that involves *negotiating emotional and ideological distance* from family relationships. All participants in this study described how family relationships were experienced as lasting bonds that connected individuals both emotionally and symbolically. When relations became estranged, family members therefore had to negotiate a continual sense of distancing, not only from previous levels of emotional connectedness, but also from previous ideas and understandings of what the relationship once was, could, or should be.

The processes of emotional and ideological distancing were seen to have an interactional relationship that was central to the experience of all stages of estrangement. There is further reflection upon the interactional relationship of emotional and ideological negotiations following presentation of the findings in the four main categories.

Presentation of the findings in the four main categories

Each of the main categories with their component sub-themes will be presented in turn. Findings will be illustrated by examples from transcript data. All transcript data has been anonymised to safeguard

participants' identity. Throughout the findings *italics* emphasise codings that were used during analysis. To promote transparency, and highlight some of the key questions raised during analysis, memo examples have been included. Diagramming played a key role in the analytic process so where it is deemed helpful, findings are accompanied by visual representations. A model proposing the relationship between categories is presented following the findings in section 4.

Section 1entitled **Experiencing a relationship under pressure** presents findings that focus upon the experience and process of the initial stages of estrangement. This includes factors concerning the historic onset of estrangement and the quality of the historic relationship bond. Also included are factors that illustrate how participants experienced family relationships as transforming under the pressure of internal and external forces.

Section 2 entitled **Engaging in a relationship at war** presents findings that illustrate how family members may engage in strategies of attack, defence and withdrawal within an estranging relationship. It is further shown that when estranged family members withdraw from conflict, in the absence of real contact, they may develop imagined relationships which carry implications for the real relationship.

Next, this section illustrates how intrapersonal distress may be endured, maintained and defended against when the estranging relationship becomes injurious. Finally, findings concerning the attribution of blame, power and responsibility are reported, highlighting the relationship between the perception of holding power in the estranging relationship and the experience of considering reconciliation

Section 3 entitled **Managing crises at the nexus of self, family and society** presents findings that show how family estrangement creates crises that require both social and symbolic negotiation. Part one identifies how estranging relationships are interpersonally managed within the context of broader family relations. Part two highlights the intrapersonal negotiations that may arise when estrangement triggers a crisis to self and social identity.

Section 4 entitled **Moving forward with the legacy of a family relationship breakdown** presents findings that illustrate the challenge of moving forward through life while continually adjusting to the experience of being estranged. Part one's findings highlight how the possibility of reconciliation presents an ongoing dilemma that is continually wrestled with. The findings in part two suggest that successful negotiation of estrangement requires continual adjusting in the areas of attachment and emotion, and self and social identity.

Estranger/estrangee positioning and the presentation of the findings

The findings illustrate that, as in any conflict, there are perhaps two 'sides' to every estrangement. Within the sample, participants varied in the degree to which they identified as estranging, or as being estranged. Indeed, the findings suggested that estranger/estrangee positioning was a flexible construct, for participants were observed frequently shifting in narrative positioning along an estranger/estrangee continuum. Positional shifts occurred in participants' historic narratives, as well as in reflections of in the moment experience. The shifting nature of estrangee/estranger positioning appeared to be play an important role in estrangement negotiation, and is outlined in detail in section 2 of the findings.

One of the principal aims of this study was to approach the phenomenon of estrangement using a wide, inclusive lens of enquiry. A key challenge of presenting the findings therefore was to integrate data from complex, shifting, narrative positions into a coherent whole, so that the map of estrangement eventually drafted is one where each participant may locate their experience. Throughout the findings, then, the experiences of 'estranging' or 'being estranged' are presented side by side, integrated in a manner that attempts to not only capture the positional elements of the estrangement process, but also to map out a composite sum of its parts.

Section 1: Experiencing a relationship under pressure

This section presents the study findings that focus upon the experience and process of the initial stages of estrangement. The six key themes highlighted within this category are presented in turn, as seen below in Figure 2.

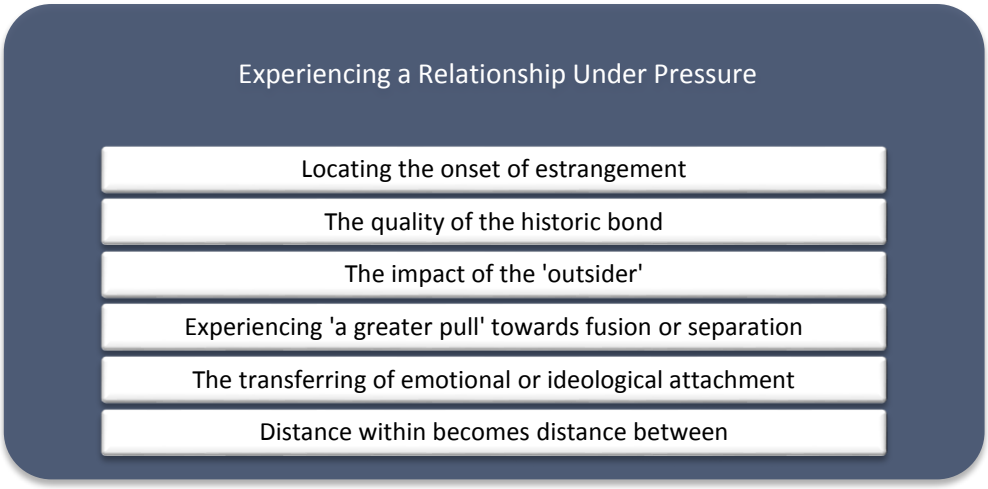

Figure 2. Experiencing a relationship under pressure: The main category and sub-themes.

Locating the onset of the estrangement

During interview, participants were asked to describe how their estrangement began. For some, the onset of estrangement was hard to pinpoint, but for others it was remembered as being triggered by a discrete event. Some participants spoke of there being *no clear point of depart* to the estrangement, describing the process as having evolved gradually, and from within the historic context of the relationship. Adopting this position, participants tended to emphasise *the quality of the historic bond* between estranging parties, sometimes reaching back into youth and childhood, as illustrated here:

> P4: *"Do you mean the difficulties going way back when? Or the difficulties where I became estranged specifically?"* [3-4]

Other participants associated estrangement onset with *a triggering event*, or *catalyst for change*, describing the estrangement process as a reaction to something impacting upon the relationship, at a specific point in time:

> P3: *"It began when he met his current girlfriend, now the mother of his child."* [3]

Early into the analysis, two tentative categories of estrangement onset were created; *gradual/emergent onset* and *sudden/reactionary onset*. With further analysis however, it became apparent that this discrete categorisation was problematic, as illustrated by comparing the following excerpts from a single interview with P1:

P1: *"It's difficult to get a start on... because me and my dad... not talking... well I was sort of used to it because we never got on... really... that well."* [2-4]

P1: "*So I made the decision of actually marrying someone from outside my culture, knowing that my dad would never talk to me again."* [40-41]

In these excerpts, P1 described having experienced a longstanding antagonistic relationship with her father that is tested when she chooses to marry someone from outside of her culture. Cross-comparing this data, and data from other interviews, led to this early memo in Box 1.

Box 1	Locating the Onset of Estrangement – Memo 3
D/R/?	I initially wondered whether there may be two discrete 'types' of estrangement onset – *gradual/emergent/historic* or *sudden/reactionary/event-triggered*. I am no longer sure however that such a clear distinction can be made. P1 and others describe both types of onset at different points in their interviews, suggesting perhaps an interplay between the two?
CX/A/CO	P1 describes how an antagonistic bond with her father has developed over time. This bond is then tested, perhaps broken, by the catalytic pressure of a marriage that meets disapproval. Although P1's father reacts to this by estranging her, his reaction cannot really be considered as sudden or in isolation - perhaps more as arising out of the antagonistic quality of the historic relationship.
CX/D/?	Rather than discrete types of estrangement, perhaps it is better to think of gradual/emergent/historic factors as interacting with event-specific factors within the category of estrangement onset?
>	The idea of estranging events as interacting with historic relationship dynamics suggests I pay attention to the categories *catalysts for change* and *the quality of the historic relationship bond* as well as the interplay between them during both subsequent interview and analysis.

Box.1. Development of the memo for the category: The Onset of Estrangement.

Subsequent analysis indeed confirmed that although there was variation in how participants located the onset of estrangement, both historic and event specific factors were seen as important and interrelated.

The quality of the historic bond

For all participants, *the quality of the historic bond* was experienced as important, either in influencing estrangement onset, or as impacting upon the later dynamics of estrangement negotiation. When fully developed, the emergent category of *the quality of the historic bond* divided into four dimensions; *close, unreliable, antagonistic* and *never really close*. Grounded theory places emphasis on categories being data-grounded, so in-vivo codes were used to label these dimensions as illustrated here:

> *P2: "Before then I was very close to my mum. We were a very close unit."* [2-3]
>
> *P11: "He doesn't put his kids first... or he does for a bit, but then he's lets us down... he's always so unreliable."* [51]
>
> *P7: "...our relationship has always been antagonistic."* [42]
>
> *P4: "...so we were never really close, no... never ever that close, ever"* [8-9]

There were nine factors supporting the dimensions for the category *the quality of the historic bond*. They were *emotional closeness*, *quality of care*, *time spent together*, *respect for each other*, *sharing of values*, *experience of boundaries*, *understanding of other*, *relationship consistency* and *quality of communication*. These mid-level categories were generated from numerous codings at micro-level. The development of the category *the quality of the historic bond* is shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Participant 2 Transcript	Micro-coding	Mid-level Category
"Before then I was very close to my mum. We were a very close unit." →	*Close unit* →	*Emotional Closeness*
"I was the one that was always there with my Mum."	*Always there*	*Relationship Consistency*
"I would still probably go round and see my Mum three, four times a week"	*Frequent contact*	*Time Spent Together*
"If I was round there it was really, you know oh, round me Mum's. It was nothing special. It was just part of, oh yeh, home life."	*Frequent contact taken for granted*	*Time Spent Together*
"Maybe my Mum relied on me as the father figure in our, if you like, in our little threesome of a family"	*Enmeshed boundaries*	*Experience of boundaries*

Table 1. Early coding development for the mid-level factors generating the category *The quality of the historic bond*.

After multiple interviews, the nine mid-level categories became saturated, and the category *the quality of the historic bond*, with four dimensions, emerged as seen below in Table 2.

The quality of the historic bond				
Mid-level Categories/ Factors	*Close*	*Unreliable*	*Antagonistic*	*Never really close*
Emotional closeness	*Close, warm, easy*	*Fleeting moments of closeness*	*Close but difficult*	*Distant, cold*
Quality of care	*Satisfying care*	*Disappointing care*	*Overbearing care*	*Absence of care*
Time spent together, contact	*Frequent, taken for granted*	*Episodic, usually brief*	*Frequent, Avoided where possible*	*Rare, unusual*
Respect for each other	*Strong respect shown*	*Uncertain, changeable*	*Little respect shown*	*Unarticulated*
Sharing of values	*Mutual, unquestioned*	*Superficial sharing*	*Conflicting*	*Independent, unknown*
Experience of boundaries	*Enmeshed and confused*	*Shifting and uncertain*	*Enmeshed and invasive*	*Separate, apart*
Understanding of other	*Good, empathic*	*Partial, confused suspicious*	*Good, used to advantage*	*Limited, undesired*
Relationship consistency	*Stable*	*Unstable*	*Unstable*	*Stable*
Quality of communication	*Good, effortless, open, honest*	*Effortful incongruent*	*Hostile, warring, tactical, defensive*	*Weak, superficial*
	Line by Line/Microanalysis/Lower level codings			

Table 2. Later development of the category *The quality of the historic bond,* including examples from Table 1. (Coloured box codings).

As seen from the mid-level factor labels to the left of table 2, a number of intrapersonal and interpersonal factors influenced participants' experience of historic relationship bond quality. Some of these factors could be considered qualities of 'attachment' as defined by Bowlby (1969), Ainsworth et al., (1978), Main (1986), and Hazan and Shaver (1987), Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991), and Byng Hall (2008).

The four dimensions of *the quality of the historic bond* that emerged during this study were thought to relate to these well documented attachment categories as seen in Table 3:

Childhood attachment types Bowlby(1969), Ainsworth et al., (1978), *Main (1986)	Adult attachment types Hazan & Shaver (1987), Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991)	Family attachment relationship types Byng Hall (2008)	Dimensions of historic bond quality Present Study
Secure	Secure	Secure	Close
Insecure/Ambivalent	Anxious/Preoccupied	Insecure/Ambivalent	Unreliable
Insecure/Avoidant	Dismissive/Avoidant	Insecure/Avoidant	Never really close
Insecure/Disorganised*	Fearful/Avoidant	Insecure/Disorganised	Antagonistic

Table 3. The proposed relationship between attachment types and dimensions of the category *the quality of the historic bond.*

It should be noted that, although historic bond quality dimensions and family attachment types appeared to relate to each other, the emergent category of *the quality of the historic bond* was quite broad, encapsulating several factors that lie outside the usual parameters of attachment definition. Also, attachment types are usually seen as fixed during early childhood, and considered relatively stable across a lifetime. In contrast, participants' experience of *the quality of the historic bond* showed more variation in development across the lifespan, and, in the case of estrangement onset, participants often described a shifting of *the quality of the historic bond* between dimensions. Examples of shifts during adolescence and adulthood, from the dimensions of *weak* to *antagonistic* and *close* to *antagonistic* are seen here.

> P2: *"When I first started going out with Nancy things started getting difficult, but before then I was very close to my mum... we were quite a close unit."* [2-3]
>
> P14: *"I'd say it was a weak relationship to begin with, but then it became antagonistic as I got older."* [18-19]

Further reflection upon the relationship between historic bond quality and attachment research is found in the discussion.

The impact of 'the outsider'

Pre-estrangement, the quality and stability of the historic bond varied between participants, though all reported that change (or accelerated change) to the relationship was sparked by *the impact of an outside attachment or new ideology*. P3 and P11 used the term *the 'outsider'* to describe the object of this new attachment. For P3, *the 'outsider'* was her brother's girlfriend, sparking friction between siblings:

> P3: *"At the end of the day, if you are kind of going in somebody's house, I think you should respect what it is that their parents require, especially if you're the outsider, but my brother would just let her get away with it."* [41-43]

For P11, *the 'outsider'* was his stepfather, whose arrival into the family led P11 to feel excluded:

> P12: *"We lived in the same house but there wasn't really any communication after he arrived. Me and my sister were from another dad, and my little sister and my little brother, they were from him. And we always saw that the treatment was different between us. It was as if we were the outsiders in the family, when in fact he was, if you know what I mean."* [108-112]

For some participants *the impact of the 'outsider'* was triggered through the act of feeling love for, or forming an alliance with, someone outside the family. This was described from both sides of the estrangement experience, as seen here:

> P6*: "I think in retrospect this relationship I had with this guy came at exactly the right time. Because that's possibly part of what gave me the strength to decide ok this is it, I'm going to do this."* [130-132]

> P10*: "She switched us off. You could see it. As soon as she associated with Matt she had very little to do with us."* [51-52]

The 'outsider' was coded in inverted commas because it was more of a perceptual term than a factual one. In the case of P7 for example, *the 'outsider'* was her second sister, born into the family when P7 was in her teens:

> P7: *"All the time as a child I was growing up there was just um, there was just the two of us and my parents. Then along came Maria, which really... I suppose... nobody really talked to us very much about... about there being another child. Because we were that much older, you know."* [11-14]

For others, *'the outsider'* was not a person, but a system of beliefs or values. For P8, it was the ideology of a cult that her son became engaged with. For P13, it was a new set of values concerning his sexuality that his mother could not tolerate:

> P8: *"...what I found out later was that's when he'd... well he'd joined a website... belonging to a cult, and he'd become engaged in conversations on the website... and had begun to distance himself from his family."* [8-10]

> P13: *"The real split happened when she found out I was gay. She hated that, because she couldn't really understand it, or get involved in it... it was nothing to do with her"* [38-39]

Accounts suggested that the initial *impact of 'the outsider'* tended to be internally and privately experienced by one member of the dyad, with the other member only gradually realising that something was changing. For the first member of the dyad, *the impact of 'the outsider'* seemed to spark an internal sense of wanting or needing to pull away from the relationship. In effect, this appeared to set up a triangular dynamic between the dyadic couple and *the 'outsider'* even if *the 'outsider'* was not a person but an ideological force. There is further reporting upon the role of triangulation in subsequent sections and the discussion.

Experiencing a greater pull towards fusion or separation

Influenced by the impact of *the 'outsider'*, some participants described how a desire to separate from the relationship simultaneously activated a counter-sense of wanting, or needing, to maintain togetherness. These *opposing forces* created the experience of an intrapsychic tug-of-war along a *fusion-separation continuum*. The main factors identified as generating *opposing forces* along a *fusion-separation continuum* is seen below in Figure 3.

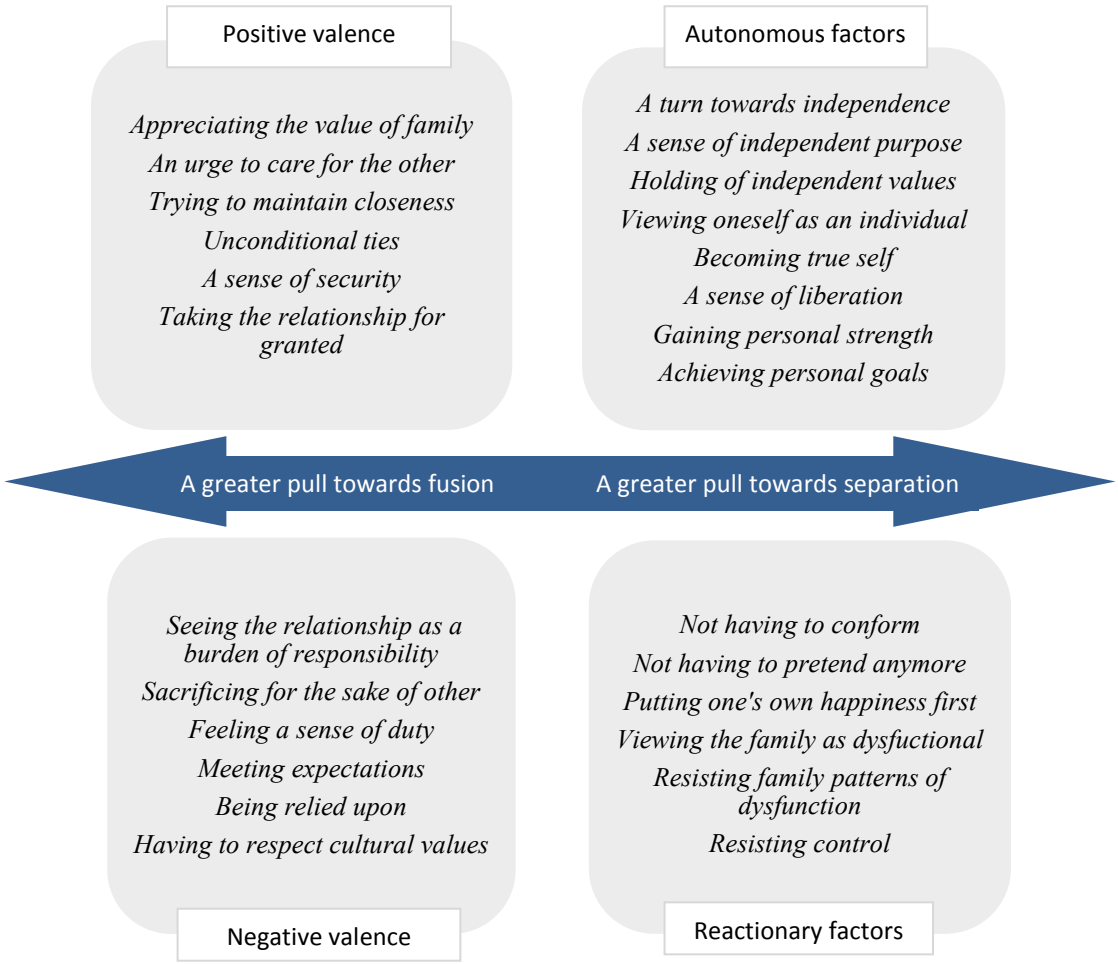

Figure 3. Factors contributing to the intrapersonal experience of fusion-separation conflict.

The experience of fusion-separation conflict was described as provoking intrapersonal tension and *confusion*. This *confusion* was articulated by P1 as she considered risking her relationship with her father through her choice of marriage partner:

> P1: *"Should I actually pretend to be this person that I'm pretending to be, is that the right person to be? Or should I just be myself... and express myself in the way that I feel is the correct way, or that expresses me truly. Um... but then again, nobody wants to be without a father."* [12-14]

A sense of fusion and separation forces as lying on a continuum was illustrated well here by P13:

> P13: *"You know, sometimes I really want to belong to them, to go back there, you know to my family, and it hurts... I can actually feel it pulling at me inside... a bit like the train I'd have to take to go home (laughs)... but then I think of how different I've become, how independent I like to be, and I can't see how I could ever go back there, you know, go back down that track"* [243-247]

Highlighting one end of the continuum, all participants spoke to some degree of experiencing a *pull towards fusion* with the family relationship, and a number of factors were identified as driving this force. Figure 3 shows how some fusion factors were considered to have positive valence, while others were seen to possess negative valence or ambivalence.

Fusion factors with positive valence included *appreciating the value of family*, having *an urge to care for the other,* and *trying to maintain closeness* with the family member. There was a sense from this position that family bonds were *unconditional ties* that gave *a sense of security*, and that *taking the relationship for granted* was acceptable.

Fusion factors that appeared to carry more negative valence or ambivalence included *seeing the relationship as a burden of responsibility*, *sacrificing for the sake of other*, feeling *a sense of duty* to the other, *being relied upon, meeting expectations, being expected to conform,* and *having to respect cultural values*.

While all participants experienced *a pull towards fusion*, those who had identified previous bond quality as *close* tended to feel the pressures of remaining fused more keenly. This appeared true for both early and later stages of estrangement negotiation.

Participants who were estranged at the time of interview, but were experiencing *a greater pull towards fusion* appeared to be highly conflicted and experiencing considerable distress, as illustrated by P8 who spoke of not giving up on her son, whom she had not heard from in three years:

> P8 *"It would make sense... for me to cut him off, because he's hurt me, and he's still hurting me. And that would show I suppose that, not that he'd see it, but it would demonstrate in some way that I can be as strong as he is. Um... but... no I don't think I'll stop looking."* [495-497]

Highlighting experience at the other end of the continuum, participants spoke of experiencing *a greater pull towards separation* from the relationship. The category of *a greater pull* was labelled using an in-vivo code from the interview of P2, where he described the struggle he experienced when caught between relationships with his mother and a romantic partner:

P2: *"...she's trying to tug at the heart-strings. You know please remember me. Don't forget about me. Don't leave me by myself. That sort of thing. Um... but the pull the other way obviously with Nancy was, was a greater pull. The pull that I wanted more than the pull towards her."* [254-256]

Figure 3 shows that several factors were identified as driving the experience of *a greater pull towards separation*. Some were identified as *autonomous separation factors,* and others as *reactionary separation factors*.

Participants who described *autonomous separation factors* spoke of experiencing *a turn towards independence* that was driven by a *sense of independent purpose*, or *the holding of independent values*, or *viewing of oneself as an individual*. The pull towards recognition of independent identity was sometimes accompanied by *a sense of liberation* or of *becoming true self*, or *gaining personal strength* and *achieving personal goals*:

P6: *"I found a strength and I liked that. I like the fact that I found I was quite a strong independent person, which I never ever thought I was."* [298-300]

Other factors had a more relative-to-other or reactionary quality and these *reactionary separation factors* included *putting one's own happiness first*, *not having to conform* and *not having to pretend anymore*. Some participants described *viewing the family as dysfunctional*, and saw *a pull towards separation* as a means of *resisting family patterns of dysfunction*. Other participants saw separation as a means of *resisting control*:

P5: *"I then got notification of this hearing. And my brother wants me to be part of it. And I said well I will be... but as an independent person. And I'm not on anyone's side. I do not take sides."* [288-290]

Regardless of bond quality, all participants spoke of experiencing a strong pull towards separation, but there were qualitative differences in the emotional consequences of internally engaging with a drive toward independence. Those with historically close bond quality tended to experience heightened guilt, confusion and loss. Those with historically antagonistic bond quality spoke frequently of defiance, frustration and relief, and those with a historically weak bond described an underlying sense of disappointment, resentment and alienation.

Transferring emotional or ideological attachment

During the later stages of analysis, participants' accounts of experiencing internal conflict along a fusion-separation continuum led to the generation of this memo in Box 2:

Box 2	Transferring emotional or ideological attachment – Memo 1
R/?	After 12 interviews I find myself cycling between data, memos and literature, trying to get a better grasp on what appears to be happening while fusion-separation conflict is experienced. Reflecting upon how the data relates to existing theory, I've noticed that it seems at odds with the theoretical language that is used around this process and my observations of what is being described in the data.
R/?	Terms used in the literature to describe this process include 'differentiation' 'separateness' or 'separation', 'apartness', 'diffusion' and 'individuation'. I myself chose 'separation' as the best label for what participants seemed to be describing as a sense of *pulling away* from the family relationship, particularly in light of descriptions of autonomous and reactionary separation factors.
C/A/D/R/?	I've noticed however that participants describing a sense of pulling away from the relationship also describe a sense of pulling away to. Indeed, they appear to be unaware of a sense of pulling away from, until there is an emotional or ideological attachment for them to pull away to. I'm not sure how important this is yet – after all, it's fairly obvious that participants would not pull away from the relationship into a social or emotional vacuum. However, I feel this further emphasises the role of triangular dynamics; a process that involves a transferring of emotional or ideological attachment rather than a dyadic shift or uni-directional withdrawal of attachment. I am therefore creating this memo to develop this theme further, for in terms of participants' negotiation of the estrangement process, a 'fusion-separation' framework feels incomplete, perhaps suggesting a fusion-separation-fusion framework instead?
TH	In terms of theory review here, I'm directed to differentiation theory, identity and developmental theory and in particular, the theory of relationship triangulation.

Box.2. Creation of the memo for the category: The transferring emotional or ideological attachment

As highlighted in the memo in Box 2, during fusion-separation conflict participants typically described not only *a pulling away from* the family of origin relationship, but also *a pulling away to* a

new relationship or ideological attachment. Indeed, most participants appeared to have been embedded to some degree in their new emotional or ideological attachment before becoming aware of wanting to pull away from the original family relationship. The potential importance *of transferring emotional or ideological* attachment in supporting separation process was highlighted by P13, who described how being gay and meeting a partner spurred him into gaining independence from his mother:

> P13: *"In a way, I think it's lucky that I was gay, so I'm really grateful for it. It was being gay and um, meeting my first boyfriend, that gave me the guts to stand up to my mother, you know, to tell her that I didn't want anything to do with her. I reckon that if I wasn't gay I'd still be under her control..."* [70-73]

It was not always obvious that participants were talking of the initial estrangement period as a time of transferring attachment, for, as noted previously, participants tended to frame their experience as a shift towards independence. Close examination of the data however suggested that, alongside shifts towards independence, there was typically a process of transfer involved. Illustrating this, during fusion-separation conflict, several participants spoke tellingly of feeling *torn between worlds*, *being forced to choose* or *deciding between attachments*:

> P1: *"The decision I had to make was in relation to getting married to someone that my dad was not approving of, because he was from outside our culture... so I had to really sit down and think... What is it that I want for my future? I had to think about... what my life would actually be like being with this person that is not accepted by my dad, or by the rest of the culture, my extended family..."* [25-29]

Having decided between attachments, some participants described experiencing an awareness of *transferring attachment,* frequently achieved by *substituting the relationship*. Participants described a number of different ways that family of origin relationships could be substituted through attachment transfer. P2 described how he transferred attachment onto his mother- and father-in-law:

> P2: *"...so I got to know Nancy's parents and we got on really well. They accepted me. They weren't distant. They've... over time have become very good friends. And I would say Nancy's mum and dad are pretty good friends. I almost see them now as, as good friends if not, almost like my own mum and dad."* [165-168]

P4 was able to find a relationship substitute within her family of origin:

> P4: *"And then I would talk to my aunt who's more like a mother, and has always been there, really rock solid, and a pillar of strength in the family"* [54-55]

For P13, who was estranged from most of his family, it was not a single relationship that was substituted but a whole family unit:

> P13: *"Since I was eighteen, before I even came out as gay, I've been in really regular contact with my best friend's family... they've kind of always been there for me... they're like my second family, and Linda, my best friend's mum, she even calls me her son... they're the ones I sometimes spend Christmas with... and they came to my graduation... and when I was in hospital they came to see me... Christine, my best friend, she jokes that I'm like one of those birds... you know that steals another bird's nest...*
>
> INT: *"A cuckoo?"*
>
> P13: *"Yeh a cuckoo... and I suppose I am really (laughs) except she doesn't really mind"* 189-196]

P11 described how he and his sister found a substitute for their family relationships through meeting others within a culture of taking drugs and going clubbing. Although the substitute relationships were temporary, they nonetheless appeared to offer enough substance to support a transfer of attachment from their family of origin relationships:

> P11: *"I look at my sister's situation, how similar it is to mine, she's been estranged from the family for six years, and I just started thinking about that one day... and I've realised that's why we were taking drugs and going to clubs every weekend, because when you're in a club and everyone else is taking drugs, you feel that other people care about you... um... and you care about them... for a few hours, or even a whole night, you feel like you are part of a family (laughs)... That's why it's so hard to stop taking them."*
>
> INT: *"What about the rest of your family when you were taking drugs? How connected did you feel to them?"*
>
> P11: *"Um... actually I felt further apart from them. It was as if my clubbing friends became my real family so I didn't need them anymore. As well as my dad I kind of stopped talking to my other sister and also my step-mom and step sister."* [179-189]

The process of transferral was typically accompanied by *appreciating other relationships more*, and an increase in *discussing the family relationship with others* or *discussing the relationship with other family members*, *identifying with others* and *receiving support from others*. Throughout the transfer process *triangular relations* were often created either internal or external to the broader family system. An example of *internal triangular relations* was offered by P3 as she described how she became closer to her sister as a result of *joining forces* against their brother:

P3: *"I think me and my sister have probably got a lot closer since we've both agreed we didn't want anything to do with my brother, and therefore since then developed quite a close relationship... where we didn't have one before."* [402-405]

P9 described how she and her daughter were involved in *external triangular relations* that she was initially oblivious to. Months after her daughter disappeared, she discovered that her daughter had been engaging with an online cult; discussing family problems, and receiving support:

P9: *"We found out later, months after she'd disappeared, that every time we would have a family row about something, you know petty stuff, nothing major, she was going straight online, and she was putting it all on the site, and sharing it with the cult members."* [54-57]

As described by P9, it appeared quite common for one family member to form *a covert coalition* with an relationship outsider during attachment transfer. Covert coalitions with an 'outsider' were potentially quite destructive to the original relationship. Once discovered, findings revealed that they could generate intense and reactive feelings of powerlessness, anger and betrayal. This could prove particularly problematic to the possibility of reconciliation, as highlighted in section 4.

Distance within becomes distance between

The findings suggested that during early fusion-separation conflict, overt conflict was typically avoided. Some participants in the position of *pulling away* reported a period of *living a secret life* or *concealing the depth or significance of transfer*. During the period of concealment, surface relations could remain stable, but the family member pulling away was likely to be experiencing *inner distancing,* as they became increasingly aligned to a new emotional or ideological attachment. Some participants identifying as *pulling away* said they increasingly found themselves *disliking the other* or even *finding the other intolerable*. This often led to *managing proximity* or *avoiding contact* with the other. P15, a mother struggling to cope with her drug-dependent daughter described this here:

> P15 *"I just didn't want to know her anymore... she wasn't my daughter... I didn't even like her... I actually hated her. I just thought I can't cope with this anymore, I don't want to see you... I... while all this was going on I met this man... and I used to go around there all the time just so I wouldn't be in when she turned up."* [28-32]

At this time, participants' inner values and motivations were typically developing counter to the other's wishes and expectations. Trying to maintain fusion at this time could lead to a powerful sense of *feeling trapped* as described by P6 who described how she married someone to please her father:

> P6 *"For God's sake, I got married to please my dad. It wasn't for Danny. It was for him (laughs). We were going to live together and he said no... if you live together I'll cut you off. This is his big thing all the time... I'll cut you off and I'll cut you out of the family. And I won't want to know you. If you're going to be with this guy, and set up home with him, you marry him... So I went off and told Danny oh by the way we're getting married (laughs). And that's what we did. And on the way to the ceremony I was crying in the car I don't want to go, I don't want to go."* [400-406]

Despite *feeling trapped*, and *wanting independence*, the opposing pull towards fusion could be felt very strongly. Therefore, pulling away or *distancing* often required a concerted strengthening of internal resolve. Participants' accounts suggested that one way of achieving this was by *exaggerating differences* with the other, while minimising, or *rejecting commonalities*. The findings suggested that this element of the *distancing* process was an important element of a relationship heading towards estrangement. The process of *distancing*, developed to its extreme, was illustrated by P4 as she made a powerful *distancing* statement that rejected the connection that she shared with her mother:

> P4 *"I feel nothing for you. I'm not a person in your life. I, I'm someone who really resents you. That doesn't like... particularly like you... that doesn't have anything in common with you."* [274-276]

In contrast, P9, a mother, offered poignant insight into the complex emotions she experienced as her daughter distanced her:

> P9 *"When I left I noticed her eyes were doing what I call the five mile stare. There was no emotion in them. I kissed her on the cheek and she ran back in the house. She wasn't even that bothered we were going really, that was the hard part. It was the five mile stare that got me. I didn't like it, but I know one thing for sure, because I had a mum that suffered severe depression, I've seen the eyes of somebody with severe depression, that are sad... really got no life in them. Uh, but Claire's eyes weren't like that, there was still life in them but there was this five mile stare, like she can't see you. So that actually made me feel better because I knew she wasn't suffering from some deep depression... If you can make yourself feel better about a situation like that."* [295-302]

This study found that during the period of covert *distancing within*, there was significant deterioration to the core relationship, resulting in *distancing between* both parties. Issues of difference at this time were typically not negotiated, and problems were therefore exacerbated. This could lead to a harmful erosion of trust between parties, and a perceived rejection of common identity, experience and understanding. The combination of mistrust and rejection appeared to create *a sense of alienation*, pushing family members further apart. P7 described the eventual consequences of this succinctly:

> P7: *"There is no trust anymore between us, and a huge part of me that is just... rejected. It's so... (exhales loudly) ... estranging actually."* [366-368]

As *distancing* increased, estranging parties often spoke of feeling increasingly *judging, disapproving or criticising* of the other. While *distancing* remained internal, and largely unexpressed, it could typically create a sense of *strained relations*:

> P3: *"If he was in the house, we would have limited conversations or there would be basic acknowledgement, like saying hello or morning or, there'd be some type of communication... it was polite, but it was tense."* [78-80]

Although core dissatisfactions were often concealed by the one pulling away, the presence of *strained relations* led the other member of the dyad to typically sense that something was wrong. Speaking from this position, some participants reported experiencing *tension that the other is pulling away* or *feeling anxiety that the other is changing*:

> P10: *"I sensed her pulling away and hiding from us bit by bit. I thought at first she was getting suicidal. A mate of mine topped himself a few years back. Before he went, he went around a load of people... he went out for a drink with them... did stuff with them... and then a*

few weeks later he committed suicide, and it was almost like she was doing that... like she was cutting us off one by one." [158-162]

The study found that *strained relations* eventually proved unsustainable, and momentum gathered for a *turn towards conflict.* Some participants described how this manifested itself in an overt expression of *wilful rejection* of the relationship by the one pulling away, or a *statement of new allegiance*:

P11: *"I just kind of broke down into tears and for some reason I wrote him a letter then. I said I hate you about a hundred times over, and I don't want you in my life anymore..."* [99-101]

The expression of new allegiance or *wilful rejection* was described by a number of participants as *provoking jealousy* or *provoking anger* in the other, and this often led to a reaction of *counter-rejection*, as described by P5:

P5: *"When I married Edward, Edward being a lieutenant in the navy was senior in rank to my father. So that was definitely a problem, and because he was really rather jealous, he was automatically quite dismissive of our whole relationship."* [343-345]

This study found that when *distancing between* became too great to ignore, a dynamic of conflict and rejection/counter-rejection was typically triggered. Participants who had previously described themselves as *judging, disapproving or criticising,* now spoke of *meeting judgment, disapproval or criticism* or experiencing *having one's new life rejected*. This appeared to mark a tipping point in the relationship where *battle-lines* could be drawn between parties for entry into *engaging in a relationship at war.*

Section 2: Engaging in a relationship at war

This section presents the study findings that focus upon the experience and process of an estranging relationship when it involves hostile engagement in a warring relationship. The four key themes highlighted within this category will be presented in turn and are seen below in Figure 4.

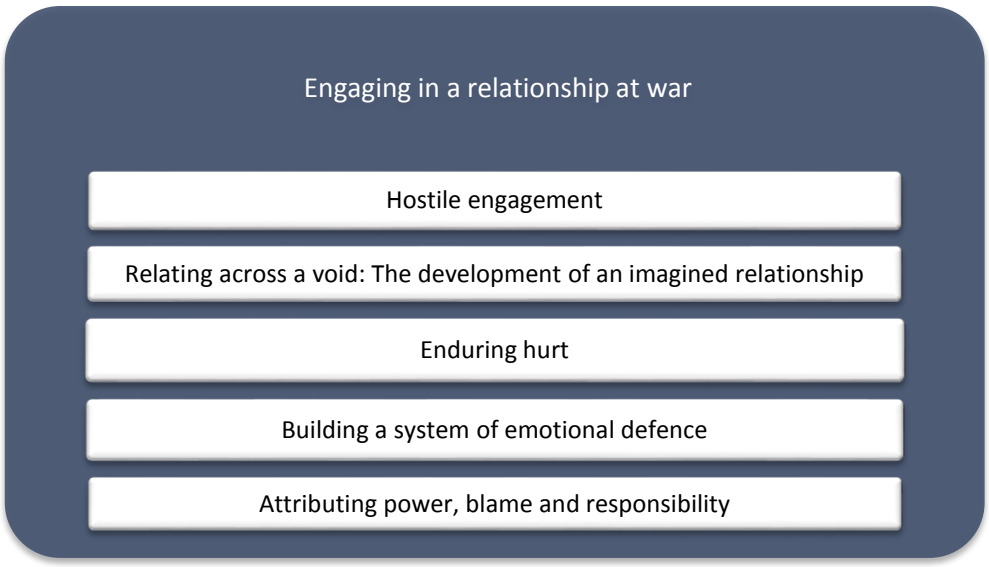

Figure 4. Engaging in a relationship at war: The main category and sub-themes.

Hostile engagement

The findings suggested that following a period of internal and external *distancing*, estranging relationships commonly entered a period of hostile engagement. The entry point for *engaging in a relationship of war* was usually dyadic, though some participants said that they experienced hostile engagement with multiple family members simultaneously. For participants with an historically *antagonistic* bond, hostile engagement was typically experienced as an escalation of already turbulent relations. For participants with a historical bond described as *never really close,* hostile engagement was sometimes described in terms of *a cold war*, involving a covert sense of *hostile withdrawal*. For other participants, hostile engagement was usually experienced as a more distinct phase of an estranging relationship.

A number of participant used *war metaphors* or language to describe the estrangement relationship at the height of conflict, as illustrated by the following examples:

> P2: *"I was literally caught in the crossfire and I had to pick a side."* [48-49]
>
> P3: *"I think that it's absolutely ridiculous that you would use your own child as a weapon to punish us."* [370-371]

P5: *"This Easter the sisters went over... and they... it was a clandestine operation, they didn't tell anyone they were going."* [220-221]

P13: "*Before I speak to her I have to brace myself. You know, get my armour on."* [122-123]

P15: *"She's fine one minute, but then if you say something... push the wrong button... she just explodes on you"* [136-137]

The use of war metaphors and language appeared to encapsulate participants' experience of the estranging relationship at the height of conflict. This afforded considerable insight into the intensity of hostility that was experienced between parties. Accounts suggested that the start of hostile engagement was usually marked by *attacking communication shifts* or *hostile withdrawal*. *Battle-lines* could be drawn, or *challenging the other's stance* could occur as a means of communicating the *holding of conflicting personal values*. Once hostile engagement commenced, participants frequently reported that there followed a period of *escalating conflict*. Participants identified several behaviours that contributed to *escalating conflict*, including *constant sniping*, *tit for tat exchanges* and *the use of emotional manipulation*.

P2: *"There was always... there was always sniping going on it seemed."* [50]

P7: *"...she's able to write letters to me saying everything I've done has been to hurt her, and you know, all of these countless things... emotional manipulation basically."* [465-466]

Hostile withdrawal could involve a number of behaviours, including *ignoring*, *ostracizing* or *putting up walls*:

P5: *"When my sisters visited my mother they'd lock the doors so my brother couldn't get in. And they wouldn't speak to him, they just wouldn't have anything to do with him."* [172-173]

Escalating conflict was also characterised by cyclic *attempts at control* and *resisting control* between parties. At its zenith, this was a process that could lead to the *issuing of threats and ultimatums*:

P1: *"I remember, uh, the night before my wedding, and yeh my Dad said to me... you're not going to go, I'm not going to let you go to your wedding. And uh, he said to me if you want to go you might as well just leave now, and get out."* [138-141]

Accounts suggested that negotiating the experience of *feeling under attack*, or *resisting control*, involved the use of a number of available strategies. These included *retaliating*, *surrendering to the other's demands*, *retreating defensively* or *using silence as a weapon of rejection*:

P1: *"And I know I really hit him on the spot (laughs). And sometimes I think actually he's trying to hurt me the same way I hurt him (smiles and laughs bitterly)."* (Retaliating) [229-230]

P6: *"He sits in his chair... he doesn't move... you have to go to him... and then he'll put down a pouffe in front of the chair... and he'll pat it. Come and sit here. And then you will... and then you'll sit so that you're lower than him... I hate him for that"* (Surrendering) [153-156]

P12: *"I used to stay out all day, and I'd just come in and go straight to my room just to avoid the arguments."* (Defensive retreat) [130-131]

P14: *"I genuinely have no interest in talking to her whatsoever. When I found out I was pregnant, I didn't want to talk to her. I didn't tell her."* (Silence as rejection) [261-262]

Each of these strategies, in their own way, could exacerbate the process of *distancing*. Although surrendering and retreating, for example, were seen as strategies of temporary appeasement, they often appeared to fuel deep *resentment.* Accounts suggested that *acts of rejection* were common at this time. While *engaging in a relationship at war*, rejection was often expressed with *increasing hostility*, or *increasing coldness* and a *hardening resolve*. If fusion-separation conflict was still being experienced then *a hardening resolve* could be seen as necessary, for hostile or cold rejecting could require considerable emotional strength:

P15: *"She was outside the door for ages, screaming at me... but I wouldn't let her in. No way I was going to let her in. I just wasn't. I'd just made up my mind I'd had enough see. In the end she started crying and begging me to let her in... and I know I'm her mother, and I felt like such a hard cow but I just turned the TV up until she went away."* [149-153]

Some participants were still actively engaged in a warring relationship at the time of interview. It was observed that these participants were typically quick to display anger and focus on feelings of grievance, yet slower at reflecting upon their own role in the conflict. Accounts of hostile engagement typically involved *other-focused storytelling*, and participants gave a sense of *positioning the other as the perpetrator* in the estrangement, while *positioning the self as a victim*. Participants *positioning the other as the perpetrator* typically reported *feeling anger* at the *spiteful behaviour* of the other and gave frequent impression of *harbouring hurt* that would prove both potent and enduring. *Harbouring hurt* appeared to generate anger, as well as maintain distress. This connection was highlighted in this excerpt from P4:

P4: *"I thought how can you (voice rising with anger) say this when you haven't bothered with me for years and years and years?"* [329-330]

The period of *escalating conflict* was reported as increasingly *trauma-like* and injurious. While engaged in conflict, participants varied in the degree to which they realised the potential long term damage that continued hostilities may cause. If left unchecked, escalating conflict could push the relationship to *breaking point*. The *breaking point* or *point of no return* was described by a number of participants. At the time of interview both P3 and P7 were engaged in hostile conflict. P3 described how she felt that *the point of no return* had already been passed. In contrast, P7 appeared to have acquired the foresight that it was looming and had made an attempt to avert it:

> P3: *"When he made his ultimatum, it was kind of so far up the line it wasn't... there was no return. It didn't feel like there was a return because it had got so ugly."* [454-455]

> P7: *"We couldn't talk around these things. There came a point when I wrote to her and said... be careful... because actually it's reaching a point now where... where we might just not come back from this."* [499-501]

The findings suggested that P7's insight and intervention before *the point of no return* was atypical of estranging relationships. Instead, warring exchanges tended to escalate until participants reported that they arrived at *a sense of stand-off* with each other. *A sense of stand-off* was often accompanied by *seeing the other as psychologically fixed*. *Seeing the other as psychologically fixed* could play a key part in estrangement maintenance as seen here:

> P9: *"I didn't really want her to go, but she'd made up her mind, and I felt like if I opposed it that there would be a row. It would be... you can get lost, I'm doing what I want. You know, that situation had become established and I knew, so I didn't want to argue."* [112-115]

By this point, the relationship had typically absorbed a great deal of damage, and the parties within it spoke of *feeling hurt/traumatised* or *feeling anger*, or both. As illustrated by P9, parties still in contact over this period keenly wanted to avoid further conflict and distress. Contact at this point tended to either decrease suddenly or gradually, or it became increasingly superficial, leading to *a widening communication void* or *a deepening communication void*. *A widening communication void* was created by an absence of first-person communication, and the study found that in cases of sudden, absolute break of contact this was often experienced as highly distressing. *A deepening communication void* occurred when the quality of communication was weakened by the presence of *incongruent communication, superficial communication* or *avoiding talking about real issues*. This effectively cut one person off from knowing the true feelings or motivations of the other. Examples from each category of communication void are seen here:

> P8: *"I know once Josh walked past me... in the town. And he was that close. He must have seen me. But that was after he'd refused to talk to me, so I knew there was no point in me*

trying to speak to him then. He would have just carried on walking the other way, so I didn't attempt to... talk to him then. It's really weird, being in... it's like being invisible" (Widening communication void) [313-317]

P12: *"I remember Mother's Day. I took my mum flowers and a CD she really wanted, and she let me in, and my little brother and sister ran up to me, but she stayed in the kitchen. She didn't really want to talk. She made out like she was really busy... but she wasn't, she was pretending. I knew it. My step-dad wasn't there so it wasn't as if she had to be wary of him... to this day I can't understand what went through her head at the time... to not want those little moments with me, when we could have shared something, when he's not there. She didn't even try to spend any time with me. It was so awkward, because I tried to talk to her, but I wouldn't get anything back except polite answers."* (Deepening communication void) [213-220]

The findings showed that, as communication decreased between parties, intense feelings of hot or cold hostility gradually began to subside. In the place of strong emotions however, parties now spoke of *feeling alienated* from each other. The decline in communication frequency or quality contributed further to the process of *distancing*, and therefore an increasing sense of estrangement. This study found that as real relations diminished, participants increasingly faced a challenge of negotiating a relationship across a void. According to participant reports, negotiation of this space largely involved *the development of an imagined relationship*.

Relating Across a Void: The Development of an Imagined Relationship

Participant narratives describing *hostile engagement* focused principally at the level of interpersonal interaction. As family members withdrew from each other however, the focus of accounts tended to shift to an intrapersonal level, where the process of estrangement continued to develop, even with little or no contact between parties.

Accounts suggested that a widening or deepening communication void between family members created the space for *the development of an imagined relationship*. Imagined relationships were experienced and constructed through *imagined interactions*, as well as assumptions and interpretations of the other's experience. Further distinction between imagined interactions and imagined relationships is found in the discussion.

Imagined relationships were seen to develop gradually, in parallel to, and sometimes in replacement of, the real relationship. Although imagined relationships were usually constructed around *minimal, unreliable or non-existent feedback* from the other, it appeared that they could provoke powerful *emotional reactions*, as well as influence *approach or avoidance behaviours and motivations*. As such, the imagined relationship had the potential to be either curative or toxic for the real relationship.

There were four key dimensions to the imagined relationship that emerged through the analysis: *imagining communication*, *interpreting the other's behaviour, anticipating the other's actions,* and *imagining the other's experience*. Examples of each are seen here:

> P7: *"It would be so much easier to just remove the mother from the book completely... but she was needed as a narrative device. And actually it was really, really hard to write because it was so true to life. And of course I had the ghost of Mum on my shoulder saying, this book's about me, this book's about me. And actually at that point I just thought fuck you, maybe it is about you. You're not going to read it anyway. You've told me time and time again, I'm not going to read your next book. I'm not going to read any of your books because it hurts me too much. So screw you, I can write what I want... because you're not going to read it anyway (laughs)."* (Imagining communication) [263-270]

> P9: *"I Googled my name the other day because I've got an unusual maiden name and I discovered that she had created a Myspace page under my name, and it's really odd that she's done that because... I can't help but think that in some way she wants to cling on to the connection between us..."* (Interpreting other's behaviour) [427-430]

> P1: *"I know that if I see him on the street... he would just walk by. Without even talking or looking"* (Anticipating other's actions) [83-84]

P11: *"I just realised one day that he didn't seem to really... care. That was actually just before he went bankrupt. I just felt like I kind of... lost him completely one day... because I'd be talking to him and he wouldn't listen or you know.... (silence)... things like that."* (Imagining other's experience) [82-85]

These passages highlight how imagined relationships could promote either a toxic/distancing effect or curative/closeness effect for the real relationship. In the second excerpt it can be seen that P9's interpretation of her daughter's behaviour facilitated *holding on to hope* and *maintaining closeness*. The other three excerpts presented led to *anticipating rejection*, or *feeling rejected*, and were therefore experienced as *distancing*. The experience of imagined relationships was found to be problematic as they were potentially based upon *a distorted sense of reality*. An example of this could be P11's interpretation of his nearly bankrupt father's emotional withdrawal. P11 interpreted this as a sign of rejection, when it is possible that his father may have been depressed or pre-occupied with worry.

It was observed that while all participants subjectively engaged in imagined relationships, they displayed, at best, only a partial awareness of doing so. One issue this raised was that over time, the boundaries between imagined relationships and real relationships could become blurred, leaving it difficult for family members to distinguish between the two. The difficulty and dangers of not being able to distinguish between imagined and real relationships were articulated by P7 and P8:

P7: *"I think because of Mum's relationship with her mother ... which she never resolved before she died... I think she sees a lot of her in me, of me in her... oh, no, no... I'm going to try and stop... I don't want to... one of the things I'm really trying to do is to stop projecting... thinking about what she's thinking... because I can't... I can't know that."* [93-97]

P8: *"Josh has now taken on the ideas that were suggested to him by the cult leader. So he now believes that he was a victim of abuse and so he's perfectly justified in leaving this horrendous family background that um... that he tells people that he's had. And I think in his head he probably believes it now too. I'm not sure when that happened. He's um... a creative person... and I think part of it is storytelling as well. And... embroidering the truth... but I think now everything's got so... sort of interwoven in his head, and he's got so used to his... his identity, as it is now, that... that's how he sees himself... as a tragic victim of abuse who's escaped."* [200-207]

For family members negotiating estrangement, *imagined interactions* appeared to serve a number of functions. The present study is too broad in scope to present these findings in detail, but examples included *imagining retaliation*, *anticipating conflict*, *rehearsing for reconciliation*, *controlling emotions*, *maintaining avoidance*, *understanding the other*, *replacing a lack of contact* and *keeping the relationships alive*.

A further finding was that the function and quality of *imagined relationships* reflected the degree of distance that family members desired. Within the category of *imagined relationships*, the desired degree of distancing lay along a continuum, from *wanting to be closer* to *wanting to maintain distance*. The degree of distance desired therefore tended to influence the quality of the *imagined relationship*, as well as reflect participants self-positioning as estranger or estrangee in the relationship.

As seen later in this section, *estranger/estrangee positioning* was a flexible construct, so participants could frequently shift in a desired degree for distance, and *imagined relationships* reflected this. If family members saw themselves as being undesirably estranged, they typically adopted a motivational position of *wanting to be closer,* or an emotional position of *caring from a distance*. From these positions, the imagined relationship sometimes involved *seeing the other as vulnerable* which could invoke *feeling sympathy for the other* as seen here:

> P7*: "She's like a child really... rather than a mother. And um... like a child I don't want to wilfully hurt her. My father says you have to be compassionate towards her. And I think she suffered more than I did... because she's so obsessive. The estrangement just consumed her for a year. Whereas as I was able to get on with my life."* [254-258]

Other family members adopting a position of *wanting to be closer* described *a sense of uncertainty of who the other has become* or of *feeling confused* and the *imagined relationship* appeared to offered a projected mental means of *trying to understand the other,* as illustrated here:

> P10: *"I really thought at one point that she was so distant from us that... was she depressed? Was she suffering? Did she need help? Was she ill? Was she schizophrenic? All sorts of things went through my mind."* [163-166]

The findings suggested that for those *wanting to be closer*, the imagined relationship offered limited insight or comfort, but could instead provoke distress, particularly as *imagined interactions* within the *imagined relationship* typically involved *anticipating rejection* and *seeing the other as psychologically fixed* in not wanting reconciliation. Emotionally this often triggered a painful sense of *anticipated loss* that could lead to *protective, cautious or avoidant behaviours,* ultimately maintaining the distance between parties, even from a position of *wanting to be closer*:

> P8: *"I think the reason I kept driving was that I knew that there was no point in trying to talk to Josh then... um... and that... it would have got messy. He would have ridden away on his bike anyway, and what should I do then? Drive after him and... it would have been horrible."* [305-307]

At the other end of the distancing continuum, when participants adopted a position of *not wanting to care* or *keeping at a distance,* the imagined relationship commonly involved *seeing the other as uncaring*, *narcissistic* or *destructive*, and invoked *feeling anger* or *feeling wary* towards the other. From this position participants also described a sense of *seeing the other as psychologically fixed,* making this a common factor at both ends of the continuum. From the position of *not wanting closeness*/*keeping at a distance* however, imagined relationships could leave family members either *feeling determined* not to give in to the other, or *protecting the self against future injury*. P13 gave a good description of using an imagined relationship to maintain distance for protective purposes here:

> P13: *"There are some moments... um, not so many now... but now and then I get the urge to call her, you know, just to share something... like a new job, or something I think she'd be proud of... but then I think of how the conversation is going to go... I just know her, and she never changes... she'll start off by telling me how upset she is, or pretend to be seriously ill or something... and then she'll start attacking me... and she'll get more and more hysterical... insult me, and then slam the phone down... and I'll be upset for hours probably... so I stop myself. Fortunately I never make the call (laughs)"* [382-388]

The imagined relationship could therefore offer a projected mental means of remembering past emotional injury, so as to guard against the risk of future distress. This could enable a strengthening of resolve against *considering reconciliation*. One means of maintaining a cautious distance was by mentally *positioning the other as a villain*, coded as such to convey the exaggerated quality of this positioning. Imagined relationships could exert a strong influence in encouraging distancing. Sometimes however they had to contend with the intrusion of information that contradicted an absolute positioning of *the other as a villain,* and this typically caused confusion as it diminished anger, replacing it with warmth or sympathy. This could also challenge the view of not wanting or devaluing the relationship as seen here:

> P1: *" My dad would say if you go to college then you must get an 'A'... so he put you under pressure but he was never encouraging... um... even though having said that... uh, he worked with me quite a lot on my... uh dissertation at university in my, my third year, um, and I think that was... um... (struggling) yeh it's getting a bit more complicated there."* [66-70]

One might think that the intrusion of *information contradicting the other as a villain* had the potential to reduce distancing. Paradoxically however, brief challenges to the imagined relationship from a position of *keeping at a distance* tended to trigger anxiety over possible further rejection or injury that may be faced through not *protecting oneself against future loss.* This could ultimately reinforce the *distancing* function of the imagined relationship.

Enduring hurt

This study found that, for estranging family members, both real and imagined relationships could provoke intense emotional distress. Participants' use of war metaphors and language suggested that estranging relationships were often experienced as psychological battlegrounds where *emotional survival* was fought for:

> P7: *"In the last two years I saw myself more as um... it's a very dramatic word, but sort of fighting for emotional survival really."* [491-493]

Many participants described feeling so *overwhelmingly affected* at times that they felt *unable to cope*:

> P4: *"It just got to a point that Christmas where I just thought... well I didn't really think, it was just a feeling, a physical emotional reaction where I just said I cannot do this anymore. I physically cannot do this anymore."* [56-59]

Through the enactment and *re-enactment of injurious events*, the hurt of estrangement was experienced as both enduring and something that had to be endured. Over time, *enduring hurt* could take a physical toll. In some cases, distress was so debilitating that it led to a significant *deterioration in physical health*:

> P6: *"I used to wake up at five o clock in the morning crying. I just kept melting down all the time, just completely melting down... it was terrible see, because I wasn't in control of it. I didn't want it to happen. So he was out there but he didn't want anything to do with me. Um... and my hair fell out. Um... I had a really bad eczema crisis, and then I got alopecia. I had little coins... where my hair kept falling out."* [87-92]

Several participants spoke of experiencing such deep and lasting emotional hurt that *life felt unbearable*. A third of participants talked of how things felt so unbearable that they considered *suicide*. Here, P13 movingly described how he attempted to take his own life after years of *feeling traumatised* by the rejection of his family:

> P13: *"The worst point in the whole thing, in my life actually was when I was twenty five. I was thrown out of my flat and I had absolutely nowhere to go... so I called home and told my mother but she slammed the phone down on me. It was the loneliest moment in my life. I felt like I had nobody. And I um, I just couldn't take it anymore. Over the years I'd become so traumatised by the whole thing that in the end I tried to kill myself... I um, I took an overdose. It wasn't a cry for help. It just seemed like the only way I'd ever stop hurting."* [411-416]

Interviews invoked the detailed *recalling of emotionally charged events*. During recall, it was observed that participants frequently shifted from speaking in past to present tense, as if *reliving the*

experience. When this occurred, difficult emotions could surface suddenly, often taking participants by surprise or temporarily overwhelming their defences. The findings showed that the recalling of *imagined interactions* could be as equally distressing as the recalling of those that were real. In the following excerpt P9 became emotionally overwhelmed while appearing to imagine an interaction that she not actually witnessed, but had mentally constructed from *second-hand information*:

> P9: *Apparently when she was leaving she really put her arms around John and said you will tell Mum to come and see me... (breaks down in tears)....."*
>
> INT: *"Ok...?"*
>
> P9: *"(through tears)...It's the hard part.... It's the hard part because....*
>
> INT: *"Take your time..."*
>
> P9: *"(through tears) Yeh it's the hard part because it's the sad part you know... (accepts tissues while crying)... thanks... .... yeh it's the hard part because it's the sad part and... (sobbing) I can't talk about it to people... this bit (sobbing)..."* [255-262]

Recalling certain types of memories appeared to carry a particularly strong emotional charge. These included: *remembering happy times*, *remembering spoiled times*, *remembering traumatic incidents*, and *remembering last words or images*. Although recalling memories could invoke distress, a number of participants appeared to feel that the process was useful. P12 explained how holding on to hurtful memories helped maintain a feeling of connection to his family:

> P12: *"There were certain things I'd start but I wouldn't be able to finish because they'd still be there in my head or whatever... they'd always have some part to play. It's like I'd sabotage my own stuff just to go with that horrible feeling. Even the bad stuff with my mother I just wanted to hold on to it in my head, so that I still had some sort of family connection if that makes sense..."* [241-244]

For P10 however, the experiencing of happy memories that triggered hurt appeared to be a sometimes involuntary and incessant process, as he described here:

> P10: *"We saw a stoat running around up there on the hill you know, another special moment, hey look at that... and she's smiling... lots of little special occasions like that with her... (silence)... you know... you never forget them... (silence then breaks down weeping)... It never switches off... (weeps)."* [73-76]

Negotiating estrangement also involved *enduring loss and sadness*, and a number of participants described the loss as so intense that it felt *like a bereavement*:

P10: *"On her eighteenth birthday. (silence) She couldn't get out of here fast enough (silence). She was a lovely girl. She was a lovely girl. (silence).*

INT: *"I notice John that you're talking about Claire using was... in the past tense..."*

P10: *"Oh God yes... she is a lovely girl... (weeps)... I feel like... I feel like she's dead. I suppose that's why I'm talking like that. To me she's dead. I'm grieving for her (weeps). That what this is... I'm grieving for my daughter (weeps). God I've been holding onto this for so long I've never really opened up as much as this. I do feel like she's dead to us. Emails and stuff to her on the internet... it's nothing... it's as if she's a ghost... it could be someone logged into her account... anybody could be on the other end..."* [310-315]

Unlike with bereavement, however, negotiating estrangement could be particularly complicated and confusing as there was *no closure*. In the following passage P8 gave an informative account of how difficult it was for her to negotiate this uncertainty:

P8*: "I was trying to deal with my grief, really. Um... because he'd gone, and I knew that... that that was it, he was never coming back... and... it's like a bereavement. Except... it's much better than a bereavement (with false jollity) because he's alive and well... but the loss is there, and with a bereavement there's social rituals and there's a mourning period, and there's a funeral, and after a while... but this... it doesn't really wear off. You get... you adjust to it. I suppose I've adjusted to it. But there's still no closure. I think with a bereavement there is closure. Even if it's you know, the worst accident in the world... there's a grave. There's... something. Um... and I'd (exhales). So I'd been trying to make sense of all of that and I suppose I still am really. I haven't really got there... because there's, I have no model to follow. I'm a logical ordered person normally and I look for... an example where I can say oh yes it's like that. So I'll do it that way, or I'll tweak those bits... but there's, there's... no... nothing comparable... that I can see"* [139-150]

The findings suggested that estrangement could feel particularly bereavement-like if there was *a volatile separation* or *a sudden or unexpected leaving*. Some described *feelings of shock* at these times and spoke of *thoughts of the loved one intruding into consciousness*. A sudden or unexpected leaving could trigger a *yearning for contact* or *searching behaviour*, especially if it was not known where the other was, or how they might be found:

P8: *"Josh rode a bike. He rode a bike a lot. He wore a yellow reflective jacket. And even now when I see a cyclist coming down the road towards me I look to see if it's Josh. And I can't help myself. I know it makes no sense and Josh is never going to be cycling through*

town because he's not, he has no reason to come back to his hometown. Um... but that's... I can't stop myself from doing that." [523-527]

Several participants spoke of *feeling obsessed* about the other, or described *obsessive behaviour* in searching for loved ones, whom they sometimes described as *missing*. Others spoke of the *emotional fallout* from the estrangement *affecting life*. The findings showed that one of the most painful sources of emotional hurt was *experiencing rejection*:

P5*: "All the photographs that they had brought over from mother, they're none of me or my children. All the rest of the family are represented, but there's, I just don't exist. It really is terribly hurtful."* [307-309]

P7: *"There was no beating or, or throwing out or changing the keys, or changing the locks or anything, but just this sort of... just this very painful... rejection... which hurts just as much at the age of forty as it does... as it does earlier".* [314-316]

As a consequence of *enduring hurt* caused by rejection, some participants described how they developed *subsequent rejection sensitivity* that could affect their experience of a range of relationships.

P12: *"I used to have really good relationships with people... but since my family stopped speaking to me I have a lot of problems trusting people. I just realised over the years that you can let people get close to you... but there's always that chance they're going to disappear and like... leave."* [436-439]

Rejection sensitivity was experienced by some as part of *the legacy of a family relationship breakdown* and is reported further in section 4.

For all participants in this study, negotiating estrangement over time involved the negotiation of an *enduring hurt*, and the findings showed that this was principally achieved through *building and maintaining a system of emotional defence*.

Building and maintaining a system of emotional defence

Enduring hurt was clearly a major challenge of estrangement negotiation. Accounts suggested that this was primarily achieved intrapersonally, through *building and maintaining a system of emotional defence*. The process of *building and maintaining a system of emotional defence* appeared to integrate conscious, unconscious, intentional and unintentional elements. During interview, the conscious and intentional aspects of building a system of emotional defence were frequently described, as illustrated in the following examples:

> P2: *"Over time I basically built up a defence mechanism of mine I presume. When I would just shut people off, if people were saying negative things it wouldn't, I just wouldn't let it in."* [202-203]
>
> P4: *"...you build up walls then that make you quite defensive."* [489]

Categorising the unconscious or unintentional development of defences relied on two methods of capture. The first was participant *retrospective insight*, sometimes triggered by the reflective and introspective nature of the interview process. The following excerpt by P13 gave an example of this:

> P13: *"You know, I'm just realising that I've gone through phases of talking about her in different ways to people. At first I used to be quite callous, like cruel... um dismissive... like as if I had no feelings for her at all. Then for years... well I still do sometimes... I used to tell funny stories about how mad she is... you know, kind of turn it into a joke... as if I you know, I could joke about it... but actually... now that I'm talking to you maybe... like really thinking about it... I think both those things were a front."*
>
> INT: *"What do you mean?"*
>
> P13: "*Well... um... just a way of covering up, or blocking out what I really felt."*
>
> INT: *"Which was?"*
>
> P13: *"Terrible, terrible pain... Oh yes, it's easier to turn her into a joke, trust me."* [445-454]

The second method of capturing unconscious defensive process relied on interviewer observation and interpretation. It was observed, during interview, that participants frequently engaged in defensive forms of communication. The challenge of reliably identifying and labelling unconscious aspects of psychological defence led to the generation of the memo in box 3.

Box 3	Defensive processes (Observed in communication) – Memo 5
R/A	After 6 interviews it is becoming clear that in terms of process during interview there are frequent, sometimes striking, occasions when a number of defensive processes are visible as participants tell their stories.
R	As a counselling psychologist however, I have perhaps a heightened sensitivity to interpreting defensive process. I should then be cautious that as a researcher I do not fall into a trap of over-interpreting the data. The challenge here perhaps lies in coding examples that will stand the scrutiny of an independent reader, who would agree that codings are clearly data-supported.
R/A/D	With this in mind, I believe that I can, with reasonable confidence identify four key defensive communication forms that participants are engaging in during interview. They are: *Denying*, *minimising*, *using silence*, and *using laughter*. As well as being the most prolific forms of defensive communication observed, I feel that there are sufficiently strong grounded examples in the data to support them as coded categories through independent observation. I believe that coding these processes may be important as they might signpost important areas of meaning and experience that participants find it particularly hard to articulate.

Box 3. The development of the memo: Defensive processes (Observed in communication).

The four most common *defensive processes* in communication observed during interview were *denial*, *minimising*, *silence* and *laughter*. Laughter, the most commonly observed, was often used when participants talked about particularly painful or sensitive issues. This suggested that *making light of hurtful experiences* was a common way of maintaining an emotional defence while discussing the estrangement experience:

> P1: *"My sister had put a photo in the living room. And, uh, he stormed in, took it and he just threw it down and he was like I don't want a photo of that slut in this house (laughs bitterly)."* [220-222]

> P5: *"It was during that period that my grandmother died. And I was never informed of this (laughs) until about seven years later and someone mentioned oh yes Nanny died. Oh (laughs). And I suppose I hadn't, I had really shut it out of my mind as well, I never really thought about it much."* [33-36]

A second form of defensive communication observed was *defensive silence*. *Defensive silence* was often used while speaking of sensitive issues, perhaps allowing participants time to gather themselves.

It also appeared to be used if participants were *considering one's own role or responsibility* in the estrangement relationship. A tentative interpretation of this was that it may have indicated that participants were either *experiencing guilt* or *struggling to shift from a fixed perspective* concerning responsibility. A possible example of such a moment was offered by P3:

> INT: *"You seem to say the stance you took throughout the whole thing, um has been to, from what you said to not, not accept her really. As a part of your brother's life. And you've spoken a bit about the cost and I'm just wondering whether you think it's worth... Now in the position you are in today, that it was worth the cost to have taken that stance"*
>
> P3: *"(Long silence) That would be quite challenging to admit (laughs)".* [447-451]

Defensive denial and *minimising* were also common, and verified through inconsistencies with broader data. Analysis showed that *defensive denial* and *minimising* were often associated with the themes of *a developing coldness* and *emotional cut-off*. This suggested that, even in extreme cases of *emotional cut-off*, participants may have been at least partly connected to an undertow of *enduring hurt*. Examples of *defensive denial and minimising* that were contradicted by broader data are seen here:

> P2: *"It gets to the point where I'm like fine. It doesn't work. That's it. If you're not prepared to work with me. Goodbye. I can quite easily cut you off."* [321-323]
>
> P15: *"Last winter my sister said to me don't you want to know where she is? And I said I couldn't give a shit if she was sleeping in a box."* [110-111]

Defensive denial also appeared to allow estranging parties to avoid accepting the potential magnitude of the estrangement as seen here:

> P11: *"I want to say one hundred percent (silence). I need to say one hundred percent that my sister would be there, because I'm not one hundred per cent that my dad would... and if I let myself doubt that my sister would be there... well... that means I'm on my own (silence)... totally on my own if I really need someone... I can't handle that thought (10 second silence)..."* [303-307]

A number of factors explained why a system of defence was seen as desirable. These included *seeing the relationship as an emotional burden*, *seeing the estrangement as traumatic*, and *seeing the estranger as destructive to self*. Building a system of emotional defence was therefore seen as a response to *feeling pressured*, *feeling guilty*, *feeling wary*, *protecting oneself against hurt,* or *protecting oneself against future loss*. Interpersonally this manifested itself in *shifts to defensive communication*, or of *trying not to react to the other*, while intrapersonally participants commonly

spoke of *trying to overcome feelings* through effortful *emotional avoidance*. A major problem of *defensive communication* between parties was that it was emotionally incongruent, and could therefore lead to misunderstanding. This could exacerbate *a deepening communication void* between parties.

Although a system of emotional defence was seen as necessary to negotiate *enduring hurt*, it was also described by some as blocking a broad range of emotions. Several participants spoke about *a developing coldness* that over time left them *feeling emotionally numb*:

> P3 *"I guess it's gone past that being angry, being upset, kind of all those emotions (goes silent, chokes up and gets tearful) I don't know it's... I don't really feel anything."* [178-179]

> P14: *"I'd like to think that there is no connection... but if I'm honest it's more like a coldness covering the connection."* [309-310]

P12 described reaching a point of *emotional numbness*, and it seemed that numbness was the result of an emotional equation where positive and negative feelings cancelled each other out:

> P12 *"With my mum it's more... it's hard to explain... I don't hate her for what she'd done, but then I don't love her because of what she's done. Does that make sense? So it's sort of in between the two, so I don't have a lot of emotions or feeling towards her, where I really miss her. It's just sort of slap bang in the middle."* [148-152]

Several participants described how *a developing coldness* could eventually lead to an emotional disconnect that they felt was permanent. P6 recalled the moment that she sensed this happen:

> P6: *"When I saw him again I was um... so apart from I did do the whole crying thing... but you see I did that out of habit. I know I did that out of habit. I didn't do that because I meant it. Because I know at the time I didn't feel remorse. I'd lost something. I knew, I knew, I knew full well I'd lost something. I'd lost some of the, those feelings that I'd had for him. I definitely had. There was no two ways about it."* [178-182]

As a result of the estrangement, several participants expressed concern that they were *unable to find forgiveness or compassion* towards the other as illustrated by P7:

> P7: *"There was that moment when I realised I can't forgive her. And it was awful. It was worse than the anger. It was worse than the hurt. It was this realisation, I can't forgive her. There's something inside me which has become so hard..."* [551-553]

Some suggested that the difficulty of being compassionate or forgiving could extend towards people in general. A number of participants spoke of *rejecting coldly or defensively,* or *engaging with others*

cynically, that crossed over into general relationships suggesting that *a developing coldness* may accompany *subsequent rejection sensitivity* as part of *the legacy of a family relationship breakdown*.

> P11: *"I can be quite cold around people... like when they get emotional about things I get very detached... and I only get emotional when I'm alone... and it's not often."* [367-368]

Despite some participants' fears of reaching an irreversible point of *emotional cut-off*, the findings suggested that, even for participants with a robust emotional defence, *breaches to defence* could occur. As previously reported, *the recalling of emotionally charged events* and engaging in *imagined interactions* could trigger defence breaches. Two notable mental processes that could overwhelm strong emotional defences were *imagining losing the other for good*, and imagining the relationship *through the lens of mortality*. Viewing the relationship *through the lens of mortality* involved picturing the event of one member of the relationship dying. In the following passage P2 described the emotional conflict he experienced when he heard that his mother was very ill:

> P2: *"When she first told me that, um, that she had emphysema, the first stages of it, I almost felt oh my God. And then afterwards you realise well it's not as bad as you think. When you first hear oh I've got... this, you sort of imagine the advert on the telly where there's the old lady with the oxygen tank and you think... ooh that's not nice. So when she first told me that I almost felt guilty that I'd cut her off."* [337-341]

For P13, it is the prospect of his own mortality that disables his system of defence, only for it to be re-activated once fears of his own death subside:

> P13: *"There was one time... I was in a bad motorbike accident abroad a few years ago... and I thought you know... this is it. I was in the ambulance, like strapped down, and I couldn't speak, but all the way there I kept imagining my family finding out, you know on the phone, and rushing to the hospital to just sit with me, telling me they loved me. I just didn't want to be alone with strangers when I died. But then when I got to hospital they told me I was going to be okay, and they asked me if I wanted to call my family... and I said no."* [293-299]

Although the category of *emotional cut-off* emerged as a coded category grounded in participants' narratives, analysis suggested that the term *emotional blocking* may more accurately represent the process of building and maintaining a defensive wall around emotions during estrangement, a wall that may be breached at any time. This distinction is explored further in the discussion.

Attributing power, blame and responsibility

Across interviews, the theme of blame or responsibility for the estrangement emerged strongly. Participants used the terms 'blame' and 'responsibility' interchangeably. When considering the cause or maintenance of estrangement, participants regularly engaged in the *positioning of self and other along a blame/responsibility continuum*. This reflected the extent to which participants self-identified as the 'estranger' or 'estrangee'. Further to this, estranger/estrangee positioning appeared related to the *positioning of self and other along a power continuum*, so that the estranger was usually perceived as having the most power in the estrangement. This relationship was highlighted here by P3:

> P3: *"I want to say that I'm the estranger but I don't know (silence). I think I've been estranged from my niece by my brother, because that's kind of not in my control."* [217-218]

A third blame/responsibility construct, *blaming a third party or influence,* was also identified. The third source of influence could be external, such as another person, or something internal seen as acting upon the other party, such as addiction or depressive illness:

> P11: *"The gambling was the real problem... and we couldn't do anything about it."* [58]

> P13: *"Okay, she's got mental health problems, but even if I don't blame her but I blame the depression, I'm still powerless to change anything"* [52-53]

From multiple accounts, it was possible to locate participants' perceived positioning of responsibility, through constructing a hypothetical blame/responsibility and power triangle, as seen in Figure 5.

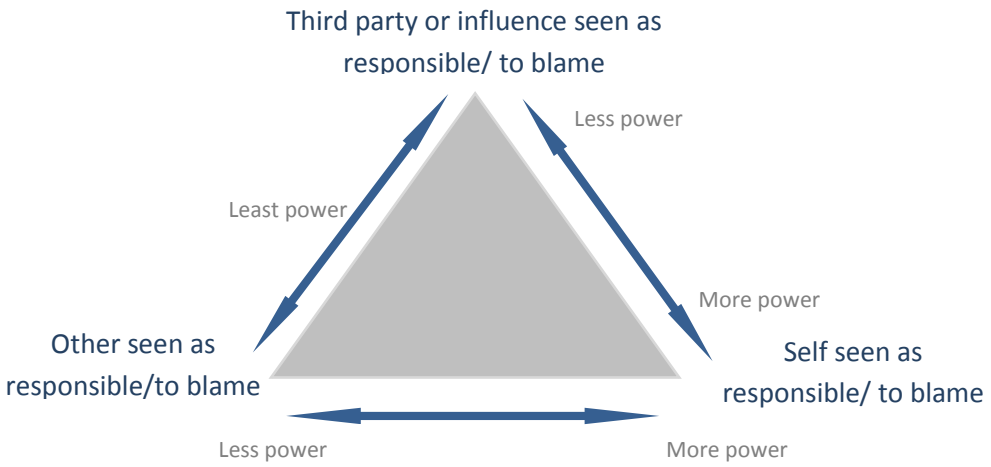

Figure 5. The relationship between attributing responsibility and experiencing a sense of power.

Figure 5 shows that, from the participants' perspective, the further that blame or responsibility was attributed from the self, the lesser the experience of holding power in the estrangement. The greatest

power tended to be experienced when one felt that they had acted, or were acting, as the estranger. If however, one's role was seen as reactive, rather than active, then the sense of responsibility and power could be negated. From a reactive position, it was therefore possible to see oneself as responsible for maintaining the estrangement, but not to blame for its cause. The least power tended to be experienced when one felt that the other and a third influence were jointly responsible.

Three potential *estrangement roles* were subsequently identified: *the active estranger* (self seen as responsible), *the reactive estranger* (self seen as responsible for maintenance, but not to blame for cause), and *the estrangee* (self seen as not responsible). The experience of responsibility appeared complex, for participants could adopt multiple roles, shifting between estranger/estrangee positions. P7 shifted between all three positions in her interview, as illustrated here:

> P7: *"Mum wasn't talking to me and she'd sort of... put herself as a sort of block between me and the rest of my family... and um... and it was horrible."* (Self as estrangee) [297-298]

> P7: *"She's blaming me for, she claims, and I, I think she's right, and I've never wanted to admit it to her... she claims that I've been rejecting her for a long time. I... (exhales) ... I know I have been. I don't know if I would use the word rejecting. I've been avoiding her. I have avoided her for a long time."* (Self as active estranger) [359-362]

> P7: *"I... feel like... I have over the years been forced into a position of estranger... ... ... to... protect myself... from this very complex... from a very complex and... quite manipulative person."* (Self as reactive estranger) [481-483]

Detailed analysis revealed further complexities. Although it was unusual for participants to take a position of overt responsibility for the estrangement it was, however, common for participants to *worry about being blamed* or *worry about being seen as cold*, and many spoke of *feeling guilty*. It seemed that many held covert concerns about being to blame, yet openly accepting responsibility appeared undesirable, even though this was potentially a position of greater power. This appeared to be due to greater responsibility leading to a potential increase in *feeling guilty*. Taking the position of *the active estranger* was therefore rare, and participants more commonly gave polarised accounts that involved *positioning the other as a 'perpetrator'*, or *positioning the other as a' victim'* (to a third party or influence). Polarised views however, could be hard to maintain consistently, and some participants were observed *struggling with a polarised view* of the situation at times. *Positioning the other as perpetrator* however, seemed to have two main emotional benefits. The first was a reduction in *feeling guilty*. The second was that it appeared easier to tolerate the loss of the relationship if the positive qualities of the other were devalued or ignored:

P15 *"Why should I feel guilty or spill tears over it? This is basically all her doing. She's turned into a totally selfish cow. And I've told myself I'm better off without her."* [380-381]

It was observed that *blaming a third source of influence* could invoke an especially strong sense of *feeling powerless* that was sometimes accompanied by particularly intense levels of *anger* (third-party-directed) or *helplessness* (relationship-directed). This appeared to be due to the positioning of both estranging parties as victims in the scenario. Casting *the other as a victim* however, could also help one retain an appreciation of the other's value. This strategy appeared to help P9 maintain positive feelings for her daughter after she had joined a cult:

P9 *"...that's how I want to remember her... as that person... not the person she is now... they did that to her... so I'm angry at them, but she's just... inside she's still that person."* [408-409]

Compared to *seeing the other as responsible,* which occurred prolifically and spontaneously, participants spoke less freely of *feeling responsible for the estrangement*. Generally, participants tended to describe the estrangement as having happened to them, typically underemphasising their involvement. When engaged in blaming, narratives could flow quite freely. In contrast, questions probing for a sense of personal responsibility could slow or halt narratives, sometimes quite strikingly, as in this example:

INT: *"And what... if any, do you feel that you have any responsibility for the estrangement?"*

P3: "(8 second silence*) No (laughs)... Um"*

INT: *"Let me ask it slightly differently. What would you say your participation in the estrangement process been?"*

P3: "(10 second silence)"

INT: *"How do you see your role?"*

P3: *"I don't know. I guess I've never looked at it. Um...* (12 second silence) *I really don't know* (8 second silence)." [171-176]

The degree to which participants had engaged in *questioning one's own role in the estrangement* appeared related to the level of *engagement in a relationship at war*. If interviewed at the height of *hostile engagement*, participants typically felt under attack and spoke from a reactive position. If a period of *stand-off* had passed, participants seemed more able to reflect upon active involvement, though some said that the interview was the first occasion that they had really done so. The introspective nature of being interviewed led a number of participants to achieve *moments of insight*

concerning the relationship between the attribution of responsibility and power. At times, such *moments of insight* appeared to have a therapeutic quality as highlighted in this excerpt by P11:

> P11*: "I don't know if everyone who's been estranged from their family believes it's the other person's fault (laughs)... maybe you can tell if that's a common trait (laughs)? Maybe my dad will see it that I've distanced myself from him, well (laughs)... I don't know, it's tough to say... hmm.. (silence).... wow... I suppose have distanced myself from my dad, but not out of choice. That's the first time I've seen it like that though... seriously. Hmm... it's actually good to know it's maybe not all him"* [408-413]

In a *moment of insight*, P6 came to a realisation, that the roles of estranger and estrangee had been reversed over time:

> P6: *"I'm realising now, as I'm telling you. I think we had a, we have now a complete role reversal now. It's a complete role reversal."* [222-223]

The study found that as estrangement developed, *estranger/estrangee role reversals* were common, and that *realising one's power* could help a family member to clarify how they were contributing to the dynamic. This finding held implications for the possibility of reconciliation, for over time parties could shift between reactive and active positions. This could mean that one party could actively initiate estrangement and then attempt reconciliation, only to find that the other had switched roles and was unresponsive. There is further reporting on the complexities of negotiating reconciliation in section 4.

Section 3: Managing Crises at the Nexus of Self, Family and Society

This section presents findings that show how family estrangement can create personal and interpersonal crises, requiring both social and symbolic negotiation. Part one identifies how estranging relationships are interpersonally managed within the context of broader family and social relations. Part two highlights the intrapersonal negotiations that arise when being estranged from family triggers a crisis to personal or social identity.

The two key themes highlighted within this category are seen below in Figure 6.

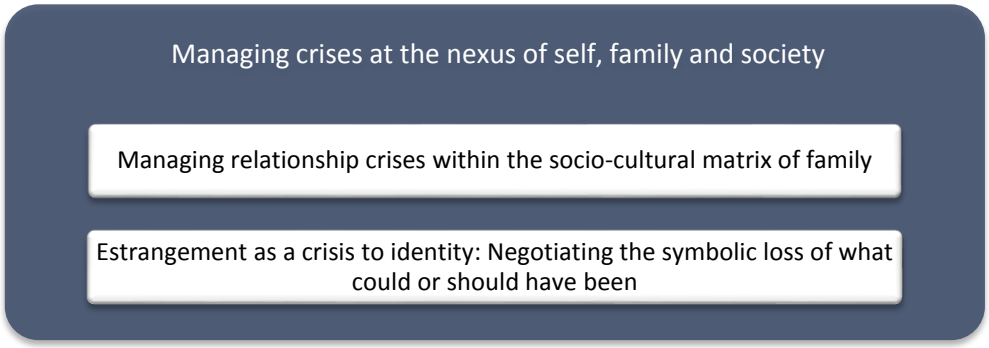

Figure 6. Managing crises at the nexus of self, family and society: The main category and sub-themes.

Managing relationship crisis within the socio-cultural matrix of family

A key challenge of negotiating estrangement involved managing relationship crisis across a broad range of family and social situations. Accounts suggested that the family could be seen as matrix of relationships that were influenced by social and cultural expectations. Estranging relationships were therefore negotiated at a nexus of this socio-cultural matrix. Participants varied in the extent that dyadic estrangements were experienced as interconnected to broader family relationships.

Some who were estranged from multiple family members saw their family as dysfunctional, and described how *being in a family* that was high in conflict left them *feeling caught up in the crossfire* of broader *hostile engagement*. The strain of this left some *questioning the value of family*, or even *devaluing the family.* Estrangement in such cases could offer a means of *escaping conflict*. *Devaluing the family* could also offer a means of reassuring oneself that one was better off estranged:

> P13: *"As horrible as it is to not have a family, I actually think that I'm best off out of it. I hate conflict, arguments and stuff, and that's all my family ever do... the lot of them, they're all as bad as each other. What's the point of being in a family like that?"* [506-509]

For some participants *the value of family* lay beyond the boundary of its members. For P1, whose family had migrated from the Middle East, the family was seen as a gateway to cultural identity. Subsequently, estrangement from her family threatened a *loss of connection to cultural identity*:

P1*: "The decision I had to make was in relation to getting married to someone that my Dad was not approving of, because he was from outside our culture... so I had to really sit down and think... What is it that I want for my future? I had to think about... er... what my life would actually be like being with this person that is not accepted by my Dad, or by the rest of the culture, my extended family."* [25-29]

The findings suggested that *schisms in social and cultural values* were a common source of conflict for estranging family members. Schisms at the level of nuclear family rules and customs could prove equally as problematic as schisms at the level of broader belief systems, such as religion:

P3: *"It started with I guess, general, housebreaking rules, from my mum and dads' house... which led to... conflict I guess, between my brother, and me and my brother and my sister... which then created conflict between us and my mum and dad."* [3-6]

P5: *"My mother was furious because on the day of the christening I was also confirmed. And my mother's absolutely ropeable because she doesn't like the church."* [66-68]

When *schisms in social and cultural values* were present, but open conflict was avoided, one consequence could be an increased sense of *distancing,* as described here:

P7: *"Mum's so... spiritual but not religious you know, and um... finds that completely baffling. And I've noticed that any time that I start talking about church she just sort of shuts down. Um... so yes there are things that are fairly fundamental to me and to who I am which I can't talk about."* [451-454]

Estrangement at the nexus of a dyadic relationship could have far-reaching implications for other family relationships. *Generational consequences* and *intergenerational consequences* were commonly reported, including the experience of *being denied access to loved ones* by an estranged family member, which could lead to *a spreading sense of loss* across the family matrix. There were several examples of how relationships could be lost across or between generations:

P5: *"No presents for my children, or even acknowledgement. I mean my father never met my son Peter. My mother only met him when he was twenty-one and went travelling."* [107-108]

P12: *"I really loved my brothers and sisters and they missed me and they hadn't done anything wrong. But what happened was that bit by bit I wasn't able to see them. I was slowly being cut out of the family by my parents..."* [170-173]

P15: *"I only saw my granddaughter once, at the hospital. My sister called to say she'd been born. Lily her name is, my mother's name... (chokes up and fights back tears)... Sorry I'm... I'm...I'm just upset... it's just that I didn't take a photo of her see... with my phone... I don't*

know why I didn't... but I didn't think she wouldn't let me see her again... so I didn't think to take a photo..." [284-288]

A sense of loss was sometimes experienced and negotiated by family members collectively, for example if one family member was felt to be *missing*. Here P10 described how his remaining family tried to cope with his daughter's absence on Christmas Day:

> P10: *"We took a walk up onto Fairborn Hill which was a place she used to love. We stood at the top of the hill. We stood facing west towards America and we called out her name. We did, we actually did that. We stood there, calling out her name. Her dad, her mother and her sister at the top of the hill calling out Merry Christmas Claire! And it was a bit daft really, but it just felt like we were doing something (breaks down and weeps)."* [282-287]

The spreading consequences of estrangement could lead to estranging parties *feeling guilty* while *seeing how the family of origin is affected.* One common area of concern was the impact of estrangement in *the spoiling of family events*. The difficulty of *negotiating family rituals, meetings and events* was mentioned frequently. This often necessitated *family adjustments to accommodate the estrangement*. P3 spoke of such an adjustment:

> P3: *"There was a kind of an acceptance. We could both access my Mum and Dad at different times, so we were never in a bubble that was going to burst. Birthdays or Christmas for example have always been, over the last few years separated."* [275-277]

To avoid a spreading involvement of the broader family network, estranging parties sometimes attempted to conceal the estrangement by *keeping up appearances*:

> P4: *"I wasn't like... a daughter anymore particularly. We were like people who just knew each other. Yet during family occasions she treats me like a child, and like her daughter almost, like keeping up appearances to the rest of the family."* [13-16]

Considerable efforts were sometimes made in *keeping up appearances.* This suggested that *the image of intact relations or an intact family* was something that estranging family members could be keen to protect. When the broader family were aware of the estrangement, there were a number of roles that members adopted around estranging parties including: *alliance roles*, *mediating roles*, *supporting roles*, *communicating roles*, *shielding roles* or *provoking roles*.

In addition to dyadic engagement, conflict could also involve the *spreading involvement* of other family members, as estranging parties engaged in *the use of propaganda to poison the mind of others* or *recruiting others on-side*:

P6: *"I rang my grandmother, my grandfather and everyone, but my dad had rung them all, and said to them if you take her in I'll cut you off and never speak to you again."* [305-307]

Some spoke of patterns of estrangement being intergenerationally repeated or *history repeating*:

P7: *"My Mum had a very bad relationship with her mother, and was the eldest daughter, I'm the eldest daughter... and just like history was repeating, our relationship has always been pretty antagonistic."* [40-43]

It was also common for *within-family triangular relationships* to play an important part in estrangement development. In some cases, a majority of family members sided with one estranging party against the other. *Meeting broad family disapproval* could be particularly difficult to negotiate, and this could sometimes lead to an *exclusion from family events,* or a *rejection at family events*. Participants in this position often reported *feeling alienated*, or *a sense of stigma within the family*:

P2: *"We were at my cousin's wedding and my aunt and uncle refused to talk to us. Refused to acknowledge we were even there. So we'd turn and up... I was quite close to my cousin. We'd still see him even though we wouldn't see my Mum. So we were at the wedding, pleased to be at the wedding, and we try and speak to people. Hello. How are you? I haven't seen you in a long time. And they would just walk off (silence)."* [312-316]

Some participants, particularly estranged adult children, spoke of splitting off from their old family while starting new relationships or a new family. This could create a problem in *seeing how one's new family or others are affected,* for example, by experiencing *disconnection from family resources*, or *impoverished support from family of origin* relationships. Responses to this included *strengthening the connection to new family*, or *securing substitutes for family relationships* with other families or friends:

P5*: "I've been very privileged to make friends with some, some lovely people... who have stood in, almost for me in a parental situation, or a grandparent situation with my children."* [440-442]

The findings suggested that *managing relationship crisis within the socio-cultural matrix of family* involved complex negotiations between personal, interpersonal, social and symbolic expectations of what *being in a family* means. Estranging relationships were typically experienced as a failure to meet these expectations. In consequence, a core theme of managing estrangement at the nexus of self, family and society involved *negotiating the symbolic loss of what could or should have been*. As subsequent findings show, this could trigger a crisis to personal identity.

Estrangement as a crisis to identity: Negotiating the symbolic loss of what could or should have been

In the introduction it was suggested that when people talk about family, they are interacting with symbolic representations of family roles and identities that are communicated through available discourses that circulate in society. The findings suggested that a particular challenge for estranged family members was negotiating relationships that lay outside prevalent social discourses of what *being in a family* means.

Throughout the interviews, *describing family relationships in symbolic terms* and *referring to available family discourses* occurred frequently. Participants often spoke of *seeing the family or family relationships as symbolically important*. When actual relationships failed to meet *expectations of family relationships,* participants typically reported *feeling let down,* and experienced *a sense of symbolic loss*:

> P1: *"Nobody wants to be without a father... and it does make you sometimes miss that... er... father figure"* [14-15]
>
> P4: *"She forgot my thirtieth birthday. She's forgotten loads of my birthdays but... And... I just thought well that's really telling. That's kind of... symbolic. Not that it's even a big thing (voice rising) but... it kind of is as well."* [23-25]
>
> P12: *"I've learned to feel nothing... but it's things like watching TV and there could be an episode with a mother and a son... and there was something between them that I had missed, or something normal that I hadn't had... like something really nice. Those sort of things really do get inside and hit me..."* [151-154]
>
> P14: *"I don't think I've ever been able to have a normal brother and sister relationship with them."* [63-64]

During analysis it was possible to isolate, through coding, elements of negotiating *a sense of symbolic loss*. Accounts suggested, however, that elements of symbolic loss were typically experienced by participants as indivisible from real or imagined loss. In narration, participants were seen to fuse these elements into a binding whole. In the following example, P13 interwove elements of symbolic, imagined and remembered loss as he experienced a dilemma over contacting his mother:

> P13: *"When I bought my first flat I imagined calling my mother to tell her, because you know it's quite symbolic isn't it. It's one of those achievements that parents are supposed to be proud of... but then I remembered how she reacted when I bought my first car. Basically she just, um, dismissed it. So I just knew she wouldn't be pleased for me. It does upset me that I don't have those moments with my mother that I'm supposed to have. It upsets me a lot*

actually... and it just makes it worse, knowing how things should be... it's like you have to compete with that... version of how things should be... and if you didn't maybe you could just accept it and move on" [420-427]

Negotiating a sense of symbolic loss could be attempted by *adjusting expectations of the relationship*, as illustrated here:

> P4*: "She's my maternal mother... I am her child in a sense. But, she is not in any way what I consider to be a mother. So she will be now what I have recreated... which is... you know, an official mother person. But... I don't expect to talk to her about mother/daughter stuff. No I'm not (laughs) going to go on a spa weekend with her."* [439-442]

In addition to having to adjust to the symbolic loss of specific relationships, participants also spoke of having to negotiate perceptions of *the meaning of being estranged*. The category *the meaning of being estranged* incorporated both personal and social meanings. *The meaning of being estranged* could impact significantly upon the experience of being estranged, either emotionally, or in terms of identity evaluation. P7 suggested that *the personal meaning of estrangement* could impact greatly upon one's sense of identity:

> P7: *"I just think family is so important for that sense of where you come from, who you are. And so I lost, I lost that."* [299-300]

In terms of *the social meaning of estrangement*, several participants spoke of *feeling pressured* by *dominant social discourses* around family, which they saw as normatively promoting close and harmonious relationships. P9 described such pressure here:

> P9: *"You know when people try to tell you what you should do, or they reassure you, you know... she'll come back, you'll sort it out together... it makes it worse because there's that expectation isn't there... that as a family you sort things out together... but what if your daughter doesn't want to sort it out, or she isn't interested in her family...?"* [464-467]

A failure to achieve close family relationships could present *a crisis to identity* in relation to societal norms. This challenge could invoke a range of difficult emotions including *guilt*, *shame* and *anger*:

> P8: *"I feel responsible. And although I don't think there was anything else I could have done, um... I'm somebody whose son has run away from home. So there's... there must be something wrong with me. So I'm not as good as the next person..."* [575-578]

> P10: *"I feel ashamed of what's happened. It feels like it's my fault. I feel like I've let society down. I feel like I've let my daughter down, my wife down. I don't think that anyone could tell me that I'm not a bad dad. I feel like I'm a bad dad."* [344-346]

P12: *"I do worry a lot about what other people think when it comes to my family... um, it's hard... even with my barber, I had a conversation the other day where I was with a friend who was saying really bad things about her mum, and the barber said you shouldn't say that sort of stuff about your mum. Then he sort of tried to look at me to get the same reaction... and that was really uncomfortable for me... I felt quite ashamed, but also a bit angry because he didn't know what some people go through, and not everyone's family is normal."* [313-319]

In *comparing oneself to non-estranged people,* participants expressed concerns over *being seen as abnormal*. They also spoke of *feeling a stigma in society*. This could lead to a sense of *devaluation of self*, or *feeling insecure* about the perception of self by others:

P8: *"I feel like a freak. Because... um... well there are a few other people who are in the same situation that I've spoken to but mostly people don't have that problem."* [566-567]

P13: *"I'm used to it now, that funny look you get when you tell people... like a cross between sympathy and disgust... it's such a stigma. Ninety per cent of people say oh that's terrible... It used to make me feel really insecure, as if I had something to be ashamed of."* [267-272]

One way of attempting to resist a sense of *devaluation of self*, was through *challenging or resisting ideas about family*. P15 described how feeling less guilty involved challenging the normative idea that an unconditional bond should exist between mother and daughter:

P15: *"My sister and I had a huge falling out about it. She said that I should stand by her no matter what, because that's what mothers do... I said I know that... Christ...! So stop making me feel like shit... What about daughters? What do they do...? Do they steal from their mothers? Do they hit them in the face..?. No... so don't tell me what I'm supposed to do... I'm not feeling guilty... because all that mother/daughter stuff is bullshit."* [254-259]

Due to *feeling a stigma in society*, or *fear of being judged*, some family members were reluctant to disclose their estrangement to others. As with *keeping up appearances* within the family, *keeping up appearances* within society was also common:

P9: *"I speak to people who tell me about how their daughters and their sons are giving them arguments at home and being horrible to them, I actually don't tell anybody that my daughter is estranged from me. I... my family know... but friends down the local pub don't know. They just take it for granted, the story is okay... you know she met a guy in America and she's gone to live with him there. And they say do you miss her? And I say yeh, yeh (breezily)... Do you speak to her often? And I say oh yeh, yeh, yeh..."* [572-576]

As a consequence of *keeping up appearances*, some participants spoke of *feeling isolated* by their experience, or of *feeling unsupported* by others. As P4 suggested, a broader implication *of keeping up appearances,* was that it could contribute to a sense in society that estrangement is less common than it is:

> P4*: "I just think in society people are so uh... maybe it's people just trying to sell spa days I don't know, but you just feel like you have to be going shopping on a Saturday with your mum. Or... you know. (voice pitch rising angrily) And that's great for people who are but I don't think it should be such a stigma for people who aren't. Because there must be a lot of people out there who've got... issues. Probably more people than they say...than they admit to."* [595-599]

The finding that estrangement may be largely hidden in society, or neglected by traditional discourse, is considered further in the discussion.

Section 4: Moving forward with the legacy of a family relationship breakdown

The final section presents findings that illustrate the developmental challenge of moving through life while adjusting to the experience of estrangement.

The findings in part one highlight how the possibility of reconciliation presents an ongoing dilemma that is continually wrestled with. The findings in part two suggest that successful negotiation of an ongoing estrangement required continual adjusting in the developmental domains of attachment and emotion, and self and social identity.

The two key themes highlighted within this category will be presented in turn and are seen below in Figure 7.

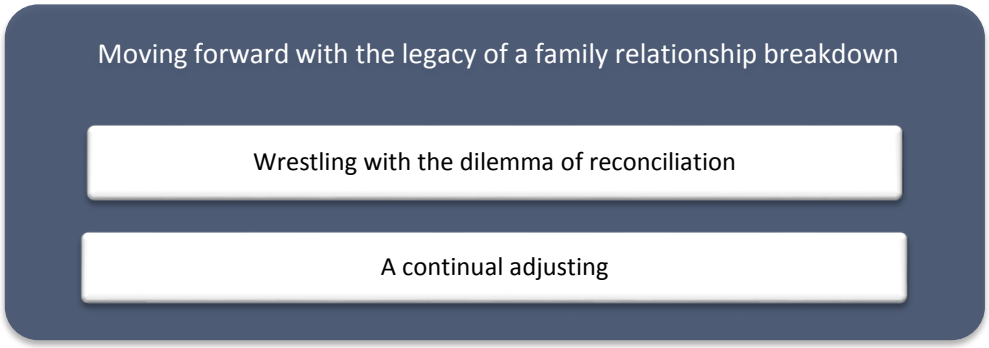

Figure 7. The category: Moving forward with the legacy of a family relationship breakdown: A continual adjusting.

<u>Wrestling with the dilemma of reconciliation</u>

Most participants were still estranged at the time of interview, though some identified as partially or fully reconciled. Although the process of successfully achieving reconciliation was not the target of this study, participants who were no longer estranged spoke of their experiences prior to negotiating reconciliation Amongst the participants who were still estranged, there was broad variation in the extent to which reconciliation was considered either possible or desirable. All participants however, reported that *wrestling with the dilemma of reconciliation* was a central preoccupation when negotiating estrangement, as highlighted in the following examples:

> P6 *"The strain of him being there is huge. It's just this big strain. Because he's just there and you don't know what to do next. Should I phone him? Should I go and see him? What shall I do?"* [387-389]

> P14: *"I just can't get it out of my head and move forward. I think about getting back to my family all the time"* [94-95]

The study found that the experience of *considering reconciliation* was closely related to *estranger/estrangee positioning*. This was because *estrangee/estranger positioning* often reflected a participant's depth of desire to reconcile, as well as the perceived degree of personal power to effect relationship change. Desirability and possibility of reconciliation were conceptualised as lying along two separate but intersecting continua, as seen in figure 10. At the nexus of these continua, participants spoke of *experiencing uncertainty* towards reconciliation. *Experiencing uncertainty* involved *feeling confused* and *experiencing mixed emotions* about the idea of reconciling.

When fully developed, the category of *considering reconciliation* divided into four dimensions, representing four broad reconciling positions that estranging parties adopted. The four dimensions were: *hoping/attempting*, *avoiding/guarding*, *despairing/fighting for* and *dismissing/giving up*. A fifth category, of *experiencing uncertainty* connected these dimensions; reflecting the finding that *wrestling with the dilemma of reconciliation* was never far from participants' experiencing. This 'never far' quality was first captured and coded as '*a constant if*' using an in vivo code from this excerpt by P1:

> P1: *"You're never really at peace. Because having a family member not talking to you is not an easy thing you know.. you uh... it's a constant...if. Should? Could? You know... it never goes away."* [191-193]

Wrestling with *a constant if* of reconciliation could feel like a perpetual struggle. Some participants described feeling a sense of *unfinished business* with the other, while others spoke of *being in limbo*:

> P1: *"I feel like there is something missing. It's not, for him probably it's just finished, cut off. But for me it's not."* [182-183]

> P9: *"If I knew she definitely wasn't coming back maybe that would change my thoughts a bit you know... maybe this being in limbo will stop... maybe after a couple of months I'll be able to settle down... and stop looking for her."* [491-493]

As participants experienced shifts in estrangee/estranger positioning, they also tended to experience shifts in their positioning towards *considering reconciliation*. The four dimensional categories of *considering reconciliation*, and the connecting category of *experiencing uncertainty* can be seen in figure 8.

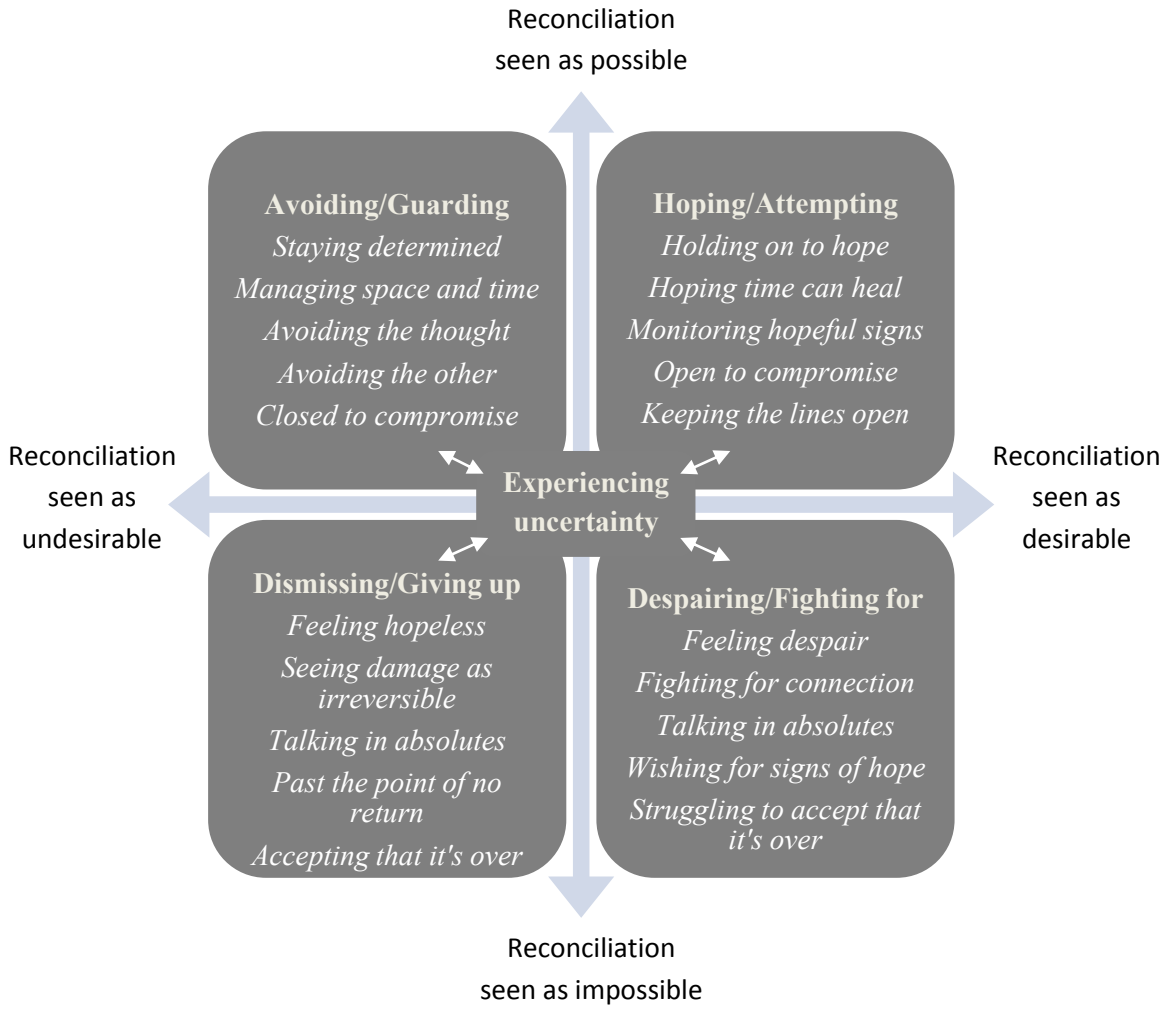

Figure 8. The dimensional categories and supporting factors of *considering reconciliation*, the axis of desirability and possibility, and the connecting category of *experiencing uncertainty*.

Figure 8 highlights how one's position towards reconciling was influenced by the degree of desirability, and possibility, experienced. If reconciliation was seen as both desirable and possible, *a hoping/attempting* stance was possible. Factors supporting this category included: *holding on to hope*, *hoping time could heal*, *monitoring hopeful signs*, being *open to compromise*, and *keeping the lines open*. Although this was the most optimistic position, the experience of uncertainty was, however, never far away:

> P7: *"For a long time I just thought no, I need to... keep the lines of communication open. I need to keep... to keep making an effort, but it was hard to stay hopeful."* [246-248]

If reconciliation was seen as desirable but not possible, a shift to a *despairing/ fighting for* position could occur. This usually happened gradually, as a person relinquished hope. Factors supporting this category included: *feeling despair*, *fighting for connection*, *talking in absolutes*, *wishing for signs of*

hope, and *struggling to accept it's over*. This appeared to be a position characterised by intense levels of distress, and a sometimes overwhelming sense of helplessness:

> P10: *"I know where she is. I've got her address. We know exactly where she is. I could get on a plane and fly out there... but I'd be wasting my time, because she won't talk to me (weeps)."* [336-337]

When reconciliation was seen as possible, but undesirable, an *avoiding/guarding* stance was common. Factors supporting this category included: *staying determined*, carefully *managing space and time* (between parties), *avoiding the thought* of reconciliation, *avoiding the other*, and being *closed to compromise*. From this position, reconciliation was usually considered to carry too great a risk of further emotional injury:

> P13: *"I know her. She could ring any time... even after years after hearing nothing... but if... or rather when, she does... part of me will be on such high alert... If I let her in, she'll only hurt me again... so I'll stay very cool and keep my distance."* [526-529]

In some cases, reconciliation was seen as neither desirable nor possible, and participants described experiencing a *dismissing/giving up* stance toward reconciliation. Factors supporting this category included: *feeling hopeless*, *seeing damage as irreversible*, *talking in absolutes*, being *past the point of no return*, and *accepting that it's over*. Participants tended to see this stance as a means of realistically accepting that reconciliation would never happen:

> P8: *"I don't think he will... come back. Um... and I know everybody tells me I'm wrong and that's very kind of them but... I just know him better than everybody else."* [485-487]

Central to all positions, including the position of *dismissing/giving up*, was the experience of uncertainty. Participants 5, 8, 13, and 14 spoke particularly strongly from a *dismissing/giving up position*, and yet each could still experience moments of uncertainty that the estrangement was permanent. During most of her interview, P14 assertively dismissed the idea that reconciliation was desirable or possible, as illustrated here:

> P14: *"People have always said to me when you get pregnant you know, surely you'll be able to build bridges with her then... and I don't want to build bridges. I don't want her to have anything to do with me or my life. I can't see it ever happening"* [380-383]

Later in her interview however, P14 appeared to be *experiencing uncertainty* around this same anticipated event:

> P14 *"I am a little bit worried about how I might adjust when I have my child. I'm a little bit worried about what feelings that might provoke... what feelings might resurface... if it could soften my stance"* [471-473]

The study found that there were strong links between the themes of *considering reconciliation* and *imagined interactions*. *Considering reconciliation* typically involved *imagining reconciliation*, a form of *imagined interaction*. As previously reported, *imagined interactions* could provoke powerful emotional reactions, such as hope or despair, as well as influence approach or avoidance behaviours.

For participants who were hopeful, *a turn towards reconciliation* remained a possibility. The early stages of attempting to move towards reconciliation were described as a time of caution. Participants spoke of carefully *weighing up the consequences* of reducing interpersonal distance, and *treading carefully* while making *attempts at reconciliation*.

A key task of attempting reconciliation was seen to be *renegotiating the relationship*. *Renegotiating the relationship* could involve *trying to compromise*, *finding common ground*, *considering making a sacrifice*, *reducing expectations*, or *finding forgiveness*. Renegotiating the relationship also crucially involved *improved communication*. *Improved communication* tended to include any form of communication that reversed the distancing effect of *a widening communication void* or *a deepening communication void*. The findings showed that the early basis of improved communication was *appeasing communication shifts* such as *apologising*. This however, could require someone to make *the first move*:

> P7: *"I just said I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry, I don't know what to say. All I can do is just ask you to please, please forgive me. I... I'm sorry. And that did it."* [230-232]

A number of participants shared experiences of family relationships that had reached a status of at least partial reconciliation. Accounts suggested that reconciled relationships may have passed through complex and difficult transitions, and that adjusting to these changes could require further major negotiation. It is outside the scope of the present study to consider these challenges, but the issue of adjustment, or *moving forward with the legacy of a family relationship breakdown*, is the focus of the final section of findings.

Moving forward with the legacy of a family relationship breakdown: A continual adjusting

The study found that the consequences of negotiating an estranging family relationship could be deeply felt and far-reaching. P7 spoke of the personal pain of estrangement as a powerful legacy - an inheritance that, without diligence, could be handed across time to a future generation:

> P7*: "I really, really refuse to give my children that legacy of, of... of... a family relationship breakdown... All that terrible hurt."* [189-191]

Participants varied considerably in the degree to which they felt they were *adjusting* while *moving forward with the legacy of a family relationship breakdown*. In the following excerpt, P13 gave a poignant sense of how *adjusting* was experienced as a continual process, without any real end:

> P13: *"You think you've adjusted to it, but you never really adjust to it. I mean, you know, how can you? It'll always be part of you who you are, part of you that's broken and you can't fix... you know how some sounds make you feel a certain way...? (INT. Like?) Like a bell... a church bell... you know that heavy sad ringing? (INT. Yeh.) Yeh... well, whenever I think of my family, I hear that... no I feel that... very deep inside me...that heavy sad ringing."* [543-548]

The findings suggested that moving forward with the legacy of estrangement could require *continual adjusting* in two broad domains/categories. The *adjusting* domains were *attachment and emotion,* and *self and social identity*. Within each domain, *adjusting* was experienced along a continuum, moving from *avoidance, confusion and unresolved conflict* at one end, to *growth, clarity, healing and renewal* at the other. The *adjusting* domain of *attachment and emotion,* and the supporting factors identified, can be seen below in Table 4.

The domain of attachment and emotion	
Key supporting factors	
Feeling emotionally insecure	*Gaining emotional security*
Being emotionally overwhelmed	*Developing emotional resilience*
Blocking out feelings	*Working through feelings*
Heightened defensiveness	*Increasing openness*
A developing coldness	*Developing warmth and sensitivity*
Isolating self from others	*Valuing and developing relationships*
Experiencing rejection sensitivity	*Learning to cope with rejection*
Experiencing loss as irreplaceable	*Finding substitute relationships*
Holding on to anger	*Finding forgiveness*
Getting stuck in the emotional past	*Looking to the future with hope*
Avoidance, confusion, unresolved conflict	Growth, clarity, healing , renewal
Adjusting continuum	

Table 4. The adjusting domain and supporting factors of *attachment and emotion*.

Table 4 shows the key factors, identified as representing the experienced level of *adjusting*, in the domain of *attachment and emotion*. Factors in this domain tended to reflect the experience of inrapersonal and interpersonal process. To the left of the *adjusting* continuum, factors supporting the experience of *avoidance, confusion and unresolved conflict* are identified. These included: *feeling emotionally insecure*, *being emotionally overwhelmed*, *blocking out feelings*, *heightened defensiveness*, *a developing coldness*, *isolating self from others*, *experiencing rejection sensitivity*, *experiencing loss as irreplaceable*, *holding on to anger*, and *getting stuck in the emotional past*. Illustrating several of these factors, P6 described how her difficulty in emotionally *adjusting* had led her to isolate herself from the world, rather than risk further emotional pain:

> P6: *"It possibly comes across that I'm cold. But that's because of that not letting, not wanting to let people in... Um, and the... that estrangement has exacerbated that. You know, there's only one place I am truly happy and that's when I'm sitting in my house on my own. Which is ridiculous but that's the only time I'm really, really happy... is when I'm sitting indoors and I'm on my own, door shut and I'm in my little house. All on my own, so no-one can get to me and... you know I don't have to deal with all these emotions and... I've spent too many years crying... years and years and years crying."* [272-278]

At the other end of the continuum, in the *adjusting* domain of *attachment and emotion*, factors supporting the experience of *growth, clarity, healing and renewal* were identified. These included:

gaining emotional security, *developing emotional resilience*, *working through feelings*, *increasing openness*, *developing warmth and sensitivity*, *valuing and developing relationships*, *learning to cope with rejection*, *finding substitute relationships*, *finding forgiveness*, and *looking to the future with hope*. Some of these factors were illustrated in the following excerpt by P5, as she described how grateful she was to her husband, for encouraging her to develop warmth and openness in her relationships with their children:

> P5: *"I think my saving grace has been my husband... he's a very gentle person. And uh, he's given that warmth, and, and forced that closeness with the children, that I otherwise wouldn't have been able to give. So I've been working at it... being more open, and warm... so I don't make the same mistakes as my mother did."* [465-469]

The second *adjusting* domain of *self and social identity,* and the supporting factors identified, can be seen below in Table 5.

The domain of self and social identity	
Key supporting factors	
Never understanding/Feeling confused	*Making sense/ Gaining insight*
Devaluing self	*Building self-esteem*
Seeing self as defective	*Normalising experience*
Feeling stigmatized	*Finding acceptance*
Falling short of symbolic expectations	*Creating new discourses and ideas*
Seeing self as rootless	*Making new roots*
Hiding experience	*Sharing experience*
Feeling alienated	*Finding connection in others' experience*
History repeating	*Authoring a new story*
Avoidance, confusion, unresolved conflict	Growth, clarity, healing , renewal
Adjusting continuum	

Table 5. The *adjusting* domain and supporting factors of *self and social identity*.

Table 5 shows the key factors, identified as representing the experienced level of *adjusting*, in the domain of *self and social identity*. Factors in this domain tended to reflect the experience of social and symbolic process. To the left of the *adjusting* continuum, factors supporting the experience of *avoidance, confusion and unresolved conflict* are identified. These included: *never understanding/feeling confused*, *devaluing self*, *seeing self as defective*, *feeling stigmatized*, *falling short of symbolic expectations*, *seeing self as rootless*, *hiding experience*, *feeling alienated* and *history*

repeating. Some of these factors were illustrated by P15, when she spoke of how a sense stigma and shame led her to hide her experience from others who might potentially support her:

> P15: *"I've never really got support from anyone. The only one who knows the whole story is my sister and she just judges me for it. I don't blame her. I would do the same, even though she should understand because my mother didn't speak to her for years. Well... I suppose I might get support if I told people, but I can't. Like I said, I'm too ashamed. I know what some people would think. What sort of a mother am I? "* [411-415]

At the opposite end of the continuum, in the *adjusting* domain of *self and social and identity*, factors supporting the experience of *growth, clarity, healing and renewal* were identified. These included: *making sense/gaining insight*, *building self esteem*, *normalising experience*, *finding acceptance*, *creating new discourses and ideas*, *making new roots*, *sharing experience*, *finding connection in others' experience* and *authoring a new story*. Several of these factors were highlighted in the following passage, where P8 described how she was working towards *making sense* of her experience, through connecting and sharing with others:

> P8: *"Nowadays I don't look back... to that time, because I'm, I'm... um... focusing on where he is now, and... I'm in touch with other parents who are in the same situation as me... and we've been um... sharing I suppose... sharing our experiences... So that's, that's where my focus is now. So it's still to do with my son, but it's not... just about him... it's about making sense of what's happened... to me... to us."* [128-132]

The compelling, often deeply personal, experiences shared by participants in this study, suggested that *moving forward with the legacy of a family relationship breakdown* was a task of perpetual negotiation and transition. Negotiating family estrangement could involve the experience of irreconcilable loss, the grief of which could echo through one's life like a deeply ringing bell. It could also however lead to a liberation from painful attachments, and generate new ways of seeing the self or the world. The indivisible nature of gain, loss and transformation, in the experience of living through estrangement, was beautifully expressed in this final excerpt by P10:

> P10: *"Am I a better person after this? I don't know. It's made me look at myself... I've looked at my world completely differently... I look at everything now differently... two years ago I wouldn't have noticed the leaves falling off the trees and noticed how the different colours change, but now I notice how quickly everything changes, how quickly things are gone when you take your eye off them... but I notice things like that now... how beautiful the world is, how it's full of beautiful things... but I can't share them with my daughter... because I took my eye off her... she's gone."* [359-365]

A proposed schematic model of the experience of negotiating family estrangement

The proposed relationship between the fifteen categories that are connected by the core category 'negotiating emotional and ideological distance' can be seen below in Figure 9.

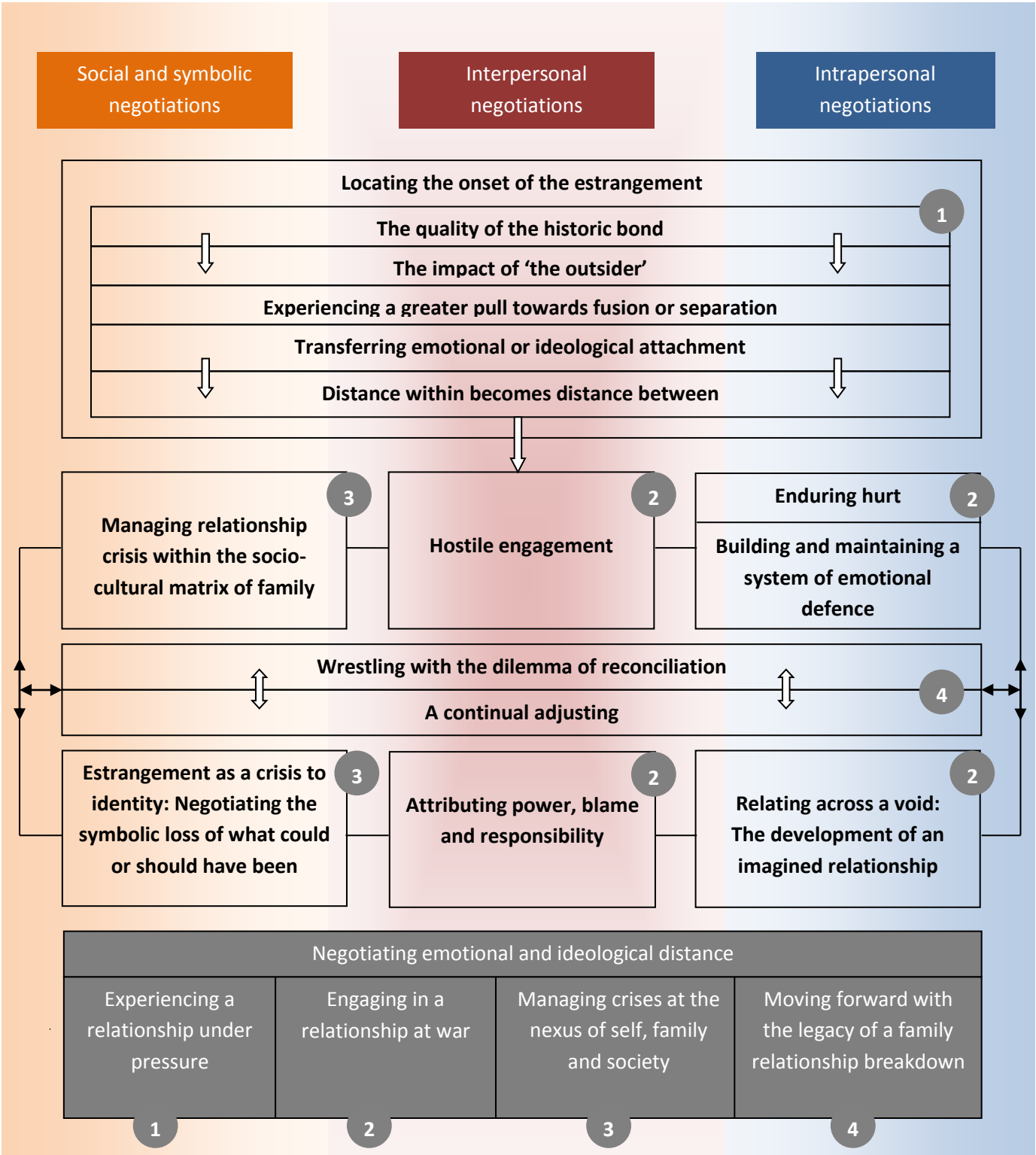

Figure 9. A proposed schematic model of the experience of negotiating family estrangement.

The schematic model in Figure 9 highlights two broad phases to the experience of estrangement. In the first phase, the onset phase, the process follows a linear path as distancing between family members increases, and as one party transfers attachment from the relationship to a third party or influence. This process is identified within the category *experiencing a relationship under pressure.*

At the point where distancing between family members triggers hostile engagement between dyadic members, the second phase of estrangement begins. This phase is non-linear and centres around a continual sense of adjusting and a struggle with the dilemma of reconciliation. Adjusting to being estranged and negotiating the dilemma of reconciliation are central factors involved in *moving forward with the legacy of a family relationship breakdown.* Influencing this process are factors from the categories of *engaging in a relationship at war* and *managing crises at the nexus of self, family and society*.

In this proposed schematic model of estrangement, the category *moving forward with the legacy of a family relationship breakdown* is situated at the heart of the estrangement process, conveying the sense given by participants that negotiating estrangement was a task of perpetual adjusting and transition. The study's focus was on how people negotiate the experience of estrangement, rather than how people achieve reconciliation. Therefore, future research into the reconciliation process would necessitate an amended version of this model.

The model suggests that to understand how people negotiate family estrangement one should include consideration of intrapersonal, interpersonal, social and symbolic factors. This is reinforced by the finding of the core connecting category that experiencing estrangement involves *negotiating emotional and ideological distance* from family relationships.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore how adults experience and negotiate the process of estrangement from close family members. From the introductory rationale and review of literature, it was concluded that little is currently known about how family estrangement is experienced or negotiated, and therefore this study had the potential to generate new knowledge. Grounded theory was selected as the best method to produce an account that might describe and explain how estrangement was experienced and negotiated over time. Qualitative interviews were conducted with fifteen participants, and through detailed analysis of the interview transcripts, four main theoretical categories emerged and were identified as representing key estrangement dimensions as experienced by participants over time. A core connecting category of 'Negotiating emotional and ideological distance', applying to all estrangement dimensions, was also identified. A schematic model proposing the relationship between categories was also presented.

In this chapter, I will first review the findings of the core connecting category and the four main categories, developing the categories further through linking findings to existing theory while highlighting areas where new understandings or questions for future research have emerged.

Next, I will discuss the strengths and limitations of this study, and demonstrate how this study meets appropriate standards of rigour and credibility. This will be followed by consideration of the implications of this study for the practice of counselling psychology.

Finally, I will offer some final points of reflexivity, commenting upon my experience of transitioning through the research process, and highlighting some of the rewards and challenges that have been encountered along the way.

Theoretical integration and development

The core connecting category – Negotiating emotional and ideological distance

The findings suggested that family estrangement is experienced as a complex and continual process of personal transition that involves *negotiating emotional and ideological distance* from family relationships. All participants in this study described how family relationships were experienced as lasting bonds that connected individuals both emotionally and symbolically. When relations became estranged, family members therefore had to negotiate a continual sense of distancing, not only from previous levels of emotional connectedness, but also from previous ideas and understandings of what the relationship once was, could, or should be.

The processes of emotional and ideological distancing were seen to have an interactional relationship that was central to the experience of all stages of estrangement. This is much in line with Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionist understanding of humans as acting and reacting towards relationships on the basis of the meanings they ascribe them. The subjective experience of the interactional relationship between emotional and ideological negotiation is best illustrated through quoting one of the participants in this study. In the following excerpt P12 described how difficult it was for him to distinguish his experience of an emotional attachment from an ideological one:

> *"On one level I feel like I still love her and I always will... but it's complicated. I do question it. I wonder, do I really love her, as a person, or is more the idea of her, you know as a mother, that I can't quite let go of?" [P12: 175]*

The sense of not being able to 'quite let go' of the emotional and symbolic attachment to close family relationships was echoed throughout this study. Even after decades of feeling estranged, participants still described experiencing a sense of constant negotiation, and as an observer, I was struck throughout by a sense of constant tension within participants, as though estrangement were experienced as an ever present mental and emotional tug-of-war.

In terms of emotional negotiation, many of the grand developmental or systemic theories, such as those of Bowlby (1969), Erikson (1959), Minuchin (1974) and Bowen (1978), all stress the importance of adults achieving healthy levels of emotional distance from family relationships. The closest existing theoretical construct relating to emotional distancing in family estrangement is perhaps Bowen's (1979) description of emotional cut off, as outlined in the introduction. Emotional cut-off might go some way to explaining the experiences of some participants in this study, though not others, who were still deeply emotionally engaged in the relationship. Indeed, the state of being estranged was typically seen to *generate* a range of relationship-orientated emotions including sadness, loss, hurt, anger and guilt. This seemed particularly true of those who felt that they had been

estranged against their will, which is a side of the estrangement experience not addressed by Bowen's theory. Thus, rather than as a state of cut-off, estrangement is perhaps better conceptualised as creating a lasting emotional crisis within the context of an interpersonal relationship, where one way of coping can be through the defensive blocking of difficult emotions.

If emotional-cut off does not really account for the subjective sense of constant emotional negotiation reported, this may be because, as Searight (1997) notes, Bowen's theory is built around the concept of 'emotions' as biologically driven, instinctive and unconscious states, rather than 'feelings', which Knudson-Martin (1994) identifies as affective states that are subjectively experienced and consciously labelled. Using this distinction, to some degree all participants in this study appeared to have negotiated degrees of 'emotional' distance through the building of a system of defence, and yet they continued to articulate how 'affected' they were by the experience.

The strength and quality of affect appeared to relate to the degree of ideological distance negotiated, but negotiating ideological distance from a family relationship could be extremely difficult. From a systemic perspective, McGoldrick (1995: 22) writes "No matter how old we are, no matter how distant emotionally or physically, we seem unable to get away from the importance of family". The idea of the family as 'important' is unsurprisingly central to systemic writings, and the findings from this study would appear to support and underline such an idea. It should be cautioned, however, that this is a finding somewhat akin to a self-fulfilling prophecy, for any research that reports on the importance of family also *reinforces* the idea of family as important. This is not a point that is generally acknowledged within family therapy research, but it deserves highlighting in view of the reported challenges of resisting pressurising family discourses reported by participants.

One key aspect of negotiating estrangement that developmental and systemic theories largely fail to address is what it means to people to be estranged, particularly in light of prevailing ideology, including the idea that "the family is always better together" as highlighted earlier by Medina (2010: 269). Dallos and Draper (2010) describe how over the last twenty years systemic theory has been increasingly challenged by social constructionist considerations of family ideologies. Such critical considerations include those of Foucault (1972), who spoke of hierarchies of culturally bound discourses or narratives which may marginalize the experiences of many.

DePaulo and Morris (2005: 57) describe the ideology of family as 'a largely uncontested set of beliefs', but the individuals in this study appeared to feel alienated from dominant family narratives, struggling instead to negotiate the distance between their own experiences and that which they perceived to be normal. This finding is reminiscent of Daly's (2001) observations of the discord and distress experienced by people whose 'family time' could not live up to expectations. In the case of estrangement, 'family time' could be forever, so much more was potentially at stake. As a consequence of feeling marginalized in society, estrangement could lead to a range of powerful and

distressing status-orientated emotions, including feelings of failure, defectiveness, shame, and worthlessness. Indeed, it was found that the meaning of being estranged could be so significant that it could lead to a sense of feeling stigmatized and trigger a crisis to identity.

The core category that emerged through analysis suggests that to best understand and support people experiencing estrangement, an approach should be adopted that integrates both sociological and psychological understandings of what it is to be a part of a family. This is because negotiating the idea of being estranged within society appeared to be equally as challenging for participants in this study as negotiating the emotional dynamics within the relationship.

Section 1 - Experiencing a relationship under pressure.

The findings in this category helped to illuminate how family members experienced the early stages of estrangement, as they attempted to negotiate a relationship that was transforming under internal and external pressures. It was found that family members could become estranged regardless of the historic quality of the relationship, and the analysis enabled four dimensions representing historic bond quality to be identified, which were considered to relate to well documented categories of 'attachment', as developed from the work of Bowlby (1969).

Although historic bond quality did not appear to indicate that estrangement was more or less likely, it did appear to lead to differences in the emotional experiences of participants during fusion-separation conflict and subsequent estrangement. For example, distancing oneself from a previously close bond appeared to lead to a greater sense of guilt, confusion and loss than distancing oneself from an antagonistic bond where frustration, defiance or relief were more common. It was beyond the scope of this study to investigate these differences in great depth, so this is a tentative finding that would merit further attention.

Attachment literature often proposes that attachment styles, including family attachment relationship styles (Byng Hall, 2008), generally remain stable across the lifespan, though Davilla and Cobb (2004) note that some studies report that, in circumstances involving stressful life transitions, attachment patterns have been seen to change until at least early adulthood. This study found that, for adults experiencing estrangement, there were considerable shifts in attachment patterns throughout various stages of adulthood. Adult attachment shifts were also noted as occurring within all categories of historic attachment bond quality. For example, some participants with historically close family bonds spoke of developing attachment insecurity across a range of relationships, while others with historically insecure bonds appeared able to negotiate attachment security in subsequent relationships. The findings would therefore support any emerging research that proposes attachment flexibility throughout adulthood. It also appears that family estrangement may be a particular stressful circumstance where attachment style shifts may be more likely, but this would need verifying.

The findings integrated the experiences of both 'sides' of an estranging relationship, and participants in the position of initially pulling away from the relationship described experiencing internal conflict along a fusion-separation continuum. This finding was strongly supported by Bowen's (1978) theory of *differentiation of self* from family relationships. During fusion-separation conflict, participants appeared to be struggling with what Bowen describes as the counterbalancing forces of individuality versus togetherness and/or intellect versus emotion. Bowen integrates these forces through the concept of differentiation, described by Searight (1997: 6) as "one's ability to maintain cognitive and emotional independence in the face of strong togetherness forces". It should be noted however that, by 'togetherness forces', Searight is referring to internal attachment instincts and not the socially embedded expectations placed upon family relationships. Bowen's theory has been largely unaltered since its conception, so it might be interesting to evaluate how well it might accommodate more recent social constructionist ideas of 'togetherness forces' that hold family relationships together - such as the pressures of dominant family discourses.

Throughout the literature, the process of differentiation of self/individuation in adult family relationships is seen as a normative developmental process. For example, Sorkhabi (2010) notes that that the renegotiation of conflicting personal values is a well documented source of conflict between parents and adolescents. Most research into the process of individuation focuses on the developmental stages of childhood or early adulthood, though this study found that in estranging relationships, fusion-separation issues presented an ongoing challenge throughout adulthood. One possible explanation for this is that estranged relationships may be caught in a state of developmental suspension, where normative adjustments and transitions are thwarted by the processes of interpersonal rejection and withdrawal.

For estranging parties, the negotiation of diverging values appeared to be particularly problematic. Two key factors were identified that could undermine the chances of successful renegotiation – third party complications surrounding attachment transfer, and deteriorating communication. In terms of third-party complications, much of the existing theoretical language used to describe the process of differentiation of self suggests a uni-directional view of fusion-separation process, as one party pulls away from the relationship to a more 'individuated' self. However, this study found that family members only began to pull away *from* the relationships once they had someone or something to transfer attachment *to*. Typically, the resulting dynamic at this time was therefore not dyadic, but one of triangulation, even if the 'outsider' was an ideological influence rather than a person. The process of transferring attachment from the historic relationship to an outside attachment, and the subsequent creation of a triangular dynamic between estranging parties and an outside emotional or ideological attachment is highlighted in Figure1.

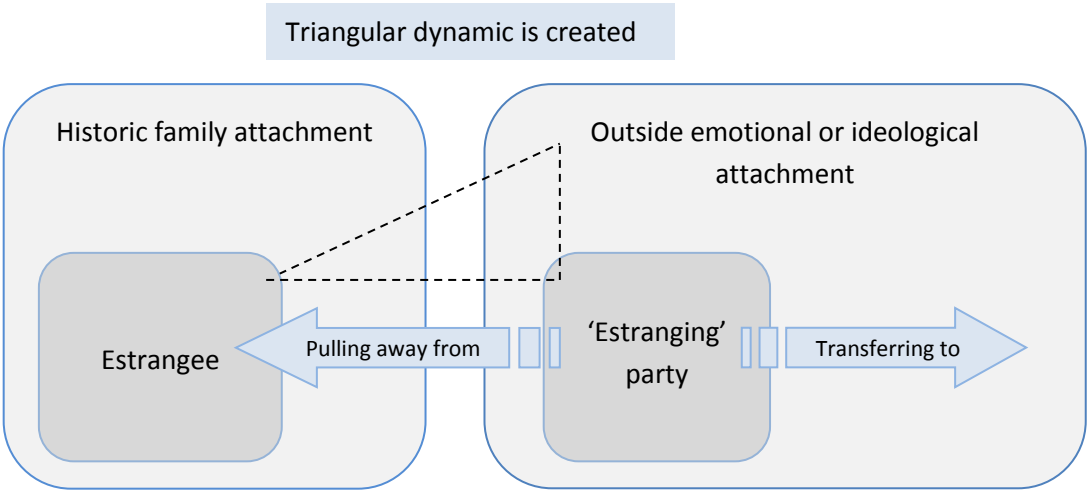

Figure 1. The transfer of ideological or emotional attachment and the creation of a triangular dynamic.

Originally proposed by Bowen (1978), the concept of triangular relationships within family of origin relationships is central to systemic theory. Bowen suggests that triangular dynamics are an intrinsic part of all emotional systems, though it is rare to see triangular relationships discussed outside of family literature. Interestingly, even when triangular dynamics are discussed within the context of family systems, they are usually used to address within-family relationships, rather than explored as involving a third party or influence. Young (2010) describes triangular dynamics as 'the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion' (p.99), and from participant accounts they appeared to play a central role in exacerbating problems during estrangement. Triangular relationships typically involve the forming of coalitions, and Haley (1987) has suggested that covert, rather than overt, coalitions possess an enhanced potential to damage relationships.

In cases of estrangement, attachment transfers and coalitions were often formed outside of the family, initially developing without the awareness of one party. The period of covert attachment transfer could be very damaging, for issues of difference at this time were typically not negotiated, and they therefore intensified. This could lead to a harmful erosion of trust between parties, and a perceived rejection of common identity, experience and understanding. The experience of mistrust and rejection appeared to toxically combine to create a sense of alienation, pushing family members further apart. It is perhaps this growing sense of alienation that may be seen as the defining early feature of a relationship heading towards estrangement.

Section 2 – Engaging in a relationship at war

The category *engaging in a relationship at war* focused upon the period of conflict that was experienced when the pressure upon the relationship triggered a dynamic of open hostility. This was a

relationship phase marked by interpersonal attack and withdrawal, escalating power struggles, emotional injury and defensive coping.

Using Goffman's (1993,1994a, 1994b, 1998) conflict management style definitions, the style typically adopted by family members at this time was hostile, and estranged relationships could be categorised as non-regulated. Goffman observes how, in marital couples, hostile conflict style predicates eventual relationship breakdown and dissolution. The presence of criticism, contempt, stonewalling and defensiveness can be particularly destructive, and these communication strategies and behaviours were widely reported by participants. Lee (2010) cautions that such behaviours in family relationships may have 'toxic cumulative effects', and this was borne out through participants' descriptions of the period of hostile engagement as a time of escalating hurt and resentment that could reverberate through time and across generations. The findings suggest that application of Goffman's theory may be usefully extended beyond the field of marital relationships, into the realm of family estrangement.

In marriage, the complete dissolution of the relationship may be possible. In family relationships, however, it appeared that the best that could be achieved was a sense of stand-off, usually accompanied by an increasing absence of contact. While family members were able to disengage from real interaction with each other during estrangement, the meaning of family relationships was so significant that negotiating a level of symbolic disengagement or ideological distance proved much more complicated. This is perhaps why, in the void created by absence of real contact, imagined interactions and the development of an imagined relationship would prove to play such an important role in ongoing negotiations.

The four dimensions to imagined relationships identified in this study were supported by a body of literature by Honeycutt (2003, 2010) who identifies 'imagined interactions' as a form of social cognition comprised of mental images and conversations with significant others. Honeycutt proposes that imagined interactions are theoretically rooted in symbolic interactionism, and have a purposeful quality, serving a number of functions for people in close relationships. Some functions appear particularly relevant to estrangement, such as action rehearsal, attempts at understanding, replacement of lack of contact, emotional catharsis, problem resolution, and keeping the relationship alive. Honeycutt largely views imagined interactions as cognitions, emphasising their communicative, dialogical and episodic nature. In estrangement, however, it appears that the interpreted meaning of accumulated imagined interactions over time transcends the episodic and forms the basis of an imagined relationship with an unfolding life and history of its own.

Imagined relationships with estranged family members share some features with imaginal relationships with the deceased, as proposed by Danenbaum and Kinnear (2009). However, the two are different enough to propose that they are categorically distinct. Imaginal relationships need not accommodate feedback, and are largely reported to function as a source of comfort and means of

maintaining closeness. Imagined relationships may be partially based upon feedback, though this may be second-hand, minimal, or defensively communicated. People are usually aware that imaginal relationships are not real, but during estrangement the boundaries between real and imagined relationships were found to be problematically blurred. Rather than provide comfort and promote closeness, imagined relationships were seen to maintain distress and promote actual distancing.

The finding that imagined relationships were based upon cognitions, and had both emotional and behavioural consequences, suggested that they could be helpfully understood using a cognitive-behavioural view of human experience, as developed by Beck (1976). Beck has shown how people may develop inaccurate beliefs about people and events based upon partial and unreliable information. Beliefs may include assumptions about how others perceive us or experience our relationships, and two common assumptions that were seen in this study were that the other perceived the relationship as no longer valuable, and that the other was psychologically fixed. As contact reduced, opportunities for corrective feedback diminished, leading to a state of mutual entrenchment, ultimately reinforcing assumptions of psychological inflexibility.

Alternatively, from a psychodynamic perspective, Pickering (2006: 251) describes how during relationship conflict "the imaginal space between the two characters can be seen as a projection screen" where the defensive projections of both parties "dovetail" and "deadlock" creating a "malignant" or "malevolent third" presence between them. This may be a particularly apt view of imagined relationships in estrangement, for they were found to serve a largely defensive function. Firestone (1987) proposes that, in the context of interpersonal relationships, fantasy can play a significant role in maintaining a defensive distance from potentially hurtful exchanges. Thobaben (2005) notes however that, although interpersonal defence mechanisms reduce immediate anxieties, they ultimately exacerbate relationship problems for they exclude information, distort reality and interfere with problem-solving ability.

As estranged relations develop over time, the issue of distorted reality may become increasingly important, for the findings suggest that there is a risk that the imagined relationship may become a mental space where false memories are created. Loftus (1997) reports that false memories may involve either distorted or fictitious recollections of actual events. During interview, there were frequent occasions when participants expressed concerns about the reality of problems 'in the other person's head'. It was also commonly observed that factual and discrepant information could interrupt and contradict participants' established and familiar narrative accounts of events. In terms of negotiating ongoing dispute, the potential complications of divergent and imagined accounts of historic interactions are perhaps easy to anticipate, and further research into this area is recommended.

Although imagined interactions and relationships were seen to be important in the development of estrangement, much of the interaction between estranging parties was real, and experienced as deeply hurtful. Therefore, although the development of a system of defence could be problematic, it was also seen as a necessary means of achieving emotional protection and distance. The concept of defence mechanisms in psychology originates from the work of Sigmund and Anna Freud (1936, 1938) and, within the Freudian tradition, defence mechanisms are seen as unconscious and automatic mental processes that protect an individual from unwanted thoughts or feelings. Cramer (1998, 2000) notes that, in modern social psychology, psychological defences are usually described as coping mechanisms, and are conceptualised as intentional and under conscious control. The literature therefore distinguishes between defence and coping mechanisms along the lines of intentionality and conscious operation. During interview, participants expressed explicit and conscious awareness of having developed defensive coping systems, and yet they were also observed displaying defensive behaviours that were interpreted as being unconscious and unintentional. In attempting to understand estrangement, this study therefore supports the usefulness of adopting an integrated view of defence/coping mechanisms, as proposed by a number of theorists including Newman (2001) and Bouchard and Theriault (2003).

One of the unintentional consequences of developing a robust system of emotional defence emerged through participants' descriptions of a developing coldness that could spread into the experiencing of a broad range of personal relationships. Harrist (2006:108) observes that one of the problems with developing strong defences against negative feelings such as grief, anxiety or anger is that this often results in "a decreased ability to experience pleasurable feelings as well". Some participants appeared less susceptible to this occurring than others and more detailed exploration of how this issue was successfully negotiated could be helpful in the future.

It is understandable that building a system of defence was so important, for the reported reactions to estrangement appeared similar to those that could be clinically expected of someone experiencing acute distress, or even trauma. The depth of distress experienced was often apparent during interview when participants could become quickly and powerfully overwhelmed by painful feelings. Distress intensity was also manifest in the prevalaent use of trauma language, a sign of severe 'attachment injury' as proposed by Johnson, Makinen and Milikin (2001).

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994) currently defines trauma as "Event or events that involve actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others". Kira et al. (2008) note that this has proved a controversially narrow definition of trauma, for it appears limited to the threat of extreme physical danger. Alternatively, Kira et al. propose a 'development-based taxonomy of

trauma' that takes into account a wide range of traumatic events, including family trauma, relationship failure, interpersonal rejection, and abandonment. This broader perspective permits a validating acknowledgement of the intense emotional difficulty reported during estrangement, which may be important, for almost half of the participants said that they had experienced suicidal feelings as a result of being estranged, raising concerns that estrangement has not received adequate recognition as a significant risk factor. This finding supports Leary, Koch and Hechenbleikner's (2001) proposal of a likely link between rejection, relational devaluation and suicidality, highlighting the importance of further research in this area, as well as suggesting that specific guidelines may be valuable for practitioners working with estranged individuals.

In terms of traumatic events, several participants likened the experience of estrangement to a bereavement, describing emotional and behavioural reactions that are central to bereavement models such as those developed by Parkes (1996) and Worden (2003). In addition, participants expressed a sense of complication and confusion at not having a normative 'model' to follow in dealing with their loss, and of not being able to achieve a state of closure. With some development, it may be possible to amend existing models of bereavement to account for the sense of ongoing adjustment required to negotiate estrangement, though it is outside the scope of the present research to do so.

As in bereavement, one of the central experiences often reported by estranged family members involved a debilitating sense of powerlessness to change the situation. Participants usually arrived at interview with a firmly established sense of who was responsible for the cause and maintenance of the estrangement, typically adopting the roles of reactive estranger or estrangee. The emotional themes associated with these positions were usually ones of hurt and helplessness and yet it was observed that participants also regularly raised concerns around feeling guilty or responsible suggesting that estranger/estrangee positioning was a more subtle and shifting construct than first appeared.

One explanation for this is offered by Weiner (2000) who has shown that during interpersonal conflict, blaming the other party can help maintain a positive sense of self-esteem. This could be said to be an example of a cognitive or discursive self-serving bias, as drawn from the work of Heider (1958), Ross (1977) and Jones and Nesbitt (1974). Crandall et al. (2007: 12) further observe that "people usually make attributions (of responsibility) that preserve an affectively consistent view of others". This perhaps explains why, when describing the other as the perpetrator or villain, some participants struggled when information was remembered that could help them view the other more sympathetically.

Seeing the other as responsible for the estrangement could benefit self-esteem and yet it was also associated with a perceived loss of control. Heckhausen and Schultz (1995) propose that experiencing a sense of personal control in situations is critical to a sense of wellbeing. According to Heckhausen and Schultz, control may be exerted outwards towards the environment (primary control), or inwards

towards oneself (secondary control). Primary control is seen as preferable, but when this cannot be achieved, a person responds by taking the only option left and makes a concerted effort to take secondary control. In estrangement, a sense of powerlessness experienced through being rejected may therefore be overcome through engaging in the process of counter-rejecting. This theory has much to offer in understanding the shifting dynamics of power that emerged at the heart of estranging relationships, in particular in explaining why a person may move over time from the position of being estranged to one of estranger. Over time, spiralling control reversals may increasingly lead the relationship into a position of deadlock, exacerbating distancing and making reconciliation less likely.

The reported complexities of negotiating positions of blame, responsibility and power in estranging relationships suggest that each position adopted has its own particular emotional consequence. Participants adopting the position of estrangee spoke of a deep sense of helplessness and despair, while those who identified as the estranger wrestled with feelings of guilt and concerns over becoming emotionally cold or disconnected. Once caught in an estranging dynamic it therefore appears that there is little freedom from being caught in a state of constant emotional negotiation.

Section 3 – Managing crises at the nexus of self, family and society

The category *managing crises at the nexus of self, family and society* focused on how estrangement was negotiated within the context of extended family and social relationships. Within family networks, while most estrangements were initially dyadic, they were often seen as an epicentre of spreading disunity that could damage relationships across and between generations. Giddens (1991) has observed that we live in times of rapid cultural transformation. Family matrices therefore cut across generational fault lines of rapidly shifting values and expectations, and schisms in social and cultural values were a common source of conflict for estranging family members. In some cases, such as those involving sexual orientation or religious values, hostility arose out of intolerance or prejudice, highlighting the vulnerability of certain groups to becoming estranged. Although this vulnerability is occasionally identified in existing literature (see Mahoney, 2005 or Koken, Bimbi and Parsons, 2009), little is known about the particular challenges of negotiating estrangement exacerbated by familial prejudice, and specific research into this issue would be welcome.

Bowen (1978) has cautioned that unresolved emotional conflict in family relationships is often intergenerationally transmitted, and there were numerous examples where estrangement was described as history repeating. The spreading consequences of estrangement were of great concern to most participants, and the ripple effect of losses throughout the family network left many to struggle with an additional emotional burden of guilt and responsibility. Some families appeared less prone to the spreading effects of a dyadic estrangement than others, however, highlighting Recchia, Ross and Vickar's (2010) call for an increased research focus into within-family differences in conflict resolution.

Some estranging dyads went to great lengths to avoid involving other family members, including keeping up appearances that relationships were functional. This often led to particular complications at times of family events and rituals. Kiser, Bennett, Heston and Paavlova (2005) have found that a positive experience of family rituals is linked to healthy psychosocial adjustment in children, but it is unclear what the impact of the negative experience of (or exclusion from) family rituals might be for adults. This could be an important area for future research, for Buchbinder, Longhofer and McCue (2009) report that family rituals can play a crucial role in mediating the effects of distressing life-events such as coping with chronic illness. Accounts highlighted how family relationships can provide vital resources in times of hardship, rendering estranged individuals particularly vulnerable in times of heightened need, and much more needs to be learned about how people manage in these conditions.

When extended family members became involved in dyadic estrangements, there was a risk that they could get drawn in to taking sides. For one party, this sometimes resulted in broad family rejection leading to the experience of within-family stigmatisation and ostracism. Participants found this particularly distressing, confirming Williams and Zadro's (2001) view that ostracism is experienced as a particularly powerful form of rejection that can lead to low self-esteem, depression and physical health decline. While Leary (2001) suggests that the intensity of felt rejection depends upon the perceived value of relationships, McGoldrick (1995) highlights the particular importance of family relationships with regard to one's sense of identity. It is therefore unsurprising that several participants reported the experience of ostracism as profoundly painful and disorientating, offering accounts reflecting Williams and Zadro's (2001:31) observation that prolonged ostracism can result in 'feelings that one does not belong anywhere'. In addition, estranged family members appeared vulnerable to developing 'rejection sensitivity' as defined by Downey and Feldman (1996), suggesting that finding 'a place to belong' might be particularly challenging. A number of participants reported that estrangement left them highly wary of relationships with others, and the long term consequences of this have yet to be investigated.

The challenge of negotiating estrangement within the context of society threw into relief the symbolic importance of family relationships, and the impact that being estranged could have upon a person's emotional security and sense of identity. Estranged family members seemed acutely aware that they were experiencing a relationship that fell short of symbolic expectations, and this appeared to involve two levels of symbolic negotiation, each with its own set of emotional consequences. Firstly, estranged individuals had to adjust to loss of a symbolic figure, such as a parent, child or sibling, and emotionally this appeared somewhat akin to the experience of bereavement. Secondly, individuals reported experiencing a sense of failure at living up to the symbolic expectations implied by their own role, and this could generate intense feelings of guilt, shame or defectiveness.

Each of these levels of symbolic negotiation were seen to impact upon the experience of identity, and the bereavement-like nature of estrangement suggests that research in this area may be informative. Parkes (1993, 1996) suggests that the loss of a close relationship involves a period of psychosocial transition, where successful negotiation requires identity adjustment, in which one relinquishes the identity of the role afforded by the relationship. Unlike with death, the study found that in estrangement one cannot in any absolute sense relinquish the role of parent, child or sibling, and this appeared to leave participants with a sense of holding a partial or defective identity. This seemed to leave participants in a state of what Erikson (1968) calls 'role confusion'. Kroger (2007: 9) describes role confusion as "the counterpoint to identity", involving "the inability to make moves towards identity-defining commitments". While role confusion is seen as a characteristic feature of identity crisis during late adolescence, estrangement appeared to invoke a crisis to identity that, unlike during adolescence, must be continually negotiated.

Parkes (1993, 1996) and Worden (2003) suggest that healthy adjustment to bereavement is often dependent upon the quality of social support received. Stroebe, Stroebe and Abakoumkim (2005) and Benkel Wijk and Molander (2009) cite the most common sources of support as family and friends, however, highlighting the potentially limited support available to estranged individuals. While some participants in this study saw friends as a source of emotional support, others were reluctant to discuss their estrangement with others, for fear of being judged as abnormal.

Interestingly, in this study, participants gave only a few examples of being overtly judged for being estranged, and yet they appeared to have internalised a deep sense of stigma and shame. Mead's (1934) interactionist approach to identity suggests that people anticipate how they will be seen by others and define themselves accordingly. Therefore, an internalised sense of stigma appeared to be enough to prevent people from disclosing the difficulties experienced in their family relationships. One consequence of this, of course, is that estrangement may persist in remaining largely hidden from everyday discourse, something which participants in this study reported as troubling. However, through non-disclosure, there is a risk that estranged individuals may inadvertently contribute to upholding images of what Kradin (2009) describes as 'the family myth'. This could reinforce a sense of alienation from normative ideas of family relationships circulating in society, due to a continued lack of 'individual identity alternatives' as defined in Shotter and Gergen (1989). The obvious implication of this, which nonetheless needs to be stated, is that, if estrangement could be spoken about more often, it should become easier to negotiate.

Section 4: Moving forward with the legacy of a family relationship breakdown

The category *moving forward with the legacy of a family relationship breakdown* illustrated the challenge of moving through life while continually adjusting to the experience of being estranged. The ongoing challenge of estrangement was seen to include the experience of wrestling with the

dilemma of reconciliation, as well as a continual adjusting in the areas of attachment/emotional development and self/social identity development.

Wrestling with the dilemma of reconciliation was seen to involve considerable cognitive and emotional uncertainty or ambivalence, and this process was influenced by the degree to which reconciliation was perceived as possible or desirable. In an insightful account of the phenomenological experience of ambivalence, Harrist (2006: 89) suggests that a significant degree of ambivalence can lead to a sense of powerlessness and "an inability to move on with one's life", while Braverman (1987) warns that chronic ambivalence can result in identity confusion and developmental difficulties. According to Harrist (2006), the psychological advantage of ambivalence is that it mentally keeps the door to available options open, yet for participants negotiating estrangement the open door of ambivalence acted as a conduit to the past through which acts of enduring hurt were revisited, or a conduit to the future where projected hurtful experiences were anticipated. Therefore, ambivalence towards reconciliation was described as a source of constant strain, and considering reconciliation could often feel involuntary or even obsessive, involving mental processes akin to rumination or worry.

Wells (2009) describes rumination and worry as metacognitive processes whereby attention is focused upon replaying or imagining events that, in general, provoke negative feelings, such as sadness, anger or anxiety. Coxon (2011) observes that, in particular, rumination has been associated with the development of depressive symtoms, while Ray, Wilhelm and Gross (2008) have reported that rumination can maintain and intensify feelings of anger. Rumination usually involves repetitive thoughts about past events, while worry is generally future focused and raises anxiety. As with imagined interactions, Wells notes that people may engage in worry or rumination because they believe that it is may be useful, and some participants said that in order to avoid risking being hurt again, they consciously used rumination and imagined interactions as a means of resisting urges towards attempting reconciliation. Thus, considering reconciliation was found to be a process that both reflected and maintained a state of ambivalence, sometimes for defensive purposes.

Supporting the link found between defensiveness and ambivalence, Harrist (2006: 89) cautions that "failure to resolve ambivalence may be reflected in reliance on defense mechanisms". Regarding reconciliation, this could be problematic, for one task of attempting reconciliation identified in this study was finding forgiveness, and Maltby and Day (2004) note that psychological defense is a key barrier to forgiving someone. It is important to remember though that defensiveness was seen by many as a conscious, intentional and necessary means of self-protection, for past attempts at reconciliation had been met with blanket rejection or abusive behaviour, and differences appeared to be irreconcilable. In such cases, finding forgiveness may offer very little help in coping with the sense of powerlessness experienced to affect relationship change. Existing research into conflict in family

relationships tends to focus on the causes, management and resolution of conflict, telling us little about how people move forward from a place of irreconcilable difference. The findings here suggest that this is not only a place that one arrives at, but also a departure point for a period of difficult ongoing intrapersonal negotiation.

Participant accounts offered considerable insight into the challenges faced by family members in their ongoing attempts to adjust to the experience of estrangement. Negotiating healthy levels of emotional and ideological distance from an estranging relationship were at the core of the process of adjusting, and analysis made it possible to evaluate how well this was being achieved through categorising the factors that lay at positive and negative ends of an adjusting continuum.

The emotional legacy of estrangement was described as an enduring hurt, and negative emotional adjustment was found to be characterised by emotional insecurity, heightened defensiveness and a sense of being locked into the re-experiencing of traumatic loss. In counterpoint to these factors, some participants spoke of achieving a more positive emotional adjustment, including factors such as working though feelings, developing openness to new ways of thinking and relating, and the fostering of hope. From a cognitive perspective, Boelen (2010) identifies several factors which impede adjustment to traumatic loss, mirroring those found in this study, including persistent engagement with negative cognitions, avoidant behaviours, and a lack of integration of the meaning of the loss into autobiographical memory. In emphasising the link between cognition, emotion and autobiographical memory, Boelen usefully provides a theoretical connection which bridges the processes of emotional and ideological negotiation, for it was found that successfully adjusting to estrangement not only involved cognitive and emotional reorganisation but also a renegotiating of identity through the sense-making experience of restructuring a positive self-narrative.

Taking a reflexive view, as a researcher there were two aspects of the process during the interviews for this study which struck me most powerfully. One was the sense that this was the first time that many of the participants had really told their stories, and the other was that, in sharing and organising their narratives, participants frequently expressed relief and appeared to experience moments of insight. Birch and Miller (2000: 189) note that in inviting people to reflect upon intimate life experiences, the qualitative researcher can become "a catalyst for revisiting very private and/or unhappy experiences". As such however, Birch and Miller suggest that, much like a therapeutic encounter, the qualitative interview may be an event that offers, not only a space for reflection, but also an opportunity for personal transition.

Although the core connecting category *negotiating emotional and ideological distance* emerged through detailed analysis of the text, during interview I could tangibly see and feel these processes in action. Oscillations in emotional distance saw participants move from levels of intensely painful connection to positions of emotional catharsis and cold disengagement. Oscillations in ideological

distance saw participants move from being hemmed in by previously held ideas to experimenting with the freedom of authoring new ones. The interview is an intimate but social experience, and perhaps provided participants with an opportunity for further adjusting within the developmental domain of self and social identity. Indeed, the study found that positive adjustment in this domain included factors such as making sense/gaining insight, finding acceptance, sharing experience and authoring a new story.

Estrangement was broadly seen to involve a sense of traumatic loss, and negative adjustment in the domain of self and social identity development was seen to be characterised by confusion, devaluation of self, a sense of alienation and an internalised sense of stigma. Writing from a constructivist angle, Neimeyer, Herrero and Botella (2006:127) offer a particularly helpful perspective on this finding, which is worth quoting in full, suggesting that "traumatic life events have the power to disrupt those self-narratives with which people order their life experience, by challenging their organisation, promoting the development of problem-dominated identities, and fostering dissociation of aspects of the experience in a way that precludes its integration". These authors also add that, while self-narratives are usually progressive, traumatic life events may thwart their evolutionary development. The interviews for this study could therefore be seen as affording an opportunity for people to integrate their experiences and take a narrative step forward.

As discussed in the introduction, existing literature tells us very little about how people negotiate the process and phenomenological experience of estrangement in their everyday lives. Over the course of this study, however, fifteen people came forward and shared what it was like for them to move through life while continually adjusting to the psychological legacy of a family relationship breakdown. Each person's story of estrangement was unique, and yet through systematic analysis a number of common processes, patterns, concerns and possibilities were identified. The core finding was that people felt not only emotionally estranged from family members but also ideologically estranged from prevailing discourses about family relationships. This could lead to a doubly painful sense of alienation from a source of comfort, meaning and security that many may take for granted. In the broadest sense, the study underscores the claim of Lee (2010) that families do 'matter', but also suggests that we should take particular care to ensure that individuals matter too. As psychologists we would perhaps do well to honour Kradin's (2009) request to humanize individuals within families through careful and critical reflection upon the assumptions that we make when we contribute to discourse about family, remembering that we are engaging, in a symbolic sense, with a very powerful idea.

Evaluation of the study

The aim of this study was to understand how people experience and negotiate estrangement from nuclear family members during adulthood. Through using Corbin and Strauss's (2008) version of grounded theory to investigate this phenomenon, it was hoped that an account could be reached that balanced descriptive and explanatory elements with the aim of developing a meaningful but also practical theory of estrangement that could be of use to estranged individuals and those engaged in supporting them.

I was aware from the start that this was an ambitious project, for family estrangement seemed a broad and perhaps loosely defined phenomenon. Nonetheless, the emerging breadth and scope of the findings was far wider than I anticipated. Corbin and Strauss (2008) advise that when framing the research question the scope of enquiry is not so broad that it risks becoming overwhelming. Willig (2008), however, stresses that the initial research question should make as few assumptions possible about the phenomenon targeted, and in the case of family estrangement I could find very little existing phenomenological research, and so I entered into an open field with no real idea of its parameters.

Higginson and Mansell (2008: 311) deem qualitative research to be highly useful at investigating psychological processes of change when one needs to "unravel complicated and slowly evolving events", for despite the complex variety of individual experience, common themes usually emerge from collective accounts of the experiences of phenomenon which cause psychological distress. My experience of this research indeed found this to be the case, and yet each of the themes identified in this study seemed so densely packed with ideas and implications that I have struggled to present and define their breadth while attending satisfactorily to their depth. The hierarchal organisation of codes and categories, that is central to building theory in Corbin and Strauss's (2008) version of GT, gave me the feeling of painstakingly arranging a thematic house of cards where without equal weight attributed to each, the theory would simply not hold together.

In order to do justice to the phenomenon, it felt crucial to communicate, in a balanced sense, the process and experiential elements of negotiating estrangement. I hope that the final account goes some way to conveying not only how the process of estrangement develops, is negotiated and is affectively experienced, but also what it means to be estranged. Gordon (2000: 12) observes that all processes of psychological change are subjectively interpreted within the 'realm of meanings' and I hope that one of the strengths of this study is that it enables the reader to feel that they are able to achieve a sense of viewing the experience of estrangement from both inside and out.

At times I wonder if I have tried to do too much, and that while the breadth and scope of this study is its main strength it may also be considered its principal limitation. Where I feel I have succeeded is in sketching out, to some degree, a broad map of the process and experience of estrangement where each

participant may locate their experience upon territory that looks familiar. The strokes that I have taken, however, feel very broad, and while the form is one which I hope has lasting value, the picture is lacking in the fine interpretative detail that could be painted by future research. Some of this fine detail I have had the privilege to see, and after months of intricate micro-coding and in-depth memo-writing, one of the most difficult aspects of this project was in deciding what should be left out due to practical considerations.

Following her small case design study into family estrangement, Jerome (1994) suggested that it might be possible to work towards a theory of the phenomenon through the use of a research methodology that is able to illuminate the interplay between the personal and the cultural. I feel that the core category that emerged in this study shows that grounded theory was both a useful and appropriate method to achieve this. At the same time, I am aware that other qualitative methods would have resulted in different but useful accounts of estrangement, and in light of the points raised in the discussion I feel that a narrative approach may have yielded especially rich results. Dallos and Vetere (2009), however, note that narrative approaches are not particularly appropriate when one is hoping to generalise from results or work towards theory. Nonetheless, in the future, a narrative approach may prove particularly illuminating for what we know about estrangement could only be enhanced through triangulation of qualitative and quantitative research methods.

In terms of quantitative methods, a vital first step should be to provide accurate statistics on how prevalent a problem family estrangement actually is. It could have added power and context to this study to have addressed this through using a mixed methods design, though this would have expanded the aims of this research beyond the parameters of manageability. Nonetheless, the absence of this data can be seen as a limitation, for in a statistics hungry culture it makes it harder to capture peoples' attention and generate an appetite for the interest in estrangement that it deserves.

In terms of developing theory, there are a number of design limitations that mean that this study can only be considered as taking a few tentative steps. The focus of this study was on how people negotiate estrangement, and not how reconciliation is achieved. This was not a focus of convenience, rather a means of attempting to validate the experience of estrangement in its own right, rather than take a prescriptive view on estrangement as a problem with reconciliation as its resolution. Reconciliation is a large part of the experience of estrangement for many people, however, and a full theory of family estrangement would require significant amendment.

Evaluating the theoretical ground that has been advanced, I feel satisfied that the main theoretical framework I have constructed is sound, though I believe that some medium level categories are only partially defined in terms of their properties or dimensions. I therefore feel that I did not reach the point where no new data was emerging, a stage that Corbin and Strauss (2008) describe as 'saturation'. In light of this, and aiming to expand upon this work in the future, I anticipate that I will

need to take the methodological step of further theoretical sampling. In particular, through recent conversation with family estranged individuals who did not take part in this study, I believe that I may have identified a category of estrangement characterised by a lack of hostile engagement and a sense of drifting apart that did not emerge from the sample. While this does not invalidate the findings here, it does highlight the utility of further investigation.

In terms of sample, a number of further limitations arise. Although a sample size of fifteen is reasonable for a grounded theory study, the broad scope of the phenomenon led to the inclusion of both sibling and parent/child relationships. This meant, for example, that there were only four parents in the sample, including only one father. Also, although the study was able to identify broadly common categories of process and experience shared by all participants, it may be that a larger sample might find greater differences between different types of relationship, for example between sibling and parent/child relationships. A further sampling limitation concerns the inclusion of individual members of an estranging relationship, rather than couples or family units. Beitin (2008) discusses the advantages of collecting data from a variety of individual and multiple configurations to explore family relationships, though once again this may have pushed the study beyond the boundaries of manageability, so for practical reasons this was not considered.

Finally, in the methodology section I stated that since the start of this project I have held in mind the belief that the study's worth would be decided by how helpful it would prove to its participants and others of similar experience. Over half of the participants gave feedback on the study, and a selection of the feedback from those that took part included the following:

> *" It was so strange reading what other people said, because a lot of the time it was just like it was me talking"*
>
> *"I actually cried. In fact I cried a lot, but don't worry, it was a good crying for once because it was such a relief to find out that I'm not the only one out there"*
>
> *"I've read it about five times, and it's really helped me to make sense of what I've been through. I wish that you'd asked me to do this ten years ago, because I don't think I would have been so confused for so long"*
>
> *"For the first time I thought about how my father must be feeling. After I read it though I did think about it a lot, and I'm not quite ready to call him yet, but I do feel a lot less angry and even a bit sorry for him"*

Procedural measures to ensure standards of rigour and credibility

Throughout all stages of this study, a determined effort has been made to ensure that the value of any emerging findings is underpinned by a sense of confidence that rigorous standards of quality control have been maintained. I have been guided in this aim by the recommendations of Elliot, Fischer and Rennie (1999) and Morrow (2005).

Elliot et al., (1999) have proposed seven key guidelines for meeting publication criteria for qualitative research. In Table 1 I briefly outline these recommendations and demonstrate how I have endeavoured to meet them:

Guideline to ensure quality control	Methodological Response
Owning One's Perspective – Highlights the importance that the researcher makes transparent his personal and theoretical positioning and declares his values interests and assumptions. Additionally recommends a clear reflexive account that continues throughout the research process.	Explicit declaration of personal, professional and theoretical values including epistemological, ontological and methodological positions are found in the methodology section. Development of a reflexive diary in parallel with all stages of the research, with excerpts of the diary presented in the appendices of this work.
Use of grounded examples – Emphasises the importance of presenting actual transcript and analysis excerpts to allow the reader to judge for themselves how credible the interpretations have been.	Numerous and consistent use of grounded examples are presented in the findings section.
Situating the sample – Asks that the researcher provides enough demographic data on participants for the reader to evaluate the range and appropriateness of the sample.	Relevant demographic and estrangement status information is provided in the methodology section in a detailed table format.
Credibility checks – Recommends that coding structures and findings are deemed credible by a combination of second parties including other professionals and participant group members.	There were three levels of credibility checks – **1.** Over half of the participants checked sections of the findings, offering feedback that led to revisions of original interpretations. **2.** Transcript codings and category synthesis were evaluated by peers and revised where appropriate **3.** A research supervisor provided feedback on all stages of the study including coding, analysis and results processes.

Guideline to ensure quality control	Methodological Response
Coherence – Requests that the research findings are presented in an organised and logical way, accompanied by a clear and integrated narrative.	The results section is structured to include both visual and narrative elements that are integrated to provide an ordered and engaging account.
Accomplishment of original, general and specific goals – Encourages the clarification of how successful the research has been in answering the research question as well as explicit recognition of the limitation boundaries of the research findings.	There is detailed account of the research strengths and limitations in the discussion section.
Resonating with readers – Describes the importance that the final work provides a useful, engaging and accessible account that adds something valuable to the reader's existing knowledge of the area.	All individual parts of this work have been reviewed, either by peers, participants and the research supervisor, who have offered feedback that valuable new knowledge has been presented. Several drafts of this work were written until the work achieved a satisfactory resonance.

Table 1. Procedural measures to ensure standards of rigour and credibility as proposed by Elliot et al., (1999).

In addition to these recommendations I have also followed Morrow's (2005) specific recommendations for counselling psychology research. There is much overlap between Morrow's concerns and those of Elliot et al. (1999), but Morrow places heightened emphasis on the importance of a suitable marriage between the research paradigm and the research question. I have therefore taken particular care to ensure that this is so.

Additionally, Morrow (2005) suggests that counselling psychologists should concern themselves with producing accounts that aim to be educative, transformative and presented in a way that invites further engagement with the research problem by other investigators. Morrow also notes the importance of praxis, or the integration of theory into practice, and believes that consideration of these principles should be at the forefront of a counselling psychologist/qualitative researcher's mind. These principles have been central to development of this study, and are developed further in the implications for practice section.

Implications for practice

This study raises a number of implications for counselling psychologists and others engaged in therapeutic practice with family estranged individuals at both a macro and micro level. I recently asked over a dozen fellow trainee and qualified psychologists to what extent they consider family estrangement to be an issue for clients in terms of physical/psychological wellbeing and personal/social development. Many found the question interesting and thought it was probably an important issue, but nearly all responded that they were not aware of specific implications outside of consideration of attachment issues. One colleague, however, said that she believed that estrangement could be an issue with far-reaching and powerful consequences, adding that she had grown to understand this through both her client work and her own personal experience of estrangement with a close family member.

Although this was an informal means of enquiry, it suggests to me that work needs to be done in the practice arena to highlight the enduring impact that estrangement may have upon peoples' lives. Participants in this study gave numerous examples of a range of difficulties that they felt were experienced as a consequence of negotiating estrangement, including physical health problems, trauma-like reactions, complicated grief, depression, anxiety, rejection sensitivity, ostracism, stigmatisation, social anxiety, identity crisis, emotional disconnection and an increased risk of suicidality.

Estranged clients may therefore present with a number of issues, many of which could have an urgent quality and could become a focus of treatment in their own right. This study suggests, however, that for some clients, each of these issues could be seen as one of a constellation of problems orbiting around the central experience of estrangement. Woolfolk and Richardson (2008: 61) observe that "presenting complaints are often only tangentially related to the client's fundamental problems", cautioning that the current trend in the provision of psychological therapy on the National Health Service (NHS) is to offer increasingly limited access to the 'treatment' of short-term, diagnostically defined 'conditions', thereby neglecting the longer term, socially embedded, non-quantifiable and more meaningful aspects of client distress. The implication of this is that, as practitioners, we must take an active stance towards ensuring that we do not lose sight of the value of creating holistic therapeutic environments which honour the complexity of psychological development through the humanizing of individual experience and the recognition of personal quests for meaning.

Mansell (2008: 30) argues that any effective form of psychotherapy "needs to consider the person in the social context and their immediate interpersonal interactions because of the relationship with inner mental processes". The complex interaction between intrapersonal, interpersonal, social and symbolic process emerged strongly throughout the findings, suggesting that an optimal way of working with

estranged individuals would entail an integrated consideration of the relationship between these modes of experience.

Perhaps the most helpful recommendations for practice can be drawn from participants' own accounts of successfully adjusting to estrangement over time. When working individually with estranged clients to facilitate and support adjustment, the findings from the domain of emotional development suggest that our focus should be on the exploration, validation and integration of emotional experience, the working through of insecurities and resistances around relationships (particularly sensitivities around rejection), and the liberation from fixed patterns of thinking and behaving.

Within the family of psychotherapies, there are a number of approaches that are particularly well suited to certain aspects highlighted here, though none which could claim to be optimally suited to all tasks. Approaches that place emotional validation and integration at the heart of therapy include Person-Centred Therapy (Rogers, 1961; Mearns and Thorne, 2007), Emotion Focused Therapy (Greenberg, 2002) and Gestalt Therapy (see Parlett and Denham, 2007). Approaches with an emphasis on patterns of interpersonal insecurities and resistances include Psychodynamic Therapy (see Dryden, 2007 for an overview on various approaches) and Relational Therapy (Safran and Muran, 2000). Approaches that directly target changes to fixed patterns of cognition and behaviour include a range of therapies situated under the umbrella of the Cognitive Behavioural Therapies (see Westbrook, Kennerly and Kirk, 2007 for an introduction).

If the therapeutic goal is to support adjustment in the domain of self and social identity development, then the findings suggest that it would be useful to focus on helping clients make sense of and derive meaning from past experiences, gain freedom from positions of felt shame, defectiveness and stigma, and construct positive and empowering self-narratives in the face pressures from marginalising social discourses. Approaches particularly suited to such tasks include Existential Therapy (see Van Deurzen, 2007 for an overview), Compassion Focused Therapy (Gilbert, 2005) and Narrative Therapy (see Payne, 2007 for an overview).

If this appears an eclectic and overwhelming mix of therapeutic task and approaches, then it perhaps reflects the complexities of distress that can radiate out from an estranging relationship into a person's life. A central implication is that this complexity is first and foremost recognised and acknowledged. A further implication is that, where possible, integrative approaches are likely to be of enhanced value to clients adjusting to estrangement. A good example of this comes from Dallos and Vetere's (2009) response to what they see as systemic therapy's neglect of individual emotional experience and developmental concerns. Dallos and Vetere (2009: 2) have recently attempted to address these issues through creating Attachment Narrative Therapy (ANT), which integrates "ideas from systemic family therapy, narrative therapies and attachment theory". The resulting approach is one which offers clients

an enhanced opportunity to make meaningful sense of their family relationship experiences in an emotionally validating therapeutic environment.

One of the responsibilities of therapeutic practitioners is to provide appropriate environments for clients to affect transformation from the inside out. The therapeutic encounter is also, however, a golden opportunity to contribute to transformation from the outside in. At the micro level this highlights the importance of recognising the corrective potential of the therapeutic relationship, emphasising Rogers' (1961) 'core conditions' of the therapeutic relationship - honesty, empathy and unconditional positive regard, which are widely accepted as vital ingredients in creating a therapeutic climate of growth and healing. Estranged family members have experienced deep injury in some of their most meaningful and formative relationships, and it is likely that the therapeutic relationship may activate subsequent vulnerabilities and challenges, and practitioners might be especially mindful of these sensitivities.

As practitioners, as we bring ourselves into the room we are shadowed by our histories, assumptions, beliefs and expectations. As such, it may that we hold very different ideas from our clients of what it means or feels like to be a part of a family. This study suggests that estranged family members appeared particularly sensitive to cues from others that their relationship difficulties are unusual or abnormal. Therefore, as with many other areas of client experience, we should be aware of how our own normative beliefs and ideas about family may be transmitted, intentionally or otherwise, within our communications. An example of this occurred recently in my own practice, when a single woman in her forties, who was estranged from her whole family, was signing up for group psychotherapy and became visibly confused and embarrassed at having to fill in the 'next of kin' section on the admission form.

This study found that one of the most powerful means of adjusting to estrangement identified by participants was the creation of new discourse and ideas about family, and as researchers and practitioners we can also contribute a great deal from the outside in by following Kradin's (2009) advice in challenging prevailing ideologies through deconstructing dominant, limiting and pressurising discourses, while facilitating the space for new, more inclusive ideas to emerge. It is hoped that this study is seen as taking an active and meaningful step in such a direction.

Final points of reflexivity

At the risk of mixing metaphors, I have come to appreciate how the final arrangement of a piece of qualitative research involves the careful conducting of an orchestra of voices. Bott (2010) describes the process of qualitative enquiry as a relationship of 'mutual exchange' between the research and researcher, and I like this definition for I feel that it highlights not only that which I have brought to the relationship, but also that which I have taken away. Like conductors, we must stand transparently amidst our research findings, for as Corbin (2009:40) notes, this demonstrates an explicit acknowledgement of "how we influence the research process, and in turn how it influences us". Throughout this study I have therefore tried to appear visible so that the reader may gain some sense of who I am in relation to what I have arranged before them.

My own estrangement has influenced this study in many ways, and the study in turn has influenced my experience of estrangement. I was initially unsure how I would negotiate enough distance from my own experience of estrangement to step aside from my own assumptions and expectations. With regard to this, I found the grounded theory method incredibly helpful, particularly during the early stages of micro-coding when systematically breaking down the data into small units felt a little like looking at something familiar under a microscope, enabling me to see it naively again for the first time. I also anticipated a danger that my own estrangement might leave me less sensitive to experiences that were quite different from my own, though in practice I found that it was similar experiences which required extra reflexive care, so as not to miss identifying subtle nuances and differences. Once again the method proved helpful, especially the creation and use of a systematic form of memoing where I asked consistent questions of the data, even if it seemed familiar.

My training as a counselling psychologist has involved gaining knowledge and experience from a broad range of theoretical and therapeutic perspectives, including humanistic, psychodynamic, systemic and cognitive approaches. This is has given me a flexible set of lenses through which to interpret the data, and the resulting account is one of shifting positions of sense-making and selective communications. I agree with Corbin and Strauss's (2008:270) observation that there are "multiple realities" and also Morse's (2009:14) view that ways "of thinking about data cannot be standardized". Within my memo-writing and reflexive journal I have tried to embrace the ambiguity of reality, developing a reflexive mantra of "another way of looking at this might be....". At times, this has felt rather disorientating, like venturing into a universe without edges, but I have increasingly learned to hold my anxiety at bay and appreciate the ambiguity as liberating.

If there are multiple perspectives on reality then how does one convey the sense of something so that its essence is captured? The answer I believe is symbolically. For me personally, one of the most enduring impressions of another person's reality communicated through this study was the sense of estrangement as a deeply ringing bell. I cannot think of a more personally fitting example of the

resonant power of symbolic communication than this, for I have carried that mournful sound with me for much of my adult life, without ever being able to articulate it. I now appreciate fully that people reach for symbols when words are not enough, and that symbolic communication not only facilitates shared understanding, but profoundly challenges any sense that we may have that we are boundaried, separate and apart. This makes me appreciate how, at a fundamental level, qualitative research has an extraordinary potential to bring people closer together.

I feel deeply moved by, and connected to, the experiences that people have contributed to this study. I am also profoundly grateful to each participant, for learning of others' perspectives on estrangement has transformed my understanding of my own. For example, my own estrangement was something that I used to keep largely hidden, and I now understand how unhelpful this has been in adjusting to the loss, and renegotiating a more integrated identity. It is my hope that the findings from this study will equally enable other family members to make sense of their experiences, while inspiring other researchers to develop further work in this area.

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Information for Participants in the Psychological Research Study: Exploring Family Estrangement

Researcher: Jason Robinson

This study forms part of a Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at City University

You have been invited to participate in a psychological study on the experience of family estrangement and this document has been prepared to help you decide if you wish to take part. The following information will explain the purpose of the research, what participation will involve, what risks there may be, and how you will be protected through the process. Please read the information carefully, and should you have any questions please feel free to ask

The Study

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the experiences of adults who have been estranged from close family members. Using in-depth interviewing this study will analyse and compare peoples' experiences of estrangement looking for similarities and differences. From this analysis, it is hoped that a theoretical model of family estrangement can be developed. Despite estrangement being a common and challenging issue, psychological knowledge in this area is limited. Counselling psychologists and other health professionals work regularly with people experiencing estrangement , and it is hoped that the theory generated from this study will assist them in offering more structured and useful support.

Participation

You are invited to participate in this study if you:

- Are aged 18 or over and have experienced a close adult family estrangement (parent/child/sibling) lasting at least 6 months
- Have no current medical, complex mental health or emotional difficulty that might suggest that the exploration of your experience might cause you undue distress or discomfort

What you can expect

If you agree to participate you will be asked to sign a consent form. Once you have given consent the researcher will arrange to meet you for an interview at a time and place that is convenient for you. The researcher will cover pre-agreed travel expenses. The interview will last 1 hour and 15 minutes and will be audio-recorded. Only you and the researcher will be at the interview. The interviewer will ask you to describe your experience of estrangement, and will be particularly interested in your thoughts and feelings about it. You will only be encouraged to disclose information that you feel comfortable with. Following the interview 45 minutes will be available for you to discuss the experience of being interviewed if you wish.

What happens with your data

The audio-recording and other data will be kept in a safe place and apart from any identifying details. The tape will be destroyed once the research has been concluded. The researcher will make a transcript from the audio-recording which you may see if you wish. For transcribed materials you will be a given a pseudonym and all identifying details of you and others will be altered or removed. In addition to the recording, the interviewer may take notes. You may also see these if you wish.

The transcript will be analysed and compared to other transcripts for similarities and difference. From the findings, a general theory of estrangement will be developed. If published, both general findings and relevant excerpts may be reproduced. Every care will be taken to ensure that any published excerpts will be anonymous and non-identifiable.

Your protection

Your safety and care will be the first priority of the researcher at all times. Careful consideration has been made to ensure this study meets this priority. The study has been granted full ethical approval from the Senate Research Ethics Committee at City University. Additionally this study fully conforms to the ethics guidelines of the British Psychological Society of which the researcher is a graduate member. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw your participation any time you wish without reason or consequence. Your participation in this study will be confidential. Only the researcher will listen to your tape, and know of your identity. The researcher is of an appropriate level of training and experience to be conducting this research.

It is recognised that the experience of estrangement may be difficult to explore, and therefore there is some risk that you may experience distress. For this reason, the researcher who is a trained counsellor, has set aside 45 minutes after the interview should you feel the need for support or a desire to discuss the experience of being interviewed. If during this time you express a need for further support the interviewer will signpost you to appropriate services. The extra 45 minutes is optional , will not be recorded, and will not be used as part of the study.

It is not anticipated that participating in this study will cause you any harm. Therefore, no special compensation or insurance arrangements have been made. Should you have any cause for concern about either the study or the researcher, please do not hesitate to contact: Dr Susan Strauss The supervisor of this study at City University. Email address: [redacted]

The Researcher:

The researcher, Jason Robinson holds a BSc (Hons) in Psychology and MSc equivalent in Counselling Psychology and is currently completing a Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at City University. Jason has over 10 years experience in training and development and 5 years experience in a counselling role. He is a graduate member of the British Psychological Society, and is currently employed at The Priory Hospital where he provides psychological therapy for adolescents and adults and the Royal Free Hospital where he works in the CFS/ME service. He has additional counselling psychologist experience at The Maudsley Hospital, Gladstone Medical Centre, HMP Bronzefield, New Horizon Youth Centre, Wandsworth Borough Employee Counselling service, and The Samaritans. Jason can be contacted by phone: [redacted] or email: [redacted]

Consent form for Participants in the Psychological Research Study: Exploring Family Estrangement

Researcher: Jason Robinson

This study forms part of a Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at City University

Before participating in psychological research it is required that the researcher receives your written consent. Please take time to read this consent form carefully and only sign if you feel comfortable with all that is requested. If you are in agreement with all points of this form please print your name sign and date at the bottom of the page.

I _____ (insert name) agree to participate in the City University research study entitled "Exploring the Experience of Adult Family Estrangement" which is being conducted by Jason Robinson. I have received and read an information sheet which outlines the nature and purpose of this study, and am satisfied that any questions I may have had about the study have been encouraged and answered. I am also aware of what is expected of me by participating. I have been made aware of any possible risks of participating in this study and am satisfied with the measures that are in place to protect me.

I therefore give consent to:

- Be interviewed by the researcher
- Allow the interview to be audio recorded and transcribed

Data Protection

The information I provide will be held and processed for the following purpose(s):

The audiofile will be transcribed and the transcription will be coded and organised into themes. The results of this analysis will be reported in a doctoral thesis and the findings of this study may be published in an academic journal. This may include the publication of anonymised quotes

I understand that any information I provide is confidential, and that no information that could lead to the identification of any individual will be disclosed in any reports on the project, or to any other party. No identifiable personal data will be published. The identifiable data will not be shared with any other organisation.

Withdrawal from study

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time I wish without giving reason or anticipating consequence. In the event of my withdrawing from the study, all material collected from me would be destroyed immediately.

I confirm that I have been given contact details for both the researcher and the research supervisor, and encouraged to use these details without hesitation should I have any questions or concerns.

I understand that the study is being conducted within the British Psychological Society's Guidelines and that ethical approval has been granted by the Senate Research Ethics Committee at City University.

Name ……..

Signature .....

Date .....

I the researcher agree to comply with all the above statements, and sign for both myself and on behalf of anyone else involved in the research process including the research supervisor and examiners.

Name ……..

Signature .....

Date .....

Please keep a copy of this consent form and the accompanying information sheet for your records

The research supervisor for this study, Dr Susan Strauss may be contacted via email: [redacted]

Appendix 3 – Pre-interview form for participants

Pre-Interview for Participants in the Psychological Research Study: Exploring Family Estrangement

Researcher: Jason Robinson

This study forms part of a Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at City University

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. It would help the researcher to have some basic background information before the study commences. This information will be kept anonymously and separate from any other information you may provide.

Please circle as appropriate

Gender Male / Female

Age 18 -25 / 25-35 / 35-45 / 45-55 / 55-65 / 65 – 75 / over 75

Status Single / Married / In a relationship / Other

Dependents Children? Yes / No How many? ____

Country of origin _____

Estranged from Mother / Father / Son / Daughter / Brother / Sister (circle all that apply)

For how long? _____/_____/_____ /_____/_____/_____ (Please specify)

Have you received counselling for your estrangement? Yes/No

Are you still estranged? Yes/No

How would you describe your contact with the estranged person/persons?

Non-existent Occasional Regular

Are you currently experiencing any medical or psychological difficulties? Yes /No

The research supervisor for this study, Dr Susan Strauss may be contacted via email: [redacted]

Appendix 4 – Resource list for participants

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire

Family Estrangement Resource List

This study forms part of a Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at City University

Thank you for participating in this study. Your time and contribution are greatly appreciated. Hopefully you found that the experience was interesting and rewarding. Should you require any further support, either short or long term, the following list of resources may be helpful.

Counselling psychologist and therapist directories

The British Psychological Society (BPS)- www.bps.org.uk / 0116 254 9568

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) - www.bacp.co.uk / 01455 883316

Emergency support

The Samaritans - www.samaritans.org / 46 Marshall Street, **London**, W1F 9BF / 0207 7439 1406 (24 hours)

Helpful literature on estrangement

'Healing from Family Rifts' (2004) by Mark Sichel. (Available on www.amazon.co.uk)

Heal and Forgive II : The Journey from Abuse and Estrangement to Reconciliation (2008) (Available on www.amazon.co.uk)

Online support groups and websites

http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/healingfromfamilyrifts/ (healing from family rifts support group)

www.psybersquare.com – Online website with estrangement advice and support

Also please feel free to contact Jason Robinson

By phone: [redacted] or email: [redacted] should you need any further support or assistance.

The research supervisor for this study, Dr Susan Strauss may be contacted via email: [redacted]

Appendix 5 – Example of early coding

Transcript H - Female 56 years old – (Estranged from son for 3 years without contact)	
Thinking back to when you said you were in town and you could see him across the road in the shop window, the cafe window... what sort of thoughts were going through your head at that moment... when you could see him but....?	
Oh (exhales) It was sort of a mix. It was sad because I'd, I could see him but I couldn't go up to him and talk to him... uh, it was relief that... that I knew where he was, and that he was still okay and he was still working in the cafe so he still had an income so he could... buy some food. Um... (exhales) and that he was happy and getting on with things. Um... I don't know maybe it was a bit of a... it was a bit like a game as well. It was a bit like hide and seek, like I could see him but he couldn't see me. And... and I think I needed that. I think I needed something that... uh... that meant I wasn't totally powerless. It was something that I *could* do... like seeing him on the internet. That's something that I can do, and I don't think he knows that I'm there. I think he thinks that I've just gone away and forgotten him.	*Experiencing mixed emotions/ Experiencing loss and sadness/ Feeling powerless/ Yearning for contact/ A sense of relief* *Caring from a distance/ Recalling emotionally charged events* *Reassuring self other is okay* *Like a game* *Managing proximity* *Trying to maintain closeness* *Gaining insight into self-process* *Challenges to self-identity/ Fear of losing other for good/ Holding on to hope/ Yearning for contact* *Imagining estrangers experience/ Caring from a distance*
You felt as though you couldn't approach him?	
I think if he had seen... if I'd gone... I was quite a distance away, so he wouldn't have seen me anyway. But I think if I had gone up to the window or closer so that he had seen me, he would have been angry. He would have just turned away. The last time I saw him face to face was a chance thing. I was driving one of his brothers to a station, because he was going back to London and there was a diversion and we ended up going on a country road, miles out of the way... and cycling up the road was Josh, on his bike... just twenty miles away from home really. Totally unexpected. And I said... that's Josh. And my eldest son said... (pauses and composes self)... my eldest son said... it's okay. And I didn't know what to do so I just carried on driving. And I was thinking about that on the way down and wondering... should I have stopped. Should we both have got out of the car and tried to talk to Josh. And	*Justifying self?* *Caring from a distance* *Positioning of self and other on the blame continuum?/ Anticipating estranger's actions/ Anticipating rejection/ Feeling powerless* *Recalling emotionally charged events* *Reliving the experience: The past, here, now.* *Unexpected sighting* *Defensive silence/ Breaches to emotional defence/ Receiving support from family of origin/ A shared sense of loss in the family* *Emotional avoidance/ Feeling confused* *Questioning own role in estrangement/ A constant if/ Regret in hindsight/ Replaying*

I think the reason I kept driving was that I knew that there was no point in trying to talk to Josh then... um... and that... it would have got messy. He would have ridden away on his bike anyway, and what should I do then? Drive after him and... it would have been horrible. And it seemed... I don't know (in a whisper)... stupid word... it seemed... the dignified thing for everybody to... just carry on. Take my son to the station. Put him on a train to London. And... and... let Josh go on his way.	*scene* *Feeling hopeless* *Justifying self/ Feeling powerless/ Anticipating estrangers actions/ Anticipating rejection/ Emotional avoidance* *Decision making/ Reliving the experience: The past, here, now/ Emotional avoidance* *A developing coldness/ Concerns over being seen as cold/ Regret in hindsight* *Adjusting to life without the estranged person* *Letting go*

Appendix 6: Excerpts from the reflexive diary

September 12th 2009

As the interviews continue, more often than not, they are highly charged emotionally and this is raising a number of challenges for me. If a participant becomes distressed, my instinct as a counselling psychologist is to 'be with' the other person in the room, and to attempt to foster a therapeutic connection, though to do so would effectively breach the boundaries of what might be considered the role of a researcher. Sometimes the interviews have the feel of an assessment or first session, but with an even greater intensity, for it is as if the participants have an awareness that there is only one opportunity to tell their story. For me, this too is difficult, having just a single encounter, for I am now used to the initial contact with a person being a first step in a developing relationship – it feels very unbalanced at times, as if the participant is giving so much, but I have little to offer in return.

I think that one of the reasons that this is such an issue is that in trusting me, and letting me into the very private nature of their experiences, there is a connection, and participant feedback suggests that it can be therapeutic. For both ethical and human reasons I attempt to bring the same qualities of warmth, empathy and positive regard to each encounter, and this leaves the line between me as a researcher and practitioner very difficult to distinguish at times - But what is the alternative?

In each interview I have seen so much that I would pick up on therapeutically, and yet I know that I will not get the chance, and it would not be appropriate. At times I feel disappointed by this, even slightly guilty, as if I could have offered something back, but have withheld it. It is particularly difficult as one of the patterns that seems to be emerging is that the interview is the first opportunity that people have had to talk about their estrangement in any depth, and frequently they describe this process as quite powerful and meaningful. My own experience of estrangement is perhaps coming in to play here – and I feel especially connected to a number of participants, in that I too kept my own experience to myself for such a long time.

I try to remind myself that researchers who are not practitioners manage to negotiate the balance between being considerate and caring without getting over-involved. I think I will contact my friend who is a researcher and sociologist to ask her how she manages.

December 11th 2009

The theme of the imagined relationships is emerging very strongly in the data, and as it does so I am having another one of those parallel senses of discovery regarding my own estrangement, that are becoming a regular occurrence during this research process. It has been so long since I have had any real contact with my estranged family member that it is probable that I too have been largely engaged in imagined interactions – in fact, when I reflect upon it I would probably have some difficulty now in recalling real interactions with any real degree of certainty – Once again, as with other findings to date, this is causing me to adopt a very different perspective upon my own situation, and actually I find that this gives me hope that there may be a way to eventually make a difference regarding reconciliation. I suppose too that the other party in my estrangement may have developed an imagined relationship with me, and it quite bizarre to think that elements of these relationships may be contributing to the gulf between us. In our most recent connections, I have

definitely been defensive, and I believe that it has been a long time since I have clearly communicated the sadness that I feel that this relationship is not working. Could this make a difference? I suppose there is only one way to find out.

July 3rd 2010

For two days now I have been attempting to organise an axial coding system that seems to work – at first it seemed impossible – too many codes appeared to fit into more than one category being the main problem. In the end I abandoned the master-themes I thought were the right ones – Managing mixed emotions/ Decision making etc – I now see that the problem with these was that they were too abstract – Then I took inspiration from the participants – taking a step back from the interviews, I realised that without exception the participants tended to make sense and relate their experience narratively – telling stories of estrangement from onset to present day – I thought if my goal is to provide an account that would make sense to the participants then perhaps I should see if there is a way of ordering things in sequence using a more narratively structured system , and to my relief the hierarchy started to work!