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Making sense of father-son estrangement

Jonathan Stockwell
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Abstract

Making sense of father-son estrangement

This narrative study explores how five adult sons of varying ages make sense of their estrangement from their fathers. In semi-structured interviews, the men explained how their estrangements came about and what significance they have had in their lives. An ideographic narrative analysis reveals the diversity of the men’s stories. The accounts are then discussed with reference to the emerging estrangement literature and to understandings of narrative constructions of self based on power and agency, intimacy and separation. The study finds that recent theorising helps to illuminate some aspects of the accounts, notably the role played by physical distance, and paternal anger and indifference. However, some accounts are not well reflected in previous characterisations of parent-child estrangement; in particular the emphasis on distancing by adult children is somewhat incongruous with the narratives of paternal distancing. The study further concludes that, while the sons regret their father’s inability to connect, some construe the distance from him as an opportunity for agency and personal growth.
The lay summary is a brief summary intended to facilitate knowledge transfer and enhance accessibility, therefore the language used should be non-technical and suitable for a general audience. Guidance on the lay summary in a thesis. (See the Degree Regulations and Programmes of Study, General Postgraduate Degree Programme Regulations. These regulations are available via: www.drps.ed.ac.uk.)

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This study is about the rifts that can develop between fathers and sons, seen from the son’s point of view. It centres around interviews with five men, who talk with me about feeling distant (‘estranged’) from their father. The study asks: how do the sons explain what has happened between them and their fathers?

In the last twenty years or so, a lot of books and articles have been written about ‘family estrangement’ – the rifts that happen when close relatives stop talking to each other, or the relationship turns sour, or one person starts seeing their relative in a negative light. There has also been an increase in the support available to people who feel estranged from their family.

This recent growth in interest is welcome. It can help estranged people feel less alone with their problems. It can also help counsellors and therapists to understand what their clients are going through when there is a serious fall-out with a close family member.

But sometimes writing about estrangement can also unhelpful, for example, when it over-generalises or over-simplifies. Then there is a risk that people will be disappointed and confused if they read something that is meant to be about them but doesn’t fit their experience. And counsellors might think that reading about the topic gives them a fuller understanding than it really does, and make it harder for them to understand what clients tell them if it doesn’t match the theory. So the study also asks: how do existing theories help me to understand what the sons in my study say? And how might they get in the way of understanding?

The first step in answering those questions was to find some adult sons who had experienced an estrangement from their fathers. In the invitation I said I was looking for sons who had had a significant
relationship with their father as children, but who lost or broke off contact with him as adults. Five sons replied, who I have called Calum, Sven, Martin, Gus and Michael (not their real names). Two were around 30, one in his late 40s, one in his 50s and one in his 70s. All had some connection to the UK; either they had grown up here or had moved here. Two came from another English-speaking country, one from a non-English-speaking country in Europe. Two mentioned they were from a Jewish background. None of the others mentioned identifying with an ethnic or religious minority.

In the interview, I asked each son about their early relationship with their father, then how the estrangement had happened, how other people had reacted, what it had meant to them, how they saw the future of the relationship (if their father was still alive) and how it had been talking to me.

After the interviews, I picked out some of the things we talked about during the interviews – mainly stories the sons told, which I then re-arranged roughly in the order they would have happened in their life, so that you, the reader, could follow the development. Alongside these extracts, I recorded my own thoughts and feelings about the things they told me. The aim was to give you an idea of what was said in the interview while staying as faithful as possible to what I understood from it.

In the ‘Discussion’ section, I compared what the sons had said in the interviews with some ideas from theory – to see where they matched and where they didn’t.

First, it turned out that one of one of the sons had actually lost contact with his father while he was still alive. For the other four, ‘estrangement’ meant a relationship that had turned sour, or they had come to the conclusion at some point that it wasn’t worth trying to build a close relationship with their father. That contrasted with the theory, where estrangement is often talked about as if it meant a decision to cut contact.

Another discussion point was about who initiates an estrangement. Some writers seem to assume that it’s usually the adult child who distances themselves from their parents. But two sons described a situation in which they were pushed away by their fathers and two others told stories in which their fathers weren’t interested in connecting with them.

What came through clearly was that all the sons really wanted a father they could talk with – a father who cared enough and who was mature enough to handle his own feelings well enough to ‘be there’ for his son. Overall, all the sons’ stories described some challenging, painful times with their father and then a later period with less contact when they were able to get on with their studies and work, though there were still some difficulties mentioned in relationships. Generally, the sons gave the impression that they accepted the
distance from their father, and even welcomed the space it had given them, but they all would have preferred
a father they could be close to.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

‘Meaninglessness inhibits fullness of life and is therefore equivalent to illness. Meaning makes a great many things endurable – perhaps everything.’ (Jung 1961, 340)

This study was born from my own experience of telling stories of my estrangement from my father, an estrangement that lasted for almost all my adult life and that finally ended last year with his death, aged 88. In telling stories, I have sought to understand how I could come to lose contact so completely with a man I lived with for the first 14 years of my life and who, 56 years ago, held me as a baby with such obvious tenderness (Figure 1).

At times, it can feel as if neither of my parents really saw me, but, when looking at me, saw each other. After my father’s departure, my mother behaved towards me as she had
towards my father – as someone to possess and assert control over. And at times of marital conflict, my father had always behaved as if I were an indistinguishable part of my mother, someone to shut off from and, perhaps, after the divorce, someone to get over and move on from. At such moments, when a sense of authentic connection with either of my parents eludes me, what remains is to create meaning through understanding.

The estrangement from my father has been a thread running through my entire adult life. Now, it is over, but I am still making sense of it and still occasionally telling stories about it. I have never felt the need to hide my estrangement. Rather, I have at times felt a strong need to speak about it and the family circumstances surrounding it (an account of which is given below). By sharing my story, I have come to hear many other people’s tales of family estrangement from parents, siblings and adult children – tales that could easily have gone untold in a culture where people still seem to fear it will reflect badly on them.

In my professional experience, men are particularly reticent about discussing estrangement outside one-to-one settings. And in my nuclear family of origin, it was my male relatives – my father, my brother – who were unwilling or unable to verbalise emotion more generally. This meant that when emotional crises arose, there was no mechanism for dealing with them together. Speaking and listening to men is personally meaningful to me for those reasons, but it is also politically significant to challenge the male tradition of silence. In the past, men have used silence as a power move. Why bother to explain or engage and open yourself up to questioning if you can get away with simply doing what you want? But now, it is increasingly recognised – and pointed out – that, by preventing men from seeking help (see O’Brien 2021, 197), silence has a cost. I would be pleased if this project were seen as part of a long-term cultural shift towards greater emotional openness and articulacy among men. I have chosen to work with sons rather than fathers – partly because I have been a son myself, but not a father, and also because I was afraid that I may have difficulties recruiting older men to talk about estrangement from their sons. Lastly, I have chosen to explore estrangement from fathers rather than mothers because relationships with fathers have been generally less explored.
Research question

How do sons make sense of estrangement from their fathers, and how do I make sense of their stories, in light of relevant theories?

Relevance to counselling and psychotherapy

Referring to narrative therapists, McAdams and Janis wrote, ‘As narrative change agents, they must become fluent in the psychological cultural and moral discourses wherein their clients’ lives have meaning’ (McAdams and Janis 2022, 169). That fluency may be particularly important for narrative therapists but seems like an essential skill for all therapists and counsellors.

A colleague recently remarked that after discussing this study with me, they had become aware of how common an issue family estrangement is among clients. With so little research directly addressing it, any study on family estrangement has the potential to raise awareness, deepen understanding, prompt reflection and ultimately improve counsellors’ responses. My hope is that by adding to the emerging body of research on family estrangement, this study will provide useful contextualised knowledge that will enrich the way that counsellors, psychotherapists and mental health professionals listen and respond to men who are estranged from their fathers. Furthermore, the study draws on narrative theories of self, which are highly relevant to counselling and psychotherapy, as well as on development theories, family systems theory and post-Freudian Oedipal theory.

Growth in interest and awareness

In the past 20 years, and particularly the last 10, interest in family estrangement has grown considerably in the UK. The emerging academic literature is reviewed in the next chapter, but the Google n-gram below gives a rough idea of the general increase in usage of the term ‘family estrangement’ in written materials. More precisely, it indicates the incidence of the term, expressed as a percentage of all terms found in machine-readable books written in
British English from 1970 to 2019. In the first 20 years since the turn of the century, this percentage had risen to at least five times its more or less stable level over the previous 30 years.

Figure 2: Google ngram – frequency of ‘family estrangement’ in written UK sources, 1970–2019

Beyond written materials, the UK now has a charity, StandAlone, set up specifically to support those experiencing family estrangement. Besides organising workshops, it gathers and disseminates information, relays personal stories through podcasts and raises awareness of the issue.

In recent years, public discussion of family rifts has been fed by the media attention given to high-profile cases. In the US, Britney Spears’s and Meghan Markel’s estrangements from their respective fathers come to mind. In the UK, the decision by the Duke and Duchess of Sussex (Harry and Meghan) to withdraw from their roles as members of the British royal family has been labelled an ‘estrangement’ (see Pillemer 2020). Whatever the thoughts and feelings of the people directly involved, this rift within the royal family has become a ‘co-authored’ family estrangement story on an unprecedented scale through social media.
A positive outcome of this, for me, is that many estranged people will have been able to identify with the perceived awkwardness around Harry and Meghan’s participation in the public mourning for Elizabeth II and their attendance (or non-attendance) at Charles III’s coronation some months later. Many estranged people will be familiar with those difficult high-stakes moments when ambiguity is hard to maintain and binary decisions are required – to invite or not to invite; to attend or not to attend; to risk explaining and being misinterpreted or not – and may see that they are not alone in such predicaments. Less positive for estranged people is the febrile and polarised nature of some of the discussion, with the risk that angry and contemptuous responses about ‘playing the victim’ or ‘toxic family culture’ are conflated with more reasoned concerns about the risks of public exposure or attempting to maintain the impression of a happy family at the cost of suppressing tensions.

Despite their very particular situation, the Harry and Meghan story points to two wider social truths: recent decades have seen a cultural shift towards destigmatising openness around problematic family relations and a greater awareness of the effects of bad family relationships on mental health and well-being, but a degree of judgement remains against people who are seen to distance themselves from their family and who complain too loudly. The greater openness creates an opportunity for research, which may partly account for the rise in interest in family estrangement over the past 20 years. The enduring stigma, however, means that people’s estrangement stories need to be heard in an empathic, non-judgemental setting.

Definitions, assumptions and expectations

Estrangement

So far, I have referred to family estrangement and father-son estrangement as if it were self-evident what those terms and their component words mean. But in a study about sense-making, the way words are used is a significant part of the inquiry. Here, I want to
clarify my own usage where possible but, just as importantly, to draw attention to some of the issues around even the most basic terms of reference.

One issue is around the meaning of the word estrangement, which is defined in different ways in the research literature, but mostly in terms of a breakdown in contact, often as the result of a decision. I did not set out to explore these definitions in depth, but they became a focus for discussion when I found that some participants’ understanding of the term differed from the way I had defined it for the purposes of this study, as a loss or breaking-off of contact. The questions that arose from this are central to the notion of meaning as socially constructed. Who has the power to define the semantic scope of a term, and what implications does this have for the creation of knowledge and for the relevance and effects of that knowledge on people?

A peculiarity of the term ‘family estrangement’ is that, in practice, it tends to be used in a way that does not include estrangement between parents or couples in general. This seems to mark a distinction between relationships that are viewed as ‘chosen’ and capable of being terminated and those that are not. Couples can be estranged (as in the term ‘marital estrangement’) but upon splitting up or divorcing, partners stop being estranged and become exes, and new partnerships can be formed. By contrast, people do not by and large refer to their ‘ex-fathers’, ‘ex-daughters’ or ‘ex-brothers’. Thus, the permanence of family relationships is to some extent encoded in the language. An ‘estranged father’ is by definition still a father unless his child explicitly says he no longer considers him as such; even then, others may not accept it.

Father (and son)

Estrangement also implies a prior connection. To refer to someone as ‘my estranged father’ is to acknowledge a pre-estrangement relationship – a father-son relationship in this case – albeit without articulating very much about the nature of it. It begs the question: What is a father? For some, fatherhood is rooted in biology. For others, it is the relational history that
counts; their father is the male parent who raised them or at least contributed in some way. Today, a father may not be male or may have transitioned from or to another gender.

And what is the appropriate role of the modern father? Going or gone is any consensus that the primary task of a father is to provide materially, to discipline and, as the ‘secondary caregiver’, to teach about the world outside the home. But no new consensus has replaced it; a father can hardly be defined by a role. The very term ‘secondary caregiver’ is problematic, firstly because it is only loosely defined and secondly because it assumes a two-parent family, in which the father is not and cannot be the primary caregiver. And what kind of values and practices around masculinity do fathers transmit to their sons? Amid a sometimes-fraught debate about the still often part-time participation of men in child-rearing and the transmission of ‘toxic masculinity’, what expectations, hopes and disappointments do estranged adult sons communicate in their stories of their fathers?

From the son’s perspective, once a father has been identified, the identity of ‘son’ may seem relatively unproblematic, at least for those who maintain the same basic male gender identity. Yet, there remains the question of a son’s responsibilities towards his father, both in adulthood and before. It is unclear, to me at least, to what extent a good son is still defined, for example, as one who makes his father proud through his achievements or values, takes care of his father in old age or stays in touch. The role of sons is little discussed, but the silence does not necessarily mean that expectations are absent.

The study does not actively and specifically seek to gather narratives from trans participants or those with trans fathers but is explicitly open to anyone who self-identifies as a son and who has or had a relationship with someone they think or thought of as a father.

Stories and values

Family estrangement may not have been a popular topic of discussion until recently, but it has been a cultural trope for some time in Western storytelling. A few examples illustrate some of the changing values around parent-child estrangement.
The biblical parable of the prodigal son can be read as an estrangement story. To the extent that the Abrahamic God is a father figure, the tale of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden is a prototype for father-child estrangement. Shakespeare’s ‘King Lear’ (Shakespeare 2016) provides a 17th-century example of father-daughter estrangement between Lear and Cordelia, while, from the 19th century, Austen’s ‘Sense and Sensibility’ (Austen 1995) features mother-son estrangement in the form of Edward Farrer’s disinheritance. Reflecting the traditional power and authority of parents, and particularly fathers, these last three involve an adult child being cast out by an angry, punitive parent. Unlike the biblical stories, however, the last two present an admirable child prepared to pay the price for maintaining their values and integrity.

The shift in sympathy away from the oppressive parent to the authentic adult child continues in the 20th century with Alice Walker’s ‘The Color Purple’ (Walker 2006), set in the African-American community of the southern US. And in Jeanette Winterson’s work of autobiographical fiction, ‘Oranges are Not the Only Fruit’ (Winterson 1985), Jess’s relationship with her (adoptive) parents ends over a clash of values about sexual orientation. The message here seems to be that relationships between parents and adult children should be based on mutual respect. In Winterson’s novel and in her subsequent first-person account of her own experience, ‘Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?’ (Winterson 2011), estrangement is a process of mutual disengagement; the adult child’s self-respect stops her from wanting a relationship with parents who cannot accept her.

In ‘It’s a Sin’ (Hoar 2021), the ambivalence and complexity of some estrangements are highlighted by the minor character Gloria, whose family at first estrange him for his sexuality, but then, in an act of disconcertingly contemptuous love, reclaim him when he becomes ill with AIDS. Unlike Winterson’s Jess, Gloria lacks agency, partly due to his illness but also because he desires even an abusive relationship with his family more than the ‘voluntary family’ offered by friends.

These few examples highlight different ways adult children deal with tensions between family connection and compliance with parental authority on the one hand and integrity,
self-respect and agency on the other. These tensions constitute an area of interest in this study. What values are conveyed in adult sons’ real-life stories of estrangement from their fathers? How do sons construct their own identities through their narratives, particularly with respect to connection/intimacy and agency/power?

My own story

With some of the main focuses for this study identified, I will now share something of my own estrangement story, specifically the cultural, family and relational background to it and then how it came about. My intention in doing this is to enable you, the reader, to better appreciate how my own personal experience might colour the way I interpret and evaluate the participants’ narratives. It should also help to introduce some secondary areas of focus, which I will set out afterwards.

For 14 years, from 1967 to 1981, I lived with my father, my mother, a sister four years my senior and, for the first 10 years, a brother seven years older than me. The setting for this story is a town in the North-East of England. In the parlance of the time, my father had a ‘white-collar’ job, my mother was a ‘housewife’. Demographers would probably categorise us as lower-middle class. The significance of time, place and class also depends on perspective; they are given meaning only by comparison with other times, places and classes. Most relevant to my story from my current perspective are the expectations and assumptions around the nuclear family and gender roles – and the shift which was taking place during my childhood. At that time, and in that place and class, nuclear families comprising a mother, father and children were expected to stay together regardless of the tensions. At the start of my life, fathers worked, and their role in raising children was limited mainly to play and discipline; men avoided emotional talk. Some mothers worked but most only if finances required it. This is relevant to me for two reasons. First, it meant that I barely knew my father as a person outside of the family. Second, my mother was unhappy with her financial dependence on my father and with her role as an unpaid servant to him.
For as long as I can remember, their relationship was marked by conflict – long shouting matches and long angry silences. There was, I believe, some physical violence between them, mostly hidden from me. Neither of my parents directed their anger at me.

Though distant, my father seemed to enjoy my company. We played games together throughout my childhood. But when he and my mother were not speaking, my father would isolate himself and stop speaking to anyone in the family, sometimes for weeks at a time. When my parents made up, both expected me to resume normal relations with my father. He behaved as if my siblings and I were an extension of my mother, without an independent relationship with him, and my mother seemed to find this quite normal.

When I was 13, my parents separated, and my father moved to another town. Contact became occasional. We were friendly and well-intentioned towards each other, but not intimate. At 15, my parents attempted a reconciliation and, again, I was expected to adjust, as if our closeness would automatically mirror theirs. Their relationship finally ended with an incident in which my mother jumped from the car my father was driving. I know few of the details, but it left my mother, who I was living with alone by then, physically and emotionally traumatised. I imagine my father was emotionally scarred too, but I did not see it and we never talked about it. After that, meetings with my father became awkward affairs, and tailed off. My mother would be distressed and angry for days before and after.

By my 18th birthday, I had not seen or heard from my father for several months. He sent me a beautiful gift and a chatty letter congratulating me on my birthday and my A-level results, wishing me well at university and leaving a contact address for if I ‘ever needed him’. The letter left the door open to contact but without anticipating or asking for it. I was unsure what he wanted. My mother’s attitude, by contrast, was not clear. She was contemptuous of the gift and the letter, and she was vehemently opposed to my replying or having further contact. I did not reply, and my father did not contact me again. I did not go to see my paternal grandmother again, nor did I have any contact with my uncles, his brothers or their wives and children.
After their divorce, my mother, though loving, supportive and proud, became possessive of me, particularly in relation to my father. Throughout her life, she needed to know that I had no contact with him and would often tell stories about how he had behaved towards her and my brother. While I acknowledged these as her truth, I had memories of a man also capable of affection and sensitivity, and I also had my own memories of his silences. But any sign of interest in him was met with a fierce reaction that could take days to subside and a reaffirmation of her version of my father centring on her and my brother. There was no space for my experience.

Having lost my father, I could not afford to lose my mother. Out of a mixture of concern and fear towards her, I did not contact him. But I never stopped wanting to meet him, if only to develop my own independent adult sense of who he had been and who he had become.

Years later, I came to realise how wary and anxious I was around men who were not immediately communicative. I often very much wanted to connect but feared their indifference or hostility. With women, I felt on familiar ground. I might like them or not, but I had confidence in my ability to manage the interactions, or at least to cope if things went wrong. With uncommunicative men, I felt lost and without a map and so tended to avoid interaction with them. I attribute this in part to my father. Slowly, through friendships with men and through therapy, I am no longer so anxious about rejection. Perhaps this was what enabled me to write to him finally in 2013, and, when he finally brought the contact to an end quite brutally, to be sad, frustrated and indignant but not crushed.

**Issues from my estrangement**

My experience is, of course, unique to me and my particular set of circumstances. It does not automatically increase my insight into other sons’ experiences or narratives of estrangement from their fathers. However, it does channel my curiosity and attention towards certain aspects of their stories.
Typical of men at that time and place, my father had little involvement in child-rearing and avoided emotional talk. To have acknowledged deep emotion and his powerlessness to resolve the difficulties in the relationship with my mother would have exposed his vulnerability in a way that was taboo for men. As a result, we had no way of affirming love or desire for contact, or of checking what the other wanted. Through gender-enforced passivity, we slid into estrangement gradually, without being able to acknowledge it. Will other sons’ narratives reveal a similar dynamic?

It occurs to me that a large part of my motivation to encourage men to talk about their estrangement stems from my frustration around my father’s traditional male reticence to discuss his experience. At times, this reticence seems like a reflection of male power: the weak explain themselves to the strong, not vice versa. But in other contexts, it seems like passivity, a missed opportunity to connect and to co-construct meanings with another person. Neither interpretation makes it seem desirable. However, my decision to invite sons to participate rather than fathers is a measure of my lack of confidence in older men’s willingness to talk.

While there was a definite turning point in the story – the incident in which my mother was injured – this did not mark the estrangement from me. While that incident might be described as a trigger, I am not sure I would label it the cause. I see various causes at different levels of explanation, including gender roles at that time, the fault lines in my parents’ relationship, aspects of my father’s personality, my own conditioned conflict aversion... The causes of estrangement seem almost indistinguishable from the relationship preceding it. Again, I wonder if this is a feature my narrative shares with others.

The same goes for effects. My insecurity around men is associated with my father, but it is impossible to say whether its cause is the estrangement or the cumulative effects of the entire relational history.
Structure

Following this introduction, I review the growing but still quite small body of literature on family estrangement in English, starting with research on the prevalence of estrangement in Germany, the US and the UK. I note how few men participated in estrangement research until very recently. The literature review then looks at the different ways of defining estrangement, some assumptions behind those definitions and the epistemological issues they raise. I then turn to causal attributions for estrangement, including low paternal involvement and parental conflict following divorce. After a brief review of the literature on the effects of estrangement, attention turns to other theories relevant to estrangement but pre-dating the recent growth in estrangement writing. These theories concern ‘cutoff’ and differentiation/individuation. The literature review chapter closes with a look at some concepts from theories of narrative identity.

The methodology chapter starts by naming some of the principal onto-epistemological assumptions underlying this work and explains, in particular, its intermediate position on the relationship between narrative and self, asserting a self that is independent of narrative and language but acknowledging narrative as a key component of and vector for the self. A brief definition of narrative is given as ‘discourse that makes sense of experience’, in line with Denzin and Lincoln (2018, 547). The methodology used for this study – a bricolage of various post-structural approaches to narratology and criticism of theory, linked by a commitment to trustworthiness – is followed by a detailed account of the methods.

The analysis chapter introduces the reader to the five participants in this study and restores their narratives in roughly chronological order, quoting substantial extracts with interpretations and comments that aim to be as transparent as possible.

In the discussion chapter, I bring the participant narratives together with the theories of estrangement, differentiation and individuation and narrative identity. I look at participant narratives through the lens of the theory but also draw on the narratives to critique the emerging estrangement theory and more established family systems theory, asking how
much they promote empathic understanding and whether they might also make it harder to hear some aspects of the participants’ stories.

In the conclusion, I review the main findings, examine some of the limitations of this study and make suggestions for future research. Lastly, I attempt to draw conclusions for both counsellors and other support workers and for training to prepare counsellors to deal with clients struggling with estrangement.
Chapter 2: Literature on estrangement and father-son relationships

How do adult sons make sense of their estrangement from their fathers, and how do I make sense of their estrangement narratives in the light of theories on family estrangement, personal narrative and relevant developmental theories? With these primary research topics in mind, I first examine the writing on family estrangement that has started to emerge since around 2010 in the US, Australia and the UK and argue that, while it is extremely useful as a resource to help counsellors, psychotherapists and others gain insight into estrangement, it also has the potential to mislead or oversimplify.

In this chapter, I begin with evidence from the US, Germany and the UK about the prevalence of family estrangement, which suggests that it affects around one in five people and more fathers than mothers. Following this is a review of the literature on the definitions, origins and effects of family estrangement, which explores how definitions – theoretical and de facto – might affect the way estranged people think of their situation and also the way others hear estrangement narratives. This leads into a discussion on fathering and what factors in the father-child relationship might increase the likelihood of estrangement later on. I then unpack the concept of ‘cutoff’, a concept recently taken into estrangement theory from Bowen family systems theory and reflect that it may appear to be somewhat tendentious. Other related concepts from two psychodynamic writers, Diamond and Loewald, look at tension between fathers and sons and its resolution from a different perspective. Lastly, I examine at some of the binaries in narrative theory intended to describe different types of narrative and how they are used for the purpose of self-identifying.

A new field of study

Writing in the early 2010s, Dattilio and Nichols speculated that most practitioners underestimated the prevalence of family estrangement and that, in addition to those clients who explicitly sought help with it, many more would be struggling silently with family rifts (Dattilio and Nichols 2011). The same authors were among the first to note that therapists
working with estranged family members faced a lack of research literature on family estrangement. In so doing, they set the stage for the studies that have followed in the intervening years.

In the last 10 years, the concept of family estrangement has finally started to appear centre-stage in some academic research literature in the US, Germany, Australia and, to a lesser extent, the UK. Various aspects of the topic have been investigated, including prevalence (Conti 2015; IpsosMORI 2014; Becker and Hank 2022; Reczek, Stacey, and Thomeer 2023), causes (Agllias 2016; Carr et al. 2015), loss through estrangement (Agllias 2011), gender, race and sexuality (Agllias 2013; Becker and Hank 2022; Reczek, Stacey, and Thomeer 2023), distancing processes (Scharp 2019; Scharp, Thomas and Paxman 2015), how estrangement is experienced (Agllias 2018) and narrated (Scharp and Thomas 2016) and the counselling/support experiences of estranged individuals (Blake, Bland, and Imrie 2020; Blake et al. 2023). Agllias, a researcher and writer working in Australia, has produced a comprehensive academic book (Agllias 2017) covering many of these aspects and others, drawing on recent research but also reaching back to the Bowenian concept of cutoff in support of her concept of ‘emotional estrangement’.

Only in the past four years has research started to emerge on counselling, psychotherapy and other forms of support in relation to family estrangement. In the UK, two studies have asked members of the StandAlone community about their experiences of therapeutic support. Unsurprisingly, participants in the studies said they valued practitioners who were knowledgeable about estrangement – knowledgeable enough to understand that each individual’s experience is unique and that directivity is counter-productive (Blake, Bland, and Imrie 2020). Clients also appreciated counsellors whom they found warm, empathic, available and dependable, precisely the qualities they missed in their estranged relative. Counselling was experienced as unhelpful when the client felt that the counsellor did not appreciate how serious the estrangement was and how specific incidents had affected their lives, when the counsellor assumed that putting things right was easy and within the gift of the client or when the client felt judged or disbelieved (Blake et al. 2023, 109).
Together, those findings suggest that the most valuable research would be that which builds understanding of estrangement within the context of a personal relationship and a set of family and social circumstances, all interrelated, rather than simplified, reductive patterns or templates for estrangement. Research would also ideally promote the kind of practical wisdom called for by Flyvbjerg – research that enables practitioners to approach clients with sensitivity and empathy (Flyvbjerg 2001).

Prevalence of family estrangement

Perhaps the first study to attempt to establish a prevalence rate for estrangement was the 2014 poll commissioned by the UK estrangement charity StandAlone, which aims to support people experiencing family estrangement (IpsosMORI 2014). In the representative survey of 2,082 UK residents, 8% said they had cut contact with a family member. The report concludes that some 12 million people in the UK are estranged as a result of a breakdown in the relationship with one or more family members.

A year later, a US study (Conti 2015) similarly set out to establish a prevalence rate amongst a sample of 354 college students (mean age 24, predominantly white/European [64.4%], female [79.9%] and single [81.4%]). Defining estrangement as a communication cutoff deliberately maintained by at least one person, it found that 39% had experienced or were currently experiencing estrangement from a member of their nuclear family. For 51% of those, the estrangement was ongoing. However, given the unrepresentative nature of the sample, it is not possible to extrapolate to the population as a whole.

More recent research in Germany, published after I had collected the data for this study, has used a far wider sample of over 10,000 children in young and middle adulthood (Becker and Hank 2022). The longitudinal study, covering 45,756 relationship-years (351), confirms that estrangement between parents and adult children is a ‘quantitatively relevant phenomenon’ warranting further attention from both researchers and families (358).
Men and estrangement

Becker and Hank’s study, which looked at prevalence through a gendered lens, found higher rates of estrangement from fathers than from mothers: 20% of participants had experienced periods of estrangement from a father and 9% from a mother, amounting to 12% and 5% of relationship-years, respectively (Becker and Hank 2022, 357). In taking a longitudinal approach, the study was able to ascertain that estrangement is commonly temporary and tends not to recur (357). With an even larger sample of around 17,000, Reczek, Stacey and Thomeer’s 2023 US longitudinal study found that 26% reported estrangement from a father and 6.3% from a mother over the study period (503).

Compared with Becker and Hank (2022) and Reczek, Stacey and Thomeer (2023), Conti’s 2015 study found an even starker difference between respective rates of estrangement from fathers and mothers among US college students: 54.7% of those estranged from a single member of their nuclear family were or had been estranged from their father, compared with 9.4% from their mother. As noted above, Conti’s sample was not very representative; specifically, the participants were predominantly female and more highly educated and younger than the two later studies. Additionally, Conti’s definition of estrangement was based solely on contact; emotional closeness/distance was not taken into consideration, unlike in the later longitudinal studies.

However, together, the three studies mentioned here – Conti’s (2015), Becker and Hank’s (2022) and Reczek, Stacey and Thomeer’s (2023) – provide fairly solid evidence for higher rates of estrangement from fathers than from mothers among adult children in the US and Germany. Furthermore, Becker and Hank found that emotional distance was more common between adult children and their fathers, and the difference between paternal and maternal estrangement rates was even higher among those reporting non-contact (357). In common with Reczek, Stacey and Thomeer (2023, 505), they also found that estrangements from fathers were more stable, that is, less likely to be resolved, than estrangements from mothers (Becker and Hank 2022, 357). However, both studies found similar rates of parental estrangement among adult daughters and adult sons (Becker and Hank 2022, 353; Reczek,
Fathers, rather than sons, appear to be especially prone to estrangement. This is further explored in the next section.

In contrast, in a 2015 UK survey, more adult child respondents reported estrangement from their mothers than their fathers (Blake, Bland, and Golombok 2015). However, this was an unrepresentative self-selecting sample of people (95% women) who had already contacted the StandAlone charity supporting people with family estrangement. It is at best unclear how generalisable this finding is to the wider population. A more representative UK prevalence study found that family estrangement affects men and women equally (IpsosMORI 2014), but the report does not provide details about whether respondents were referring to estrangement from parents or adult children, so it is not possible to say specifically if estrangement was more common for or from fathers than for or from mothers. No UK studies on the scale of Becker and Hank’s (2022) and Reczek, Stacey and Thomeer’s (2023) have yet been reported.

What makes the two most recent studies (Becker and Hank 2022 and Reczek, Stacey and Thomeer 2023) particularly valuable is that they used gender-balanced samples. The 2015 UK study is not the only one in which a high proportion of participants were female. Women accounted for 71% of the cohort in Scharp and Thomas (2016), 80% in Conti (2016) and 82% of adult children and 93% of parents in Carr (2015). The reasons for the preponderance of women in earlier studies are unclear. It may be that men do not volunteer, or they are present in fewer numbers in easily available recruitment pools, among humanities students or people accessing support through a charity. Either explanation would be consistent with traditional male avoidance of emotional topics or appearing vulnerable in public settings. As UK clinical psychologist Richman puts it, talking of this first commandment of ‘old’ masculinity: ‘Thou shalt not cry or expose feelings of emotion, fear, weakness, symptoms, empathy or involvement before thy neighbour’ (Richman 1982, 103). However, the most recent studies show that reaching men affected by estrangement is possible.

Beyond the estrangement literature, US research points to the relative fragility of relationships between adult children and their fathers. Silverstein and Bengtson (1997, 451–
452) indicated a ‘wide schism’ between the types of relationships that fathers and mothers have with their adult children. Fathers were more likely to have ‘detached’ relationships. Similarly, Pillemer et al. (2012, 1104) found that among nuclear intergenerational relationships, those between mothers and daughters were closest and those between fathers and sons least close. However, the authors noted that a lack of closeness and warmth did not imply a lack of emotional engagement. This raises the question of how family, estrangement is defined (discussed below). If prevalence studies used a broader definition taking account of affect and frequency of contact rather than focussing solely on contact, it is possible that rates of estrangement might be higher for fathers.

The above discussion provides two motivations for me to focus on father-son estrangement in this narrative study, aside from its personal resonance for me. First, I wish to enrich the body of research with less-heard stories, which may illuminate some less-familiar aspects of family estrangement. In so doing, I am contributing, in a small way, to the ongoing process of normalising the non-violent expression of emotional personal and relational experience by men and further weakening social pressure to self-censor.

However, I made the choice to restrict the study to men with some trepidation. What if they did not want to speak? Imagining that younger men may feel less bound by Richman’s first commandment, I chose to open the study to sons rather than fathers. Concern about not being able to recruit fathers outweighed a desire to knock on the most tightly closed doors and to hear fathers’ voices. To involve both fathers and sons would have added richness but also layers of complexity that a small-scale study might not be able to do justice to.

Before going any further, it feels necessary to draw attention to the way gender is handled in estrangement literature. Many quantitative studies classify participants and break down results using traditional binary gendered labels – woman, man, mother, father, daughter, son. The literature more generally treats these categories as straightforward, self-explanatory and all-encompassing. Trans and non-binary identities are rarely mentioned in the research, an exception being Blake, Bland, and Golombok (2015). In reporting the research, I can only replicate the terms used, while acknowledging the possible distorting
and exclusionary effects. For a discussion of my own treatment of gender in this study, see Chapter 3: Methodology.

Definitions of family estrangement

Leading writers on estrangement acknowledge that there is no agreed, neat definition of family estrangement in the literature (Agllias 2017, 17; Scharp 2019, 428). In one sense, this seems appropriate given the complexity of family relations and the subjectivity of experience; it avoids oversimplification and reductivism and allows people to self-define, for example, when accessing therapeutic support services. However, as Agllias points out, the fuzziness can make in-depth discussion difficult (Agllias 2017, 17).

Definitions are important epistemologically. As knowledge is constructed through research, researchers need to know what prior knowledge is and is not about; counsellors and therapists need to know how research relates to what their clients bring. And as academic knowledge feeds through into popular literature for the benefit of affected people, those people need to find an answer to the question, ‘Is this relevant to me?’.

What defines estrangement?

In 2011, Agllias wrote that ‘The most common clinical indicator that an estrangement is present is when a client states, “We don’t see each other anymore”’ (Agllias 2011, 108). Some years later, Conti defined estrangement as a cessation of contact (Conti 2015). Yet, Agllias cites other ‘key indicators’ found in the literature: lack of intimacy, conflict and avoidance and a perception that the difficulties cannot be resolved (Agllias 2011, 108). She identified lack of intimacy and trust as a feature of all estrangements. In a later work, Agllias cited the same defining features but also posited that estrangement involved a choice or decision by one or more parties (Agllias 2017, 17). She also distinguished between two main types of estrangement: physical estrangement, involving a total or near-total cessation of contact, and emotional estrangement, in which the parties continue to have some contact but relations are both distant and strained (Agllias 2017, 19). Yet, while a loss or cutting off
of contact is present in both types, both are marked by dissatisfaction and a lack of trust and intimacy. Though she does not state this explicitly, one could conclude that a lack of trust and intimacy is more fundamental to estrangement than a lack of contact.

Yet, in the field, many studies on intergenerational estrangement (between parents and adult children) have adopted an operational definition based on a cessation of contact (Agllias 2016; Scharp 2014; Scharp, Thomas and Paxman 2015; Scharp and Thomas 2016). Thus, the emerging de facto definition for research purposes based on a breakdown in contact seems to be at odds with the theoretical definitions in which lack of intimacy is central. The risk here is that a body of knowledge is accumulated based on the experience of ‘physical’ estrangement, which excludes or misrepresents those who have never lost contact but who experience intense and prolonged levels of tension and emotional distance. This risk is somewhat mitigated by the more recent work by Becker and Hank (2022) and Reczek, Stacey and Thomeer (2023), which used a wider definition extending to infrequent contact combined with self-reported emotional distance (351).

Here, I confess that when I designed this study, at a relatively early stage in my thinking, I opted, like previous researchers, to restrict its scope to participants who had lost or cut contact as I had. I did so partly because, in my experience, a lack of contact causes additional problems that I wanted to explore: it makes family estrangement more ‘visible’ to others, and those affected may face questions or feel pressure to explain why they never see their estranged relative. And, as Agllias points out, estranged people can believe that others blame them for non-contact, especially when it is the result of a conscious decision. However, despite my efforts to set eligibility criteria operationalising this definition, all but one participant had maintained some level of contact during their estrangement. This meant my data contained little of relevance to questions around disclosure. However, it opened up an unexpected and rich line of inquiry: how is estrangement constructed in the narratives? What are the narratives of estrangement about if not loss of contact? How does it compare with theoretical constructions of estrangement?
Sub-types of estrangement

To be able to address that question, I need to say more about the different ways of characterising estrangement. Beyond the main distinction between physical and emotional estrangement, Agllias discerns various other types of estrangement (Agllias 2017, 20).

In ‘cyclical estrangement’ (Agllias 2017, 20), the parties move back and forth between emotional and physical estrangement, moving apart when tensions or frustrations become too intense and being drawn back into contact by residual affection, need or a perceived duty to maintain family connections. Scharp also examines cycles of distancing and rapprochement as a way of communicating affect (Scharp 2014).

‘Absent estrangement’ develops from absence during childhood, so that no strong connection is formed, with some resentment or disappointment differentiating this from a distant relationship and, presumably, from a non-relationship where there is no engagement.

‘Mutual disengagement’ describes a gradual drifting apart, with no strong sense of grievance but minor hurts leading to the conclusion that the relationship is not worth maintaining (Agllias 2017, 112–113). It is perhaps easiest to imagine mutual disengagement happening between siblings, consistent with the finding that brothers and sisters are far less likely than intergenerational pairs to have a clear sense of who ‘initiated’ the estrangement (Blake, Bland, and Golombk 2015, 15).

‘Secondary estrangement’ is the term Agllias uses (Agllias 2017, 131) for situations in which a family member becomes estranged from a relative in the wake of a rift between that relative and another family member – either because they blame the relative for the rift or because the relative they remain attached to puts pressure on them to cut ties as an expression of loyalty. Her description fits my own estrangement from my father and his family. In my case, I could not and did not want to apportion blame for their split myself, but
my mother made it clear that she would have viewed any contact between me and them as a deep betrayal and a rejection of her.

Lastly, ‘inherited estrangement’ (Agllias 2017, 129) describes a situation in which a child grows up with people who are estranged from relatives and never forms a relationship with them because of that estrangement.

This bold first attempt at categorisation exposes some of the subtle and not-so-subtle distinctions between different situations and provides some concepts which I, at least, found helpful as points of comparison for estrangements I know of among family and friends. However, Agllias does not draw attention to the potential for overlap between these categories, which do not seem mutually exclusive. For example, if a mother is fiercely opposed to her adult son seeing her brother, but the son has never much liked his uncle anyway, this could be partly secondary estrangement and partly mutual disengagement.

A component-based model

In contrast to Agllias, Scharp does not attempt to categorise but uses grounded theory to identify various components of estrangement in narratives collected from 32 US-based adult children estranged from one or both parents – mostly women, almost exclusively white (Scharp is unusual in specifying ethnicity) aged 20–66 (Scharp 2019). Critiquing approaches that focus on just one aspect of estrangement and seem to ‘reflect researchers’ a priori beliefs about a binary relational state’ (Scharp 2019, 430), Scharp formulates a conception of estrangement that recognises it as a continuum. The components she identifies are: (1) communication quality, (2) communication quantity, (3) physical distance, (4) presence/absence of emotion, (5) positive/negative affect, (6) reconciliation/desire to be a family, (7) role reciprocity and (8) legal action. Scharp cites phrases from participants reflecting more and less severe forms of each component (Scharp 2019, 438).

This approach offers a conceptual framework for thinking about family which is capable of accommodating a large degree of freedom to self-define. The components have many
points of contact with the dimensions of intergenerational solidarity used by Silverstein and Bengston to evaluate US-based adult children’s relationships with their parents (Silverstein and Bengtson 1997, 432). It is as if the two lists are describing the same phenomenon, one from the negative view of estrangement and the other from the positive perspective of solidarity. Silverstein and Bengston’s dimensions of solidarity are as follows:

‘(1) structure (factors such as geographic distance that constrain or enhance interaction between family members), (2) association (frequency of social contact and shared activities between family members), (3) affect (feelings of emotional closeness, affirmation, and intimacy between family members), (4) consensus (actual or perceived agreement in opinions, values, and lifestyles between family members), (5) function (exchanges of instrumental and financial assistance and support between family members), and (6) norms (strength of obligation felt toward other family members)’. (Silverstein and Bengtson, 432)

Epistemological problems

As the title of Aglias’s book indicates, estrangement is a matter of perspective. Perspectives differ between people (if they did not there would likely be less estrangement); they change over time, and they have to be expressed and interpreted. My own view of my estrangement from my father has certainly changed over time and, based on his final letter, I am fairly sure he felt rebuffed by me, but I know that was not my intention. He may also have a different interpretation of what was going on in our last few meetings. Therefore, to categorise an estrangement, someone would need not only to verify the relationship between the parties’ reports and events but also to synthesise two or more accounts to come up with a ‘bird’s eye’ outsider view. This epistemological issue is less pronounced for Scharp’s list of variable components, which is effectively a set of parameters for describing family estrangement rather than an actual description itself. Nevertheless, a study based on estranged parents may have produced a subtly different set of parameters.

These epistemological problems are avoided in a recently published book of autoethnographies on estrangement, which describe the various narratives in terms of the root causes as perceived by the author, but, crucially, these are descriptions of single stories
rather than labels to be applied to categories (Spinazola and Purnell 2022). The reader is left to infer their own fuzzy and contextualised taxonomy of estrangement.

A decision or intention to estrange

A further definitional issue concerns intentionality. Agllias describes family estrangement as ‘the condition of being physically and or emotionally distanced from one or more family members, either by choice or at the request or decision of the other’ (Agllias 2017, 17). This seems to rule out the idea of drifting into estrangement, though mutual estrangement, absent estrangement and secondary estrangement as described by Agllias all seem to allow for the possibility. I suspect my estrangement from my father emerged without either of us making a choice or a decision. I made many small decisions that over time turned into a pattern, but they were micro-decisions based on the balance of relationships within the family system despite a desire to see him.

In practice, researchers have tended to use Agllias’s definition involving a decision to estrange. I would argue that an even more restrictive de facto definition of intergenerational estrangement is emerging as a result of the preponderance of studies limited to adult children (rather than parents) who have ceased contact with, or ‘voluntarily distanced themselves from’, one or more parents (rather than children) (Agllias 2016; Scharp 2014; Scharp, Thomas and Paxman 2015; Scharp and Thomas 2016). To some extent, this preponderance seems warranted: studies have found that a majority of both estranged parents and estranged adult children in the UK think that the adult children cut contact, rather than their parent (Blake, Bland, and Golombok 2015, 15). Crucially, however, parents’ perceptions differed somewhat from children’s, suggesting the possibility that, here too, ideas about who started the estrangement is a matter of perspective (though the adults and children in question were not paired, so were not commenting on the same case of estrangement). In the UK study, a significant minority were not sure who started the estrangement, while in US research, 28% of young adult children thought it had been jointly initiated, against just 23% who said they had initiated it and 45% who thought their parent(s) had (Conti 2015). Against these figures, the number of studies restricted to adult
children who thought they had initiated the estrangement seems disproportionate and somewhat tendentious. So, too, does Agllias’s use of the terms ‘estranger’ and ‘estranged’ (Agllias 2017, 21; 2018, 2), though she does acknowledge that both parties can engage in distancing practices at different times (Agllias 2017, 21) and that ‘it takes more than one person to create and to maintain an estrangement’ (Agllias 2011, 108).

There is a limit to how much we can learn about the origins of estrangement from research based solely on unilateral self-reporting by adult children who identify as having initiated their estrangement. However, researchers’ preoccupation with this kind of study may tell us something about the way we, collectively, as a culture, want to construct those perceived to have been disempowered and vulnerable (children) as finding agency by freeing themselves from bad relationships. In a rare cross-cultural study on family estrangement involving estranged adult children in India and the US (Ungar and Mahalingam 2003), participants were asked to identify reasons for their estrangement. One category of responses, labelled ‘moral outrage’ showed a stark difference between the American participants, who tended to speak about their own moral outrage in response to a parent’s behaviour and the Indian participants, who tended to mention rejection by parents so disappointed in their children’s academic or professional achievements that they no longer wished to have contact (Ungar and Mahalingam 2003, 173–175). While I acknowledge that parental disappointment can be felt as rejection in contemporary Europe, stories of parents who cut off contact because of their children’s failure to achieve are rarely heard. It is almost impossible not to imagine an equal and opposite moral outrage from the adult child to such an intolerant and unaccepting attitude in the parent. And moral outrage is just one small step away from a decision to estrange.

How will UK-based adult sons talk about initiating estrangement? To what extent will it be presented as an evolving situation or as the result of someone’s intentions – theirs or their fathers’? If estrangement is spoken about as a choice or decision by the adult child, how will it be evaluated? What emotions might accompany that choice or decision? Might they express pride at having the strength to become more independent, for example, or guilt at weakening a relationship that is often considered permanent?
Causal attributions

Linked to the issue of who, if anyone, initiated the estrangement is the wider question of the causes of estrangement, or, to put it in more epistemologically sound terms, what causal attributions do estranged people make when talking about their estrangement? With regard to causes, at least, researchers seem quite alert to the unattainability of objective realist knowledge when relying on personal accounts. Agllias points out that it is not possible to establish causes but talks instead of insights into possible contributory factors (Agllias 2011, 27). Carr draws attention to the fact that in the past, researchers have often been concerned with specific problems in family relationships (such as divorce, alcoholism and abuse) and have sought out people who were estranged as a result of those problems and so were not necessarily representative – giving us greater awareness of some types of ‘causes’ than others (Carr et al. 2015, 131). In their study, Carr et al. made no pre-selection of participants and put open-ended questions to both parents and children. For Ungar and Mahalingam, identifying the causes of family estrangement is not possible; the most ambitious question one could hope to answer is, ‘Why is a cut-off between these people occurring at this time?’ (Ungar and Mahalingam 2003, 181), although even that question presupposes that an objective answer is possible.

In examining causes, researchers advance a wide and non-mutually exclusive range of factors at different levels of explanation – cultural, socio-political, developmental, relational, behavioural and biological. For example, Carr et al. code the causes cited by their participants into four different categories: intrafamily, interfamily, intrapersonal and unsure/don’t know (Carr et al. 2015). Scharp, Thomas and Paxman mention both internal realisations (e.g. that a parent would never meet their expectations) and external events (parental behaviour is given as an example, though it is not clear to me how this is external) and network pressures (i.e. pressure from family and friends), which can also be pressure to ‘reconcile’ (Scharp, Thomas and Paxman 2015, 339–340). Macdonald Kingsbury and Shaw (2005) write that estrangement can be a defensive move – a ‘social flight’ – to defend against the threat of ‘social pain’ involved in not being valued.
Divorce, parental conflict and paternal involvement

Estrangement research in the Netherlands has established a strong correlation between the breakdown of the parents’ relationship on the one hand and loss of contact or a poor relationship with the father on the other. In Kalmijn’s 2015 study, conducted in the Netherlands, 26% of respondents with divorced parents never saw their father, compared with just 3% among respondents with married fathers (928). In the US, Silverstein and Bengston found that following parental divorce or separation, adult children were five times more likely to have a detached relationship with their father than with their mother (Silverstein and Bengston 1997, 451-452).

Unpacking this correlation, Dutch researchers found a more complex picture. Kalmijn concluded that parental conflict had a major effect on the frequency of contact and relationship quality with fathers in adulthood (Kalmijn 2015, 929 and 931), but conflict appeared to have a smaller effect when parents were divorced (934), perhaps because divorce provides relief from the stress of conflict. In a subsequent study, Spaan, van Gaalen and Kalmijn (2022, 1203) found evidence that, first, parental conflict affected father involvement in childhood (for example, helping with homework, talking about school and personal issues, going on outings or doing sport together), and second, this reduction in involvement accounted for some of the loss of father-child closeness in adulthood. Indeed, reduction in involvement had a bigger impact than a reduction in contact (1203). Or, put in positive terms, ‘the more involved a father was in youth, the closer fathers and children are later on’ (1201). The same study further found that, though geographical distance between father and child leads to less contact, it does not diminish father involvement as perceived by participants.

Against this background, the present study hopes to explore how estranged sons tie together the different childhood factors – parental conflict and separation, paternal involvement, amount of contact, geographical proximity and others – and link them to the loss of contact with and closeness to their fathers in adulthood.
Overall, the research shows how complex and multi-layered family estrangement is. The multiplicity of causal attributions may derive from its being an ‘ongoing relational process’ in contrast to a one-off event (Agllias 2017, 17). In this study, rather than assuming individual causal attributions, I want to investigate a more open question: when people are asked how their estrangement came about, what factors are given the greatest weight in the story, and how are they linked together?

Expectations of fathers

One causal attribution that appears in almost every study involving adult children estranged from a parent is some form of ‘bad parenting’ from the point of view of the adult child. Exact categories differ but the descriptors include: psychological and physical maltreatment, sexual abuse and parental indifference (Scharp, Thomas and Paxman 2015, 338–339); long-term disconnection and physical or emotional abandonment, authoritarian parenting style, where parents were demanding and highly critical; shaming; scapegoating; favouritism; name calling; parentification, where the child was expected to exhibit adult-like behaviour and take on adult-like tasks and responsibilities; and withholding of parental attention and affection from offspring that failed to comply with the opinions and demands of the parent (Agllias 2017, 32). Such findings reveal what adult children expect and want from their parents – what they consider to be good and bad parenting. It also reflects self-confidence in expressing it that might not be shared across all cultures.

Etchegoyen argued that the role of the father may be more ‘culture-dependent’ than that of the mother (Etchegoyen and Trowell 2001, 18). Social norms around parenting also change over time. In a narrative study looking at sons’ narrated memories of their fathers, Long et al. note times when the men contrasted their fathers’ behaviour with current fatherhood norms (Long et al. 2014, 129).

This study will focus on sons’ expectations of their individual fathers and of fathers in general. To what extent will adult sons trace their estrangement back to a difference in role expectations between them and their fathers? What will sons’ narratives say about
dissatisfaction based on their fathers’ material and emotional contribution to the child-rearing process?

Traditionally, the father has been seen as the ‘secondary attachment figure’ or ‘secondary caregiver’ with the task of connecting the child to the worlds of study and work beyond the home and academic achievement (Youniss and Smollar 1985, 52), while the mother’s task, as the ‘primary attachment figure’, has been to provide a secure base (Consentino 2017). However, other research suggests that qualities associated with primary attachment are important in child-father relationships too – at least in terms of outcomes. Dunn found that reliable, high-quality and consistent fathering was more important than the amount of contact (Dunn 2004, 660). Equally important were warmth and affectionate closeness, support, involvement, monitoring and authoritative parenting. Hostility between child and parent and critical and punitive parenting have been associated with poor outcomes (Dunn 2004, 661–662), as has authoritarian parenting based on psychological control (Barber et al. 2012).

Effects

The effects of family estrangement have been less well researched and written about than the causes. Aglias associates estrangement with a range of emotions towards the estranged relative: sadness, loneliness (Aglias 2011, 108), anger, hurt, resentment, frustration, disappointment, bitterness and hate (Aglias 2017, 52). However, the causal direction is unclear here. These strong emotions could as easily be construed as driving or causing estrangement or even constituting it in the case of emotional estrangement. They could easily have started before the onset of estrangement (assuming that it is possible even to discern an onset). Wisely, it seems to me, Aglias does not present these feelings as effects but more as possible features or, to borrow Scharp’s terminology, components of estrangement (Aglias 2017, 53–65).

Another three feelings mentioned by Aglias – guilt, shame and embarrassment (Aglias 2017, 64–65) – are perhaps more unambiguously impacts of estrangement in that
they are not also functions of the relationships with the estranged person before estrangement but functions of internalised values about the importance of maintaining good family ties in the case of guilt (65) or a function of other people’s judgements, real, imagined or anticipated.

Estrangement can be confusing too. Agllias (2011, 109) points to the potential for ambiguous loss, characterised by feelings of loss but without the opportunity for closure that death or another unequivocal loss brings (see Boss 1999). In physical estrangement, the estranged person is physically absent but still alive and psychologically present, perhaps with the risk of running into them unexpectedly or the hope of rebuilding a relationship at some point. In emotional estrangement, the estranged person is physically present but psychologically distant. Decisions must still be made on whether to contact them when something significant happens, such as a birth, death or marriage.

Cutoff

Though ‘family estrangement’ is a relatively new field, it overlaps with and draws on several other pre-existing fields, such as attachment theory, parenting styles and individuation in adolescence. These fields are too numerous and too diverse to consider in depth here. However, I want to explore one particular concept: Bowen’s concept of ‘cutoff’, developed in the 1970s, which refers to the act, undertaken by an adult child, of separating, isolating, withdrawing or ‘running away’ from the parental family or denying the importance of it (Bowen 2004, 400). This is done as a way of regulating anxiety arising from ‘fusion’ within the family. ‘Fusion’ refers to excessive closeness, which can either be warm but suffocating or cold and conflictual. Typically, it might manifest in children taking responsibility for their parent’s reactions (Brown 1999, 95), for example, by refraining from behaviour that might generally be considered reasonable in case it triggers anger in a parent.

The relevance of cutoff to estrangement is self-evident, and indeed Agllias has worked it into her own contemporary analysis of family estrangement (see Agllias 2017, 30) while other researchers (Ungar and Mahalingam 2003) had used the term almost as a synonym or
a proxy for intergenerational estrangement. When I first encountered the concept, it appealed to me because, initially, it seemed to offer a more flexible and comprehensive defining characteristic of estrangement than the absence of contact. For example, a ‘covert’ or ‘emotional’ cutoff can occur while remaining in contact with the parent(s) (Bowen 2004, 554; Klever 2003, 231). The distinction between ‘covert’ and ‘overt’ is very similar to the distinction between Agllias’s twin concepts of physical and emotional estrangement, which may well have their roots in Bowen’s theory.

According to Bowen’s theoretical framework (2004, 402), there are many different gradations of cutoff and almost everyone is cut off from their parents to some degree; it is not always a deep rift (Brown 1999, 97). It is depicted as a common part of the process of differentiation, whereby, for example, young people separate from their past in the nuclear family of origin to start lives in the new generation of which they are part. However, it is hard to see how cutoff would apply in a family where a parent was poorly engaged or neglectful. This would not count as fusion, so any withdrawal by the adult child would not then be cutoff, by definition.

Further, cutoff only refers to distancing enacted by the adult child, so when cutoff is imported into estrangement theory, it comes with the notion that the adult child is the ‘estranger’ and risks strengthening an assumption that already seems to be shaping contemporary research, given the number of studies with adult children who have distanced themselves. In mitigation, however, Titelman, writing some years after Bowen, stresses that cutoff is a function of the emotional process in a family unit rather than something enacted by a single individual (Titelman 2003, 23).

Another danger is that more ‘extreme’ forms of cutoff may be pathologised by the family systems theory. I am not in a position to assess the claim made by family systems theory that people who remain cut off from their families of origin will be unable to differentiate sufficiently in subsequent relationships; that may or may not be true. But the language Bowen sometimes uses, such as ‘running away’, can seem pathologising and to modern ears would border on victim-blaming if applied, for example, to people who had ‘cut off’ to
escape abusive parents. However, Bowen does acknowledge that keeping in touch is not always desirable in cases of ‘disasters, fragmented families [and] a number of other extreme social situations’ (Bowen 2004, 557), and later writers recognised the possibility that ‘[t]he person cannot see himself or herself surviving the relationship process with the family and so ends contact to gain relief’, adding, ‘but in the long run the person pays a price for this isolation from important others’ (McKnight 2003, 281–282). Overall, there is a whiff of directivity about the theory, which might make it appear, superficially, to be aligned with traditional values of family togetherness even though the underlying value is differentiation rather than outward harmony or compliance with social norms.

To further complicate the relationship between cutoff and estrangement, Titelman views cutoff as an automatic emotional and/or behavioural response, that is, not a conscious choice or a decision (Titelman 2003, 30). On this view, it would seem to be incompatible with Aglias’s definition of estrangement as involving an intentional decision.

The research question associated with the concept of cutoff is how relevant it would be to the sons’ narratives. To what extent do their accounts present them as cutting off from their fathers and, if so, for what reason? A further question would be: how do they see the future with their fathers? Would differentiation of the kind advocated by Bowen, in proximity to their father, seem like a reasonable proposition on the basis of what they said?

**Differentiation, individuation**

The central concept and chief goal in Bowen family systems theory is differentiation of the self (Bowen 2004, 548), which involves resolving unresolved emotional attachments (Bowen 2004, 553) and enables an individual to establish an autonomous identity from their family of origin while staying connected (McKnight 2003, 276) – to enjoy both separateness and togetherness. An essential part of the differentiation process entails ‘going back home’ (Framo 1976) after cutoff and learning – with proper therapeutic support – how to become an autonomous individual in the environment that made it difficult in the first place. The idea is to transition to a more equal, adult-to-adult relationship with parents, which Bowen
family system theorists refer to as ‘terminating the intergenerational hierarchical boundary’ (Williamson 1981, 411) and which could also be described as a kind of reconciliation.

Family systems theory specifies that breaking away from the family is just the first part of this process; ‘going back home’ and changing the terms of the relationships is the second. It is important to acknowledge that even though somewhat directive, the theory is not suggesting that adult children should make peace or sacrifice their own interests for the sake of a relationship with their family. On the contrary, its agenda is to empower the adult child within the family. However, others may argue that true empowerment would lie in trusting and respecting someone’s decision as to how much contact to have with their estranged relative.

Some psychoanalytic theorists have also posited a two-stage individuation process starting in adolescence and continuing into a person’s 20s. Blos, writing specifically about fathers and sons, called these the second and third rounds of individuation (Blos 1985, 144) (the first being the infant’s early individuation from the mother). Diamond, also focussing on fathers and sons, adopts the same terminology (Diamond 1998, 283–285) to denote a movement away from the father in adolescence and then a movement back towards the father, meeting the adult son’s desire for re-connection. However, unlike Bowen family systems theory, Diamond looks at the issue from a relational point of view. Rather than heaping the responsibility for changing the relationship from within, Diamond talks of the patience, restraint and humility a father will require to act as a ‘container for paternal de-idealisation’ (Diamond 1998, 256). Loewald writes about a similar challenge facing parents of any gender to survive de-idealisation by the adult child and to allow themselves to be dethroned through Oedipal ‘parricide’ so that the adult child can gain in autonomy and self-respect and build a more equal relationship with the parent(s) (Loewald 2000). Loewald stresses that this dynamic – of asserting autonomy from parents and then recalibrating the relationship – re-emerges throughout the life cycle and alludes to it as the waxing and waning of the Oedipus complex (Diamond 1998). To be good enough for the relationship to recover and to meet the sons’ desire for (re-)connection, fathers must be available and willing at some point to communicate about what has gone wrong and build a different kind
of relationship, with greater equality. This is the process that Diamond labels, from the son’s perspective, the ‘third individuation’, a concept mirrored in Loewald’s work as a (second) ‘waning of the Oedipus complex’ (Loewald 2000) and in family systems theory as the ‘termination of the intergenerational hierarchical boundary’ (Williamson 1981, 411).

While adolescent distancing from and de-idealisation of the father is widely recognisable from popular culture, the ‘third’ individuation – a renegotiating of the relationship on more equal terms – has no such echoes. In folk psychology, the adolescent rebellion ends, and there is little more to say until parents approach the end of life and may require support. Yet, if some degree of adolescent cutoff or at least de-idealisation is common, and what differentiates adult children who feel estranged from those who do not is the lack of a movement back together again (‘reconciliation’), perhaps that is where attention should be focussed. What will the sons say about the prospects of re-establishing a closer relationship?

I am aware I have been skirting around the word ‘reconciliation’ because I feel it to be somewhat charged. My clinical experience tells me that the word is laden with other people’s expectations for many estranged people, who have often felt under pressure to explain why ‘reconciliation’ is not possible while trying to maintain self-respect, psychological well-being or, sometimes, physical safety. Some have been pressured to ‘reconcile’ for the sake of appearances or ‘peace’ even when it would really amount to submitting and jeopardising their well-being. Theories that do not dodge the challenges involved in reforging a closer relationship are therefore of interest. But how do they stand up against the narratives of real people? How do the participants in this study talk about what comes after estrangement?

**Narrative binaries**

In talking about how they have dealt with estrangement and the difficulties in their relationships with their fathers, the participants inevitably convey a sense of who they are, what they believe and value and what qualities and vulnerabilities they have exhibited. This
study also set out to look at this ‘narrative identifying’, as Frank puts it (Frank 2010, 49), and what the sons might be ‘accomplishing’ (Holstein and Gubrium 2016, 7) by telling their stories. What are they trying to do, and how might narrating increase their well-being?

For McAdams, the lifelong practice of autobiographical storytelling is a way of constructing personal ‘myths’ (McAdams 1997, 109). A myth does not imply something untrue; it refers merely to an idea of oneself, a self-construction. Mythmaking, which involves asserting one’s own narrative and working things out through storytelling, is in itself a form of agency. Narratologists (Combs and Freedman 2022; Frank 2010, 30) point out that it can also be a form of resistance to the self-myths imposed on us by others, such as parents. What imposed or inferred identities might the estranged sons in this study be resisting through their narratives?

Many theories around dealing with narratives of adversity set out contrasting binaries: compensatory (good-to-bad) narratives versus antithetical or redemptive (bad-to-good) narratives (McAdams 1997), with similarities to narratives of loss and restoration from bereavement theory (Stroebe and Schut 2010), and narratives of power versus narratives of intimacy (McAdams 1988), with some parallels to the separation-togetherness duality of family systems theory (Titelman 2003, 32). Stroebe and Schut have concluded that when faced with loss (such as estrangement from a father), men tend more towards narratives of forward-looking reconstruction and women towards retrospective narratives of loss. This is consistent with Gilligan’s observation that men are conditioned not to reveal vulnerability through their narratives (Gilligan 1982). For the same reason, men might be expected to focus on narratives of power rather than intimacy, separation rather than togetherness. To what extent might this be borne out when men are asked to talk about their estrangement from their fathers? Might there be differences between the generations as old conceptions of masculinity have weakened? And how are we as hearers/readers struck by narratives of redemption, given McAdams’ recent acknowledgement that when positivity is culturally enforced, as in the US, redemptive narratives can effectively become forms of denial (McAdams 2023), perhaps a denial of an enduring unresolved attachment?
A further question is how any desire for connection might be expressed or acknowledged even to the self if doing so seems to play into the hands of dominant social discourses of relationship endurance – highlighted by numerous theorists, such as Scharp, Thomas and Paxman (2015, 340) – which adult children may well be trying to resist.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter discusses the onto-epistemological position underlying the study and assembles some methodological principles to guide the research process and explore the research questions. The design is divided into two parts, dealt with respectively in the analysis and discussion chapters and described here. The two parts are connected by the participants’ narratives but, broadly speaking, explore different sets of research questions. The first part is an extensive narrative analysis, a gently interpretative re-storying of the material that the participants shared with me. It chiefly addresses the questions about how adult sons make sense of their own estrangement from their fathers. The second part brings those accounts together with estrangement and related theories and narrative theory. There, I describe an approach that enables me to explore how theory might help or hinder us from gaining an understanding of the participants’ narratives. By focussing on this question and critiquing theory, I hope to be able to avoid adopting an expert position and summarising, simplifying, over-interpreting, misinterpreting or conflating the individual participant stories.

This chapter also explains in some detail the methods used for this study, including defining eligibility criteria for participants, recruiting participants, designing an interview, handling online interviewing, informed consent, data protection and anonymity, transcribing data and, finally, narrative analysis.

Narratological onto-epistemology

In their contribution to the 2004 Handbook on Narrative and Psychotherapy, Botella et al. cite 10 assumptions underlying their ‘relational constructivist’ approach. The assumptions are related to discourse and conversations by the authors (Botella et al. 2004, 120–22), but they also apply to co-constructed narratives and any form of linguistic exchange, and many of them are foundational for this study. The first two assumptions are that humans are by nature meaning-makers, seeking to interpret experience and find significance in it, and that this seeking, when successful, involves integrating life events into narrative in a way that
maintains value and agency and increases our interpretative and predictive power. Botello and Herrera thirdly recognise that language is a resource that we share with others, even those we would rather isolate ourselves from; we are not totally in control with language, but neither is anyone else. Fourthly, relationships are dialogical and rooted in language; without someone to interpret and decode, there is no meaning. Thus, I surmise, in a research interview too, there is a negotiation going on about meaning and language use. The fifth assumption is that when we talk with others, we take subject positions, which are then interpreted, and we respond to those interpretations. Again, this is an ongoing process, of which a research interview is merely part.

Cumulatively, through these dialogical interactions and subject positions, we develop a self-concept in a process that is partly private and partly public. The voices we use to express subject positions are many and diverse; they are in a dialogue with each other, and they are also addressed to other competing discourses (Botella et al. 2004, 121), be they those of another person, of other parts of the self or dominant narratives in society (Bakhtin 1986, 36) or the person an estranged son once was before the estrangement. For Osatuke, stories help us to connect those different parts of the self (Osatuke et al. 2022, 192).

Botella et al.’s seventh assumption is that voices ‘expressed along a time dimension’ are narratives. As our different voices (and other people’s) are constantly interacting, our life story is always evolving in ways that allow for positive change (Botella et al. 2004, 121). This idea is in tune with the notion that no story is finalisable: all stories are always open to supplementation (Josselson 2011, 227), and identifying is an ongoing issue throughout the life cycle (McAdams and Janis 2022); we recreate ourselves, or at least part of ourselves, every time we tell a story.

The eighth assumption is that identity is authorship. The act of narrating, with the choices we make, constructs our identity (Botella et al. 2004, 122). To me, however, this seems too strong a statement. It is possible to define identity in this way, but only by excluding many other things which might be felt to be part of our identity, not least the dispositional traits
and characteristic adaptations (goals, strategies and defences) that belong to identity (McAdams and Janis 2004, 168). Similarly sweeping and categorical are the ninth and tenth assumptions, which restrict psychological problems and therapy to the realm of narratives (Botella et al. 2004, 122). While the ‘songs we learn to sing’ and stories we learn to tell undoubtedly have a profound effect on our well-being, and it is a proper task of therapy to open up new narrative possibilities, to imagine that narratives are all there is seems like a refusal to believe in anything that cannot be seen and heard.

My position is closer to McAdams and Janis’s ‘intermediate’ position of psychosocial constructionism: while not mimetic, narrative identity does refer to some kind of social and material reality (McAdams and Janis 2022, 170), even if that reality is ultimately unknowable and inexpressible. For that reason, it means something to speak of a narrative’s credibility. If narratives were everything, heuristics of faith and suspicion would be meaningless because a narrative would refer to nothing. More than just an onto-epistemological point, this issue seems to have a strong ethical aspect to it. Would it not be so deeply unempathetic as to be unethical for a therapist, or a researcher, to hear someone tell of years of physical abuse at the hands of their father and to think, let alone say, that their problems are solely narratological? It would be to deny the physical and emotional legacy of trauma and its impact on the sense of self.

What is a narrative?

Since Labov and Waletzky defined narrative in the late 1960s as comprising at least an orientation, a complicating action and an evaluation (Labov and Waletzky 1997), the definition has become ever more fuzzy and contested. In this study, I will use the deceptively simple definition offered by Denzin and Lincoln: narrative is ‘discourse that makes sense of experience’ (Denzin and Lincoln 2018, 547). It may be chronological but need not be; it can refer to the past, present or future, which is significant for narratives of estrangement, some of which may project forward into the future. Denzin and Lincoln also specify that it need not refer to an action, but it can be about an internal event such as a thought or feeling. Again, this is important for a study on family estrangement, where
changes in perception or feeling towards family members can have a very strong effect without being in the least visible.

Methodology

Many narratologists point to the lack of a clear-cut methodology for narratological studies. Riessman introduces her work, Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences, by advising: ‘Students looking for a set of rules will be disappointed’ (Riessman 2007, 53). Later, she adds: ‘I continue to believe... that there is no canon, that is formal rules or standardized technical procedure for validation’ (186). In 2019, researchers in the field of narratology (Nasheeda et al. 2019) were still quoting Ollerenshaw and Creswell, who wrote in 2002 that researchers must construct their own inquiry procedure and play process (Ollerenshaw and Creswell 2002, 331). This presents both a danger and an opportunity for the novice narratologist: the risk of falling foul of the adherents of one or other narrative tribe but also the chance to prioritise prudence, the Greek term meaning ‘practical wisdom’, popularised by Flyvbjerg as the basis of social science research (Flyvbjerg 2001). Faced with the ‘infinite complexity’ of all the ways narratives can be analysed (Onega and García Landa 1996, 6), I had little choice but to become something of a bricoleur (Denzin and Lincoln 2018, 11–12), drawing on different paradigms to bring out what is important – to me and, I hope, to readers.

My primary concern throughout the study has been to be trustworthy – above all to participants, including prospective participants. This concern informed my narrative analysis of the participants’ individual stories and also led me, in the discussion, to ‘turn the tables’ by scrutinising emerging estrangement theory and related theories in the light of the participants’ narratives, rather than trying to make the narratives fit the theory or artificially summarising, grouping or theming them in a way that could have reduced or distorted the narratives and, thus, the narrative identities of the people concerned.

The ethic of trustworthiness (Denzin and Lincoln 2018, 550) demanded that I should ‘re-pot’ the narratives as fully as space would allow, with as much transparency as possible
about my own responses, so that my interpretations could be seen to be subjective, not authoritative. Rather than an analysis of the narratives, I aimed for a narrative (storied) analysis – a distinction made by Frank (Frank 2010 Ch 5). Instead of coding the narratives, I attempted a holistic interpretation of them in line with Riessman’s guidance (Riessman 2007, 57). Inspired by Angus et al., I viewed the evaluative and emotional aspects as the glue that binds them together into a meaningful whole (Angus and McLeod 2004, 88).

Here, I was sorry that practical considerations prevented me from offering the participants greater ownership and co-authorship of their stories as they appear in this study. Given the short amount of time available to me and my status as a novice researcher, I was wary of offering greater engagement than I was realistically able to process. To have promised a more collaborative process and then been unavailable would have made me untrustworthy. Instead, I reminded the participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time prior to the submission of the thesis or, if they had any misgivings about specific things they had said, I would willingly remove anything they wished from the transcript.

In the discussion, I wanted to bring the participants’ stories into dialogue with the literature on narrative identity and on estrangement, differentiation and individuation in line with Josselson’s recommendation (Josselson 2011, 228). Here, I struggled for various reasons with the theories on estrangement and with the related psychodynamic and family systems theories. It felt as if estrangement theory was still too exploratory to have much explanatory power, whereas the psychodynamic and family systems theories had perhaps too much. It would have been unethical and epistemologically unsound to ‘analyse’ the participants using those theories; that was not what they had signed up for, and I had only spent an hour with each one. I noticed my own indignation arising from my initial impression that some of the theories placed responsibility for estrangement onto the adult sons and reinforced the grand narratives of the permanence of family bonds. This led me in the discussion to question how helpful the theory was in illuminating the narratives. I will say more about the method of analysis below, after explaining the recruitment of participants, consent, interviews and transcription.
Methods and ethical considerations

Defining and communicating eligibility criteria

The first practical design decision was to define eligibility criteria for participation. Polkinghorne points out that ‘[n]arrative analysis requires that the researcher select a bounded system for study’ (Polkinghorne 1995, 15), which meant defining, in operational terms, what I meant by ‘son’, ‘father’ and ‘estranged’. I specified in the participant information sheet (see Appendix 2) that the sons should be over 18 and, to be inclusive of non-cis men, that participants should identify as male. I explained that by ‘father’, I meant any man the prospective participant considered to be their father. In retrospect, I would now write ‘person’ instead of ‘man’ to be more explicitly trans-inclusive. My definition of ‘estranged’ had three elements: first, the son should have been in regular contact with their father during childhood or adolescence (estrangement is only possible where there has been a relationship to start with); second, the son should have broken or lost contact; and third, sons could still participate if their contact with their father had subsequently resumed or their father was no longer alive.

Advertising the call for participants

I had initially approached StandAlone, the UK charity supporting people experiencing family estrangement, and asked if they would consider circulating a call for participants, but this did not prove possible. Instead, a call was sent on my behalf to counselling students and staff at the University of Edinburgh, I placed an advertisement on the online research notice board of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), and I posted a message on a closed Facebook group for person-centred counsellors, asking permission to post a call for participants, but I did not need to post it as there were replies to the first message already. See Appendix 2 for the text of the calls for participants. I also let it be known informally through my social network that I was looking for participants.
Recruitment

In total, five men contacted me who were interested in taking part in the study. To them, I sent the participant information sheet, and they all agreed to take part. For the eventuality that more than six people might reply, I had prepared inclusion criteria designed to ensure a spread of ages. Given the low number of responses, I did not need to apply the inclusion criteria. Happily, the men who volunteered covered quite a broad age range.

Following initial contact via email, I sent each participant a copy of the participant information sheet, a consent form and an information sheet on connecting online, for them to look at ahead of the interview.

Interview design

My research questions concerned the nature of the estrangement process, the attribution of causes and effects, the involvement and influence of others inside the family, feelings about the future and the longer-term significance of estrangement. My questions, recorded in an interview schedule (see Appendix 4), are designed to elicit responses relevant to those aspects of estrangement without being overly explicit. To avoid confirmation bias, I decided not to ask about specific issues, such as parental separation or parenting styles. Instead, I left participants fairly free to talk about what was important to them. I included questions about specific memories to elicit responses that were recognisably narrative in form.

The interview was to be semi-structured so that I could adjust to the emerging stories.

Before the first interview with a participant, I conducted a pilot interview with a good friend and asked a fellow student to interview me using the schedule. Both provided insight into questions that could be confusing or understood in a different way from the way I had intended.
Interviewing online

As the interviews took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews had to be held remotely. For this, researchers were required to use their University of Edinburgh Microsoft Teams account and to store all recordings, transcripts, consent forms and other files from which it might be possible to identify a participant in the cloud space allocated to us on the University of Edinburgh servers. During the interview, I used a virtual private network for additional privacy protection.

I was required to prepare materials informing participants about how to connect, what to do if the connection broke and the importance of guaranteeing privacy at both ends (see Appendix 5: Connecting online).

During the interview, I was mindful that online settings tend to have a disinhibitory effect; people may disclose more than they would face to face. For that reason, it was especially important to remind participants at the start and the end of the interview of their right to ask for anything they had said to be removed from the transcript.

Consent conversations had to be recorded and retained, separate from the interview session, so that proof of consent could be retained after the interview had been erased.

Consent procedure

The consent procedure described below was designed to ensure that participants understood what taking part in the research involved, had an opportunity to ask questions and took part only if they appeared capable of managing any distress that might arise from taking part. Dual relationships and privacy and data protection are covered in the consent procedure too.

At the start of our interview, I checked that the participant had read and understood the participant information sheet and consent form (see Appendix 3). I asked if they had any
questions or concerns and how they felt. If the participant had expressed or demonstrated strong reservations or presented a risk of suicide or self-harm, I would have supported them in reflecting on the risks and benefits of taking part for them and, if potentially of help, expressed any concerns I may have had. I would also have considered signposting them to the Samaritans and suggesting they consider speaking to their general practitioner.

Once connected online, I first asked for the participant’s permission to record our conversation around consent, started to record, confirmed that consent for recording had been obtained, then invited them to read the consent form, answered any questions they may have had, then read out each item on the consent form and asked them to say whether they consented or not after each item. This recording of the consent conversation was kept separately from the recording of the interview. This process was quite heavy. I was concerned that its length and formality might irritate, bore or otherwise dampen participants’ spirits, but it did not seem to do so.

Consent procedure – after the interview

After the interview, I reiterated the participant’s right to withdraw from the study at any time without any further obligation and with no effect on their legal rights. They were also reminded that they could ask for a segment of the data not to be used or to be discarded.

Lastly, I explained the arrangements to ensure that the participant’s data was anonymised.

Conducting the interviews

The interviews felt very different from one another. I was aware of being very nervous for the first one. Each one brought its own challenge: one participant still had a lot to say after the allotted time and wanted to continue; another spoke about things not directly connected to his father or estrangement; a third was interrupted on a couple of occasions, and we had a bad internet connection. In each case, the challenge was to allow for individual differences but to maintain the frame of the interview as much as possible. It may
be helpful to future researchers to think about how they would respond in each of these cases, which are no doubt common.

The most unexpected element, however, was that four out of five of the sons said during the interview that they had never lost or broken contact with their father, despite this being one of the eligibility criteria. In retrospect, I might have checked in the preliminary conversation that the criteria were met. As it happened, it would have felt unethical to discard the interview after the event. What seemed like an insurmountable problem became an opportunity for me to rethink my own understanding of estrangement.

Preparing for the possibility of distress

Family estrangement is usually accompanied by some negative, or at least ambivalent, feelings. Talking about estrangement might be expected to evoke some of those feelings to some degree, though it may also have some therapeutic effect. It is to be hoped that anyone whose negative feelings around the topic were still very intense and raw might not volunteer to take part in the research. However, it was possible that some people may underestimate how affected they would be by speaking about this topic, perhaps for the first time.

As part of the pre-interview briefing, I invited participants to think about what they would be happy to disclose and what might be too much or what they might regret saying afterwards. I was ready to signpost them to helpful organisations, such as the Samaritans, if necessary. If it had appeared that taking part was very distressing or could have left participants at risk of suicide or self-harm, I would have paused the interview and discussed with the participant whether to stop or how to continue in a way that felt safe. If we had stopped the interview, I would have asked participants what they would like me to do with the data already collected and reminded them of their right to withdraw.

After the interview, I asked participants if they had any concerns about my using what they had shared with me and if there were specific pieces of information I should not use. I also encouraged participants to think about the implications of disclosing their involvement in the study to others.
Privacy, anonymity and data protection

In this thesis and in all transcripts relating to this study, all names have been changed. I collected participants’ names, email addresses and phone numbers solely for the purpose of communicating with them. I have altered or omitted any details that could enable participants, their family members or others named by them to be uniquely identified.

Recordings and transcripts

Files containing video and audio recordings of interviews with participants were transferred to my section of the University of Edinburgh OneDrive within 24 hours after the interview. Any files on local recording devices were deleted immediately afterwards. Transcripts of recordings were similarly stored on my section of the University of Edinburgh OneDrive. Once a transcript was complete, the video or audio recording was deleted.

Participants were informed about data protection policies in the participant information sheet.

Benefits to participants

At the end of the interview, I asked participants how they had felt talking to me. All seemed satisfied with the experience. One or two said it had felt good to talk and to contribute to knowledge in this area. A research interview is not a counselling session, but it can still be therapeutic to express thoughts and feelings in a non-judgemental.

Risk of distress to the researcher’s family

The only surviving member of my nuclear family of origin is my sister, who is aware of this project and who supports it. It is possible, though unlikely, that other relatives may read this thesis or other research outputs. For that reason, I have taken care to write respectfully about my family members, with due consideration for their dignity, and recognising that any one person’s perspective is just that: a perspective rather than an objective truth.
Furthermore, my research will focus on my experience of being estranged rather than on the events or circumstances leading to the estrangement. Though I will refer to some events and circumstances, to the extent that these are relevant to the experience of estrangement, I will take care not to sensationalise, over-disclose, make objective truth claims or be judgmental.

After the interview

Directly after the interview, I made notes about my feelings, impressions, things that had me feel proud, triumphant, defiant, suspicious, puzzled and any visual information (facial expressions and body language) I had observed.

Transcribing

The interviews were transcribed by hand, which, though laborious, helped me to engage deeply with the material. I explored possibilities for speech recognition but found that no software was available that would have processed the speech locally on my laptop; all software would have involved the speech being sent to a remote server, which would have compromised data security.

In transcribing the interviews, I attempted to convey pauses, laughter, repetition and incoherent speech to give a flavour of the participant’s speech. However, since I was not analysing the speech at that level of detail, some of the markings and repetitions seemed more of a hindrance to comprehension; they were unlikely to enhance the reader’s experience of the participant’s personality and speech patterns. For that reason, I occasionally removed some of the fine-grain markings. Where I have (occasionally) removed words in the extracts for reasons of space, I have inserted suspension marks in square brackets. Long pauses are indicated by points in parentheses, with each point representing approximately one second. For example ‘(..)’ would indicate a pause of around two seconds.
Analysis

As explained above, I did not follow a recipe in analysing the narratives I collected from the participants. However, with due attention to time and location, I marked references to ages, dates, periods and places and movements of the participant and the father to get a better understanding of what happened when. I then organised the events in chronological order on a timeline, as recommended by various narratology researchers (Josselson 2011, 224; Nasheeda et al. 2019, 2). I also noted whether or not movements towards greater closeness or greater distance in the relationship were presented as voluntary.

Next, drawing on the critical incident technique (Long et al. 2014), I focused on the event or events that appeared to mark an emotionally significant distancing in the relationship, in other words, the events that could be seen as marking the onset of the estrangement. This ‘event’ did not have to be an action or anything physical at all; in one instance, it was two quite simple but poignant realisations, 10 years apart. This provided a possible answer to the question of what the estrangement looked like in the participant narratives and so became a focal point of the re-storying in the Chapter 4 analysis.

In this study, the relational setting is as important a part of the situatedness of the estrangement as the physical location or time. In most cases, it seemed, after several readings, as if the early relationship between the father and son contained at least part of the answer to the question about the causes of estrangement, seen from the participant’s point of view. That early pre-estrangement relationship was also likely to provide clues as to the effects of estrangement from the participant’s perspective, at least where the estrangement developed out of problems in the relationship.

One surprise upon reading the narratives was how little significance participants seemed to attach to their mother’s relationship with their father. Most spoke at least as much about their siblings’ relationship with their father in comparison to their own. I decided to keep references to other relatives in the re-storying where they seem relevant, but only in line with the emotional significance I felt the participants gave them, rather than to reflect any
theories about mother-father-child triads or indeed with my own father-son estrangement story, in which my mother is a dominant figure. I also noted some places where, in the early interviews at least, I pushed a line of questioning – either about loss of contact or about the attitudes of family members to the estrangement. Here, I became aware of my own agenda and assumptions, which was very instructive for me, but since it seemed to have little effect on the participants, it was not a priority for inclusion in the re-storying.

Finally, the next remaining focal points for inclusion into the re-storying were the answers to questions about the significance of the estrangement and, for those participants whose father was still alive, about how they saw things developing. Those were obvious places to look for narratives about the perceived effects of estrangement and about overcoming those effects or thriving in spite of them and for ‘future narratives’ of continued estrangement or the possibilities of rapprochement.
Chapter 4: Analysis

In this section, I present the five participants in turn, starting, for each one, with my first impressions and some basic biographical information, followed by a re-storying of the material gathered through the interview, roughly in life-biographical order.

Calum

When the video connection opens, I am nervous; this is my first interview. Calum is in his late 20s and seems full of what I perceive as a buzzy energy. At first, this makes me uneasy; Calum reminds me of edgy, rebellious boys at school whom I feared as someone favoured with the teachers’ approval that was denied to them. During the long, formal consent procedure, I am anxious that Calum will react badly to my role power, but this is not borne out; Calum is patient and cooperative.

Now studying in the UK, Calum grew up in another Western European country, in the countryside. His nuclear family consisted of his father, mother and four boys, of which he is the second eldest. Straight away, Calum identifies his predominant emotion towards his father as fear, as a result of his father’s violence. He describes both his parents as career driven. His father worked long hours and never took care of the children. His mother, too, was often busy with work, and in Calum’s words, ‘it was my (paternal) grandmother raised us’. Now friends, the four brothers fought as children. Calum characterises the ethos of the household as competitive. All three adults in the parental home seemed concerned with being visibly successful to the outside world.

Calum sets out this context with a clarity and fluidity that he maintains throughout the interview. He appears to know what story he wants to tell, sometimes punctuating his flow with ‘ba-ba-bab-am’ vocalisations as he pauses, I think, to recall what he wants to say.
Readers will notice that Calum’s re-storying is by far the longest of the five participants. This is for the simple reason that he provided more material, speaking fluently throughout the interview, and with lots more still to say when we ended it a good 20 minutes over the allotted time. (I let Calum know when we had reached the hour, but he wanted to continue.)

Prominent from the outset is Calum’s father’s physical violence and verbal abuse towards him and a younger brother, which began at an early age. Calum cites many examples; it seems important to him to convey the extent of the abuse and its central place at the root of the later problems: behavioural problems in adolescence, escalation of the violence from his father, followed by ostracism of Calum in the family home; physical fights when Calum becomes powerful enough to hit back; and, eventually, Calum’s decision to move away, for which he is blamed by the older generations in the family. These episodes are followed by narratives of personal growth that see Calum move from self-harm and drug use to university and therapy.

Beyond his immediate family, Calum’s story is populated by many people, including an uncle and aunt who temporarily take him under their wing when life at home is toughest, a maternal grandmother to whom he tries to explain his decision to move away, druggy bandmates, friends who turned out to be into ‘weird fucking far-right shit’, current friends into ‘being loving and connecting with people’ and a girlfriend.

Calum’s story contains several narratives of the abuse he was subjected to as a child. These are eagerly shared by Calum and provide the relational setting for later narratives that Calum identifies as being about ‘estrangement’. Out of respect for Calum’s experience, but also for narratological reasons, it feels important to honour these narratives of abuse by including them, while leaving sufficient space for the turning points in the adolescent relationship. With this in mind, I have chosen to summarise much of the abuse and to provide an extract from just one.

**Early abuse**
Calum narrates how, for talking back to his father, he was punched in the arm or hit across the hands or neck with the handle of a wooden spoon. His episodic memories of this go back to around age 11, but he supposes that it goes further back based on seeing his father punch his younger brother hard even as a baby.

From this extrapolation, we see how narrative can be a vehicle for constructing hypotheses about our early past of which we have no episodic memories. Likewise, Calum’s observation that his brother was ‘always upset’ and ‘always crying and always scared’ is potentially a piece of sense-making about the roots of his later emotional and behavioural difficulties, including the post-traumatic stress disorder he has been diagnosed with.

Demonstrating just how ‘fucked up’ and ‘weird’ things were at home, Calum recounts how a brief exchange between his father and Calum’s other younger brother escalated into violence. The father would humiliate the brother by calling him fat and disgusting. On one such occasion, the brother protested, whereupon the father threw a fork into the brother’s face. Calum continues:

Extract 1

Calum  And, man, he fucking threw it. It was erm, it wa- fyyeah. And I remember, like, seeing my brother’s face go back like that and, and I remember just the fear. Oh, like, oh like, my brother’s eye (. ) And my mom, I remember, just lost the rag and was just like, ‘What the fuck you doing? You could have taken his fucking eye out.’ Bla-bla-bla. So there was shouting ensued, and he was like ‘That fucking animal did this.’ And it was always, you you know, everything to do with his anger or his reactions was always our faults, like, he made me do it. If he wasn’t this, this, that way, I wouldn’t have to do this, you know, no responsibility ever taken for his own rage or his own behaviour.
This short extract is significant for a number of reasons. First, ‘fucking animal’ provides an example of the dehumanising language Calum mentions later when his father habitually refers to him as ‘it’. Calum’s mother’s strong response is unusual. When he later talks about leaving the family home, he points out to her that she has never stood up for the children. Calum speculates that his father might have hit his mother too, though he is not sure. Lastly, the issue of blame makes a first appearance. Later, Calum talks of feeling blamed by his family for the estrangement from his father.

I wonder, too, whether these narratives of violence against his younger brothers are a pre-emptive narrative defence against the idea, in Calum’s mind or anticipated in the listener’s, that his father’s violence against him was a response to his disruptive behaviour in adolescence and that this might partly legitimise it or make it Calum’s fault.

In this introductory section of his account, Calum makes references to how disturbed he was at the time. He mentions smoking weed and being aggressive to peers and teachers at school and to his mother and grandmother at home. He also tells of his difficulty in concentrating on schoolwork and of shaking uncontrollably in lessons. Only later in the interview does Calum mention a diagnosis of PTSD. I take it that Calum mentions these as effects of the abuse he has experienced, either directly or vicariously. This is confirmed later on in the narrative:

Extract 2

Calum Because I remember, like, one day, my old man, like shouting something about, like erm, my youngest brother being like, ‘Why is he always fucking like this?’, you know, because he was always so upset, he was always scared and crying, like and I remember my oldest brother was just like, ‘Where do you think they learn it? Where do you think they’re learning to be like this?’ You know and I remember that being like a ‘fucking hell!’, that was a very, like, eye-opening moment.
I imagine that this epiphany is so significant because it enables Calum to unburden himself of at least some of the guilt around his dysregulated behaviour and to introduce a note of more objective sense-making into what was previously an undifferentiated tangle of affect. It opens up the possibility of seeing his own disturbed behaviour and the ‘rage’ he refers to at another point in the interview not as an intrinsic flaw but as a response to his experience.

**Cutting-off by the father – ‘the estrangement’**

Significant as the narratives of distance, violence and humiliation are in Calum’s story, they are not presented as narratives of estrangement but as a relational setting for the estrangement, which Calum equates with a shift in the relationship when he was 15.

Extract 3

Calum Erm, I think the estrangement occurred when I was about [...] ooo, 15, I think. Yeah. [Long inhalation] Because I remember [...] Calum’s account of this can be split into three parts: the trigger – a brief narrative of dysregulation about Calum’s suspension from school following a day of drunken truancy; the immediate response – a narrative of abuse, involving exceptionally fierce violence from his father; and, lastly, the long-term effect – a narrative of cutoff and ‘disownment’ whereby Calum’s father starts behaving as if Calum were no longer there. This first extract includes the end of the truancy narrative to the end of the violence. I quote it extensively because the different aspects of the attack and the details are important to convey its significance.

Extract 4

Calum when I got home that day, I got probably one of the most vicious beatings I’ve ever taken in my life. I remember just, erm, cos I’d long hair as well, I remember just being caught by the back of my hair, being punched repeatedly in the back of my head and punched into the ribs, all along my back, and then I remember having the wooden handle of the wooden spoon taken to my back
and, my God [inaudible], he really put the fucking effort in that day. Erm, and I remember my mum trying to pull him off of me, while he was doing this and I was screaming and crying because what he was doing was so vicious, but I still never forget that the whole time he was doing it, he kept shouting, ‘He’s laughing at me. He’s laughing at me.’ Over and over again while he was beating the living shit out of me. And he hit, he had hurt me so hard that I told him I was going to call the police. And I remember him catching me by the back of the hair and looking me into the eyes and saying, ‘If you even think of calling the police, I’ll kill you.’ Erm. So, erm, I was left in a pretty shit position at that point of, you know, kind of fearing for my life, from this man and not feeling that there was anyone that was gonna you know, help me, protect me. Erm, my mother was like kind of powerless in this situation, erm, did her best, erm, became very angry with her for a long time, still have a bit of a residual issues with her.

In addition to the escalation in the level of violence is the extreme, controlling threat to kill Calum if he goes to the police. As a listener, I see this as a sign that, even as he is doing it, Calum’s father knows others would see this violence as wrong, but Calum’s point is how this leaves him without recourse and feeling vulnerable and powerless.

His anger at his mother suggests a sense that it is her responsibility to protect him and provides context for the later narrative of leaving home and the attribution of responsibility for that. Perhaps his acknowledgement that she ‘did her best’ and was ‘powerless’ was an evaluation Calum came to later, as part of his ongoing sense-making.

Calum’s observation of his father’s repeated “‘He’s laughing at me’” is not evaluated. It is possible that Calum has still not made sense of that, has not yet integrated it into his account of what was going on. To me, it suggests his father attributes to Calum a casual and deliberate defiance of him and, in the context of the truancy, what he stands for: academic
achievement and standing in the community. Defiance it may be, but hardly casual or even conscious. Perhaps this is what Calum is referring to when he calls his father a narcissist later on: the inability to see events in terms of anything but his own status. Perhaps, then, he has made sense of “‘He’s laughing at me’”.

Calum’s story carries straight on from that point as he begins to talk about his father’s non-acknowledgement of him.

Extract 5

Calum from that point on I was disowned, erm, so this is where his, his behaviour become actually probably more damaging in ways after that was that I was, I became a non-entity in my house. So, I was never acknowledged, never even looked at, you know, for probably, you know, another four years until I was able, I was old enough to move out. [...] I always find very, very painful was that, like, I would be sitting in the living room at night time, so it would be dark outside and any time I was doing something he would just come and disrupt it in some way, like, I might be, like, I don’t know, playing my play station, so he would just come and he’d rip the controller out of my hands and just take it away and say nothing [...] and then he would like turn off the light and shut the door as if I would never, never have been there. So that went on for, pretty much until I left, the, the, the, the non-acknowledgement is still ongoing [...]

In this narrative of cutoff, rather than kill him physically, Calum’s father obliterates him metaphorically instead. Calum uses two words to describe his status: ‘disowned’ and ‘non-entity’. The word ‘disown’ is used almost exclusively for the cutting-off of a child by a parent. Unlike its closest semantic relative, ‘divorce’, it is necessarily asymmetric; it is always done by the more powerful partner. And it retains a dramatic, almost archaic, force, which
divorce, now between two legally equal partners, has lost. Calum’s use of it conveys his powerless passivity.

Though Calum says his father acts as if ‘he would never, never have been there’, his narrative describes a combination of non-acknowledgement with something more actively aggressive: the ripping of the console out of his hands, which maintains the note of violence and combines it with ‘you do not matter’ and ‘you have no power’. To borrow a word that Calum uses more than once elsewhere, he is dehumanised.

Evaluating this, Calum uses emotion words to refer to his feelings at the time of speaking: ‘very, very painful’. But he also talks of the effect: ‘probably more damaging’ than the more violent incidents. He does not talk here about the damage but mentions smoking weed, self-harming and PTSD at other points in the interview.

**Attempted restoration of contact**

Calum tells how there were still some outbreaks of violence after the cutoff by his father. He first mentions incidents provoked by himself.

> Extract 6

Calum: I think from the ages of sixt-, ‘member from the ages, from 15 to 17 though I would still be quite cheeky and stuff like that, like I’d still call him, I’d s’, you know because I wasn’t really getting any sort of attention from him then, that’s when I would actually start calling him a fucking cunt and [...] I wanted his attention so much that I would do that and it would erm result in me getting fucking punched into the fucking head and stuff

This narrative is consistent with Calum’s presentation of the disownment as ‘the estrangement’. He portrays his provocation as an attempt to restore the ‘pre-estrangement’ situation in which he received attention in the form of physical violence. What makes this
narrative, for me, perhaps the most poignant in Calum’s story is the implication that violence was the only form of connection Calum could imagine with his father and that it was preferable to none. Goading his father to violence was the only means available to restore this connection.

**Taking power**

The next narrative, however, tells a different story. It recounts how Calum effectively put an end to the violence by making it clear that further violence would be met with retaliation.

**Extract 7**

Calum I remember one day [...] I had left some, some [...] yoghurt pot [...] up there and I forgot about it and I came down and he said something like, ‘Get up there and clean that up after yourself, you fucking animal’ or something like that. And I remember just turning round and I was just like ‘Do you fucking hear yourself, like s- s- screaming at me, calling me a fucking animal cos of a yoghurt pot?’ I was just like, ‘What the fuck is wrong with you?’ like. And I remember just seeing the, the, the fucking rage on his face and it’s like, ‘OK, you gotta prepare yourself for this one’, like. So I remember just seeing the, the, the fucking rage on his face and it’s like, ‘OK, you gotta prepare yourself for this one’, like. So I remember just seeing the, the, the fucking rage on his face and it’s like, ‘OK, you gotta prepare yourself for this one’, like. So I remember just seeing the, the, the fucking rage on his face and it’s like, ‘OK, you gotta prepare yourself for this one’, like. So I remember just seeing the scene, he was like a-, he was not expecting that to have ever occurred [unclear]. So he just stood there and he stood back and just said nothing, just stared me down [...]. And I remember then as I walked
by, he waited until I turned the corner and then he jumped on. He punched me as hard as he could into the back of the head and I remember falling forward and s-, like, hitting my face, into a wall. Erm. But that was the last time he ever, ever hit me.

This narrative of boundary setting contains two sub-narratives: one of verbal challenge, then, when this fails, a sub-narrative of physical threat. By this point in the story, Calum’s verbal narrative features questions to his father. Given the aggression-laden atmosphere and the relational history, I do not think Calum wants to portray this as an attempt to establish a dialogue with his father, but the questions are defensive, and we might hear in them Calum giving his father an opportunity to back away from further attack. They are certainly a repudiation of blame for his father’s verbal attack and a placing of responsibility onto his father. Whatever narratives might be playing out in Calum’s father’s head, Calum is asserting his own take on the situation.

This is intolerable to the father, who then moves towards physical violence. Calum responds with a threat of violence but, by this point in the interview, after all he has told me, he seems confident that I will understand this as a necessary form of boundary setting, using the only method available to him in the circumstances, and he is right: I feel vicarious satisfaction at his new-found agency and power. The last part of the narrative is a vindication of Calum’s approach: the violence ceases. And that Calum does not mention attacking his father back after the last violent act suggests that he, unlike his father, is able to restrain himself. Overall, this narrative is a demonstration of Calum’s physical power as a young adult and also a claim of difference from his father: he will use force only if necessary to protect himself.

However, a later narrative reveals Calum using his physical power to make his father feel his own loss of power.
Extract 8

Calum I’d purposely do things just to fuck with him, as well, like, just like, eh, you know (..) kind of like ashamed of it now but I, if I knew that I was gonna stand in his way because I knew that he’d never, like, say ‘Excuse me’ or whatever. I’d purposely, like, step in front of him as he was walking by. I suppose it’s my own means of trying to intimidate him back and just be like, you know, ‘What are you going to do?’ And, erm, you know, like, he’d be (.) I could see, like, he’d get so passive and frustrated that he’d be, like, looking to say something but he couldn’t, so he’d have to step around me.

To me this narrative seems to be about communicating at least three things to the father: first, that Calum exists and cannot be ignored; second, that he is too powerful to be physically intimidated; and third, that in cutting off verbal communication with Calum, he has literally boxed himself into a corner and is unable to talk his way out. At the same time, Calum’s evaluation of his own behaviour (‘ashamed of it now’) constructs him as having moved on from that.

Creating distance

Calum’s next narrative is about cutting off and moving on by physically removing himself from the paternal house.

Extract 9

Calum And I remember that day I just packed my bag, and we were living in the countryside. And my mom, I told her I said [unclear] ‘drive me to the bus’ and she was just like, ‘Why are you leaving?’ I was just like, ‘I’m sick of this’. I was just like, ‘You, you’re not doing anything [...] to protect us’, like. And, you know, my mom just, I don’t know, she just couldn’t deal with the whole fucking thing either, like. So, I remember, I just packed my bag and I just stayed
with friends. [...] Just not to be in the family home as much as I could. And so that continued for another year or two until I finished school.

What strikes me here is that it is Calum’s initiative to move out. He is not told to leave. Calum does not comment on this. However, he does not present this physical estrangement as a positive choice but as the only solution to an intolerable situation. Nevertheless, there is an element of agency, not just in leaving but in making sure his mother understands what he is doing and why. Calum says he stayed out of the house as much as he could, which implies that this was not a total rupture, but he describes how he made clear the symbolic significance of his departure that day. The extent of the communicative and emotional estrangement from his father is apparent in the narrative, from the fact that he could not tell his father how he was feeling but spoke to his mother instead. She is portrayed as playing a dual role, as a part of the family system that has failed Calum but also as the channel through which Calum’s frustration can be communicated to that system.

**Maintaining an uneasy contact**

Around halfway through the interview, Calum starts, without prompting, to talk about living with the estrangement and growing beyond it. He begins though with a scene from the present:

**Extract 10**

Calum I don’t really go back to my family home that much. Like I go back at Christmas. That’s about it, but then it’s, but it’s a fucking painful experience in the sense – not like [sneery laugh] nothing pleasant, like I, it brings up much, erm, it’s just like it’s, like, just going to the fucking dentist’s because it’s so awkward that there’s like, this clear divide as to, like who can be spoken to, like, it’s kinda weird, there can’t be, there can never be a conversation occur between the entire family because my old man will not acknowledge me and my
brother Conor so, like, we sit [laugh] on our own sorta table while he will sit on the other side. So ku- it’s like, it’s like there’s always like dual conversations has to always happen because, you know, one person can’t be acknowledged and all this shit, so, just really awkward.

Listening, I notice Calum’s laughs as he says this. The first, delivered with a sneer is, I think, at the contrast between his actual family Christmas and some idealised version of Christmas and the second at how blatantly the division in the family is expressed and enforced by the seating arrangement, with Calum and his brother sitting apart from the others. Calum says elsewhere in the interview that he has good relationships with his brothers and is on speaking terms with everyone but his father. In light of this, Calum’s description of the Christmas awkwardness and the positioning of the two brothers seems to point to his father’s power in the family, who accept this treatment of the sons.

What puzzles me is how and why Calum, this assertive young man capable of critically analysing the family dynamic, tolerates this treatment and returns every year. Is it love for the rest of his family, a commitment despite everything to the idea of family, a lingering attachment to his father, emotional pressure from others to return home, or the continued economic dependence to which he alludes elsewhere? Calum does not say, and I wonder if he has reflected on this himself and found answers or whether he is similarly puzzled by his annual trip home.

I remark to Calum that everyone seems to accept this awkward situation and ask if he ever feels under pressure from others to make things all right with his father. Calum’s initial response is this:

Extract 11

Calum

Yeah, yeah, there will be no reconciliation in our family for this. Absolute, that is one thing that I’ (.) sure of. I used to kind of dream of it, I kind of wanted it before and that’s why I went back to uni,
erm, to try and work hard. I always looked at it, like, oh if I go and get a degree, you know, that’ll, that’ll get me status once again and then [unclear] I got my degree, and there was no, like, ‘We’re proud of you’ or anything like that.

At first, I think that Calum is saying that he will never try to reconcile with his father but, as he continues, it becomes apparent he is saying that he has tried by doing what he thought his father wanted, but it failed to have the desired effect. What is most surprising to me is Calum’s ability to acknowledge to himself and to me that despite being ‘sick’ of his abusive father and moving out, he did still dream of winning his approval. It is an acknowledgement of an unmet desire for approval and the vulnerability that it brings. Behind Calum’s last sentence, I sense painful disappointment, but disappointment that might also have helped drive the process of sense-making, in the search for understanding. In this context, Calum’s first sentence appears to signal a loss of hope. The wording has a more formal feel than much of Calum’s language: ‘there will be’ is not contracted to ‘there’ll be’, there is a precision about ‘for this’ and ‘Absolute’ sounds categorical. It is as if Calum is not just imparting information to me but making for himself a formal disavowal of hope and desire.

The struggle to assert his own narrative

Calum then recounts a number of conversations that demonstrate how his mother and grandmother are unable to accept the narrative that, despite his hope of reconciliation, he has been trying to assert for years: that the option of having a relationship with his father has simply not been open to him. He describes how some family members frame it as his choice and how this led him to cut contact with them all for several years. I present here just one of these narratives.

Extract 12

Calum  because I cut contact with all my family for a long time, you know, like, maybe five years there where I just didn’t talk to anyone, erm, because I just didn’t want to [intake of breath]. And I remember
telling my, my maternal grandmother, I wrote her a letter kind of explaining a lot of it [...] I remember basically saying to her that, like, you know, I've been disowned, erm, and so like, you know, to say that I have been shunned or whatever whereas then though it was with her framed that I (.) decided to do those things. You know, that I decided to not talk to my dad or whatever, so there’s this weird denial that goes on there where I get really angry about that but I was just like, well, the the denial is happening for a reason and, I was like, I feel like that any time I try to address it, it’s just like coming up a brick wall or whatever, so I just like, I just stopped.

Calum’s syntax here is unusually fragmented and he leaves the sentence ‘because I just didn’t want to’ unfinished. This uncharacteristic inarticulacy seems to mirror the struggle he had to say or do anything that could break the paradigm through which the family interpreted his words and actions and get his own point of view heard. He seems to be describing a double bind: whether he stays in a brutalising situation with no voice and no ‘agency’ other than defensive violence towards his father or whether he leaves and cuts contact, the ‘scapegoating’ family (Calum’s word) will see him as the problem. The only option is to cut contact with them all and stop trying, which no doubt also reinforces their idea of him. The fluency of Calum’s speech returns, however, when he is able to name the family’s denial, acknowledge that it is performing a function not related to him and say that he stopped engaging with it. Here, Calum is describing the cessation of a collective sense-making process. In order to develop his own understanding of his estrangement, he had to estrange himself from the other family members. He gives up on influencing their interpretation but gains the space to assert his own narrative, which is what he is doing in this interview.

Calum does attempt to make sense of the denial too, referring to his mother, who he says, ‘couldn’t admit’ to what happened between Calum and his father ‘because I suppose it
kinda, you know, we would have blamed a lot of it on her, so [unclear] done nothing to protect us’.

As we know from Calum’s Christmas narrative, he is now back in touch with his family but is still confronted with the pressure to reconcile.

Extract 13

Calum but I remember actually being really angry at her on the phone, well not angry, I, I, I didn’t get angry, I told her that I was like, I’m quite annoyed to hear you say those words, because she said to me, she was like, ‘Calum, you still don’t talk to your father.’ So it’s been framed that it’s, and even now it’s still being framed that it’s me and Conor who are kind of the problem ones.

Calum’s sense-making is shifting to a meta level; in both of the two extracts above, he is looking not directly at his relationship with his father but at how that relationship is seen, or ‘framed’ by others. And yet, his self-editing from ‘really angry’ to ‘well not angry’ to ‘told her I’m quite annoyed’ suggests that their framing still evokes a response but, in his narrative, Calum is framing his response as a measured response. I wonder how much Calum is, in his conversation with his grandmother, still trying to change her perception of him and how much, in the interview, he is building a new persona for himself, as someone who is now assertive, but with moderate, processed reactions.

Dealing with the legacy and moving forwards

Calum talks about some of the challenges he has faced – rage and violence, self-harm, drug use, cycles of over-eating and self-starving – and ways in which he is trying to meet them, channelling anger through martial arts, therapy and studying to become a therapist himself. He does not explicitly link these challenges to estrangement, but he does describe his experiences as traumatic. From the fact that he is talking about his difficulties in an
interview about estrangement and training as a therapist, I infer that Calum does link them
to his father’s treatment of him.

Calum talks at length about his search for role models, mainly male, and the different
directions they have taken him in.

Extract 14

Calum  For me (.) erm, you know, tried to get a role model in my uncle but
unfortunately that relationship went away so I would have to file,
to find role models, er, with people that I had a lot of interest with,
erm, particularly music, so I started to, to hang out with these guys,
erm, who were all like really good DJs, so like, I would have
followed them a lot, like, you know, and learned from them. But
unfortunately some of them wwwere far more self-destructive
than I was. So I would have ended up developing quite unhealthy
relationships with class-A drugs while I hung out with them. Took a
lot of cocaine for a long time (.) erm, you know, ket, a lot of
disassociatives, erm, and then, you know, when I was 25, I kinda
had a breakdown, when I kinda realised that I’m, like, so unhappy
that I’m still doing this. I landed myself in hospital, you know,
almost ha-, almost caused one of my kidneys to collapse because of
taking so much cocaine. So, when I turned about 25, I was, like, all
right, I need to just change my life, like. Erm, went back to uni, got
my degree, applied for the master’s course in psychotherapy, but
as I-, since then though I still find myself looking for role models all
the time, so, you know, I buried myself in Carl Jung’s work, and I
would have looked at Carl Jung as my dad in a way, and you know,
and he, he kinda then said, yeah, he was just like, you’re, he was
like, to be careful with doing that though because he was like
saying that that is often what men who are quite lost do, is that
they, like, attach themselves to role models, so, thankfully, I’ve
quite positive ones, you know [...] I just count myself lucky that I, I’ve other friends that ha-, that are the same but then they’ve ended up sss-, subscribing to weird far-right fucking shit, you know, so, it’s kinda like, I’m lucky that I’m quite lucky that I went more left-leaning and more about, you know, more into mysticism and shit like that, which is all, like, is all about being loving and connecting with people, whereas I’ve other buddies who’ve gone very different directions, so, I count, I count myself lucky that for all, for everything that has occurred, I’ve ended up in place where I am quite self-aware and, you know, trying to be more positive than I certainly was for such a long time.

The turning point in this narrative is Calum’s hospitalisation. He speaks only fleetingly of his emotions at that time – ‘I’m so unhappy’ – but the events he describes are powerful enough for us to appreciate the depth and intensity of that feeling, which was strong enough to motivate him to overcome an addiction. But the second, more cognitive, part of the turning point is his engagement with Carl Jung, who, it seems, helps him to make sense of what he has been doing. Through Jung, he comes to understand that his abusive relationship with his father has left him ‘lost’ and with a need to attach that has made him vulnerable to further destructive attachments (though Calum is also able to recognise what he learned from his DJ friends).

Calum counts himself ‘lucky’ that he is attracted to left-leaning politics, mysticism, loving and connecting, unlike his old friends who are attracted to ‘far-right fucking shit’. The juxtaposition of the word ‘love’ with that strong language alerts me to a paradox: Calum has said how he struggles with rage. His energy and strong language, evident throughout the interview, make that easy to believe; but now he is directing that rage against hate, against abuse and disconnection, leaving space for love, reflection, self-awareness and positivity. Luck may well have played a part in determining the opportunities for self-development open to Calum and his ability to make use of those opportunities, but that narrative leaves much unsaid. One specific pairing of opportunity and ability that goes unnamed but
emerges very clearly from what Calum says about Jung and therapy is the ability and opportunity for sense-making.

At the end of the interview, I ask Calum how it has been talking to me. He answers:

Extract 15

Calum  it's offered me something where I was just like, ‘Wow, this is something that sounds like it's turning something very negative into something that's potentially a positive.’ So, that's why I kinda jumped at the opportunity. I was like, wow, something that was really fucking difficult for me could potentially be helpful towards a study or something like [...] Because, it’s, it’s gonna be turning, I’m all about trying to turn the negatives and making them positive in some way now. But this has kinda been an opportunity to do that.

Sven

When I see Sven appear on the screen, I take him to be around 30 and of white European ethnicity. He confirms his age during the interview. When he speaks, I notice a light accent from what I rightly assume to be a Western European country. But, at times, there are traces too of a Scottish intonation, which I notice most when he is expressing tentativeness or qualifying something; he has lived here for some years now. At first, Sven seems business-like, clipped even. I become slightly anxious that he may not be willing to talk openly and at length about his estrangement. But these doubts are soon dispelled once the interview has started.

Sven’s country of origin appears to be of no great significance to his story, but place is important in other ways. Sven grew up in a rural location, a relative monoculture, which he depicts as aggravating the sense of isolation that is a crucial element in the story of his adolescence and his estrangement. Referring to his moving abroad, aged around 17, he emphasises not the change of country but the shift to a more diverse setting, where he saw
that there were other ways of living and became more consciously aware of his ‘shut-down’
state of mind.

Similarly, his chronological age seems to be less relevant to his participation in the study
than the stage he is at in his personal development. Sven recounts a rapid evolution over
the past decade or so in his twenties: in occupational terms, from student to professional
and back to student again, and, in personal terms, from ‘shut-down’ to fun-oriented, to
ambitious and success-oriented, to a desire to get beyond the ‘façade’ of success and an
interest in psychology, which seems consistent with his desire to reflect on his personal
history and make sense of the estrangement between him and his father within the wider
context of his life.

A close and warm start

When I ask Sven to tell me about the people he grew up with, he begins with a short
summary of his father’s movements in and out of the home where Sven lived with his
mother: not present for the first six months, then moving in for three or four years, then
moving away, with Sven visiting on holidays. But despite this, Sven says he and his father
remained close, going as far as to say:

Extract 16

Sven  I, I somehow wonder whether he sort of became a primary
attachment figure. I felt like I was closer to him [...] maybe because
he would do a lot of the fun stuff with me, like take me to the zoo
and things like that [...] I don’t know whether it’s because of that.
And I always, like, got on better with my dad as well. It’s like my
dad had, I think it’s better at empathy with kids [...] Erm, you know,
he’d communicate on a level that was meaningful to me at the
time.
Already Sven is perhaps unwittingly challenging a dominant discourse, in attachment theory at least, which holds that the primary attachment figure offers safety, stability and continuity, which is what his mother seems to be providing, while it is the secondary attachment figure, often the father, who leads the child’s exploration of the world. I resist the urge to challenge this but find it hard to hear Sven’s experience of his father as a better communicator and more empathic, and I imagine that the people around him, who have got to know him since the estrangement, might struggle to understand what Sven has lost through it. In effect, Sven is using ‘primary attachment figure’ as a shorthand he knows I will be familiar with to set out the relational context for the dramatic change to come.

Speaking of the time when his father had moved away, Sven further builds this picture of strong attachment:

Extract 17

Sven I would usually visit him during the holidays and I was still really close to him so, when, you know, when he was going to visit, when I knew he was going to visit, like I would maybe wait outside in front of the house for maybe hours or something like that, uhm, just waiting for him.

This affecting image of the boy waiting devotedly in anticipation is a powerful one. His loyalty will also prove to be a significant part of the setting. What Sven does not mention, but what springs to my mind, is how Sven felt when his father left and how these surely painful separations affected him.

Catastrophic change

Having established his early closeness to his father, Sven introduces the complicating event quite early on. The event is a catastrophic financial loss suffered by his father, with far-reaching consequences.
Extract 18

Sven I was like, 11, 10, 10 or so or so [...] and my dad just at the time had lost lots of money [...] on the stock markets [...] he lost everything, [...] he just became very different, I would say. I think he was really, really struggling a lot, you know, with the situation he was put in, and financially had put himself in to some degree, and he would, you know, lash out a lot, very angry [...] I think, like, that breaking point, uhm, you know, with the, with the finances (...) kind of like (.) [short laugh], unleashed all those things that were kind of like, sealed away almost, you know. [...] He’d lash out at me, he’d lash out at everybody else [...] and then he would like to ask me to, to visit him at his new, uhm, at his partner’s place and, and things like that I remember, ah, I really don’t want to go [burst of laughter], you know? Yeah. And it was, was just, like, and I felt like I never could say no. It’s like, it’s like this obligation. I always had to go.

This exposition, for all its brevity, is narratively complex, combining causal attributions, evaluations and interpretations. It is also a synthesis of various elements: recollections (‘he’d lash out at me’), factual knowledge (‘had lost lots of money’), attributions of responsibility (‘the situation he was put in, had put himself in’), insightful interpretations (‘unleashed all those things’), assessments (‘breaking point’) and remembered responses (‘I don’t really want to go’). It shows the complex nature of Sven’s sense-making process – how many things he is holding in mind.

Overlaid onto the direct experience of being the recipient of anger are some elements of insight that must have developed over a number of years, in particular his understanding of the implications of financial ruin, his awareness of the other things ‘sealed away almost’ (Sven later mentions the extreme violence his father was subjected to by his own father) and the ability to think in subtle ways about the relationship between responsibility and misfortune. In Sven’s narrative, these are knitted together into a coherent whole that makes sense to him and perhaps enables him to feel less personally attacked and responsible for
the anger. I wonder to what extent Sven has been able to assemble these layers of understanding alone given that he says later that he does not talk to people about his relationship with his father and to what extent he is bringing them together for the first time now, for the purpose of telling me. Does talking help?

Sven reveals that he also has access to the rawness of his direct experience of vulnerability, though his internal processes have also been encapsulated by a theoretical understanding:

Extract 19

Sven it was very hurtful [...] because he was like the one person in my family who I had full trust in [...] I trusted him no matter what sort of thing, so everything that he said with this anger felt like it, felt like there was no barrier or no protection like, like went straight in, went straight to the heart sort of thing, you know, and it’s like very much internalising this anger, and making it about me, almost.

Sven understands that, at the time, he interpreted his father’s anger as a response to him personally, an insight that lays the foundation for his later narrative of withdrawal and low self-esteem. His comment, ‘there was no barrier’ implies that Sven no longer feels so exposed; his narrative of past vulnerability contains the germ of a narrative of growth and current strength.

The personal development work Sven has done and the way he now handles his father might be seen as two forms of protection Sven has put in place, but I wonder if his habit of laughing at moments of tension in his story is another form of defence against feelings that are still raw. One such burst of laughter precedes the words ‘I really don’t want to go’ above, when Sven is recalling his reluctance to visit his father. Perhaps it still feels a little heretical to say this out loud. Besides the loyalty he felt towards his father, there is still a taboo – felt by many estranged adults and documented in the literature – against speaking openly about not wanting to see one’s parents.
The estrangement dynamic: a vicious circle of anger and isolation

As time goes on, Sven’s father’s anger at the world, including Sven, and Sven’s withdrawal both become more entrenched.

Extract 20

Sven  I think this [anger of my father’s] just led more and more to shutting down and, and naturally putting barriers in place, and not disclosing and being not seen [...] not dropping the faintest clue as to what might or might not be going on to me and [...] So, and I think my dad was sort of taking it personal [...] you can see how he would have been hurt by that. [...]. So that [...] made him angry as well, became a trigger point and then, you know, he almost tried to get around that with anger, ha!, which of course was a, erm, perpetuating dynamic, you know. It just made things worse.

Sven describes how his shut-down state became more pronounced over a period of years, amounting to what would probably be termed ‘emotional estrangement’. (At no point does Sven mention deciding or even wanting to cut all contact with his father, even temporarily. Nor, it seems, did his father, despite the anger he directed at Sven.) In the interview, Sven explains how his withdrawal from his father took place against a background of isolation at home. He attributes this chiefly to living with his mother’s emotionally abusive partner, recounting how his mother was unhappy when Sven spoke back to this man. Just as Sven’s father’s attitude towards him was affected by factors outside the relations, so was Sven’s towards his father.

What strikes me about the extract above is Sven’s capacity to empathise with his father’s hurt as well as his own. This enables him to construct and articulate a model of the relationship that incorporates his father’s perspective as well as his own and that describes the negative feedback loop that spiralled into estrangement. I imagine that having this narrative understanding of the dynamic between him and his father helps Sven to keep a
detached analytic eye on his present-day interactions with his father and perhaps confers a
sense of power and agency. With a coherent model of what used to happen in the
relationship and still happens, Sven is somewhat ironically in a better position than his
father to regulate the relationship and to subtly maintain, it might be argued, a conscious
distance.

An interesting aspect of Sven’s narratives of withdrawal is the way that, on more than one
occasion, he verbalises what seems like a gut response to his father’s rages, then follows it
up with the more muted response he remembers having at the time. In the example below,
Sven is describing a visit to his father in his teens:

Extract 21

Sven And this is feeling really uncomfortable. And saying, ‘Oh, for fuck’s
sake, I don’t want to be here’, you know. [...] Errm, and this is me
retrospectively saying this. I didn’t think at the time, ‘For fuck’s
sake’. It was more like, just feeling really (...) just like, ‘Oh God, I, I
don’t want to be here’, but not with the, the assertiveness of the
‘for fuck’s sake’.

His term ‘retrospectively’ suggests that ‘Oh for fuck’s sake, I don’t want to be here’ is his
current take, but this is not the more refined, adult, cognitive reappraisal we saw in
previous extracts. It is as if, with time, Sven has become conscious of an exasperation that
he was unaware of at the time, eclipsed perhaps by anxiety. But what is his motivation for
recalling this more passive stance? Might he want to make sure that I see the intimidated,
repressed and isolated younger? It may also serve to reinforce his own sense of the distance
he has travelled in the intervening years towards a more expressive and confident self.

Even though he has accounted for his withdrawn timidity, Sven seems to be puzzled himself
by his earlier inability to challenge his father:
Extract 22

Sven I, I couldn’t talk back to him as well. It was like I had to kind of accept everything that he said. You know, it’s like, he always had to be right. Like, I couldn’t be seen disagreeing. It was strange, it was-more like (.) because of how I valued him before as a as a child, you know, we had a good relationship, you know, I just valued him so much that (.) I couldn’t show my disapproval.

This part of the narrative has a distinctive quality about it. Whereas much of the time, Sven seems to be recounting facts and stories he is familiar with, here he is in a more reflective, inquiring mode. The desire to construct a narrative that makes sense to him is prompting him to try to connect to his younger self, to imagine what was going on.

If, in that extract, Sven is relating the experience of lacking the power to speak, the next describes a more extreme bodily response to being disempowered. Here, Sven’s father has just driven him to England to start his final year of secondary education at a school he has already been attending for a year. Sven’s father has been very angry for the entire journey, shouting at him and arguing with Sven’s mother who has joined them for the trip. The three – Sven, his father and his mother – have just had dinner, and Sven is returning to his accommodation.

Extract 23

Sven I was walking back to the boarding house by myself, I remember being just so (.) in terms of, like, confidence and self-esteem. Like, I felt so self-con-, I f- felt like I could, couldn’t almost like move, it’s like my-, I had to focus on each of my limbs, you know, erm. Think I felt so awkward in my whole body, erm, (.) that I was like, it was like, it felt like super-conscious even about my, my, my legs and my hands and [...] you know like nothing was natural anymore, kind of thing. Mmm, yeah, like, I really got a sense for how, erm, how it
was really, really, really bad and unhealthy for my (...) would I say self-esteem?

Having suppressed his response to his father’s anger for six or seven years, Sven can no longer ignore these quite extreme physical manifestations, which leads to a moment of realisation of the damaging effects on his mental well-being. Besides these acute physical symptoms and his sense of being withdrawn and isolated, Sven also recalls becoming aware that he had a tenuous hold on reality and difficulties in thinking clearly. He concludes that there is ‘something lingering’ to this day around self-esteem and competence but, crucially, notes that it ‘doesn’t dominate his experience’.

At this point, Sven recalls that contact with his father diminished:

Extract 24

Sven I was still occasionally contacting him but I think from there on, it just, over the years gradually became less and less and there might have been periods where we spoke a little bit more, but then it became less and less, I would say, and now it’s like once maybe every three or four months or so.

He does not expand on how that reduction comes about and uses impersonal pronouns so it is unclear how deliberate this was on his or his father’s part. As with many parent-child estrangements, it is not clear who, if anyone, is driving the process.

Recovery

From here, more positive narratives prevail as Sven reaches a point in his story where he turns his attention away from his father to the wider world beyond the family. To that extent, the reduction in contact with his father may be seen less as a problem and more as providing a space into which Sven can expand.
Sven goes on to detail how he took advantage of this sense of possibility for exploration and growth, focusing first on having fun and breaking rules with schoolmates, then on serious study and applying his mind, then to achievement in his chosen career, and latterly, having come to see his ambition as a façade, to psychology and self-development. It is as if Sven is fast-tracking himself through some of the stages an adolescent might go through in the years since his father’s financial catastrophe derailed their relationship. What feels poignant, to me at least, is to recall Sven’s reminiscences of trips to the zoo with his father as a small child. The attachment relationship that once facilitated exploration and expansion into the outside world now does so again but by its absence. To that extent, the reduction in contact with his father appears to be more of a solution than a problem.

**But no repair to the relationship**

I ask Sven how he sees the situation with his father developing in future. He replies that sadly, he sees little prospect for change. Coming full circle within the narrative, he refers back to his memories from childhood:

Extract 26

Sven  
Like, still those memories are still there and to some degree even those, those tender feelings although (.....) I think I would have the
capacity under the right circumstances to get back in touch with that, and to express themselves, but it’s not possible because-

During his long 5-second pause, I imagine that, unsure, Sven is trying to see whether he can experience those feelings, and how strong they might be. At such points, the narrative is much more than a straightforward recounting; it is an opportunity for Sven not just to cognitively process feelings as theoretical concepts or symbols but to conjure up the feelings in real time and make them available for reflection. The feelings inform the narrative, but the speaking of the narrative also facilitates feeling.

Sven goes on to specify that to be able to express his tender feelings, he would need his father to acknowledge his own anger, but Sven has little expectation that this might happen, speculating that it is probably too hard for his father to open up to his own difficult past. Sven does not present his position in regard to his father as a choice or part of a transaction; he is not saying, ‘I choose to maintain a distance from my father until he is prepared to acknowledge what he did and apologise’; he seems to me to be describing a state of fact: he is unable to express his tenderness towards his father until his father is able to recognise how Sven has experienced him and what effect this has had. If Sven’s father can set aside his own anger and defensiveness enough to listen to Sven, then it will feel safe enough.

Extract 27

Sven when I was just in my [...] third year of undergrad, I think I kind of like opened up to him and I was like, I was like ‘Look, this is what it was like, for me’. And it was really hard to say these things. [...] And I remember (. ) he just going on about how he did the right thing, how I misunderstand what was going on how, you know, it was, like, really, really dismissive of, of the feelings. Like lecturing. And it’s like I told him like, I think, five times, ‘All I need you to do is to
listen’ (.). You know. But he didn’t. He’s like, ‘No, no, no, no, you don’t understand.’

**Enduring vulnerability**

I imagine that taking part in this study might have been something of an exercise in opening up more fully for Sven – the latest step in this recovery process. His answers to my final questions, about talking to other people about his estrangement and talking to me about it, suggest that the openness that matters most is inward – openness to himself. At least in relation to his father, he wants to recognise and ‘own’ his own feelings more than he needs to share them with others.

**Extract 28**

Sven I don’t, I don’t really talk about my dad, you know, really. I used to, for the longest time I used to be very, you know, hold him up on the pedestal, like, whenever-, I’d say only the best things about him. [...] And now (...) I don’t really talk about much about my dad (.). Very occasionally like, I don’t know.

Above all, there seems to be a sadness here that Sven no longer has ‘only the best things to say about his father’. I wonder what might make it difficult for Sven to tell other people what he *does* have to say about his father now. Could it still be that it would feel like a betrayal, that the loyalty he spoke of before is still intact? Could it be that the topic is still too sore, that Sven is still protecting himself from hurt? Or could it be that he does not trust people not to respect his position and his lived experience of his father – a problem familiar to many people who are estranged from family members? These possibilities are not mutually exclusive. When I ask Sven about the reasons, he answers that he is ‘quite slow to open up’ about his internal world and that this is ‘very close to the centre’, which leads me to think that whatever else may be the case, Sven is still feeling vulnerable about his father. This interpretation is strengthened when I ask him how it has been speaking to me:
Extract 29

Sven  it’s, it’s nice just to (.) talk about these things sometimes. Er, (......) What was it like? (........) Yeah, it’s, it’s almost, I mean there’s almost still like a, like a wound. And, it’s, like, once in a while, it’s almost like taking care or managing it, you know and there’s something, ahm, (..) something I wouldn’t quite say soothing but more like, like an element of (..) more, being more at peace with the things, you know. By giving it a bit of attention and, and care, I would say.

It has been of benefit to Sven to talk – and yet, he rarely feels able to, presumably because there are relatively few spaces where he can rely on being heard without being pressed to disclose and process more before he is ready or without being pushed in one direction or another. What makes Sven’s evaluation all the more moving for me is the tender care he shows towards his own vulnerability and the long pauses, of two, six and eight seconds, allowing himself space and time to introspect and connect with his feelings before answering. Here, he is not just telling about his recovery from his emotional disconnectedness but living it.

Martin

The interview is not the first time I have met Martin, so I start by explaining that I will not use any of the biographical knowledge I have of him in the study and will never mention the interview or any disclosures from it outside of the context of the study. The context makes this encounter feel very different to meeting socially, yet, when reflecting on the transcript, I notice that, perhaps inevitably, my responses to the material are informed to some extent by the relationship with Martin outside. Ethically, I believe I can be as good as my word by not bringing in material from outside the interview. Epistemologically, I can only be alert to the possibility that my acquaintance with Martin might colour my analysis, just as I am to the possibility that a whole array of subjective factors might influence the way I perceive other participants’ material.
It emerges from the interview that Martin is male, gay, in his mid-forties and has grown up in the UK. Nothing in his story points to any marked identities, other than being gay, which is, however, highly significant to Martin’s story.

The most immediately striking thing about Martin is the speed and energy he talks with. Martin’s words and his tone are often serious, but he sometimes lightens them by comparing people and situations to fictional characters and films. He transitions quickly from one narrative thread to another, sometimes with tag phrases (‘but there we go’), which feel like they bring a line of thought to a close. There are no silences longer than two seconds. At times, I feel that Martin’s energy keeps him driving forward through reminiscences that might cause some people to be sad and slower. At times, I struggle to keep up, a task not made easier by the poor quality of our audio connection. Quite often, the sound drops out for a few words. In addition, Martin was called away from the interview twice for work-related matters; it was a busy day.

**Family background**

The first part of Martin’s narrative introduces his parents as two strong characters: his mother as a matriarchal ‘Ma Larkin’ from the ‘Darling Buds of May’, a strong matriarch, and his father as a ‘terrifying, draconian, scary character who would lash out’. Martin’s earliest memories of his father date from around the age of three, by which time his parents had separated. He lived with his mother and two siblings quite a bit older than him, in a hotel run by his mother and surrounded by land farmed by his father, ‘like a Berlin Wall’ around the hotel. Martin recalls his father throwing bins across the road to block their exit and making life difficult in other ways. Despite this, he says his mother wasn’t bitter about him. In a phrase that suggests a subtle non-pressuring approach from his mother and the possibility that Martin did not feel love towards his father, he says that his mother ‘tried to give us the impression we’d be able to love him if we wanted to’.

**Early neglect**
Martin’s narratives around contact with his father as a child revolve around outings with his father. Quite near to the start of the interview, Martin jumps straight into the topic:

Extract 30

Martin I remember distinctly wanting to be liked by him, being, wanting his acceptance, and he would pay that acceptance in presents. Erm, and of course, you’d go home on Saturday evening, go ‘Look what daddy bought me’, and actually mum’s thinking, ‘I put fucking food on the table. How the fuck you think I’m gonna…?’ It was just really insensitive on, of him to do that, because he wouldn’t pay any child maintenance. Erm, and err, I also realised later on in my teens, when I looked back again, that those Saturday afternoons we’d always go to very random places all around [geographical location]. Essentially, I would be sent off to the sweet shop, he had sex with some random man, and I would then come back and sit in the car or sitting watching ‘Rainbow’ or whatever. Anyway, it’s just, the thought of that kind of, it’s just maybe (.) disgusts me, but there we go.

Reading this, I recall how agitated I was hearing so many different aspects raised in rapid succession: desire for acceptance; material objects received in lieu; being an unwitting instrument of pain and frustration to his mother; neglect; being abandoned for casual sex with strangers and his current affective response to that recollection, disgust. It combines recall of direct experience (being left alone), self-reflection (on his desire for acceptance), empathic understanding (for his mother’s position) and understanding acquired after the event (realising, as a teenager, why his father had left him alone as a child). Drawing partly on my own experience, I sense how hard it might be for Martin, with his rich awareness and associations, to tell his story in a linear narrative.

I am shocked by what he says about his father leaving him alone to have sex, but Martin’s ‘but there we go’ seems almost dismissive, as if to indicate that there is nothing more to be
said and that he expects no response or an unhelpful response that would prolong a topic he prefers not to dwell on. So I do not respond but nevertheless feel I am letting him down.

As the interview proceeds, Martin tells me about the Saturday outings that did not happen at all because his father did not even turn up. He recalls being afraid of his father but still wanting to be liked and accepted by him.

Extract 31

Martin he would take me out every Saturday, and then it became once a month and then it was always like disappointment, he would never turn up, and it would be like, ‘Yeah, he’s not coming’. And it was still really sad. That’s just, feelings of 12 o’clock on Saturday and if I was still at home, that feeling of disappointment, how the day would have been void of, you know, and all. Yeah, grim.

This is the only time in Martin’s interview where sadness is explicitly acknowledged. It contrasts with the more energetic disgust he mentioned earlier and the energy otherwise present. Unusually, Martin does nothing to this narrative story to embellish it, lighten it, or round it off and move on. I feel him at his most vulnerable here, as a child left without explanation and without the sense of being accepted and liked he says he wanted.

Yet, despite the neglect and the disappointments, Martin does not say that, as a child, he wanted to stop seeing his father or was angry with him, only that he developed a transactional approach to the meetings:

Extract 32

Martin it was all just about the, the contractual, erm, ‘I come out for the day with you, you buy me a gift, or you buy me an ice-cream’.
Given the background of neglect that Martin has described, I suspect that today, Martin might see these gifts in a different light, perhaps as a payment to offset guilt, but Martin is talking about the meaning he attached to the gifts as a child. It is easy to understand how a child might need to defend against the sense of not being cared for. In his transactional model, young Martin retains a sense of being valued. Among other things, Martin’s story is one of how, through his adolescence and early adulthood, his father consistently put his own wants ahead of his children and led adult Martin to the conclusion that he and his siblings ‘weren’t really part of the plan’.

**Separation and a change of perception**

It emerges from Martin’s interview that he was physically separated from his father during his early adolescence, from age 11, for four to six years; Martin is not sure. First, Martin was sent away to school, returning home for weekends which, he says, he did not spend with his father. He then explains that his father was also away for some years.

Extract 33

Martin  Err, I think he went off to [country A] for a bit, or to [country B] or there were some crazy ideas he had. And he, erm, then, erm, well (.) he didn’t really appear that often to be honest, I don’t think (..) I think he actually was in prison for a couple of years, some sort of fraud claim he’d done

Martin says very little else about his relationship with his father during this period. In particular, he does not reflect on this physical separation – how it was handled by his father or his family, how he felt about it or whether they kept in touch during it. Nor does he comment on finding out his father had gone to prison. He does not specify when he was told or what his response was. He does, however, recall being shocked to discover, aged 13, that his father was gay at a time and place when strong prejudices were still common: ‘the 1970s, it’s not exactly liberal London’. He also remembers telling his mother he might be gay himself at 14.
Martin does not comment directly on how he viewed his father’s sexual identity in relation to his own or what kind of emotions or curiosity it might have engendered. And it was only later, when he knew more about his father’s life, that he was able to make sense of his mother’s cryptic response when Martin told her he might be gay:

Extract 34

Martin  ‘You don’t want to live in a life full of such sadism.’ (.) And I was like, that’s not the only way this has to work, roll, but that was her imaging

But young Martin is able to see that his mother’s response is just one somewhat biased perspective.

Though Martin may have given little thought to his father’s sexual identity or to his relationship with his father during the years of separation and subsequently, Martin’s response on seeing his father again suggests that he was still a significant figure for Martin, at least in terms of what he represented, if not as someone to interact with.

Extract 35

Martin  he’d turned up and I was 17 and he was in the house, and my mum was taking the piss out of him, and in a funny way, like friends, in a way, but I suddenly lost [...] all my trust in him. He was this, bit of, erm, effeminate [...] kind of weak character, who hadn’t, who I had, I was, I pitied rather than feared. And I was disgusted with myself that I didn’t pity him before. So, that was kind of like, I don’t know why I (.) I felt betrayed that he had been this fearsome character, it was like I was unable to judge, judge people’s characters, or something. I don’t know there was, I, I just lost interest in his presence.
This layered narrative introduces a tangle of emotional processes: pity, loss of fear, betrayal, loss of trust, disgust and loss of interest. It conveys three different perspectives: child Martin, who feared his father and, as we have seen, wanted to be liked by him; adolescent Martin, who felt only pity for his father but disgust towards himself for having feared him, and who then lost interest in the father; and narrator Martin, who is still feeling his way back to his younger self and reaching for words that fit his remembered thoughts and feelings. Martin lands on the word ‘betrayed’ but does not specify by whom he feels betrayed. Has he been deceived by his father, who is now showing a side to his identity that he had previously hidden? Has 17-year-old Martin been let down by his inexperienced younger self, who failed to see past his father’s anger to the weakness inside? Or is this disconcerting shock merely an inevitable function of the time they have spent apart at a period when Martin has been developing and learning fast? Perhaps Martin cannot say who he feels betrayed by or, from his current perspective, thinks that the term does not apply. In any case, Martin seems here to be doing more than merely recounting. In acknowledging uncertainty, he is opening the door to reappraisal and potentially new narratives.

I wonder, too, if hearing himself say he was disgusted with himself for not pitying his father before, Martin is becoming more aware of how harshly teenage Martin judged his younger self for fearing someone so weak. The narrative tracks an arguably typical progression: from a powerless child who loves and fears to a more powerful and critical but still affect-driven adolescent capable of switching to another perspective but still defining themselves through their reaction to their previous position, to a mature adult able to reflect with some distance on his feelings at different stages.

However, later in the interview, when Martin returns to the same scene, he does so in a less tentative and detached mood, but he seems to be re-experiencing rather than reflecting on the revulsion he felt forwards his father’s weak effeminacy.

Extract 36

Martin   See, we never really had adult conversations where I would have had this out with him. I suppose at the latest, we’d have had a
chance to talk when I was about 15 or 16. I can’t remember when that happened, but I just remember him coming to the kitchen, this sort of like weak, effeminate man, er, drippy, you know kind of. You know had a very strong handshake before and then he held his hand out like the Queen Mother. It was eeuuuugh, ghastly. It was just everything I loathed about him was just apparent in one gesture.

This extract powerfully demonstrates how contingent narratives are. The same incident can produce quite different narratives, with different evaluations, even in the space of a single interview. Here, Martin does not provide another layer of evaluation by reflecting on his disgust. Perhaps he omits to do this because he knows I will interpret what he says in the light of his current identity as an open, progressive gay man. And yet, I am struck at how live that ‘euuuugh, ghastly’ sounds. On first hearing, I remember how normative it sounded – as if Martin’s narrative were re-manifesting a 1970s demand for men to be strong and masculine. It made me wonder how hard it might have been for Martin to construct a positive gay identity for himself if this were an expression of internalised homophobia.

But, at this point, Martin has not explained what he means by ‘everything I loathed about him’. Later on, it transpires that it goes far deeper than simply appearances. In the interview as a whole, Martin’s anger, if not loathing, is most evident when he is talking about his father’s selfishness, his failure to recognise that his children may need some help in understanding his pursuit of sex and his failure to provide that help.

Extract 37

Martin Why did he want to think that it was okay to just negate all responsibility and go chasing around the world cock, money? And, you know, and, and, I don’t think he had any understanding that what his actions would do would show us, you know, the limits of his humanity and lack of faith in human relationships. I mean, there’s a lot of, er, misogynistic, lots of self-harm, lots of, lots of S
and M, err, lllots of, just (. ) behaviours and attitudes, err, which I don’t think are fair game for children to be aware of in the way that they presented. It wasn’t like, ‘This is, we’re gonna talk about sex education, we’re going to have a really open understanding of what people like and do like in their sexuality’. It was more like, ‘I like [inaudible], I like to provide harm to people because I’ve had a shit life’.

Reading this, I find myself close to tears for Martin’s ability to articulate what he needed – guidance, communication, authenticity – and for his awareness of how things could have been different. It may be reading too much into Martin’s words, but it is easy to imagine adolescent Martin wanting to ask questions, talk and listen, and hoping for a response. Certainly, now, Martin seems to think he could have empathised with his father’s past suffering and understood his need to build a new, different life, if only his father had cared enough to try to keep him on board.

Elsewhere in the interview, Martin tells me that, a year or so after the encounter with his ‘drippy’ father in the kitchen, he was shocked to learn that, before marrying Martin’s mother, his father had had an affair with her father. This ‘huge whammy’ had also undermined his trust in his father. I imagine that Martin might have been similarly shocked upon learning that his father had in fact been having sex with ‘random men’ on the Saturdays when he was supposed to be taking care of him. Martin does not say when he found this out, but it is possible that recalling meeting his ‘drippy’ father in the kitchen also evokes feelings associated with the later learning of unpalatable facts. Just as we conceive of our own identity as having at least some continuity over time, so is our image of others an amalgam of impressions from different times and different sources. Narrating the history of a relationship is an opportunity to bring together disparate impressions and understandings of ‘the other’ and create associations between them.

We do not know to what extent the stories Martin heard might have retrospectively coloured his memory of meeting his father after a long separation, but Martin does make it
clear that the stories have an impact on the way he feels. Paying tribute to his mother’s sensitivity in realising that Martin might identify with his father, regardless of how low an opinion he had of him, Martin says:

Extract 38

Martin Once I knew all the stories, she knew I wouldn’t be supportive of him, but she still tried not to take sides. She realised I am half of him. It’s a complex situation, isn’t it, to think that your half of you’s foul?

These two short sentences highlight the significance of the family stories about Martin’s father in shaping the son’s attitude. Interestingly for me, Martin does not detail how these stories are conveyed to him or for what reasons; he does not engage in his own critical narrative analysis of them. I am curious about this, given my own sense that when my own mother told me tales about my father, she was passing on not just facts but also evaluations and interpretations, and doing so with a particular intention in mind. That Martin does not feel this might suggest that the family stories about his father fit what he knows of his father from direct experience and that he trusts his family not to manipulate him.

On the other hand, believing his father to be ‘foul’ is distressing, especially since it implies, for younger Martin, that he himself is ‘half foul’, as if foulness were an essential, intrinsic and heritable quality. It is not clear to what extent adult Martin still feels that about himself. Elsewhere in the interview, Martin reflects on the relative importance of nature and nurture, suggesting that he is still unsure what he might have inherited from his father. But he also suggests that his father’s lack of nurture might play a role in the distress and dysregulation in his life.
**End of the relationship**

In the later part of Martin’s story, the lack of nurturing takes the form of a lack of material support and a verbal disowning of Martin and his siblings followed by a lack of any attempt to stay in touch.

First, Martin recounts how, for his 18th birthday, his father ‘dump[ed] an old car’ on him as an unwanted present, then dismissively refused a request for financial support at university, citing his own deprived background. As Martin tells me this, I recall the ice-creams and gifts Martin received as a child and interpreted as payment for his presence. At this later stage of his life, Martin has a better sense of what he does and does not need. His father, Martin’s narrative suggests, is not interested in knowing these needs or meeting them, and Martin is adult enough to recognise this.

Martin then narrates two incidents, some 14 years apart, which leave him in no doubt as to how unattached his father is to his children: a further incident in which he is the passive recipient of his father’s pushing away, and another, 14 years later, in which the detachment is confirmed by his father’s nonchalance.

**Extract 39**

Martin  erm (.) my father turned up drunk wanting to have a fight with [my brother], saying, ‘I’m disinherit[ing] you all. I’m going to America. I’ve never had children’. So there were signs already that were- [...] And then, erm, after that, err, he called when I was at my sister’s apartment in London. This must have been about 2005, 6. And he was already living in America [...] and then I was, ‘Oh, it’s you, it’s Alf’. I said, ‘It’s your youngest son, Martin’. And he was very matter-of-fact and went, ‘Oh hi, Martin, how are you?’ as if like. I’m your fucking son. You haven’t spoken to me in, like, 12 years.
The first of these two events takes place when Martin is around 17 or 18. To hear a parent not only declare the relationship over but to deny your very existence, present and past, must have a profound impact, no matter how drunk or histrionic the parent may be. And yet, to come to the house where they are, in order to make that declaration is itself a recognition of their existence. Martin does not evaluate this incident except to say it was a sign of something – presumably his father’s total disengagement.

Martin also provides relatively little evaluation of the second incident, when by chance, he found himself speaking to his father for the first time in 12 years, but his tone conveys his anger. This anger, at the father’s casual greeting, seems to communicate the same message as Martin’s earlier disgust on seeing his father after a long separation: though Martin no longer has any hopes or desire with regard to his father, he recognises that what has passed is significant. The anger might be directed at two things: Martin’s father’s effective abandonment of him, but also his failure or refusal, with his offhand manner, to acknowledge this abandonment and the pain it has caused.

**Describing the estrangement**

In telling his story, Martin makes a number of statements about his part in the estrangement. Juxtaposed below, they may appear to be disjointed or even contradictory but, set in the context of the overall story, they all make sense.

**Extract 40**

Martin wasn’t a choice, it was forced upon me. It became a convenient one.

**Extract 41**

Martin it was never a conscious decision to say, ‘I’m never going to speak to you again.’

**Extract 42**
Martin I was happy just to cut my ties with him. I mean, I had no reason to be in touch with him.

Extract 43

Martin I just (...) ha, ha, had no interest in him anymore, erm. I sort of just let him go, you know.

Martin has described several times when his father was not present for him, physically or emotionally, form early childhood to his university years and beyond. When Martin says this absence was not his choice, I understand him to mean he felt there was nothing he could say or do that would make his father behave differently towards him. Though Martin has been and perhaps can still be angry with his father, he has not cut contact as a deliberate policy; in fact, he has not needed to because his father essentially removed himself from Martin’s life right up to his death around 10 years ago. Martin’s response to this has been to disengage from a presence that came to have unpleasant associations, making the absence ‘a convenient one’. When Martin’s father died, he was careful not to get involved with the estate, fearing it would bring trouble, and not needing to be involved emotionally.

Moving on

Extract 44

Martin It, it’s, when he died, I kind of moved on. Erm, I made my peace with him. I’ve sort of written a letter, which I then just got rid of. (...) Very indulgent. I don’t need, it’s just, I-, him being part of my life even in my, in this afterlife, is just holding me back. I’ve kind of dealt with it. It’s just like, as I mentioned, there is no resentment [inaudible] I can find plenty but I don’t need to find them. They’re just gone. Erm, because (...) it’s just holding on to them is just like, it’s, it’s like I’m eating the poison expecting them to die. And he’s already dead for God’s sake, so I mean, this is so insane. You know, I don’t need to cull down more resentments just to give myself
more poison. Erm, he was a bad person. Erm, a sad individual. Erm, and I can forgive him for lots of things, and I can understand how he got to be the way he was and the way he had relationships with other men. But I can’t get over how he would just disengage with the children, it just doesn’t make sense, and I can’t forgive him. No, jus- wha- eugh, can I forgive-? Not even forgiveness, I’ve just moved on. That’s it. So, yeah.

I have quoted extensively from what Martin said about dealing now with the estrangement because it illustrates several of the different approaches that sons might take to recovering from a bad paternal relationship. Martin is going through different steps he has taken to move on: an attempt at active reconciliation with his father’s memory is rejected because Martin feels it would keep his father tied to him; thinking about this generates resentment, which Martin does not want to allow in, believing it will simply damage him. Martin considers the idea of forgiveness and finds it is possible for some aspects of his father but not for all. What he is unable to forgive is the thing that ‘just doesn’t make sense’, namely, the way he disengaged from the children. It implies that to forgive, Martin first needs to understand. Unable to do that, his only alternative is to stop trying to work it out, with the anger and resentment that come up when doing that. That seems to be the meaning of ‘moving on’ here – a decision not to devote mental energy to the issue. And yet, when I ask Martin how it has been talking to me, he replies very positively:

Extract 45

Martin    Lovely (. ) Wonderful. Cathartic. And, and because I’m doing my own daily journey of talking about my feelings and experience, I’m quite used now to opening up.

So moving on does not mean avoidance. My intuition, based on the range of responses that Martin has mentioned, is that Martin is still processing what happened, still wondering how his father came to feel and behave the way he did, but knows that he is unlikely to get satisfactory answers and wants to feel some choice and agency over how much time and
energy he spends on it. Sharing with others with the intention of giving or receiving support feels more productive than mulling things over alone, perhaps.

Lastly, Martin singles out one thing that he has appreciated about our conversation:

Extract 46

Martin It’s like, err, erm, so many people put a lot of emphasis on ‘Did you love your parents? Did you feel they loved you?’ and that sort of thing, but. It’s quite refreshing not to have that as a, as a parameter of this conversation

I know from my work with estranged adult children that common preconceptions about how families do or should work can feel oppressive. It is as if they are being judged against an ideal or invited to judge themselves. It can produce feelings of pressure to live up to the standard and shame and a sense of failure when circumstances make living out this ideal family impossible. Martin explains that he thinks love was absent from his relationship with his father. But he expresses that abstract idea at the end of his story. Perhaps for me to have imposed that question as a frame would have made the telling, and the reflecting, more difficult. It is Martin’s sense-making, after all.

Michael

Michael and I both join the video call late and somewhat stressed. I had IT problems; Michael had been a little confused about the time. It transpires that both of us were worried about the other’s reaction to our lateness. For some minutes, my anxious, agitated state of mind affects my ability to listen, and I am aware of giving some inaccurate summaries of what Michael has said, which he then corrects. Michael’s anxiety is something that he brings into his story, as we will see below.

Michael, as he reveals in the interview, is in his late seventies. Though Michael lives in the UK, he speaks with a North American accent from the country where he grew up in an
Orthodox Jewish family comprising his father, mother and two older brothers. Michael’s age, geographical origins and cultural background are all significant to his story, not least because in the intervening years he has travelled very far physically, temporally, culturally and in terms of personal development.

Michael’s father died when Michael was in his early twenties, so he is looking back on his estrangement from a considerable distance. When he talks about his father’s emotional withdrawal in his teens, I sense an air of wistful reflection; he does not seem to be re-experiencing what I imagine to be the intense emotion from that, but rather expressing empathetic understanding for his younger self. Yet, Michael does suggest that his unmet need to be valued has left a legacy of vulnerability to this day.

Michael talks of his association with Mary Hendricks, his former therapist, and Gendlin and the influence of other illustrious names from psychotherapy and philosophy, which establishes his authority and experience in my mind. I feel by turn clumsy when he seems vulnerable and inexperienced when he talks about his work, as if Michael might have a better idea than I do as to what should happen in the interview.

Michael’s narrative often moves away from his relationship with his father, sometimes into aspects of his later life: family life, politics and everyday encounters. These narratives seem only tangentially related to estrangement but often have a theme of relational difficulty. I wonder whether, given his psycho-philosophical affiliation to Gendlin’s ideas about focussing, Michael attaches greater value to verbalising his process over producing a neat narrative. Michael does not address this directly but, towards the end of the interview, does say he is glad he was able to bring in some humour and politics, which reflects who he is, and that he appreciates how I ‘let that happen’.

**Questioning the bar mitzvah**

At the start of the interview, Michael tells me a little about the influence of his father when he was a child. Michael could not play out much with his neighbourhood friends because his
father wanted him to go to Hebrew school in the evening during the week and was quite
‘strict’ about Michael having to stay home and observe the Sabbath on Saturday, even
though his father went out to work. And, Michael points out, his father did not play sports
with him, as other boys’ fathers did. My impression is of a somewhat stern father and a
quite isolated boy.

Just two minutes into the interview, Michael moves on to the ‘complicating event’ in his
story – a distinct shift in his father’s attitude towards him:

Extract 47

Michael Well, until I was (...) bar mitzvah’d which is 13, or 12, 13, [the
relationship] was okay [...] Erm, so, but then, when I foolish-, now I
say foolishly but at the time it didn’t feel like foolish, ‘Why do I
have to get bar mitzvah’d?’ Oh, my God, that was it, that was the
end of our, ah, relationship. From then on, he hardly, he hardly
ever spoke to me, but we would go (. ) He had a bad, slipped, he
had a bad back, so he’d go to the Turkish baths every Sunday
morning. We still did that. (...) Not much of a chat, but I would go
with him for that [...] But it was a minimal relationship until, and
then towards the end of his life, he had cancer about 59 or 58. And
we were looking after him at home, my mother and I, my two older
brothers had left already, and I was shooting him up with heroin,-
erm, you know, with morphine [...] with my mother. So I was
looking after him in my last year of, err, my degree, master's
degree. That was tough.

In the interview, and still now, I am curious how Michael makes strong statements about his
question being the end of the relationship but then, without evaluating that, goes on to
qualify these statements somewhat when he talks about interaction with his father in the
subsequent years. Might it be that Michael is remembering a long-known fact or a long-held
interpretation about what happened (semantic memory) but no longer has strong episodic
memories and so cannot offer a detailed textured account of what happened? Or are memories too painful to stay with still? Or perhaps the poignant memories from his father’s terminal illness are far more salient for him. It does feel throughout the interview as if Michael is speaking about his process rather than trying to construct a neat, focussed narrative.

I am surprised too at Michael’s retrospective assessment of his question as ‘foolish’. I might have expected that boy Michael could be made to feel foolish simply for asking the question but that adult Michael would be more forgiving of himself. It seems a perfectly legitimate question. I can make sense of it best if I take it to refer to a sense of regret: Michael was not to know at the time what the consequence of asking the question might be. With the benefit of hindsight, he knows it was the wrong question.

I am interested to know more about that shift in the relationship, so I bring the conversation, somewhat clumsily, back to the bar mitzvah:

Extract 48

Jonathan So that, it sounds like that saying no to the bar mitzvah was, was, was a real shift in the relationship, then?

Michael I wasn’t saying no, I said, ‘Do I have to?’

Jonathan Ah. Mmm

Michael No, I didn’t say ‘No, I don’t want to.’ I said- Why on earth I ever came up with that question! I’ve always been a bit, I’ve always been provocative. I, I. In, in my time, I’ve always been provocative and innnn questions, but the questions are good, have always been good ones. In my work it’s very good and I base my whole educational approach on, on questioning and answering. But why
on earth, I, I, I can’t remember that. But, from then on, he was not happy with me.

Michael is understandably agitated by my inadvertent misrepresentation of his words: he did not refuse the bar mitzvah but simply asked a question. It is easy to imagine him wanting to defend himself to his father in similar terms: he was not being defiant but just wanted dialogue. Yet, his ‘why on earth...?’ exclamations suggest that he does see how his question was construed as a provocation and, while he values questioning as a crucial part of his educational method, he still seems to see it as misplaced in regard to his father. As an outsider, I might want to ask, ‘Why on earth did your father react so strongly to the question?’, but that is not Michael’s question; some 60 years on, he is asking what motivated him to put the question.

Michael paints his father as somewhat stern and distant even before the bar mitzvah incident. He does not expand on how his father communicated his dissatisfaction with him, but Michael’s narrative conveys regret about asking that question; there is a tragic, fatalistic feel about the scenario Michael describes, as if the relationship was doomed following Michael’s momentary lapse, which pushed his father away forever. In addition, Michael goes on to describe the long-term effects in terms of sensitivity to rejection and fear of disappointing people.

Extract 49

Michael And (.) and what I feel was, I’m very sensitive to being rejected, as a res-, I feel as a result of that rejection by him, I’m extremely sensitive to anyone, even though they may not mean it to me, I, I, I do. It touches-, you know that, that hap-, that happens to me a lot. [...] Waiting for phone calls, waiting for an email, all that. Impatient, bit of impatience.

Jonathan I’m glad I wasn’t too late in joining today [laughing at the end]. (...)
Michael  Oh [with a slight laugh in the voice], well! (. ) That, you’re right about that because I could, because of the, my (. ) I sup-, what’s laid down, in me, you know, what’s in me, the trauma in me, it, it is that sensitive [...] I was pleased that I could come in time and didn’t want to disappoint you. That’s the issue. (. ) That’s the other issue: disappointing people [...] 

Jonathan  Was that, then, what you felt about your father, that you’d dis-

Michael  Yeah, disappointed him. Yeah, oh, I’ve always disappointed him.

Michael’s narrative does not provide us with a rich account of how his father’s rejection felt or how it played out in the relationship, but it does give very clear examples of how it affects him to this day and in what kind of situations. His mention of waiting for phone calls reignites my own sense of guilt at joining the call some minutes after the appointed time. Feeling that Michael might still have something to communicate about that, but not wanting to contradict his earlier assurances that it was okay because he was late too, I try to acknowledge the link to our situation in a light-hearted way. Michael’s reply is hypothetical – ‘because I could’ – but makes me think he might have felt hurt or rejected. Michael then goes on to speak of what I take to be the corollary of his sensitivity to rejection, namely, his fear of disappointing people, and his enduring feeling that he has always disappointed his father. Michael’s use of the present perfect tense here (‘I’ve always disappointed him’) rather than the simple past (I always disappointed him) connects that feeling to the present. Michael is presenting it not as a memory of being disappointing but as an experience still alive today.

**Dialogical sense-making**

Around 19 minutes in, Michael tells me that a degree of warmth returned to the relationship with his father when he agreed to go to Jewish high school (though he left again after a year, which, he says, disappointed his father again). Michael explains how, at Jewish
high school, he enjoyed learning the Jewish tradition of debate over scriptural interpretation associated with the medieval author Rashi. He presents this as the starting point for a lifelong practice of critical questioning. ‘We are brought up to debate and ask questions’, Michael says. This short narrative stays with me because I am struck by how right this questioning feels to Michael – it seems like a core value – yet how wrong he feels it to have been to question the need for a bar mitzvah. I wait until the end of the interview to link these two things together:

Extract 50

Jonathan [...] you were talking about the, the questioning, and the argumentation that you were taught at school as part of that Jewish culture of questioning.

Michael And educat-, it’s part of my education, yeah.

Jonathan Yeah

Michael Jewish education [...] 

Jonathan But I’m also struck that, that in a sense, that’s what you were doing when, when you said to your dad ‘Well, why do I have to have the bar mitzvah?’

Michael Yeah, you’re right, you’re right, I was doing it, but I was in, you know, I was in, was going to Hebrew high school at the time and I asked him ‘Why do I have to?’ They were telling me to ask questions. [laughs]

Jonathan But not that one.
Michael never, I never put that together to what you’ve just said. That makes sense to me.

When Michael responds, his voice is quite excited. I have no way of knowing how significant this was to him after the interview, but it seems remarkable that, 60 years on, new sense-making is still happening as, through dialogue, old elements of Michael’s narrative are being combined in new ways.

**Education: a source of tension**

Michael’s bar mitzvah, which, despite his question, did go ahead, is connected to another narrative centred around his father’s reluctance to fund his sons’ higher education. Through this narrative, Michael is expressing a degree of understanding for his father’s attitude.

**Extract 51**

Michael He had a rough life, he, he, he was the oldest of all his, oldest, his brothers and sisters, he was the oldest son. He had four brothers, he was the oldest. He had two older sisters (.). But he was the one who chose [laugh]–, he had to work. He never, he didn’t finish primary school because he had to work all the time, bring money home. And the money went to his brothers and sisters to go to school. And that left us, my brothers and I, left with a father, who was not happy with bringing any money home that would go into our education (.). So. One brother got a scholarship, the other one had to work and go to school, and so did I have to work and go to school. And at my bar mitzvah, any cash I got he, he and my mother kept and she secretly gave it to me for my erm, to start my bachelor’s education. Cos if he had known that, he would have been irate.
In this extract, and elsewhere in the interview, Michael communicates his understanding of how hard his father’s upbringing was. His narrative here conveys not just the material hardship but also the injustice his father faced, being expected to go out to work from a young age to fund his younger siblings’ education and presumably having no choice about it. Here, he incorporates his knowledge of this father’s background into the narrative as a way of explaining his reluctance to fund his education. Michael does mention conversations in which his mother explained to him that his father was ‘not a happy man’, but there is a lot that we as listeners cannot know: how and when Michael came to know about the obligations placed on his father when he was young or, for that matter, how and when he was made aware of his father’s reluctance to fund his education, and how and when Michael was able to bring these two pieces of knowledge together. All we know is what the narrative gives us: that at this moment, Michael is able to empathise to some degree with his father. We do not know either, but it is possible to imagine, that this empathic understanding might also make his father’s attitude feel less personally punitive and might make Michael feel less to blame.

Death, anger, moving away

Michael recounts how his father became ill and died when Michael was a young adult. Michael talks about looking after his father during his illness, about his anger when he died, about moving away from his origins and the feeling, on looking back, of having moved too far.

The three excerpts below are taken from different parts of the interview, and Michael spoke the second before the first. I have inverted the order to follow the chronological sequence of the events narrated for ease of understanding.

Extract 52

Michael    Well, it got to a point where I was, when I was looking after him, giving him morphine shots, so I was, you know, changing my
relationship with him. And then he died. So I didn’t do good enough, I didn’t save his life. He still died.

Extract 53

Michael I remember at his funeral. (.) I can remember where I was, I swear, I can always remember where I was standing. I chose not to stand next to the (.) grave like on a hill in the cemetery. I was really angry that he died. Yeah, I was very, very angry and upset that he died. And, as a result, then I, I, I just (.) I gave up any ceremonial stuff with the, err, Jewish religion. (.) I was so angry that he died, as he did.

Extract 54

Michael I wish, erm, I must say, I went, I think I went too far to uproot myself, but I did.

Jonathan Hmm, hmm, do you mean geographically too far, or, or culturally?

Michael Yeah well, both as well. I do both. Yeah, I did both. I was, yeah, it’s a good, that’s a good, I left because I was, I didn’t feel valued in, in, in the States. I didn’t feel valued by my family.

First, Michael says that, through caring for his father, he was changing the relationship. It is possible to imagine how illness and caring/being cared for might change the relationship in many different ways, good and bad, but I understand Michael to mean that he was doing something good by caring, not least because of his later evaluation that the ‘didn’t do good enough’. Perhaps Michael’s commitment was breaking down some of the barriers he felt his father had put up.
Michael narrates his father’s death in a way that any child might about a parent who had died. Feelings of inadequacy about not being able to do enough to save a loved one are not restricted to adult children who feel estranged, nor are feelings of anger. But, seen in the light of Michael’s previous narratives on disappointing his father, they do seem relevant to the estrangement. Might we infer from Michael’s wider story that his dedication to his father’s care was motivated in part by a desire to make amends for disappointing his father as a boy? And what of the anger? Michael does not specify what he is angry about or with, but he appears to be angry with himself, even now, for letting his father down once again. But his rejection of the Jewish ceremony at the funeral suggests anger with the religious practices that played quite a prominent role in his estrangement. Michael does not try to resolve this vagueness in his narrative by articulating exactly what he was angry about. And, if he were to try to, perhaps it would be an oversimplification of complex feelings with no specific named object. Perhaps his vagueness is the most authentic account.

It is striking, however, that Michael chooses to distance himself both geographically and culturally from his origins after his father’s death, going, he says, perhaps too far. This feels like he is describing a new voluntary form of estrangement, chosen by him this time, necessary at the time, but in retrospect a disproportionate response that has brought with it some regrets.

Gus

Born in the mid-1960s, Gus is in his mid-fifties. Though he came from the US to London aged around three, he speaks with a slight American accent. Both of his parents were from North America. Gus says they ran away very young from their ‘very staid, old-fashioned’, poor, working-class, American-Jewish backgrounds. He describes them as being cultured, well-read, politically radical, highly sociable, busy and extremely successful. Their attitude to raising children was liberal. They soon accepted his identity as a gay man, after some initial signs of ambivalence about it. Gus says that he and his siblings ‘just did whatever we
wanted our entire lives. So there was no guidance, barely’. But, he says, they were ‘show kids’ for his parents, there to shine.

Gus never cut contact with his father, who died 10 years before our interview, or his mother, more recently deceased, but he describes a relationship with his father in particular that was superficial from the start. What did change is Gus’s perception of his father – a realisation in his twenties and thirties that his father was insecure, addicted to alcohol, egotistical, incapable of proper conversation and using anger to deflect any challenges. Gus says there was no honesty in the relationship.

Gus gives a rich characterisation of his parents but says the contradictions in them make it hard to articulate how they were. He expresses the confusion he felt and still feels, despite years in therapy. At times, it seems that Gus’s ability to hold so many of their different facets in mind makes it hard to create a coherent narrative of his childhood relationships with them. His narratives from later years are simpler, as certain things about his father became clearer to him.

**A confusing early relationship**

Three extracts from the early part of the interview, presented in the order they were spoken, demonstrate the contradictions that Gus struggles to make sense of:

**Extract 55**

Gus  And, erm, many, many of these people really did consider them friends and they were very deep influences on people’s lives and all of this stuff, because they, they were such-, they were so generous. But, with the four kids, it was almost like, they didn’t-, my father certainly, never knew how to have a conversation. I mean it was just impossible. He just-. It was-. There was no back and forth. Because the egos were so huge, the narcissism was so huge.
Extract 56

Gus  I knew I had to aim for my whole life, what I know I have to aim for my whole life is these high standards. They had high standards for their work, high standards for their friends, high standards for culture, high standards for, at every level, so it was-, they never settled for anything that was kind of, erm, that was below this, this kind of high stan-, this high cultural standard.

Extract 57

Gus  It’s that they were telling us we were brilliant when we hadn’t really achieved eno-, you know. So there were too many contradictions. They were extremely-. I just realised that I contradicted myself. So they were telling us how brilliant we were. All of their four children were the most extraordinary beings on the planet. Yeah, I don’t know, I don’t know if that’s right, if it’s we-, if I’m giving mixed messa-, if it makes sense or not. It’s sort of, if that, if I’m now contradicting myself. [...] But there’s a co-, a strange combination of (..) pushing forward (.) and erm (.) and y-. You know there was (..) It was strange. You know, they never said, for example, they could never say to any of us, ‘I love you.’ (...) So, there was this very strange combination of (.....) not being personal (..) and yet (.) when you were with them, they had a lot of warmth, that was genuine warmth. But it wasn’t, it wasn’t very personal. [...] You sort of knew that you were loved. (...) But it was never spoken.

Three contradictions emerge from these extracts. In the first extract, Gus contrasts his parents’ wide circle of friends and the esteem they were clearly held in with their inability to communicate in a meaningful way with their children. The egos and narcissism Gus mentions directly afterwards seem to link the two, as if their charismatic personas (and generosity, of which more later) draw people in to bolster their sense of self, but their
concern with their image prevents them from engaging properly with their children and their needs. In this light, the lack of boundaries Gus has referred to right at the start of the interview seems to be tinged with neglect. Gus does not make these connections explicitly, however, but only through juxtaposition. As an adult, he may or may not connect those elements in the way I just have, but a child surely would not have the concepts of ego and narcissism to explain their experience and would be unlikely to be able even to name the apparent contradiction. So this appears to be a piece of adult sense-making.

The second apparent contradiction is made very explicit by Gus when he compares the pressure of living up to his parents’ high standards in Extract 56 with their invariably positive feedback, mentioned in Extract 57. Even now, Gus cannot reconcile these two things in his narrative. His words indicate that he feels he is contradicting himself, and his pauses suggest he is reflecting on ways to resolve the contradictions, but he finds no way to do it. It feels to me as if he were unable to believe their praise, no matter how sincere because, according to his own evaluation, his performance fell well short of what he understood to be their standards. In the light of Gus’s comment that he and his siblings were ‘show kids’, it seems possible he was valued not for himself but for his ability to enhance the family’s status, and, to this end, the parents would present their children’s achievements as outstanding, even to themselves and the children, no matter the reality. If so, what might sound like unconditional approval was experienced as a misrepresentation of reality, again for the purposes of self-image.

The coda to his extract reveals a third contradiction: his parents were warm and loving but never said so and were never ‘personal’. This is presented as an extension of the previous point about standards and praise, and the connection is apparent. Yet, the contradiction is inverted: rather than the parents’ words being positive but Gus’s experience negative, here, Gus is saying that he experienced genuine warmth and love, but it was never made explicit. This might be seen as a common experience of children in the 1970s, when, from my own memory at least, love was rarely spoken between parents and children.
Recapping later in the interview, Gus says, referring to his father, ‘I have no idea, the combination of emotions is so confusing, that it is, it’s hard for anybody to even understand the, the kind of person-. It’s so weird, this person, you know’. In the earlier extracts, however, Gus has not spoken directly of his emotions but has focussed rather on his parents’ behaviour, leaving us to infer what he might have felt at the time, beyond feeling loved and confused. Gus puts forward some interpretations of the behaviour, which I have attempted to unpack above, adding some of my own interpretations, but what does not emerge from the narrative is the agitation and even anger apparent in Gus’s way of speaking and, above all, his frustration at his inability to make sense of it and resolve the intense confusion, felt even now.

Perceiving the distance

Having established that backdrop of early confusion, Gus goes on to describe a moment when, aged 19, he had a sudden realisation about his father and the nature of their relationship. At the time, Gus had just moved abroad and started an art course he was greatly enjoying.

Extract 58

Gus  The first time my parents come to visit me (.) I notice for the first time (.) my father’s insecurity. I had never-. I didn’t even know how to use that word before, properly. And I could see this sort of very strange way that he was relating to me, that it was just him. But I realised, this is who he is. This is this person who has these quite odd eccentricities but they’re insecurities in terms of how (..) we relate to each other, that we in fact don’t. And that this, maybe (.) was the signal to me that, actually (..) this person, I don’t relate personally to this person. He’s not going to relate to me. This is now the moment that I I’ve seen this. Now I understand. I don’t actually have this bond that I know other people have spoken about. I don’t know if I could have, if I could have had those words then. But I do know for sure, that’s what it was. He-, this was the first time he was seeing (.) erm, me, establishing myself. It was clear that I’d established myself in a-. It was a remarkable thing for me. [...] And
all the things that, I could see the things that he was trying to hide. [...] And then it was really from then on because from then on, I was on my way, and I had a very strong, you know, erm, had a very strong independent life.

Although Gus is describing something lacking – his father’s insecurity and inability to relate to his son – I sense in Gus’s narrative a satisfaction as he recounts ‘seeing through’ his father’s disguise. There is perhaps a hint of acceptance, and an adjustment of expectations, in his realisation that his father’s eccentricities are in fact insecurities, which make the act of relating impossible. Whatever other emotions Gus might have felt at the time – it is easy to imagine sadness or anger – the narrative is expressing a kind of resolution, most apparent in the phrase ‘Now I understand’. Gus says that he might not have been able to articulate this at the time, but he is doing so now, which suggests two different forms of sense-making: implicit then, explicit now. Narrating might help Gus to conceptualise this event, but it seems that words were not needed for a shift in understanding of some kind.

But there is more in this extract than Gus’s realisation. Gus recounts that his father, too, saw something new: a confident, established Gus making his way in the world. Is Gus suggesting that his own confidence fed his father’s insecurity? I wonder, too, if, for Gus, his father’s insecurity was to some extent a measure of his own achievement, one of the ways in which he knew that he was ‘on his way’.

Gus stayed out of the UK for 12 years, returning aged around 30. He says that upon returning, he had a second epiphany of sorts.

Extract 59

Gus I then saw this (.) a sort of, a second very strong layer of this, that was just this impossible barrier to break through, which was (..) this very strange way of not being able to have a conversation. It was just-. He would talk. [...] it was kind of like there was no room to have a reflective back and forth, whatsoever. It, it didn’t even enter his understanding of how to relate to people. It wasn’t just me.
Nobody. [...] He was the authority, because he was an authority on everything. [...] I can’t really say to you that we really had a kind-, there’s a, a bit of a vague kind of like an empty bubble.

Here, Gus is not talking specifically about their relationship but about a general trait in his father. I interpret that in linking the way his father blocked two-way communication with the concept of ‘authority’, Gus sees his father’s need to maintain his own sense of authority as a block, preventing him from hearing any potential challenges. Gus says it was impossible to break through the barrier, which leads me to imagine that, upon his return, Gus was still hopeful that he might be able to communicate with his father in a more meaningful way but that the hope was in vain. This time, the sadness seems a little more apparent in Gus’s description of their relationship as an ‘empty bubble’, but, again, perhaps seeing that his father behaves this way with everyone enables Gus to feel less responsible for the emptiness.

Later in the interview, I ask Gus whether he thought his father noticed that Gus’s perception of him had changed. His short answer is telling:

Extract 60

Gus I, I would imagine that he (...) [brief sigh] (...) They were not willing to say it.

I take it that Gus was going to say his father did notice it. This might have been a painful thought, and potentially a moment of empathy for his father and even guilt, which could account for the sigh preceded and followed by significant pauses. If this interpretation is correct, then Gus seems to resolve these difficult feelings by reminding himself and telling me that his parents (he switches to ‘they’) were unable to verbalise it. This feels connected to the authority Gus mentioned earlier; Gus seems to be implying that to maintain their aura of invulnerability to humiliation, they were not able to be open about their feelings.
A lack of open, honest communication

Throughout the interview, Gus returns repeatedly to his father’s addictions, first to prescription drugs, which his father had been using for many years, then to alcohol. He recounts how his father eventually weaned himself off alcohol around 20 years before he died.

Extract 61

Gus I began to not like him at all, like really, really not like him, because his sobriety was real (.) but it was not honest. [...] I always make a joke that, when he made his amends to the four children, he did a photocopied letter to the four of us, and he didn’t do an individual letter to each of us. And I just think, for any of my friends, who are in AA, whatever, I always say that and, of course, they laugh because that’s ridiculous. We’re each different. You have to write a different fucking letter to each of us. You know, how long is that going to take? You know, you’re not dying next week. Write a fucking letter and—.’ You know, so it was-. And he had a lot of amends to make [...] because he had behaved so poorly to a lot of people.

Gus does not link this event to the two realisations he has already described but, as his father has been dead for 10 years at the time of speaking, he must have written the letters and Gus must have developed this strong dislike of his father a few years after Gus had left the UK – and after Gus had been able to see his father’s insecurities and inability to relate to him – but before seeing how generalised this communicative block was in his father.

The reference to not liking his father is one of the few times in the interview that Gus names his own feeling towards his father, besides his early confusion. Mostly, he focuses on his father and mother’s behaviour, leaving the listener to infer from Gus’s hurt, frustrated or exasperated tone how he felt about that behaviour. This gives salience to Gus’s dislike in the
narrative and evokes in me the question of how clearly Gus is able to name, to himself or to others, the other feelings he may have or have had. His anger is also apparent in this extract.

This narrative illustrates a theme that runs through Gus’s interview: a feeling that his father is unable to acknowledge him as a subject with his own feelings and agency rather than an abstract object – here, as a recipient of his amend-making and, elsewhere in Gus’s story, as an instrument for projecting an image out into the world. With his ‘Write a fucking letter’, Gus is communicating that he still wanted a relationship with his father and knew what he needed to feel in the relationship but that this was not forthcoming. Lastly, we see Gus once again indicating that his father had behaved badly not just to him but to many others.

As if bookending this narrative, Gus also recounts wanting to arrange a therapist for his father after he had a leg amputated in the last few weeks of his life.

Extract 62

Gus

I did attempt to add, to try to contribute some honesty to the situ-, to the situ, whatever the situation might be. So, for example, when he was in hospital, when he was dying [...] He’d had one of his legs cut off [...] And so when he awoke from the anaesthetic, he was quite confused and, erm, I said, ‘We have to get a therapist in here’. You know, ‘Somebody has to come in and start talking to him about what has happened’ [...] Nobody in my family (.) could do that. They, nobody really, there was no-. I felt there was some urgency. And nobody really felt that that was some, something of, that was urgent. And, my mother who sat with him every single day, for the entire six weeks until he died (.) could not be honest with him. And not tell him (.) what had happened. The end of his life.
Putting aside the question of what a therapist could ethically or practically have done without Gus’s father’s consent and engagement, I see this narrative as an expression of the value Gus places on acknowledging experience. Gus is talking about wanting to give his father, albeit vicariously through a therapist, the gift that was withheld from him: to be listened to, told the truth and helped with the processing of painful feelings. There is an edge of desperation to this last-minute hope, as Gus expresses it, and his wish for his father is thwarted by the family’s complicity in denial.

**Enabling financial dependence**

Yet, Gus has already hinted in the interview that he was not always honest with his parents. I ask him whether he ever considered cutting contact with his father. His answer suggests that he might have done so but found the money they put his way too convenient to do this.

Extract 63

Gus  

because a lot of what they tried to remedy with the four kids was with money, whether they had the money or not, (.) that, erm (..) I think, for me, definitely has just made this void bigger. Because, as a young person, as an artist, all I, I, in order for me not to have to go out and get a job, I need as much support as possible to do my work, so I can be in my studio as much as possible, so in all honesty, I enabled the relationship as did they enable the relationship, to, err, further it, not […] what they were doing was, it was screwing themselves up, also, you know, realistically, because they were fucking themselves over by, by doing that.

It feels as if Gus is not comfortable, perhaps even ashamed, to imply that he maintained a connection for the sake of money. Gus does not need to tell me this, but his doing so seems consistent with his valuing of honesty: he enabled a relationship based on not communicating and being dishonest; perhaps his desire to break that pattern is part of his
motivation for disclosing things that he might think show him in a negative light and for taking part in the interview in the first place.
Definitions with consequences

Indirectly, through my eligibility criteria, I defined estrangement as a break or loss of contact in adulthood – a form of physical estrangement. I did so not because I considered only those people to be truly estranged, but because it seemed they would be most likely to experience social pressure to reconcile or fear people’s judgement most. As I had initially intended to make this a combined narrative/autoethnographic study, I had also wanted participants with a roughly similar estrangement background to my own. During the interviews, however, I discovered that only one of the participants unequivocally met that criterion. After some initial consternation, I accepted and then welcomed the participants’ right to self-define; the data they provided was rich and varied (though the question remains as to why more men who experience physical estrangement from their fathers did not come forward). It prompted me to pay closer attention to how estrangement was defined in other studies.

Paradoxically, while theorists agree there is no clear, agreed definition of estrangement (Agllias 2017, 17; Scharp 2019, 428), studies with adult children almost invariably investigate some aspect of their distancing process. Understandably, researchers want clarity about the scope of their studies; this is one way of achieving it. But, over time, a body of knowledge is building that is ostensibly about child-parent estrangement in general but, in practice, is based on input only from adult children who see themselves as having distanced themselves (Agllias 2016; Scharp and Thomas 2016; Scharp and McLaren 2017; Scharp, Thomas and Paxman 2015; Scharp 2019). In a UK survey some years back – the first of its kind – just 51% of respondents said they had initiated the estrangement from their father (Blake, Bland, and Golombok 2015). And in the present study, just one participant, Calum, explicitly spoke of taking action to create a self-protective distance between him and his father, in response to extreme distancing by his father. At the other end of the scale, Michael mentioned actions likely to have pleased his father and overcome his silence. The other participants’ narratives spoke of a desire for movement both towards and away from their fathers at different
times. Under the heading ‘Paternal distancing’ below, I argue that defining estrangement as something enacted by adult children risks casting them by default as estrangers, with the potential for stigmatisation, even when this is not how they see themselves.

What constitutes estrangement in participant accounts?

In these circumstances, perhaps the best I can do, ethically and epistemologically, is to look at how estrangement is constructed in the participants’ stories and see what defining traits are discernible. To do this, I will focus on the ‘turning points’ in the participants’ stories (Bruner 1993, Ch 4). These are not necessarily the only key episodes (or ‘nuclear episodes’, in the words of McAdams 1988, 133-175). They may not even be the most dramatic episodes. But they are turning points in that they mark a shift in the relationship. They involve ‘complicating episodes’ (Frank 2010; Labov and Waletzky 1997) that present some kind of challenge to the protagonist of the story. Except in Sven’s case, they are not what McAdams would refer to as ‘contaminating scenes’, however, because these stories, by and large, are not tales of good things gone bad but more often more simply a worsening of something already dissatisfactory or a new awareness of something bad (McAdams and McLean 2013a, 234). However, in line with the idea that estrangement is not an event but an ‘ongoing relational process’ (Aglias 2017, 17), I also take backstories and narratives of sustained estrangement into account as essential context.

The diversity of the stories is striking. The key turning-point episodes vary in duration and in degree of interactivity: some are interactive processes lasting years; others, such as Gus’s and Martin’s, are mental events – perceptions, emotions and cognitions – that happen instantaneously but constitute a lasting change, in response to a long-standing situation. Such internal ‘self events’ may be less salient than interpersonal conflict and harder to convey, but they can be deeply significant turning points, important elements in autobiographical memory and narrative identity. They can cause changes in relationships and the way we see ourselves in relation to others, as with Martin, or reveal pre-existing aspects of ourselves in relation to others, as with Gus (Singer et al. 2013, 572). I will discuss these stories further below under ‘Estrangement from an already distant father’.
All involve at least one or more of the ‘components’ of estrangement identified by Scharp (2019): a deterioration in the quality of communication (e.g. Sven), a reduction in the quantity of communication (e.g. Calum and Michael), a physical distancing (e.g. Calum), negative affect (Martin’s contempt), a loss of desire to be connected (Martin) and a realisation that the father would never fulfil the role the son wanted him to (Gus). The component model is useful in illuminating different aspects of estrangement, but Scharp does not claim that her list is exhaustive or that any component is definitional. However, the quantity or quality of communication is relevant to all the participants’ estrangement narratives, at least if we include Gus’s appraisal of his father’s availability for communication and connection.

One feature that all narratives share is a lack of intimacy – an emotional distance or distancing – from the son’s perspective. However, contrary to Agllias’s understanding of estrangement, this distance/distancing is not depicted in the narratives as the result of a choice, decision or request by either party. In some narratives (Calum and Sven) the son does engage in a relational distancing process, but it is not always fully conscious. Or if it is conscious, as when young Sven resolves to conceal his feelings from his parents in the story, it still does not sound like a choice, but a defence mechanism to obscure his feelings of powerlessness. For example, recalling episodes with his angry father, Sven contrasts the emphatic, powerfully assertive thoughts he has now with his more subdued responses at the time. This lack of choice may be connected to the young age at which the estrangements in these stories began (see ‘Estrangement: a retrospective label’ below). Related to this apparent lack of conscious agency is my sense that in some narratives, estrangement is more noticed by the son than ‘enacted’ – a key word in Agllias’s definition (2017, 17). Moreover, neither Gus nor Martin depicts the distance as being deliberately or relationally ‘enacted’ by the father. That is to say, it is not a response to any particular feature of the son or the relationship but more a function of the father’s way of being in the world.
Physical or emotional?

Calum’s estrangement could be said to be physical, according to Agllias’s definition (Agllias 2017, 17) in that Calum moved out and later went to study in another country, putting a physical distance between himself and his father and, thus, reducing contact. But what of the situation before he moved out, in which his father had stopped speaking to him almost entirely (or what of a hypothetical situation in which he could not afford to move out)? Would that also count as ‘dramatically reduced contact’ and therefore physical estrangement?

In other estrangement narratives, father and son are just as physically distanced as Calum at points in their story, living in different countries, but this is not framed as an expression of their estrangement. Sven’s father has been living away since Sven was very young; Gus moves abroad for studies, but not to escape his father. Nevertheless, even if getting away from their fathers is not presented as the primary motivation for the moves away, in both cases this distance is constructed as providing a space for growth and expansion.

In Martin’s case, the distance seems to some extent like an indicator of his father’s detachment. Listening to him, I am also struck that he seems not to have known where his father was at some periods, for example when he was in prison. It is easy to imagine his family were sheltering him, but, as a listener, I wonder if not knowing could have increased the sense of emotional distance and his father’s detachment.

In summary, the significance attributed to physical distance in estrangement is quite nuanced. It appears not to be a core component of estrangement in all narratives, unlike emotional distance. I would argue that this is not merely an empirical finding; it points to a definitional truth. Emotional distance is part of Agllias’s overall definition of estrangement and physical distance is not, for a good reason (2017, 17): while ‘emotional estrangement’ still makes sense without physical distance, it is hard to imagine what ‘physical estrangement’ would mean without emotional distance being experienced by at least one person involved (Agllias 2017, 19). In the light of this and of the participants’ narratives,
which focus more on emotional distance than on a reduction in contact or geographical
distance (i.e. physical estrangement), it seems quite appropriate that new research is
defining estrangement not solely in terms of frequency of contact but also emotional
closeness (Becker and Hank 2021; Reczek, Stacey and Thomeer 2022).

Paternal distancing

Both Calum and Michael recount nuclear episodes involving an extreme reduction in the
quantity of communication by their fathers, to almost nothing. Both sons convey a keenly
felt communicative and emotional breaking-off. Michael describes it as ‘the end of our
relationship’; Calum says, ‘I was disowned [...] I become a non-entity’.

Indifference, absence and neglect, covered in the estrangement literature, do not seem to
fit this very active behaviour. More apt descriptors might be ‘abuse’, ‘maltreatment’ or (an
understatement) ‘poor parenting’ – three commonly cited reasons for adult children to
estrange from their parents (Ungar and Mahalingam 2003; Carr et al. 2015; Scharp, Paxman,
and Thomas 2015; Agliias 2016; Scharp and Thomas 2016; Scharp and McLaren 2017; Agliias
2018; Scharp 2019). However, while these labels do justice to the severity of the behaviour
narrated by Calum and Michael, they mask its nature as a distancing practice intentionally
employed by the parent.

‘Parental cutoff’ would communicate that idea, but in Agliias’s (2017) work ‘cutoff’ is almost
always discussed as something enacted by the (adult) child, and for good reason. In family
systems theory, where the term originates from, ‘cutoff’ is defined as a distancing strategy
deployed by adult children towards their parents (and siblings) as a way of regulating their
anxiety and stress levels in a ‘fused’ family system with a high level of unresolved
attachment (Bowen 2004, 400; Titelman 2003, 22; McKnight 2003, 277; Ferrera 2003, 310).
It is not used to refer to parents emotionally distancing themselves from their offspring. In
family systems theory, it would, I suspect, be conceptualised in terms of parental projection
rather than cutoff (Bowen 2004, 180; Brown 1999, 96). But cutoff and projection are not
mutually exclusive, and an exclusive focus on the projective aspects might make it hard to
hear what Calum and Michael seem to be saying: that their fathers’ distancing from them constitutes the estrangement – the whole of it in Michael’s story, part of it in Calum’s – rather than preceding and causing it. Note that in this narrative study, I make no realist claims to know what the fathers’ behaviour is or is not an instance of in Calum’s or Michael’s lives but merely point out that the constructs we use to theorise estrangement can nudge us towards some interpretations of the participants’ narratives and away from others.

The tendency to view adult children as the initiators of distance seems quite natural. In the wider culture, it is expected that children will ‘grow away’ from the parents as a fundamental part of their developmental trajectory. A degree of turbulence and power struggle during adolescence is not pathologised, even by those who do not see it as universal or inevitable (Bowen 2004; Titelman 2003). Psychoanalytic thinkers write about teenage sons ‘turning away’ from their fathers, or even metaphorically killing them, or at least their own need for their father, as a normal part of development (Diamond 2007, 119; Loewald 2000). The risk is that adult children’s specific early experience of being cut off (using the term in its non-technical sense) or ‘ghosted’ does not get adequately represented in the literature. Even someone like Calum, who subsequently moves out as a young adult, may become, in the literature, an ‘initiator’ or, to use Agllias’s word, an ‘estranger’ (Agllias 2017). This word would both negate Calum’s experience of being frozen out and attribute to him an agency (and responsibility) entirely absent from his narratives about his relationship with his father relating to that period. Witness Calum’s indignation, addressed as if to his grandmother who pleads with him to reconcile with his father, as if it were in his hands to do that. Further, though in a theoretical context, ‘estranger’ may be intended as a morally neutral descriptor not imbued with blame or guilt, the dominant cultural narrative about family loyalty does tend to blame and stigmatise adult children perceived to have given up on their parents, as Agllias and others acknowledge.

Both narratives are about the father asserting his power in response to a perceived challenge. But the narratives that follow it construct the participants’ younger selves in very different lights. Broadly speaking, Calum’s later narratives about his relationship with his
father focus on power; Michael’s, featuring less abusive behaviour, is about closeness and intimacy – the two aspects of identity highlighted by McAdams (1988). Calum has made his own power move first in attacking his father, taking action, demonstrating strength and making an impact. And afterwards, he eventually reasserts that power by moving out. By contrast, Michael protests indignantly, and at times with great remorse, that his father (and I) mistook his young curiosity for wilful defiance. He follows the episode with recollections of things we might imagine his father would have approved of: going to shul and helping to take care of his father in his final illness.

Although the interaction between father and son in these episodes is highly personal, and their respective personal power and status in the relationship is very much at stake, the wider conflict is around cultural values. In this, the fathers are playing a traditional father role as intermediaries between wider culture and society (Trowell and Etchegoyen 2001; Marsiglio et al. 2004) and the growing child, bringing the latter into contact with the world of values outside the home: hard work, success and status for Calum’s father; religious observance for Michael’s. The narratives suggest a strong paternal identification (I might even say ‘fusion’) with those values. Though Calum’s father’s ‘estrangement move’ was not about that, many of Calum’s other episodes from his adolescence constructed him as stupid, a failure at school and an embarrassment to his father. Michael is cast as ungrateful and rebellious and betraying.

**Covert cutoff?**

In Calum’s narrative, he explains to his mother why he is leaving home, and others know. In family systems theory, this might be seen as a narrative of ‘overt cutoff’ (Klever 2003, 231) – a physical distancing. At the other end of the spectrum, there are no explicit narratives of cutoff at all in Michael’s account. Sven’s narrative sits somewhere between these two. Being so young, Sven cannot regulate the frequency of the contact or the geographical proximity, but he does significantly reduce the degree of openness (Klever 2003, 231), or, in Scharp’s terms, the quality of communication (Scharp 2019). However, as we saw above, his
withdrawal is covert in that he explains nothing to his father or his mother until years later, though still the father picks up on it.

In some ways, Sven’s narrative fits well with Bowen’s concept of cutoff as a mechanism that manifests in a situation of intense unresolved attachment (fusion) (Bowen 2004, 481) as a way of regulating anxiety. Sven is suppressing anger and maintaining an outwardly compliant façade, partly perhaps to avoid the guilt involved in hurting his vulnerable father and perhaps also to keep himself physically safe after his father’s implied threat of violence. But Sven’s cutoff, rather than easing tensions, only serves to increase them. What Sven’s father requires in the fused system is not (only) submission but a demonstration of unconditional trust and intimacy, which Sven is unable to supply. But Sven understands the father’s requirement well enough to make it impossible for him to express a desire for greater distance.

Adult Sven attributes his father’s anger to a sense of failure and weakness following his financial collapse. As a child, we can imagine he may have internalised the disloyalty, coldness or whatever other quality his father was attributing to him, yet the anger Sven recounts feeling and his observation of his father’s unwarranted anger towards other people suggest that, on some level, he recognised that his father was projecting – another concept associated with ‘cutoff’ in family systems theory (Bowen 2004; Titelman 2003).

It is important to issue some caveats about applying an elaborate theory such as family systems theory to a one-off narrative interview. Epistemologically, a narrative cannot be taken as a straightforward representation of objective reality, and an hour’s interview with an interviewer untrained in family systems theory is no substitute for months of therapeutic work by a trained practitioner. However, I hope to have illustrated how ‘cutoff’ could be relevant in helping to conceptualise at least some processes in estranged young people.
Estrangement from a distant father

As we saw earlier, the turning points in Martin’s and Gus’s estrangement episodes were relatively internal, involving a strong negative affective response to a father not seen for a couple of years (Martin), and for both of them a disappointment and frustration on realising that their fathers would never be the kind of close, communicative father they wanted.

In terms of Scharp’s components of estrangement (Scharp 2019), the quantity and quality of communication had been unsatisfactory to both sons for a long time at the level of affect, and both were angry and remained so at the confusion and hurt their father’s apparent indifference had caused.

Yet, beyond these similarities, the stories are very different from each other: Martin depicts his father as selfish and uncaring about Martin, while Gus conveys a sense of a father who is physically present but whose valuing of his children is expressed more to others outside the family than to his children themselves, creating the suspicion in Gus that his father values him instrumentally, as part of the glittering, vibrant family he displays to others.

The sons’ stories do not find strong resonances in the estrangement literature. Martin’s story has some obvious links to Agllias’s concept of absent estrangement (Agllias 2017, 112–113), but as Agllias and others recognise, absence by itself does not constitute estrangement, and the quality and consistency of contact is correlated more strongly with outcomes than the quantity of contact (Dunn 2004, 660). Martin tells of the unreliability of his father in his early years, which is cited by many children in studies as a reason for not wanting contact (Dunn 2004, 661). Martin’s story presents a father who has been present enough to be an attachment figure and to be resented for not having been more present but absent enough for Martin to form a possibly somewhat two-dimensional view of his father (Dunn 2004, 661), which could contribute to a sense of shock when the young adolescent Martin sees his father for the first time after a break. Just as Martin’s story does not quite match the category of absent estrangement sketched by Agllias, ‘mutual disengagement’ is only a partial fit for Gus’s story, though the best among the categories
proposed by Agllias (Agllias 2017, 112). As she describes in mutual disengagement, there is no rupture in the relationship, which even survives Gus’s strong disappointment at some of his father’s later actions. But Gus clearly does feel let down by his father. He tolerates the lack of communicativeness but is still agitated by it, some years on from his father’s death.

Despite their differences, the two participants’ accounts have shared features: first, as narrated by the sons, there is an asymmetry in the relationship; the son cares more about the lack of intimacy than the father seems to, which disempowers the sons in a different way from the high-tension, arguably fused systems in the other accounts. Like fusion, the behavioural indifference of the fathers may leave the sons feeling low status or humiliated (McAdams 1988), but as a result of separation rather than conflict. If Martin’s anger and disappointment were strong enough to motivate him to distance himself from his father, to ‘cut off’, he would have been unable to take action because his father had already left the scene. The same goes for Gus, though to a lesser degree and only in emotional, not physical terms. I am not suggesting that the primary aim of cutting off is to communicate displeasure to the other (though it may also serve that purpose). My point is rather that the fathers’ disengagement in Martin’s and Gus’s accounts has the effect of reducing both their scope for exercising power and autonomy in the relationship (agency) and the degree of intimacy. The other participants, as adults, at least had the theoretical choice of increasingly personal agency through cutoff.

Yet, I would not wish to overstate the similarity between Martin’s and Gus’s stories or the differences between them and the others. All are marked by different kinds of paternal distance in childhood. Despite the father’s emotional intensity in Calum’s, Sven’s and Michael’s story, it does not translate into the kind of paternal involvement during childhood that Spaan, van Gaalen and Kalmijn (2022) identify as foundational for a future close relationship in adulthood. Only in Sven’s account of an idyllic early father-son relationship is the father’s interest child focussed. For the three adolescent boys in the story and for Gus, the father is not genuinely interested in hearing about the son’s experience or better understanding their needs. Instead, interactions are based around the father’s agenda, be it
academic success, religious observance, creative brilliance or, paradoxically in Sven’s case, expressions of filial warmth.

Parental conflict and divorce

Spaan, van Gaalen and Kalmijn (2022) and Kalmijn (2015) look at the role that divorce plays in adult children’s estrangement from fathers and the various factors that mediate this effect, including parental conflict. Among the participants in this study, only two participants, Sven and Martin, experienced parental separation and divorce as children. Neither dwell on the fact of their parent’s divorce in itself as an emotional event or present it as the cause of the estrangement. For both, the reduction in contact following the divorce seems to have been painful, but for different reasons. For Sven, separation meant being deprived of enjoyable, loving interaction, at least initially, while for Martin, it was a sign of his father’s indifference. The differences suggest that researchers are right to try to unpack the broad concept of ‘divorce’ and look at the processes behind it.

Both Sven and Martin tell distressing stories about witnessing parental conflict, with Martin focussing on his father’s extreme angry behaviour towards his mother and Sven on the emotional strain for him of being at close quarters with such an angry father during the car journey to England. But both also speak about their father’s anger in contexts other than the parental relationship, and paternal anger is a major theme in Calum’s, Michael’s and Gus’s stories. This leads me to question whether paternal anger might not be a more fundamental driver of estrangement than parental conflict, which may be just one of the areas in which that anger is expressed, albeit an important one.

How typical are the stories?

Some of the participants’ stories do not fit the typical narratives and descriptions of estrangement found in the literature. As mentioned above, most do not involve a total break in contact. In contrast, 75% of respondents in the 2014 StandAlone survey said they had no contact with their estranged father (Blake, Bland, and Golombok 2015, 14). Can we
then conclude that they are not instances of estrangement? To this, a number of responses are possible. First, the ethics of imposing definitions can be questioned. To the extent that they took part in the study, the sons identify as estranged. Further, a social constructionist response would be that it is in any case futile to police the language. The sons are appropriating the concept to help make sense of their experience for themselves and to communicate it to others. In the process, they are co-constructing the concept. But also, they meet Agllias’s criterion that estrangement ‘involves some level of dissatisfaction by at least one party’ (Agllias 2017, 17) (my italics). We do not know what Gus’s and Martin’s fathers might have felt at different moments but, to their sons, they appeared to be at ease with the distance between them and their respective sons. It is precisely this lack of unease that seems dissatisfactory to the sons, as evidenced by Martin’s narrative about his father’s casual tone upon finding himself speaking to his son on the phone after a silence of some years.

Narratives of vulnerability

In the later part of their stories, particularly when asked about the significance of the estrangement from the fathers, the participants talk about some of the challenges they have faced, including some they are still dealing with. The challenges mentioned include drug use, addiction, eating problems, self-harm, aggressive behaviour, poor performance at school, cognitive problems, fear of rejection, the inability to stay in relationships and ‘unhealthy attractions’ (attractions to relationships that do not enhance well-being). The range of issues and potential causes is so broad and complex that they preclude any attempt to discuss them in depth here. In addition, the participants do not always explicitly attribute specific difficulties to specific causes or describe the processes by which one thing led to another. Sven is unusual in describing the self-reinforcing vicious circle of his father’s anger and his own withdrawal but even he relies on juxtaposition and our empathic sense to convey the connection between a long anger-filled car journey and a feeling of detachment from his own body. In broad terms, however, in answering the question about the significance of estrangement, the participants link their issues, past and present, to estrangement-related aspects of the father-son relationship, including paternal anger (a
theme common to all participants), minimal paternal involvement, emotional distance and outright abuse. Further, the sons’ evaluations of the effects of the fathering they have received are broadly consistent with meta-studies linking the quality of father-child relationships to adjustment outcomes to in general (Dunn 2004), the quantity and quality of paternal involvement to academic achievement, social competence, behavioural problems and substance abuse (Allen and Daly 2007), paternal anger to anxiety (Shenaar-Golan, Yatzkar, and Yaffe 2021) and, more generally, anger and aggression within the family to low self-esteem (Renk, Phares, and Epps 1999, 210).

It would be potentially misleading to say that the sons presented their difficulties as an effect of their estrangement. That would be true only to the extent that they make no distinction between estrangement and the relational dynamic it emerges from or forms part of. When the estrangement literature discusses impacts, it tends to talk about more tangible or external effects such as financial implications for still-dependent young adults or awkwardness and anticipated shame or embarrassment in speaking about their estranged relationship to friends and acquaintances (Agllias 2017). Martin and Michael both mention their fathers’ unwillingness to provide financial support for their studies, while Calum discusses the pressure to ‘reconcile’ from his grandmother, and all participants, including the two younger men with fathers still living, say they rarely talk to others about their fathers. Generally, however, the participants talk more about internal challenges to mental well-being.

Given the severity of some of the difficulties the sons have faced, it is perhaps not surprising that they want to talk about them. Yet, all say they rarely speak to others about their estrangement. Their willingness to do so for the study may be connected to the anonymity it provides and to the low risk of being judged. Compared with women, men are commonly thought to be less comfortable talking about vulnerability, a point made forcibly by Gilligan (Gilligan 1982). If true, this may partly account for the small number of men who volunteered for the study and for the predominance of women’s accounts in previous research (see Chapter 2).
Redemption, power and individuation

It is noticeable that the sons’ narratives of vulnerability and adversity in late adolescence and adulthood, when talking about the significance of estrangement, tend to be recounted as part of what McAdams and McLean refer to as ‘redemptive sequences’ (McAdams and McLean 2013, 234) – narratives of progress in living with estrangement – in which at least some, though not all, challenges are overcome. This tendency seems consistent with the finding that men are more restoration oriented than loss oriented when discussing loss; that is to say, they focus more on looking forward and rebuilding than on looking back and processing negative emotions (Stroebe and Schut 2010), in a way that could be related to the relative reluctance to construct themselves as vulnerable. However, the sons whose redemptive narratives seem particularly vigorous – Calum and Sven – also seem to talk most extensively, and with feeling, about the losses in their relationships with their fathers. The power of their redemptive narratives may be connected to the recency of the events they are talking about. With fathers who are still alive and problematic, perhaps they, of all participants, derive the greatest utility from narratives that bolster their self-belief, thought to be one of the beneficial effects of redemptive narratives (Singer et al. 2013, 576). Yet, they are also convincing to me. They detail specific improvements and do not shy away from speaking about the frustrations of their continuing contact with their fathers or, in Calum’s case, the difficulty he sometimes experiences with anger.

In these narratives, I hear the sons narrating who they are; more than just accounts of past events, they can be seen as acts of narrative identifying (Frank 2010, 49). Both Calum and Sven tell stories of progression and agency once they are at a safe distance from their fathers. These stories have a strong emotional impact on me as a listener. Particularly affecting is the sense Calum and Sven convey of discovering abilities, qualities and strengths they did not know they had and that the interaction with their fathers had obscured. The stories have very different starting points, with Sven shut down and Calum aggressive and self-destructive, but both chart a path through several stages of development: cognitive advances, academic success, competence, initial social connections that they outgrow and, eventually, a practice of self-reflection and a valuing of self-awareness. Michael’s
remembering of the eminent people he has worked with and of his lifelong commitment to
learning and teaching provides a counterpoint to his continuing vulnerability to rejection. He
is letting me know, and perhaps reminding himself (Frank 2010, 82), that he is far more than
the adolescent his father stopped speaking to, demonstrating that narrating identity is a
lifelong activity (McAdams and Janis 2022). Gus and Martin, too, recall times when they
became aware of their competence away from their fathers.

In mixing stories of adversity and redemption, the sons are constructing bridges that
connect different parts of themselves (Osatuke et al. 2004, 192), namely, their younger
disempowered, dependent, vulnerable selves with their later more powerful, competent,
resilient selves. The later redemptive stories might be thought to provide an escape route
out of narratives of vulnerability and so to lessen the fear of getting ‘locked into traumatic
scripts’ (Osatuke et al. 2004, 197). In this way, the past can safely be revisited, the
vulnerable self explored and woven together into a single story (Martin). The father may
have been lost, but the past self, at least, can be maintained and does not need to be cut
off.

These narratives also resonate to a degree with some of the positive aspects of the ‘power’
theme that McAdams (1988, 149-155) detected in narratives of self and with the related
theme of agency in Holstein and Gubrium (2016, 7). Many of the narratives relate in some
way to status and action in the world, which constitute two of the power aspects mentioned
by McAdams.

However, the types of power described by McAdams – strength, impact, action and status –
(McAdams 1988, 149–152) do not easily accommodate some of the themes that appear in
all the participants’ stories to some extent: academic/professional competence, venturing
out into the world, emotional and behaviour regulation and self-awareness/connection to
self. Somewhat ironically, the first two of these have traditionally been associated with the
father function (Youniss and Smollar 1985, 52; Consentino 2017, respectively). The
participants present these as facilitated by the father’s absence, though that is also
consistent with the finding that exploration is delayed when a poor paternal relationship
means there is no secure base to return to (Sartor and Youniss 2003, 232). With regard to emotional regulation, all participants mention having been in some kind of therapeutic setting, sometimes to deal with addiction and self-destructive behaviours; Martin mentions his decision not to nurture resentment towards his father. To me, these sound like narratives of self-mastery that could justifiably be classed as relating to power, but McAdams’ classification does not include them. The theme of self-mastery is particularly strong in Calum’s story, which also illustrates a crucial distinction between different kinds of power: on the one hand, the power to win fights with his peers and physically subdue his father; on the other, the power to stop demonstrating his physical dominance over his father, the power to leave and the power to flourish despite his father’s ongoing psychologically abusive behaviour.

Narrative resistance

Another way to explore what the sons’ stories are doing – what the narrators are accomplishing with them (Holstein and Gubrium 2016, 7) – is through the lens of narrative resistance: how the narrators show character and values by resisting the characters they have been cast as (Combs and Freedman 2022; Frank 2010, 30) by paternal, familial or broader cultural ‘myths’ (McAdams 1997). The most straightforward instance of this is Calum’s narrative of personal development, disproving his father’s labels of ‘stupid’ and ‘an animal’ and resisting his father’s attempt to pin the blame for his violence on Calum. This blaming of the child is a common feature of child abuse (Smith Jr. 2003, 369). Calum’s naming of these names seems predicated on the listener’s understanding of the well-established idea that children can internalise parental narratives (Etherington 2008, 31); there would be little point in him saying it otherwise. But in naming them, he is also setting them up to be disproved, as he does both in the story and through the thoughtful, self-reflective way he tells it.

Could Michael’s story about going to shul and taking care of his dying father despite his father’s angry coldness also be a way of resisting the inference that he was a disobedient son? An inference, of course, is not a paternal narrative, but it is a form of communication
and thus liable to induce internalised narratives in the child. Anger expressed through silence or reduced verbal communication can surely convey strong disapproval and can be a feature of authoritarian psychological control (Barber et al. 2012) and lead the child to conclude that they are bad or inadequate. Additionally, if a child strongly identifies the father with cultural or religious norms, as both Michael and Calum did, then the father’s disapproval can be linked in the child’s mind to narratives associated with those norms, for instance, children should obey their fathers, or the community’s respect depends on academic and professional achievement. When I mistakenly misrepresented Michael as saying he did not want a bar mitzvah, his forceful correction suggests that he was sensitive to the suggestion that he had been defiant rather than questioning; so, too, does his pleased reception of my later remark that he had in fact merely been following the cultural practice of debating. Throughout the interview, while gently critical of some aspects of the culture he grew up in, Michael made it clear that his Jewish background was important to him, wondering at the end of the interview if he had moved too far away from it.

There is an ambivalence here: throughout the interview, any resistance to the paternal narrative of the disobedient, impious son is tempered by a willing identification with some aspects of who his father wanted him to be; indignation is countered by narratives of love and care. It becomes apparent that this ambivalent identifying is conditioned not just by interpersonal factors but by tensions between powerful cultural narratives. Most immediately apparent to me is the tension between, on the one hand, the values of conservativism, patriarchy and community and, on the other hand, those of individual freedom and personal growth so influential in the 1960s America of Michael’s formative years (a struggle in which, coincidentally, Gus’s parents were engaged). But, in response to my question about his experience of talking to me, Michael draws my attention to another opposition. He speaks of his culturally and theoretically informed wariness of being ‘too open’, especially when talking about Jewish identity to those of non-Jewish heritage like me. From this, I understand that his narrative identifying in the interview was influenced by the tensions between Orthodox narratives represented by his father and potential anti-Semitic narratives. Asserting his own identity is not a simple matter for Michael, who takes on the ‘responsibility’ (Frank 2010, 24) of choosing the narrative he tells about himself in the light...
of the period and the culture he was born into. Yet, awareness brings power, as well as responsibility; Michael’s awareness enables him to make informed choices about what he says.

In all the stories, the sons’ willingness to self-reflect and achieve a degree of emotional self-regulation contrasts strongly with their fathers’ apparent inability to regulate their emotions, anger in particular, and to communicate their feelings verbally in a non-aggressive manner. All sons mention engagement with some form of therapy. Calum, Sven and Michael even talk of studies in the field of psychology or counselling. More than simply narrating their own attachment to self-reflection, they also demonstrate it by their very participation. It is not clear to me how far this constitutes a form of resistance by the sons to their fathers’ values and/or to the widespread but now weakening cultural narrative equating masculinity with action rather than reflection. If not resistance, it certainly seems like the assertion of a value that is at least distinct from that embodied by their fathers.

In other words, the sons could be said to be forging – or perhaps, in the case of the older men, consolidating or editing – a personal ‘myth’. As a value-neutral narratological term (McAdams and McLean 2013), a myth simply means a story with no assumptions or evaluations about the ‘objective’ truth behind it, which is anyway unknowable. More important, narratologically speaking, is what is socially accomplished through storytelling (Holstein and Gubrium 2016, 7) and, therapeutically speaking, how helpful the narratives are in increasing the narrators’ own psychological well-being.

In narrating their own myths, independently of or in opposition to their fathers, the sons can be said to be individuating. All the stories refer back to adolescence and to early adulthood, seen as the primary periods in which we start to narrate an identity for ourselves (Erikson 1997). Speaking in relation to fathers and sons, Blos refers to the ‘second’ individuation during adolescence and early adulthood (the first individuation being the infant’s understanding of itself as separate from the mother) (Blos 1985, 144), often accompanied by a de-idealisation of the father by the son (Diamond 1998). From a family systems perspective, the sons are accomplishing an aspect of differentiation by taking an ‘I
position’ (Skowron and Friedlander 1998). This idea of a second individuation is also strongly present in Loewald’s reworking of the Oedipus complex, which emphasises how the issue of individuation from the parents is revisited during adolescence and young adulthood, when young males face the task of outgrowing the paternal attachment they have had to up that point. The intensity of individuation during this period is reflected in the comparative vividness and detail of Calum’s and Sven’s accounts. The incidents they are recalling are more recent; their episodic memories are fresher. But also they are still very actively engaged in working out who they can be, with Calum in particular looking ahead to the prospect of raising his children differently from the way his father raised him.

Individuation may seem a strange term to use in relation to men in their forties and above, but narratologists (Frank 2010; McAdams 1997) see identifying as a lifelong process and, by definition, a story about self is an instance of self-identifying. Likewise, Loewald, stresses that Oedipal issues involving conflict and de-idealisation of the father are liable to resurface at any stage in the life cycle (Loewald 2000). Indeed, there are signs that the older sons are not merely reiterating well-established identities but are still engaged in processing how their early relationship with their fathers influenced the way they saw themselves and who they are now.

Martin, Gus and Michael all acknowledge in their narratives the psychological legacy of their early relationship with their fathers, which might be interpreted as the ways in which they have not yet been able to fully individuate. Arguably, their process of reflection is part of that individuation process, by constructing residual emotional dependence as a function of past experience rather than an intrinsic quality. The men do not always make explicit causal connections, but their stories juxtapose episodic memory with the long-term self through reflection and evaluation in a way that might create a ‘synthesis that does justice to the intricacy of both the living world and the psychological one inside us’ (Singer et al. 2013). Michael links the shock of his father’s change in behaviour to his anxiety about rejection. Recollecting, Gus identifies a hard-to-articulate confusion about the messages he received from his father – valued as a member of the showcase family but left without guidance or boundaries to have sexual encounters with older men; this confusion seems reflected in his
adult attraction to hyper-masculine, dominant older men, which is only now abating. Martin
knows he can be different from his father, especially as a gay man, but his thoughtful
quietness when talking about ‘thinking half of you is foul or wrong or evil’ suggests to me a
process of live reflection, not just a recounting of something long understood.

Desire for connection

To sum up this section on individuation, the participants all tell of having achieved things in
their lives despite their problematic relationships with their fathers and despite ongoing
challenges – and, sometimes, thanks to a certain amount of physical and emotional distance
from them. But, looking at what they say at the end of their stories, reflecting on their
current relationship with their fathers or the relationship between the onset of
estrangement and their fathers’ deaths, I think it would be equally valid to say summarise
their narrated experience thus: they have achieved in life, but have had to abandon hope of
a meaningful, fulfilling relationship with their fathers. The sons have not been able to
redeem their earlier narratives of loss of connec\_\_tion, which closely match the negative
intimacy themes of separation and rejection, and are left with disillusionment (McAdams
1988, 158–159).

What is easy to miss in the sense of resignation present in Calum’s, Sven’s, Martin’s and
Gus’s stories is the implied desire, now abandoned, for connection – or, in other words, for
‘togetherness’ contrasted with individuality (Titelman 2003, 32) and for ‘intimacy’
contrasted with ‘power’ (McAdams 1988, 158). This past wish for connection may not be
expressed directly, but it can be seen in Sven’s tender introspection to see whether the
embers of his earlier warm affection could potentially be rekindled. But also, paradoxically,
it is apparent in negative evaluations: in Gus’s disappointment that his father wrote a
standard apology letter to all his children; in Martin’s lament at the missed opportunity for
his father to connect over being gay and in his anger at his father’s nonchalant greeting on
the telephone; in Michael’s regret at having perhaps moved too far from his father and
associated places and culture; and in Calum’s long search for a male role model. Some of
the men may be more direct in talking about their individuation achievements, but contrary
to Gilligan’s generalisation, they do not hold up separation as a value (Gilligan 1982, 88) or give me reason to think they view involvement with others as diminishing the self (idem, 163).

The sons’ desire for connection to their fathers, it would appear, ‘is not overridden by the drive to individuate’ (Sartor and Youniss 2003, 232). Indeed what all the participants are expressing, in one way or another, is the desire for a father who could engage with them during their individuation process – to try to understand and help them understand their struggles (Calum and Sven), show enough interest in their lives to provide guidance (Gus and Martin), help them figure out what being gay means (Martin) or help them understand the cultural and personal significance of the transition to manhood (Michael). In short, these narratives speak of a desire for individuation to be a ‘cooperative process’ with fathers who were ‘concerned and available’ and who could provide ‘structure and knowledge of their activities’ and ‘parental control exercised in a supportive environment’ (Sartor and Youniss 2003, 222).

Both Loewald and Diamond write of considerable difficulties in fathering adolescent sons – in particular of the need to contain one’s own feelings well enough to be present for the developing son. Fathers face being dethroned by challenges to authority, by de-idealisation, by the son’s attachment to different values and by his increasing competence and autonomy in the world (Diamond 1998; 2007; Loewald 2000). (I am not a father, but here I recall with some shame how my own fear of being ‘de-idealised’ by my godson led me to withdraw from him somewhat during his teenage years.)

We cannot know what the participants’ fathers were experiencing, but we can explore how the sons’ narrative constructions of their fathers relate to the theory. Calum and Michael tell of fathers heavily invested in their own power and authority over their sons, which their sons then challenge – mostly unwittingly, and intentionally only latterly in Calum’s account. Unable to stand back from these challenges and process the emotions they provoked, the fathers distanced themselves instead from their sons. In Sven’s account, it is de-idealisation that the father is unable to tolerate, coinciding with his financial embarrassment. What the
father does not understand is that the de-idealisation is not a direct response to the loss of financial status, but an indirect response to the changes in the father that the loss induces. Gus and Martin, however, present fathers who are consistently distant and uninvolved throughout their lives, showing no particular responses to their growth into manhood, but they are unavailable during a critical stage of their sons’ development.

No reconciliation

Perhaps no father is good enough for their child during adolescence, a proverbially turbulent and conflict-ridden time. Indeed Diamond’s concept of the ‘good enough’ father implies the idea of healthy failure and healthy de-idealisation that spurs individuation (Diamond 1998). And, as discussed above, that dynamic is reflected in the sons’ narratives. But to be good enough for the relationship to recover and to meet the sons’ desire for (re-)connection, fathers must be available and willing at some point to communicate about what has gone wrong and build a different kind of relationship, with greater equality. This is the process that Diamond labels, from the son’s perspective, the ‘third individuation’, a concept mirrored in Loewald as a (second) ‘waning of the Oedipus complex’ (Loewald 2000) and in family systems theory as the ‘termination of the intergenerational hierarchical boundary’ (Williamson 1981, 411).

We might be tempted to view the absence of this third individuation in the participants’ stories as the feature that differentiates relational turbulence in adolescence from estrangement. But, for the sons, whose stories are not concerned with theoretical distinctions, the paternal characteristics that frustrated and hurt them when they were younger are the same characteristics that make or made rapprochement, let alone reconciliation, impossible: a lack of willingness and/or ability to communicate. All say or imply that there is (or was, for those whose fathers are dead) little to no prospect of change in their relationships with their fathers, because there has been no change in the fathers.

The issue for all sons is not whether they can forgive the fathers for past hurts but whether the fathers are/were willing and able to acknowledge and explore the problems. This is one
of the key ingredients of reconciliation according to Katz, who also identified other factors that the fathers in the participants’ narratives were lacking, namely, a commitment to solving problems, respect for the son (raised by Calum and Martin in particular) and gentle communication (all sons mention their fathers’ anger) (Katz 2002, 24–28). It is a resigned Calum who looks ahead and concludes ‘there will be no reconciliation in our family […] I have come to accept that I am never ever going to get what I’ve wanted, you know, the most’. I take him to be referring here to basic respect and constructive engagement. Martin, the only participant to mention forgiveness, singles out his father’s disengagement from him and his siblings as the thing he cannot forgive (before adding that it is not really about forgiveness and that he has simply moved on).

Differentiation in family systems theory

Above, I have discussed the father’s contribution facilitating a more equal relationship between father and son, with reference to Diamond and Loewald’s ideas on individuation. While family systems theory also traces an ideal trajectory towards greater relational equality between parents and adult children who have ‘cut off’ from them, its concept of differentiation focuses on the difficult work the adult child needs to do to change the relationship from within. The theory holds that, without bridging cutoffs from the family of origin, adult children are almost certain to remain emotionally dependent, to crave closeness but run from it and consequently mismanage other relationships (Kelly 2003, 140). It feels important to discuss this idea in relation to the participants’ narratives if only to argue that, even if true, it is of limited relevance here, not least because three of the five fathers are dead, and to raise a note of caution about the prescriptive language used in early family systems theory: references to ‘running away’ from a problem (Bowen 2004) and the exhortation to ‘go back home’ (Framo 1976) risk feeding the powerful though waning cultural narrative (echoed in the self-help literature; see LeBey 2001) about the moral importance of families staying together, irrespective of the cost to individuals.

Earlier in this discussion, I concluded that, in the participants’ narratives, estrangement did not result from them cutting off or distancing themselves from their fathers, with Sven’s
teenage withdrawal a possible exception. But even the narratives about later periods, when
the estrangement is entrenched, are about disillusionment and resignation over the
impossibility of genuine reconciliation. Resignation and disillusionment are not cutoffs in the
Bowenian sense of the word; their function in the narratives is not to regulate tension and
anxiety in fused family systems. They may not convey that the sons have given up the need
to be parented, which Williamson saw as the mark of an adult (Williamson 1981, 444), but
rather the hope of being parented. But in any case, where a separation or distance is a fait
accompli, accepting it may seem like a less damaging and less ‘fused’ response than trying
to restore a connection with an abusive or indifferent father, as Gilbert points out (Gilbert
2019, 200). Further, even Bowen allows that there are cases in which making a permanent break with the family of origin and building alternative families is the only option. As examples of these exceptions, he cites ‘disasters, fragmented families, a number of other extreme social situations’ (Bowen 2004, 556), in a list that begs the question of how each of these is defined and who gets to define them.

Bereavement

The work of making sense of estrangement, and arguably of differentiation, appears to continue long after the death of an estranged father. For Martin, Gus and, several decades on, Michael, the process is still ongoing. Their accounts suggest that losing an estranged parent does not resolve or repair the loss suffered through estrangement; rather it adds a new layer of bereavement.

The stories told by the sons with living fathers are noticeably fuller and more coherent than those of the sons whose fathers have died. This might reflect the pressing and ever-present need for them to decide how to move forward – to decide what connection to their fathers is still possible or desirable and how. But I would argue that all the sons are still making sense of their feelings towards their fathers. The sting of estrangement is still apparent in Michael’s and Gus’s stories; they express strong emotions. Martin, by contrast, speaks of his conscious effort not to dwell on negative feelings but that, he explains, is because he could otherwise be damaged by the resentment he could easily feel if he allowed himself to.
All the themes mentioned in this chapter are present in the narratives of the sons whose fathers have died: ongoing vulnerability to wounds inflicted, the task of self-redemption, resisting internalised narratives and individuating. And, though the sons do not seem able to fully account for their fathers’ behaviour and so cannot build a new relationship with a rehabilitated internalised father, perhaps they find some peace of mind in recalling and re-explaining how and why the estrangement came about.

My experience of this study

I had intended to weave my own estrangement story into this study. It was to be half autoethnography, half narrative study. I am sorry that this was not possible but relieved that I soon gave up the attempt. My own story is very different in some respects; mingling them would have confused matters and distracted attention from the stories that Calum, Sven, Martin, Michael and Gus were generous enough to share. The five accounts were already different enough from each other; the task of tying them together has been hard, and I have resisted it for fear of diminishing or distorting the participants’ voices.

Another concern has been to acknowledge that the narratives relate to the narrators’ sometimes painful lived experience while keeping in mind that they are far from being a full or definitive reflection of that experience. To treat the words solely as symbols, structures or even actions would seem disrespectful to the feelings, thoughts and memories behind them, but to treat them as if they were those feelings, thoughts and memories would be a betrayal too.

Though my own story is different, the points of contact between it and the participants’ stories have helped me to understand some aspects of my own experience better. But I have also been aware of how it has influenced my analysis and interpretations of their accounts. Like most of the sons in this study, I have never made a decision to distance myself from my father. More than that, I have never wanted that distance or felt my life was easier or better for it. In the course of this study, I realised that has made me sensitive to narratives that challenge the common assumption that adult children are the ‘estrangers’,
the cutters-off. And I suspect that few estranged adult children would want to own those labels without at least explaining what circumstances or which people had pushed them to distance themselves.

Similarly, my experience has left me highly ambivalent about those who are convinced of the benefits of re-contacting estranged relatives. I was right, ultimately, that my father would not be open to sustained contact; my very directive and determined therapist was wrong. On the other hand, he was right that I would be pleased I had tried. And perhaps he sensed that I (or at least my defences) were strong enough to deal with my father’s refusal, brutal as it was. I can certainly see the value in reaching out and trying to build a different kind of relationship, provided the attempt is well prepared and well supported. But advice in books can be powerful, particularly when it comes from an authoritative source. It can be taken out of context and reinforce pre-existing cultural values. I feel protective of fellow estranged people when I read injunctions to try to re-connect.

My engagement with estrangement theory and family systems theory for this project informed new ways of thinking about my own story. Though I am wary about the potential of estrangement typologies to encourage reductive thinking and to make us less open to the complexities of individual stories, I am grateful for the concept of ‘secondary estrangement’. Together with the Bowenian notion of fusion, it has helped me to conceptualise my own estrangement. I better understand how fused I was with my mother and how, from my side, my estrangement from my father was a function of her deep anxiety-driven cutoff from him.

When I started this study, I imagined the mothers would feature much more prominently in the narratives of father-son estrangement than they did and that, like mine, they would be mostly hostile to the relationship between their sons and ex-partners. I was pleased to find that was not the case. However, the diversity and complexity of family configurations in the narratives was such that it would have been impossible to do them justice had I tried to unpack them.
Lastly, about a year ago, during the writing of this thesis, a cousin we had never met contacted my sister and informed her that my father had died two weeks previously and that the funeral had been held. A perceptive friend summed it up: nothing has happened and yet everything has happened. Most of all, the news brought an end to many years of regularly googling his name for any snippets of information and wondering whether, as he drew near to the end of his life, he might contact me. The cousin also told us that our father’s two brothers and their wives (our uncles and aunts) would be delighted to hear from us. When contact with my father had ended, so had contact with them – another secondary estrangement. We were indeed delighted to see each other. Their joyful hugs and tears on seeing us after 35 years were balm. As we get to know each other, we are gently, cautiously exchanging pieces of information that help us to piece together what happened. Many questions are still unanswered, and each piece of new information raises fresh questions. And stories change, subtly, with each telling.

Psychologically, answers do help. But more important than having full coherent stories is the activity of sharing them. After many years of having unvarying mantras about my father insistently and anxiously repeated to me, there is satisfaction in uncertainty, in being able to tolerate the gaps left by missing pieces because, more than simple certainties, relating is valued.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

The study adds to the existing body of qualitative estrangement research, revealing the diversity of understandings of estrangement among those who have experienced it and those studying it. Estrangement is seen to be constituted by many more things than a loss or cutting off of contact. For the people concerned, estrangement can be as subtle as a change in perception or a private thought that permanently changes the perceiver’s level of hope, expectation and desire. Nor is intergenerational estrangement always initiated by the adult child, at least not in their eyes. Parental rejection or neglect can start long before the young adult finally makes a move away or adjusts their attitude to protect themselves from further hurt.

This study has helped me to conceptualise estrangement more as a process or an emergent property than an event or a thing in itself. I explored expressions of anger, hurt and withdrawal at a finer level of subjective granularity than is possible using concepts like ‘estranger’ and ‘estrangee’, which seem to presuppose an objective third-party assessment. The methodology enabled me to acknowledge the participants’ strong assertions of being cut off or pushed away by their fathers and their own cutoff, presented not as a choice but as a protective response. All participants traced their relational difficulties back to adolescence or earlier, which provided a context for understanding and empathising with the lack of agency in their narratives.

Researchers’ definitions of estrangement are commonly less diverse and more simple than estranged people’s first-hand experience, or indeed than those same researchers’ more reflective definitions. It seems. However, the most recent research appears to be adopting more subtle operational definitions. My own awakening through this study has been salutary. Another learning is that people who feel estranged are not particularly concerned with definitions; they want someone to listen empathically to their experience, whatever it is. Still, in the long term, they will be more likely to find understanding among therapists, counsellors and others if the growing literature covers their situation instead of indirectly defining them as not really estranged.
The temptation to reach for well-theorised, well-defined concepts like cutoff and to import them into estrangement theory is understandable. They provide the still tender shoots of estrangement theory with something solid to grow around. However, that very solidity can be uncompromising. Along with the words come underlying assumptions rather at odds with the contemporary ethos of autonomy and moving on from families experienced as abusive. A term that applies only to adult children is of limited value in a field capable of recognising that parents, too, can be rejecting, neglectful or abandoning, or so abusive that cut-off is the best option. But family systems theory seems to be acknowledging that now too and is slowly changing its rhetoric to be less directive.

Eschewing the concept of reconciliation, which implicitly places a value on the restoration of contact, the study, in line with some of the narratives, assumes that estrangement can only properly be overcome by the development of a mutually respectful adult-to-adult relationship. For this reason, it looks at the narratives through the lens of differentiation, a concept, like cutoff, taken from family systems theory. However, this perspective highlights the sons’ narratives of continuing powerlessness to effect change in the relationship, faced with the fathers’ apparent inability to acknowledge the sons’ perspective. While the concept of differentiation sheds light on the difficulties the participants have had in making their pain and frustration heard, to depict it as a task for them is at the very least premature. Moreover, a therapeutic differentiation agenda risks burdening the adult child with the moral responsibility to overcome what they present as insurmountable barriers. Of course, a research interview is not therapy, far less family systems therapy, where the possibilities for relational change would be explored over time in the context of a therapeutic relationship. The conclusion is not a criticism of family systems theory (though some of the language used in the literature does unfortunately suggest that not attempting to build a better relationship is in some way cowardly) but a call for care when using the concept of differentiation out of its original context to think about estrangement with affected adult children. This care seems particularly important when their narratives suggest they are sensitive to pressure from relatives to restore contact or to the grand narrative of the permanence of family ties. Lastly, differentiation is irrelevant when the father has already died and there is no hope of relational change.
As a less repair-oriented lens, the dual process model of bereavement supports a more open and empathic hearing of the diverse losses involved in estrangement, including those narratives that concern the death of the father during a prolonged estrangement. This seems important given that (a) the fathers did not acknowledge these losses and (b) men tend to avoid a loss orientation in bereavement processing, perhaps under the influence of a cultural construct of masculinity associated with resilience and invulnerability.

Lastly, both narrative therapy and the dual process model provide good frameworks for exploring the narratives of restoration and redemption present in some way in most of the participants’ stories. Through these narratives, the participants are able to construct agentive identities that do not necessarily transcend, resolve or heal the wounds of estrangement but enable the adult sons affected to project around them some space to move forward. The concept of differentiation and Oedipal theory pose the useful question of what might be lost when cutoff is not resolved. The narratives contain some hints at possible answers to this. However, they also have the potential to undermine the task of restoration, building a life or continuing through estrangement or after the death of an estranged father.

Limitations and possible directions for future research

For various reasons, my analysis and discussion did not focus on relationships with other family members. Starting this project, I imagined that estrangement from fathers would almost invariably take place against a background of breakdown in the parental relationship or that participants would be estranged from both parents. Based in part on my own experience of a fused relationship with my mother, my assumption was that the son’s relationship with the father would be inextricably linked in the stories to the relationship with the mother. For this reason, my interview schedule specifically asked about the influence of other family members on the estrangement from the father. To my surprise, participants tended to brush this question aside, even when repeated or reformulated; they seemed to want to focus on the father. Mothers (and siblings) do feature in the stories but usually quite fleetingly; their roles in the narratives are as diverse as the estrangement
stories themselves, but where they do play a prominent part, they are not depicted as having strong views on how the sons should conduct their relationships with their fathers. This is somewhat at odds with at least two strong narratives: the psychoanalytic notion that, in childhood at least, the mother is the gatekeeper of the child’s relationship with the father, but also the cultural narrative pushed by some ‘fathers’ rights’ campaigners and supported by the theoretical construct of ‘parental alienation syndrome’. Both assume a strong maternal influence. Given the strength of these narratives, future research could usefully focus on the role of mothers in father-child estrangement.

Certainly, parental conflict features in some of the narratives, including those of sons whose parents stayed together, but uncontrolled paternal anger is a theme in all of them, whether directed at the mother, the son or siblings. Future research could investigate this further. Is paternal anger a more fundamental factor in father-son estrangement than parental conflict or low paternal involvement?

Missing from this study is the voice of fathers. The media channel voices of paternal protest, often at limited access to children, and fathers are represented and discussed in therapeutic literature, but I am not aware of studies focussing specifically on their experience of being estranged from adult children. In my experience of supporting estranged family members, I have never encountered an estranged father. The reluctance of estranged parents, and fathers in particular, to seek support is worthy of research in itself, although, by definition, participants would likely be hard to recruit. Indeed, the anticipated difficulty in recruiting fathers was one of the reasons I chose to focus on sons in this study. Further research might ask whether mothers (or primary carers) view, handle, and talk about estrangement from their adult children differently from fathers.

A recurrent theme in the interviews was money: financial catastrophe as the trigger for relational change, unpaid child maintenance, reluctance to fund studies and continuing financial dependence on the father in adulthood. Since references to this were sometimes quite fleeting and difficult to interpret, I left this theme to one side. However, given that providing for the child’s material needs is traditionally seen as part of the father’s role, and
StandAlone has recently been drawing attention to the financial implications of parental estrangement for students, the topic of money in father-child estrangement seems worthy of further research.

Lastly, a methodological and epistemological limitation: the collection of data was restricted to a single interview, with time for participants to narrate only fragments of their estrangement stories and their evaluations of it. I have applied a heuristic of trust, assuming not only that participants are sincere but also that aspects of the narratives represent aspects of their experience at the time of narration. However, readers should be mindful, as I am, that stories are never finished, and anyone telling of it is affected by a multitude of factors too numerous to mention. Readers will interpret the narratives and my take on them for themselves, but neither their understanding of the narratives nor my interpretations of them, nor even the experience of narrating, can be taken as definitive or complete.

**Learnings for counselling and support group work**

Such is the diversity of practice among those called on to support estranged adult children through psychotherapy, counselling and support groups that I do not presume to set out generalised implications of this study for practice. Rather, I prefer to describe the learnings I will take into my own practice in the hope that these might resonate with others.

First, hearing the participants’ disappointment, frustration, sadness and resignation reinforced my belief that a son who cuts off from his father emotionally or physically does so because he values the idea of a close, healthy relationship but has been unable to achieve it in reality with his own father. An apparent lack of interest in repairing or improving the relationship cannot be taken as an indication that the rupture does not hurt.

As a practitioner, the study presents me with a number of challenges. The first is to remain open to hearing as many different aspects of the estrangement experience as possible, including fear of paternal anger and rejection, an enduring desire for a good relationship
with the father or an imagined father, sadness, shame and anger that it has not been possible, frustration and resignation that it remains beyond reach, hope that it may be possible and hope that, even if no meaningful relationship is possible, the damage can be repaired.

Concepts, models and theories can help to sensitise me to those different narratives but may come with an agenda, usually implicit, such as relational repair in the case of family systems theory or the encouragement of positive, agentive narratives in narrative therapy. I need to be aware of those agendas and attentive to the way they may influence my listening and responses. Family systems theory, in particular, seems a double-sided coin. On the one hand, the notion of cutoff has enhanced my ability to engage with a more subjective and granular understanding of estrangement. On the other, I see the risks inherent in the concept of differentiation of amplifying the pre-existing idea that family bonds must be maintained and of alienating clients – especially when removed from the context of family therapy and taken into one-to-one counselling.

Lastly, the study raises my awareness as a practitioner that the process of coming to terms with estrangement does not end with the death of the estranged relative. Rather, the loss is compounded. And while death always leaves those who remain with ‘loose ends’, the sense of unresolved issues and things left unsaid is likely to be sharper for those who have lost estranged relatives.

**Implications for training**

In considering how the study might inform counsellor training around estrangement, my starting point is similar to that for counselling practice: what would I have benefited from as a trainee when I first started to think about estrangement as a phenomenon beyond my own personal experience of it?

First, it would have been useful to have my attention drawn to the wide range of definitions and the fuzzy boundaries around the concept of estrangement. This would facilitate self-
directed learning by preparing trainees for the otherwise confusing lack of a common
definition in the literature. Equally, discussion with peers around personal, pre-reflective
understandings of estrangement could help to prepare trainees not to assume that their
prospective clients’ understanding would be the same as theirs.

Carrying out this research has broadened my own understanding of estrangement to
encompass emotional estrangement in which there may not be long periods without
contact. It is easy to imagine that trainees would bring their own assumptions, for example,
that estrangement always involves someone making a decision to estrange, that there is an
estranger and an estrangee or that it has a definite start and can be distinguished from the
relational difficulties that inevitably precede it, or even that all parties involved have a
shared understanding of what is happening. Teaching theory can help to challenge these
assumptions, but first-person accounts of estrangement might help students to understand
estrangement as a complex, messy process and to tolerate not knowing the answers to
‘what’, ‘who’, ‘how’ and ‘when’ questions, which the client may also not know.

To help trainees become more aware of the values they might be taking into the counselling
room, a discussion could be useful around the common cultural discourses of ‘families stick
together’ on the one hand and ‘cutting out toxic people’ on the other. Martin’s appreciative
comment that I had not brought love into the discussion highlighted to me the possibility
that clients may assume a counsellor has a stance on this even if they do not. Training could
usefully draw attention to this possibility and to clients’ potential sensitivity to inferences of
blame for estrangement and responsibility for reconciliation. Further, a critical reading of
theory could be encouraged so that trainees reflect on the provenance, values and
implications of concepts found in the estrangement literature and how to handle the
baggage that always comes with theory.

Lastly, training could draw attention to men’s relative reluctance to talk about
estrangement, despite research suggesting that, in the UK at least, as many men as women
identify as estranged from a family member. Why might this be, and what implications
might it have for counselling?
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