Middlesex University and Metanoia Institute

A mother without a mother:

Women's experiences of maternal estrangement in motherhood

Samantha Barcham

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Abstract

Family estrangement can be a devastating experience. The traumas associated with estrangement can occur at multiple levels, in the form of past neglect or abuse, or arising from distressing events such as divorce or poverty (Agllias, 2016). The process of estranging from a family member or being the rejected person can also be traumatic to experience. However, as a fundamentally relational issue, estrangement can be understood as often being linked to early relational trauma (Agllias, 2015b; DeYoung, 2015). The silence and shame that usually encircles estrangement, particularly between parents and children, obscures the picture around its pervasiveness with research suggesting it occurs more commonly than might be thought (Conti, 2015).

This study addresses existing gaps in the field of estrangement research. Positioned within a hermeneutic constructivist perspective that foregrounds subjectivity and self-experience as a means of interpreting the world, a methodological approach of narrative inquiry was used to explore the lived experiences of six women estranged from their mothers, who were also mothers to one or more children. Narrative interviews were conducted with each participant. From their accounts, three in-depth individual stories were produced using dialogical narrative analysis and within which my own story of estrangement was interwoven. The fourth story is a fictionalised account created from the narratives of the remaining three participants who are depicted as friends supporting one another.

The stories that have emerged through this research poignantly demonstrate the struggles of estrangement and what it is like to be a daughter who cannot have a functioning relationship with one's mother. They show the effect this can have on one's sense of self, often imbuing it with a sense of shame. The wounds of estrangement ran deep, fuelling a powerful desire for the participants to be a *different* kind of mother for their own children. In becoming mothers, their stance toward the behaviour of their own mothers shifted, as did their capacity and willingness to accept such treatment at the expense of their wellbeing. The intergenerational thread that wove through their narratives exposed a cycle of hurtful behaviour often being passed along the generations. The participants' wish to break the pattern came coupled with the pain that their own mothers were unable to do this for them. This study also revealed the inner tensions daughters contend with concerning their mothers as they age and the imagined sense of relief that comes with their passing.

The insights offered through the telling of these stories can support the work of psychotherapy and those working with families affected by estrangement. They reveal the profoundly complex nature of estrangement and its relational roots, encouraging practitioners to give particular attention to the shame infused interpersonal difficulties often masked in experiences of estrangement.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

(Maya Angelou)

1.1 The story begins—How did I get here?

Family estrangement was not my first choice of research topic. In truth, it had not entered the horizon when I contemplated the possibilities. Like most people, I assume, I sought something meaningful to me. It made sense for the research to be inspired by personal experience given how they shape us. Initially, I focused on women who had recovered from anorexia and their experiences of pregnancy, particularly as a time when a woman’s body changes significantly, and she has little control over these changes. From my past eating disorder battle, I struggled during my first pregnancy with the changes my body underwent, and it triggered complicated feelings. The fear of being judged prevented me from voicing these because I should just feel fortunate to be pregnant—it was a “gift”. However, after writing the research proposal, my enthusiasm waned, and so, I set it aside for the time being.

Back to square one, I did not know where to go next. I asked myself what else had happened in my life that might be unusual or distinctive. Some ideas floated to mind, but none caught on. I tweaked the question to, *what has had the greatest impact on me in my life*. My mother immediately came to mind. Thinking about our broken

relationship, I realised it was not just the impact on me as a child but also how difficult it has been as an adult and as a mother to not have the support and presence of a mum. It has been an isolating experience that I rarely shared with anyone because of the shame associated with having such a fractured and unhealthy relationship with my mother—for what did it imply about me and my upbringing? Besides, I never knew how to talk about it so that others would understand. To somebody from an apparently *normal* family, the idea that I did not speak to my mother appeared baffling and inconceivable.

Aware that I would not be the only one affected by this, I wondered what it was like for other women in a similar position. I had clearly found my research topic. I felt strongly that the heart of this research was to produce detailed and rich expositions of what the experience was *like* for women who were estranged from their mothers. If others better understood the experience of being estranged from your mother while also being a mother, perhaps women in this position would feel less alone and have additional support. Thus, I aspired to tell their stories in their raw and unadulterated form as best I could.

As an English-speaking psychotherapist practicing in France, I encounter many clients who have difficult and complex relationships with their mother's, and most find living in a foreign country make their relationship manageable. Interestingly, it was not until after I started this research that estranged clients started to find me. I published a short blog about estrangement on my website and this prompted these clients to contact me. Perhaps this indicated something about those seeking therapy

specifically for estrangement feeling more comfortable speaking to someone they think understands something about the experience.

1.2 Research question and aims of this study

The aim of this study was to explore the inner world and experience of estrangement from the perspective of adult-daughters who are estranged from their mothers while also being mothers to children of their own. In this sense, the lived experience of estrangement would be heard from the positions of being both a daughter *and* a mother.

To accomplish this aim, I opted to perform a narrative inquiry, conducting interviews in the form of narrative conversations, guided by the research question, **'How do women with children experience being estranged from their mothers?'**

1.3 An outline of the chapters for this dissertation

Chapter 1 focuses on an exploration of the existing research in the field of family estrangement. Concepts of family and the biological bond are discussed, together with the challenges of estrangement for those experiencing it. I identify gaps in the current research and show how this study was positioned to address these. I conclude by describing the theoretical framework for this research and its relevance.

Chapter 2 provides an account of my journey navigating the methodological terrain and its philosophical origins. I explain how this study came to use narrative inquiry as

its approach and how I sought to integrate my roles of researcher-participant-psychotherapist.

In **Chapter 3**, I present Hollie's story—an evocative account of performing motherhood as a woman estranged from her mother.

Chapter 4 is Lucy's story of coming from a split family and how such experiences have the potential to be repeated across the generations.

Chapter 5 tells the story of Scout and our intertwined experiences of estrangement, and more…

Chapter 6 is a fictionalised re-*presentation* that weaves together the stories of three of the participants written as a chapter from a fictional book.

Finally, in **Chapter 8,** I reflect on the discoveries and process of writing these stories. I consider the methodological issues and limitations of this study, its contribution to the research literature and therapeutic practice, together with future directions for research.

Chapter 2. Exploring the field of family estrangement

In this chapter, I explore existing research on family estrangement. I start by considering concepts of family and the biological bond before looking at family estrangement and how this can impact people's lives. I then draw attention to what the research shows concerning parent-child estrangement, the focus of this study, and the difficulties in coping with the losses associated with estrangement from a parent or child. This leads to an exploration of estrangement in the context of specific parent-child relationships, where gaps in the research come into view. I position this research within an attachment-based theoretical framework, where this study specifically focuses on experiences of estrangement in the mother-daughter relationship in an intergenerational context. Finally, I outline the use of narrative inquiry as a methodological approach that has not been used before in estrangement research.

2.1 The concept of the family

In starting to consider family estrangement, it is useful to clarify conceptualisations of family. However, I found attaining a consensus on the notion of family surprisingly challenging, complicated by a range of cultural and societal tensions as perceptions of family have increasingly diversified (Turner & West, 2006). Families do not arise in isolation. They exist within a social and cultural context and thus, family and culture are intertwined (Putnick et al., 2014). Even so, the family remains ideologically a foremost human and social institution. My conceptions of family are influenced by

Winnicott's (1990) book, *Home is Where We Start From*. The title itself is a poignant communication of the powerful impact of the family environment on shaping a person. One need only see a baby to be reminded of the complete dependence on their family during those earliest years of life—a family whose presence and participation are essential for their survival (Lyons-Ruth, 2002; Panksepp, 2004). Thus, independently of the form a family takes, I understand family relationships as a cornerstone of human development (e.g. Braithwaite et al., 2010; Lichtenberg et al., 2011; Turner & West, 2006).

Family is often conceived of as arising through blood and marriage, adoption or social designation (Bedford & Blieszner, 1997). Certain ideas about family focus on its structure and composition, with normative concepts emphasising a traditional nuclear model, typically comprised of parents, children and other relatives in the extended family (Turner & West, 2015). Some scholars challenge such conceptions of family because it does not recognise the numerous contemporary and diverse topologies that can exist today outside of blood and legal, or otherwise, family affiliations (e.g. Braithwaite et al., 2010; Galvin, 2006). Thus, the repertoire of family configurations has expanded in parallel with a society where there is an increased prevalence of divorce, remarriage, same-sex marriage, cohabitation and life expectancy. Hence, Schmeeckle et al. (2006, p. 595) posed the question, "who is considered family?"

Perhaps the answer rests in understanding whether legal and biological definitions of family adequately reflect people's experiences. Some scholars have found that the

concept of family is applied in diverse ways which do not necessarily fit the aforementioned ideological boundaries (Cheal, 1991; Holstein & Gubrium, 1999). Consequently, this has led to several expanded conceptions of family such as “chosen families” (Weston, 1997, p. 211), “fictive kin” (Chatters et al., 1994, p. 297), also known as “voluntary kin” (Braithwaite et al., 2010, p. 388), “postmodern families” and “divorce-extended families” (Stacey, 1996, p. 45). These alternative family forms are characterised as *family-like* relationships, although they are not necessarily bound genetically or legally (Floyd & Morman, 2013). However, sociocultural changes mean families have evolved to reflect structures that include traditional (biological and legal) and socially diversified (non-biological and non-legal) relationships. As a therapeutic practitioner, I wonder how the absence of legal or biological ties within family-*like* relationships might have a bearing on the intrinsic human need for safety and security, which family bonds are expected to offer in the proper context (Lichtenberg et al., 2011).

Undoubtedly, these shifts highlight the fluid nature of the boundaries of conventional families and family-like relationships. By means of encapsulating these varied conceptions, Galvin, Brommel, and Bylund (2004, p. 6) define family as:

> “Networks of people who share their lives over long periods of time bound by ties of marriage, blood, or commitment, legal or otherwise, who consider themselves as family and who share a significant history and anticipated future of functioning in a family relationship.”

The importance of this definition relates to my earlier observation concerning the human need for security through close family connections. The distinction of this conceptualisation of family is its emphasis on developing deep and meaningful family-like ties over extended timeframes, a period sufficiently long enough that there can be a sense of shared history between one another (Galvin et al., 2004). Having a shared history plays an integral part in why family connections tend to endure, because the past is irreplaceable and part of oneself (Scharp & Thomas, 2016). Consequently, these different conceptions of family are important to understand because of their potential influence on the process of estrangement and the implications for those affected across biological and non-biological relationships.

2.2 The sanctity of the 'biological bond'

Although contemporary definitions of family have expanded considerably to accommodate the range of social relationships that people experience and perceive as familial, there is an enduring theme within the literature and likewise, within society, concerning what it signifies to have biological ties to others (Dolgin, 2008; Fisher, 2003). The intention here is not to privilege one family configuration over another, nor to diminish other forms of meaningful non-biological relationships that are considered familial. Rather, it is to acknowledge that for human beings, alongside meaningful non-biological relationships, there remains something inherently vital and arguably evolutionary pertaining to being biologically connected to significant others in a physical sense, as *part* of one another (Darwin, 1859).

In the context of the parent-child relationship, the desire to have a child that is of one's own "flesh and blood" (Holtzman, 2008, p. 174) or one's "real" child (ibid, p. 171) often becomes all the more prominent. Generally speaking, there is a human instinct to reproduce and pass along one's genes (Nicholson, 1998). The research literature on adoption and fertility further underscores the human desire to have children of one's own (e.g. Becker, 2000; Loftus & Andriot, 2012; Matthews & Matthews, 1986; Park & Hill, 2014). Research shows that many heterosexual couples never consider adoption when starting a family, despite having positive views about it (Fisher, 2003; Park & Hill, 2014). Heterosexual and same-sex couples who typically look to adopt rarely do so as their primary means to have a family (Smock & Greenland, 2010). More commonly, the path to adoption is taken as a last resort when all other options, such as fertility treatment to conceive a child biologically, have been unsuccessfully exhausted (e.g. Fisher, 2003; Park & Hill, 2014).

Furthermore, within same-sex relationships, where there has been a rise in donor-conceived families for couples wishing to start a family, it has become routine to seek the same donor, so siblings are biologically related (Cahn, 2011; Smock & Greenland, 2010). With same-sex couples seeking to ensure their children are biologically related, this accentuates the idea of the value people place on biological connections. Thus, it appears that many go to great lengths to conceive a child of their own "flesh and blood" (Holtzman, 2008, p. 174) before considering the alternatives, which is not a straightforward decision either (Fisher, 2003).

Undoubtedly, there are many considerations that shape people's attitudes with respect to the nature of family bonds, whether they are genetically based or otherwise. The purpose here is not to decipher whether the emphasis on biological relationships is instinctually driven or constructed through various social discourses. Nor is it to determine the value of biological versus non-biological relationships. Rather, the research suggests that although biological relationships are not the final word on what constitutes family, biology does have an influential role on people's conceptions and experiences of family (Dolgin, 2008; Fisher, 2003; Turner & West, 2015). As previously noted, these differentiations are important because of their bearing on family estrangement, given how the nature of one's family relationships affects what unfolds in later life (Deyoung, 2015).

2.3 Conceptualisations of family estrangement

Following on from the above discussion, family relationships, particularly between parents and children, have tended to be perceived as everlasting and virtually impossible to dissolve (Pillemer et al., 2007; Vangelisti, 1993). Perhaps these assumptions help explain why, until recently, the area of family estrangement and the devastating effects it can have on people has received limited attention. In the last decade, this has started to change, where a growth in research interest has begun to increase awareness of the pervasiveness and impact of estrangement on individuals and families (e.g. Agllias, 2016; Allen & Moore, 2017; Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2017; Scharp & Thomas, 2016).

Accordingly, researchers have attempted to characterise family estrangement in several ways. Bowen (1978), one of the first theorists to describe estrangement, coined the term *emotional cutoff* to define estrangement processes. From this perspective, Bowen (1978, p. 382) observed:

> "The life pattern of cutoffs is determined by the way people handle their unresolved emotional attachments to their parents. All people have some degree of unresolved emotional attachments to their parents. The lower the level of differentiation, the more intense the unresolved attachment. The concept deals with the ways people separate themselves from the past in order to start living their lives in the present generation."

Bowen's definition draws attention to the central role of attachment regarding the degree of emotional 'fusion' that exists between family members (ibid). Thus, it is the quality of the emotional attachment, an area I will return to later, that keeps "members of the family from falling away from the emotional nucleus, to which their survival necessitates attachment" (ibid, p.36).

Other conceptualisations of estrangement are closely related to the idea of emotional cutoff. Scharp (2016) defines family estrangement as an intentional distancing by one family member from another, usually aimed at discontinuing a relationship experienced as harmful or negative. Bowen's (1978) original definition is extended by Agllias (2016), who distinguishes estrangement as being either on a *physical* or an *emotional* level. A physical estrangement is characterised by an absence of or

reduction in physical contact, for instance, only sending birthday cards or photos, though no further contact is offered or sought. This differs from an emotional estrangement where interactions continue despite a lack of emotional intimacy and connection; however, they are generally limited because of the discomfort or distress they arouse (Agllias, 2015a).

These definitions highlight that estrangement can take different forms. Perhaps at its most fundamental, family estrangement can be understood as the disintegration of the relational bond between family members (Agllias, 2015a; Sucov, 2006). The occurrence of such a breakdown tends to be a prolonged and complex process that evolves over time rather than something that occurs because of a single event (Agllias, 2015a; Scharp & Thomas, 2016). Research shows there are often numerous cycles of “estrangement and reunification” before a more lasting estrangement ensues (Agllias, 2015b, p. 5), and often, it is prompted by the realisation that one cannot effect change in the *other* (Agllias, 2016). Hence, estrangement is part of an ongoing relational process whereby individuals may move in and out of periods of estrangement as they struggle to reconcile the tensions arising within the relationship.

Although they are not wholly unrelated concepts, it is useful to differentiate family estrangement from other similar concepts such as ‘marginalisation’ and ‘alienation’ within family relationships (Agllias, 2015a; Scharp & Thomas, 2016). The differences are arguably subtle but important. The critical distinction between these family distancing processes is from where they arise. Scharp and Dorrance-Hall (2017)

define marginalisation as occurring where individuals are excluded by their other family members. For example, they leave the family religion, marry an undesirable partner or perhaps do not adhere to prescribed gender roles. However, alienation develops in situations of separation or divorce involving custody decisions, where parents either consciously or unconsciously attempt to influence their child(ren) to reject the other parent (ibid). These are related to, yet distinct from, family estrangement, which can be seen as a deliberate withdrawal of contact, usually because the relationship is experienced as harmful or damaging (Scharp, 2016).

2.4 Stigma, silence and loss

Having reviewed different conceptualisations of estrangement, it is important to understand the consequences of estrangement for those experiencing it. One of the most challenging and distressing effects of estrangement, especially between a parent and child, can be coping with the loss of the relationship. It is a loss that is inevitably felt on both sides and can be felt just as deeply by the *estranger*, the person who withdraws contact, as it can by the *estrangee,* the person who is estranged from (Agllias, 2011; Bowen, 1978; Scharp, 2017).

A barrier to my grieving process is what I describe as an *affiliated* loss—the loss of the idea of having the kind of mother-daughter relationship I craved. Often, the loss extends beyond that of the relationship itself. One's sense of the meaning of family may be affected, a person's sense of belonging, of having a voice or any control over what has happened. These likewise amount to losses. The grief associated with losing a parent or child can be significant and prolonged by the prospect of

reconciliation. Hence, there can be an inability to accept the loss, so one becomes preoccupied with their longings for the *other* (Shear, 2015). Equally, the loss of the relationship might be a relief because of the harm it produces (Scharp & Thomas, 2016).

The potential effects of estrangement on a person are important to be aware of, especially to effectively support those estranged in a personal or professional context (Scharp, 2016). In a psychotherapeutic setting, estrangement could be understood as having something to do with childhood relational trauma, a major symptom of which is chronic shame (DeYoung, 2015). Indeed, the experience of estrangement can also be a form of trauma, with it being likened to being “buried alive” or “a living bereavement” due to the despair arising from losing a parent or child in this manner (Agllias, 2016, p. 38).

Thus, family estrangement can be a traumatic shock that produces complicated emotional responses, significantly impacting a person's psychological well-being (Dunk, 2020; Sichel, 2004). Those affected report poor sleep and other somatic disturbances. They struggle with complex emotions such as disbelief, shock, anger and helplessness (Blake, 2017; Scharp, 2017). Such traumatic responses can, unsurprisingly, intensify a person’s sense of anxiety and vulnerability (Cozolino, 2014; Schore, 2009). Furthermore, estrangement can challenge an individual’s implicit assumptions about themselves and the world—assumptions that are crucial to one’s sense of safety and stability (Agllias, 2011, 2016).

Hence, estrangement as a loss can be challenging to reconcile. Unlike a bereavement, those with whom relationships have been lost are not permanently gone and might return. Doka (2002) describes such losses as *disenfranchised grief*, which is grief associated with a loss that is not openly acknowledged. The nature of estrangement may mean others do not recognise the loss, an individual may not feel entitled to grieve, or circumstances surrounding the estrangement might invoke feelings of shame that inhibits someone from seeking and receiving support (Agllias, 2011). This is comparable to the notion of *ambiguous loss*, which refers to a loss that feels irreconcilable and the inability to resolve the loss creates a powerful barrier to coping and grieving (Boss, 2010). These kinds of losses are complex and difficult to grieve, often leaving those devastated by estrangement isolated and potentially unable to seek support (Agllias, 2011; Scharp, 2016).

Another challenging aspect of estrangement is the considerable stigma associated with the breakdown of family relationships. For parents, estrangement from a child calls into question their reputation and success as parents. Therefore, disclosing an estrangement can induce fear of judgment, being labelled as a dysfunctional family or being rejected by others (Allen & Moore, 2017). Many adult-children experience similar feelings of shame and fear stigmatisation in revealing an estrangement. Such shameful feelings are intensified where there is a history of childhood trauma, such as gross neglect or abuse (Scharp et al., 2015). Another difficulty for those experiencing estrangement is the belief or experience that others do not understand their situation. They worry that people, including friends and family, will judge their ability to maintain close relationships. This prompts them to keep this part of their life

secret from others and avoid talking about their family in conversations (Agllias, 2016; Scharp et al., 2015).

A side-effect of the silence resulting from such fears is that it becomes difficult to gauge to what extent people are affected by estrangement. One US-based study tried to establish a prevalence rate for family estrangement. From a survey of 354 undergraduate and graduate students across four universities, the study found that 16.9% of students were estranged from one or more members of their immediate family (Conti, 2015). This suggests that estrangement could be far more widespread than previously understood, certainly in the US. One scholar has even characterised estrangement as a “silent epidemic” (Allen & Moore, 2017, p. 281).

The pervasive sense of shame that seems to shroud estrangement creates an enormous barrier to its disclosure, not just socially and within the wider family context, but also in therapeutic settings a person may conceal their estrangement to avoid being responded to negatively or with judgement (Carr et al., 2015; Kelly, 1998; Scharp, 2016). Furthermore, those who reach out for therapeutic support concerning their estrangement are not always met with helpful responses and instead have felt unsupported and lacking in guidance (Blake et al., 2019). In my own therapy, I recall being encouraged to overcome my feelings and reconcile with my mother despite believing this would not be in my best interests. It created a sense that my therapist did not understand, which was detrimental to our therapeutic relationship.

2.5 The parent-child relationship and estrangement

Within families, particularly among extended family, it is not necessarily unusual for there to be greater degrees of distance or a loss of contact between family members (Blake, 2017). However, the parent-child relationship is viewed differently from other types of relationships as it is rooted in the attachment system—the system within which the emotional bond between parent and infant develops (Lichtenberg et al., 2011). It is this critical, early relational bond that differentiates the parent-child relationship from any other. Understandably then, estrangement researchers have mostly focused on the parent-child relationship because they are usually considered the strongest and are expected to be lifelong (Dolgin, 2008; Gilligan et al., 2015; Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee stated, “you can choose your friends, but you can’t choose your family” (Lee, 1960, p. 84). This truism has led to family relationships being characterised as non-voluntary, thereby implying the parent-child relationship is interminable and devoid of choice (Scharp, 2017). However, the non-voluntary status of these relationships has increasingly been called into question, casting doubt over whether family relationships should be regarded as unbreakable, especially given the kind of constraints this perception places on individuals (Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2017). Within supportive family environments, such constraints can increase commitment among family members. However, within harmful family environments, such as those that are infused with hostility and a lack of affection, or

worse, these kinds of pressures to maintain the relationship can place individuals at great risk (Vangelisti et al., 2007).

Within clinical practice, developmental theory and research have shown the significance of the early relational environment between parent and child as pivotal to human development. An individual's first attachment relationships provide the basis for understanding how early interpersonal interactions scaffold an individual's way-of-being in relation-to-others in later life (Cozolino, 2014; Schore, 2001; Wallin, 2007). Furthermore, the importance of these developmental relationships is shown to be culturally universal (Pierrehumbert et al., 2009). Hence, the parent-child relationship is crucial because of the relational foundations established through the quality of the attachment relationship and whether this might influence estrangement later on (Agllias, 2016; Wallin, 2007). Indeed, as already noted, it was Bowen (1978, p. 382) who originally made a connection between attachment and cutoff, suggesting this was a way for "people to handle their unresolved emotional attachments to their parents".

With this in mind, it can be said that relationships are pivotal to family estrangement. The uniqueness and importance of the parent-child relationship cannot be understated as this is typically the first and most influential relationship that lays the foundations of the interpersonal world (Cozolino, 2014; Wallin, 2007). Beginning with the observations of Bowlby *et al.* (1952), the extensive research and literature on attachment and parent-infant interactions have generated an understanding of how these formative relationships provide the "original blueprint of the mind" (Wallin,

2007, p. 84). These blueprints become internal working models that establish patterns for interpersonal communication within relationships throughout life. Hence, from birth, people's experiences are structured through the medium of relationships with others.

Significantly for estrangement research, early childhood attachment patterns remain highly stable in adulthood. When Ainsworth *et al.*'s (1978) attachment classifications were compared with the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) classifications in adulthood, they were found to be consistent 68-72% of the time, which is an "unparalleled level of consistency between behaviour observed in infancy and outcomes in adulthood" (Fonagy et al., 2002, p. 40). The centrality of relationships to human existence has powerfully shaped clinical practice, thus positioning relational approaches at the core of psychotherapy. Consequently, the theoretical understandings and supporting research of attachment and relational approaches provide an important theoretical framework within which this study seeks to explore parent-child estrangement. I comment on the possible tensions between this theoretical framing and my philosophical stance towards the end of the chapter.

Within the research literature concerning parent-child estrangement, several scholars have sought to understand why estrangements develop between parents and their grown children. In a US-based study, Carr *et al*. (2015) explored why parents and adult children estrange through an online survey of 898 participants, which was subsequently thematically coded into categories. The foremost reason parents gave concerned their children's "objectionable relationships outside the family", whereas

children mostly attributed estrangement as resulting from the “toxic behaviour of their parents” or feeling “unsupported or unaccepted” by them (ibid., p. 137).

Likewise, other studies have sought to gain insight and understanding into the origins and experience of estrangement from the relative positions of parent or adult-child. In an Australian-based study, a group of 25 parents were interviewed to explore how they made sense of being estranged from their adult-children (Agllias, 2015a). Based on an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), parents explained their estrangement from their child as attributed mainly to one, or a combination of, the following: (i) a choice being made between them and someone else, (ii) a divergence in values, and (iii) a belief they were being punished for a “perceived” past transgression (ibid).

Notably, all the parents who participated in the study were *estrangees*, in other words, they were estranged *from* by their adult-children. Consequently, many of the explanations offered appeared to be influenced by their feelings of rejection (ibid). Although this is not something explored in this study, it would be interesting to contrast the reasons given above with the explanations of parents who are the *estrangers*, that is, as the ones who initiated the estrangement.

Additionally, the same Australian-based researcher explored estrangement from the perspective of adult-children and the reasons they gave for being estranged from one or both parents (Agllias, 2015b). As with the previous study, an IPA approach was utilised to identify emergent themes. For the 26 adult-children interviewed,

estrangement was a response to attempts to navigate a relationship that had, over time, eroded their "trust" and "goodwill". Estrangement was perceived as stemming from one, or an amalgamation of, three core issues: (i) a background of abuse, (ii) poor parenting, and (iii) betrayal (ibid., 97, 99).

One prominent characteristic of both studies was the direction of estrangement as mostly originating from the adult-child. Those that had been initiated by a parent were often subsequently maintained by the adult-child. The tendency for an estrangement to occur more commonly from adult-child to parent, as seen in the studies above (Agllias, 2015a, 2015b), might denote something important and will have shaped the kinds of responses given by parents and adult-children concerning their estrangement. Although this was not the central focus of this study, it was also possible that this tendency might arise here.

Another notable feature of these two studies (ibid), and indeed the aforementioned survey by Carr *et al.* (2015), was that most participants were women, namely mothers and daughters. This could merely suggest that women are more likely to participate in such studies. Alternatively, it might convey something about female family relationships that deserves closer attention, which I will explore in the next section.

The complexity of family estrangement is further highlighted by Scharp and Thomas (2016), who investigated the parent-child relationship from the perspective of 52 adult-children at a large US Midwestern university. Using relational dialectics theory,

the authors identified two competing discourses regarding the constructions of the parent-child relationship. First, the discourse of *relationship endurance* (DRE) emerged based on the assumption that parent and child are intrinsically and forever tied to one another biologically and through a shared history, regardless of what happens between them. Next was the discourse of *temporal contingency* (DTC), which directly challenges the DRE by positioning the relationship as contingent on the quality of the interactions and investment made by each person, and that this is necessary regardless of shared biology.

These two competing discourses illustrate the array of conflicts adult-children experience in relation to being estranged from a parent, often leaving them emotionally torn in multiple different directions. The emphasis on a shared history and biology as underpinning the durability of the parent-child relationship could be considered as meaningless, “in the absence of support and care”, or when that shared history is problematic (ibid., p. 40). Consequently, the expectation that parents and children will love each other no matter what becomes unrealistic. As shown by the DTC, and contrary to this thinking, a “lack of love outweighs shared biology and history”, and this can be the basis for estrangement (ibid., p.41). For those adult-children who choose to estrange, it appears that biological ties are insufficient in maintaining a relationship with a parent that is experienced as harmful or negatively impacting one's life.

2.6 A gap in the literature: The mother-daughter relationship

"My son is my son till he gets him a wife, but my daughter's my daughter all the days of her life."

(Ray, 1768)

As previously highlighted, there has been a significant number of women in contrast to men participating in parent-child estrangement research, meaning that participants have mainly been mothers or daughters (e.g. Agllias, 2015b; Carr et al., 2015; Scharp, 2017). Still, it is difficult to explain why a large proportion of research participants have been women, particularly as mothers, fathers, daughters and sons alike are affected by estrangement. Furthermore, estrangement research has predominantly focused on the perspectives of either *parents* or *children*. However, this has not provided insight into estrangement from the individual perspectives of a mother, father, daughter or son. Indeed, within estrangement research thus far, there has been no real distinction made between the dyads of mother–daughter, mother–son, father–daughter, and father–son.

However, such distinctions within family relationships and the unique features of these dyads are important to understand, and not just in the context of parent-child estrangement. Cowan *et al*. (1993) spent decades studying the development of families as part of the *Becoming a Family Project*. In one longitudinal study, they followed the progress of 72 couples adapting from their first pregnancy through to the child starting school. Although gender was not the intended focus of their study, they drew attention to the following:

> ‘‘Our longitudinal findings make it clear that we cannot describe *parents* without knowing whether we are talking about mothers or fathers, nor can we discuss *children* without specifying whether we are talking about boys or girls. We have come to believe that it is not possible to understand family processes without paying attention to the particularities of husband–wife, father–son, father–daughter, mother–son, and mother–daughter relationships” (ibid, p. 165 italics in the original).

The observations of these researchers underscore the idea that gender plays a significant role in family relationships. However, the potential implications of gender and the particularities of the unique dyadic relationships outlined above have not so far been examined in family estrangement research. A closer exploration of family relationships between women is warranted, given the proportion of women participating in estrangement studies. An obvious starting point would be to consider the mother's role, as typically, the primary caregiver. From an attachment standpoint, this relationship is recognised as one of the most influential for human emotional development, which for better or worse, sets the stage for the relationships and life experiences that will follow later on (Wallin, 2007). While not seeking to diminish the importance of the relationship between father and child, there is something exclusive about the mother-child relationship that cannot be ignored—it is a relationship that starts in the womb, with mother and baby always interconnected with one another for the first nine months of development (Ginot, 2015; Schore, 2001; Trevarthen, 1993).

In focusing on the relationship between mothers' and daughters', there is an extensive body of literature from multiple theoretical perspectives that regards the mother-daughter relationship as distinct from other parental and familial relationships (Boyd, 1989; Herman, 1989). This includes feminist (Chase & Rogers, 2001), psychoanalytic (Chodorow, 1999), life course (Elder et al., 2003) and family systems literature (Charles et al., 2001). Part of the uniqueness of this relationship stems from research that supports the idea that the mother-daughter bond is "lifelong, intimate and developmentally important" (Bojczyk et al., 2011, p. 453; Bromberg, 1983; Fischer, 1981).

Consistent with this understanding, studies have shown how mothers tend to favour daughters over sons in various interpersonal circumstances (Suitor & Pillemer, 2006). Mothers with grown sons and daughters are more likely to confide in a daughter over a son about a personal problem or approach a daughter for help (ibid). Additionally, mothers describe feeling emotionally closer to daughters over sons. A key reason for this was that mothers felt more able to relate to daughters as *women* because they were more understanding, and they felt more comfortable talking to them (ibid., p. 150).

This supports the idea that the emotional bond between mothers and daughters is accentuated by their being of the same gender (Chodorow, 1999; Hammer, 1976). Because they are both women, there is a greater degree of identification between them and, consequently, a sense of feeling less separate from one another. By contrast, Chodorow (1999, p.110) found that sons are experienced as a "male

opposite” and, as such, are differentiated from their mothers. On this basis, perhaps it is unsurprising to find that when it comes to emotional forms of support throughout life, it is usually mothers and daughters who have been shown to maintain the closest connection through the frequency of contact, advice, listening and practical help (Fingerman et al., 2020). Furthermore, research shows that the mother-daughter relationship is strongly valued across different cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds (Shrier et al., 2004).

Considering the anticipated intimacy of the mother-daughter relationship, it could seem even more acute when this relationship collapses and results in estrangement. However, as previously mentioned, within the field of estrangement research, there has been no specific exploration of the mother-daughter relationship and only limited research considering the role of gender in an estrangement context (Agllias, 2013; Gilligan et al., 2015). With the mother-daughter relationship as ordinarily shown to be the closest and most enduring of all parent-child relationships, it seems especially important to gain a deeper insight and understanding of what happens in the relationship between a mother and daughter when an estrangement develops (e.g. Boyd, 1989; Chodorow, 1999; Fingerman et al., 2020).

Naturally, my personal experience of estrangement from my mother influenced my interest in researching this relationship dynamic, and besides this, I have observed the kind of closeness and intimacy between mothers and daughters the research describes. Accordingly, the expectation of such a relationship between mothers and daughters has been something I have found difficult, creating a sense of obligation to

maintain a relationship, regardless of the personal cost to my well-being, and this sense has been echoed in estrangement research (Agllias, 2018). Hence, based upon the research and personal experience, there seems to be greater pressure on daughters to uphold a relationship with their mother than is the case with sons, which is potentially connected with the idea that women are perceived or expected to be more nurturing and supportive (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998). This has also been referred to in the literature as “the feminine tilt in family life” (Jerrome, 1994, p. 251), whereby women tend to become responsible for maintaining family connections in this kind of “linking role” (ibid, p. 251). Hence, an estrangement between mother and daughter would appear to signify an especially serious kind of relational breakdown.

2.7 Summary

Following this examination of the research literature, this study sought to attend to some of the gaps identified concerning specific parent-child relationships by exploring experiences of estrangement from the perspective of adult-daughters who are estranged from their mothers. As previously highlighted, the majority of the parents participating in estrangement research were found to be estranged *from* by their child, rather than the other way round (Jerrome, 1994, p. 251). In other words, adult-daughters are more likely to be the initiators of estrangement. Consequently, this study sought to attain a deeper insight into the experience of being estranged from one’s mother from the perspective of the adult-daughter.

Notwithstanding the trauma of estrangement, the implications of estrangement between a mother and daughter intensify when grandchildren are involved. This

introduces an intergenerational dimension whereby the estrangement might be inherited by the subsequent generation (Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2017). Moreover, following the arrival of a grandchild, when an adult-daughter transitions into motherhood, this is traditionally an occasion when mothers and daughters become more closely involved (Fischer, 1981; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). When daughters become mothers themselves, research has shown that they tend to re-evaluate their own mother and their relationship in light of their new experience (Fischer, 1981). Hence, there is the potential to offer additional insights into estrangement as the experiences of adult-daughters can be explored from the perspective of being both a daughter *and* a mother. Consequently, this study sought to enrich and deepen the current understanding of the complexities and impact of estrangement by exploring the experiences of adult-daughters who are estranged from their mothers while also being mothers themselves. Furthermore, thus far, there have been no studies on family estrangement that have utilised a narrative inquiry approach, and so, there was an opportunity to represent the experience of estrangement in a unique way.

This exploration of estrangement has been guided by a theoretical framework that converses with attachment theory (Schore, 2000; Wallin, 2007) and a spectrum of relational theories (Cozolino, 2014; Ginot, 2015; Kohut & Wolf, 1978; Orange et al., 2015; Schore, 2009) within psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, originating with Bowlby's (1952) early concepts of separation and loss. I chose this framework as one that speaks to me as a psychotherapist and a narrative inquirer and because it offers a means of conceptualising an individual's relational way-of-being. In keeping with the philosophical positioning of this study, as delineated in the next chapter, I am

aware of the possible tensions that adopting such a framework could create. Consequently, it is important to emphasise that the theoretical ideas within this framework are not propounded as *truth,* and the interpretations they offer are intended to be held lightly. Thus, what is presented is *'a'* version of *'a'* truth amid a multiplicity of truths, rather than a metanarrative.

Chapter 3. Navigating the methodological terrain

This chapter is an account of the path this methodological journey has taken, and the junctures encountered along the way. Not all paths are discrete, many inevitably intersect and influence one another. I therefore begin by positioning the research philosophically and epistemologically to elucidate the meaning-making processes underpinning my engagement with it. Then, I turn to the methodological landscape, which places human experience at its core, and in so doing, I seek to reflexively and transparently integrate my varied positions of researcher, psychotherapist and participant, within the research itself. The latter sections present a description of the methods used to reach participants, how I gathered and analysed their stories, together with reflections concerning considerations of ethics and trustworthiness.

3.1 A philosophical orientation

The problem of how it is we come to know anything in the world is one that is vividly captured by Escher's famous Drawing Hands picture, depicted below (Figure 1), which presents the paradox of the hand that draws the hand that draws the hand. Within a cycle of mutual reciprocal influence, each hand acts as both the product and creator of the other and so, reality can be seen as operating within a matrix where our relationship with the world and its relationship with us are continually shaping one another in subtle and complex ways. Therefore, the basis of knowledge and awareness depends on the *kind* of attention that is brought to the world, where the

kind of attention we pay governs what we find and significantly alters our understanding of the world (McGilchrist, 2009).

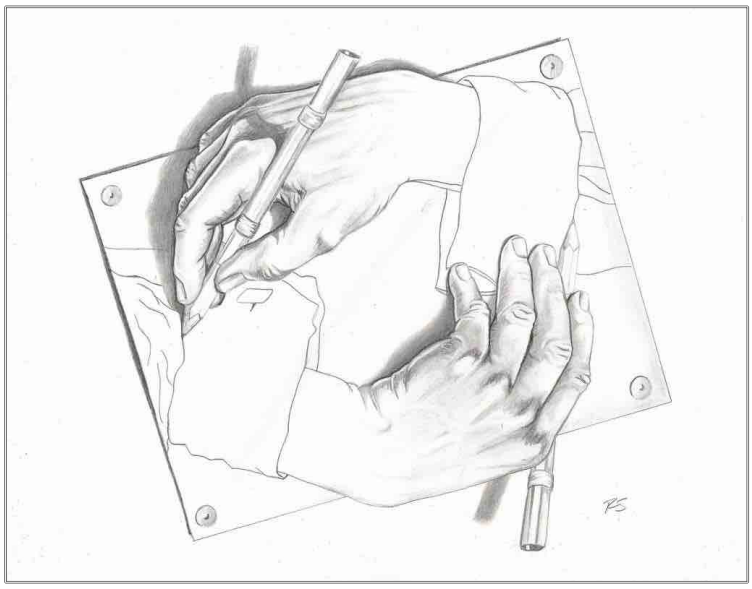

Figure 1 Drawing Hands [M. C. Escher]

From this standpoint, people can be understood as meaning-making beings, as interpreters, whereby reality arises through a person's interaction with the world and the space in-between (Chiari & Nuzzo, 2000). Consequently, this research is positioned within a hermeneutic constructivist perspective, which foregrounds experience and the interpersonal nature of what emerges in the "sphere of between" – the individual, the world and reality (Buber, 1971; Chiari & Nuzzo, 2000; Peck & Mummery, 2018). By means of language and consciousness, reality arises through one's interpretations of ongoing experience which are shaped by *historicity*—in other words, present-day reality can be understood through a contextually situated reciprocal interplay and the nuanced lens of previous experience whereby we rely on

the mode of language, and the limitations of it, as a means to convey and have such experiences realised.

As a philosophical and epistemological foundation, this makes the most sense to me as a reflective-practitioner-researcher, where reality and the world cannot be directly perceived as they do not exist independently of the observer. Instead, we are continuously and actively involved in a process of interpretation, as self-experience is inextricably bound and embedded in an individual's lived experience and history through which their experiences are assimilated (Chiari & Nuzzo, 2009; Gadamer, 1976). Thus, an interdependence and mutual relationship exists between knower and known. In this sense, hermeneutic constructivism starts from the place that human experience is always an experience of *something*—it is an experience of being situated in the world (Peck & Mummery, 2018).

This position closely mirrors the psychotherapeutic process where individuals attempt to make sense of their lives by developing narratives as a means of scaffolding and organising their experiences (Mitchell, 2000). When such conversations occur, each person opens themselves up to the other and strives to grasp the "substantive rightness" of the other's subjective experience (Gadamer et al., 1980, p. 387). There is no *final truth* to be determined. Rather, language and knowledge emerge as outcomes of a person's experiential world and adaptation to their environment, and understanding arises from an interplay of perspectives, each bearing their preconceptions. In acknowledging our preconceptions, we can hear others as "having access to realities that are hidden from us by our own perspective" (Stolorow

et al., 2008, p. 114), so we might then remain open to the likelihood that the other person can teach us something.

Philosophically speaking, it would be remiss not to mention the powerful *feminine* dimension within this research by way of its focus on both the relationship with and as a mother within the family and additionally, by concentrating on the relationship between mother and daughter. Despite this presence, adopting a critical feminist epistemology felt at odds with a position that acknowledges the multiplicity of social and contextual forces contributing to an individual's subjective experience (Chiari & Nuzzo, 2000). Thus, rather than privileging a critical feminist position, I sought to assume a stance that recognises and integrates women's experiences by placing them at the centre of the research process, together with the uniqueness of how each person, individually, constructs reality.

In foregrounding human experience and holding in mind the position of *being-in-the-world* to describe one's inner relationship with the world, this research sought to create a space that would engage with experiences of estrangement from one's mother while also being a mother, as an endeavour to find expression and meaning (Heidegger, 1962). Collecting and re-*presenting* these human lived experiences aimed to produce enduring "expressions of life" that are to be understood, where one partner in the hermeneutical conversation, the textual representation of the story, speaks through the other partner, the interpreter-researcher (Gadamer et al., 1980, p. 389).

3.2 The metaphorical methodological “maelstrom”

I knew the kind of research of interest to me was qualitative, rather than quantitative. A qualitative approach was more than the obvious choice though. For an earlier master’s research project, I had been enticed by quantitative research as a path considered more scientific than qualitative counterparts. Research tutors favouring quantitative methods employed phrases like “gold standards” in pontificating about these approaches, accompanied with keywords like *reliability* and *validity*. Disregarding my inclination toward qualitative approaches, I convinced myself a quantitative study would have greater significance with findings that would be deemed more credible and consequential.

Complicit in misleading myself, I was going against the grain and repudiating my philosophical belief system and values. Unsurprisingly, my venture into quantitative research was met mostly with disappointment and only a modicum of satisfaction in the research itself and the results they generated. Statistics presented only a partial view of the picture, a somewhat colourless, uninspiring one. Writing up was a mechanistic, lifeless process where I was at odds with my instinct to elaborate and interpret the many possible meanings I could draw from the data. Yet, I was required to take subjectivity out of the equation. As a quantitative researcher, I was preordained to be an *object*, rather than a meaning-making being—a position I found inherently impossible regardless of how one might strive or believe in their capacity for abstraction. Explanations beyond the stark, numeric facts had to be tentatively offered to remain *scientific* and objective, where the *golden rule* was to not overly

extrapolate from findings. Decontextualised, I found these statistically *significant* results appeared hollow and meaningless, with no real relevance in the world in the absence of the much-needed colour of human experience.

This time, I sought to remain faithful to myself through a position that accentuates human experience by following a path that embraces the role of the researcher as a partner in its creation and our relationship with it, thus recognising the “reciprocal nature of the dialogue we have with whatever exists apart from ourselves” (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 18). My personal involvement and connection with the research motivated me to shine a light on a place that was seldom explored, influencing my powerful desire for the approach to preserve, not *take away*, from these women’s experiences, and to convey what it is like, with the aspiration that it would deepen our understanding of how it is to be “a mother without a mother”, in the context of being a mother who is estranged from one’s mother.

The question of how to accomplish the aforementioned research aspirations within the sphere of qualitative research seemed ambiguous, with methodological handbooks and papers confounding any grasp I might attain on the direction to head toward. I felt trapped by the idea of standardised approaches that would necessitate a person’s subjectivity and biases to be fully apprehended so as not to eclipse its *trustworthiness*. My confusion and doubts about how human experience could be brought to life within the research were amplified by the thorny and impenetrable world of research vernacular. Nettling questions swam around in my mind. How would academics regard that I am *part* of the research—would it be recognised as

valid? How could the research be understood as relevant, reliable, trustworthy, or any other adjective that might be applied to corroborate its contribution to the world of knowledge?

3.3 "Speak! That I may see you": Finding a narrative stance

(Bromberg, 1994)

As a researcher-participant-psychotherapist, my connection and involvement with the research incontrovertibly fuelled my desire to approach it with a sense of care and warmth. Perhaps in an interesting mirroring of the mother-infant relationship, I felt protective of participants' experiences, which was also reflected in my struggle to think of their stories as *data*. It would be jarring to me to hear people's deeply personal experiences referred to as data due to its impersonal tone, implicitly creating a sense of abstraction and depersonification. Perhaps it was understandable that the application of such terms would land this way, where within my profession as a psychotherapist, I engage with human experience within an interpersonal context, as an interplay between our internal and external worlds (Beebe & Lachmann, 2003).

Part of my research journey has been to bring together and integrate these distinctive positions of researcher-participant-psychotherapist. I sought to find a place where my role and subjectivity as an insider and outsider within the research could be recognised as it is neither possible nor desirable to be devoid of these other parts of my-'*self*' (Bromberg, 2004; Riessman, 2008). Therefore, determining a methodological path was not only about *the research*—it was also profoundly

connected to the philosophical orientation underpinning my position across each of these distinct and yet inseparable roles.

Combined with the strong sense that this research should touch at the heart of an experience that, all too often, was cloaked in silence and shame (Agllias, 2018; Scharp, 2016), I felt resistant toward approaches that might reduce or condense the essence of these experiences, including that of my own, to something more homogeneous. Thus, I sought to gather *stories* with the aim of "[bringing] diffuse voices into contact with one another", and this was at the core of this research (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012). And so, the path of narrative inquiry came into view as a means for these complex personal experiences to find expression and offer the possibility to learn something more about the nature of human relationships (Bromberg, 1994; Kim, 2015).

Before arriving at narrative inquiry, I considered Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a methodological approach that may also have been well-suited to addressing the research question of this study. Certainly, on the level of interpretation and the inevitable influence of the researcher's interpretative lens, I saw overlap between the two approaches. However, I found the structured approach and distillation of data into themes as contrary to my fundamental wish not to synthesise individual experiences to "a description of a universal essence" (Creswell, 2012, p. 107). Rather, I sought to present stories of human experience in a manner that did not seek to dilute them and that sought to explore what might lie beneath and illuminate the multi-layered context of life experiences. Indeed, the structured

approaches in IPA for analysing data can be advantageous, however, an ambition of this study was to embrace and convey the infinitely complex experience of estrangement through multiple, yet distinct voices. Hence, narrative inquiry offered the possibility to re-*present* the ambiguous and messy nature of life as lived through stories, and to tangle with the knots in a way that IPA would not have allowed (Chase, 2003). Furthermore, I perceived an opportunity to introduce a new perspective on the experience of estrangement as no studies have thus far used narrative inquiry whereas several have used IPA (Agllias, 2013, 2015a, 2018).

Narrative inquiry is distinct from other qualitative research approaches because it is "inspired by a view of human experience in which humans, socially and individually, lead storied lives" (Clandinin, 2006b, p. 45). In this context, narrative inquiry is:

> "…a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places... An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in the same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that made up people's lives" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20).

As a narrative inquirer, my role was to traverse narrative inquirer relationships where I was placed in the midst of stories—my own, together with those of the storyteller-participants, thereby allowing for the expression of unheard voices. Hence, the title of this section, "Speak! That I may see you", as professed to have been said by Socrates. Because it is by speaking the things in our hearts and minds that

something of a person might be known by the *other* (Bromberg, 1994). Words act as carriers, however:

> "Relationally, words in themselves do not exist in time and space. Only the speaker's meaning exists in time and space; and the speaker's meaning is constructed from a perception of his (sic) words framed by the immediacy of the context in which they are spoken" (ibid: 522).

Thus, for words to achieve meaning, the speaker must be recognised by the *other*. That is to say, words consist entirely of relations, and they mean nothing in themselves. It is the quality of the subjective experience carried in the "betweenness" where the message, therefore, resides in the gaps (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 114). However, it is not *just* the gaps and not *just* the words. It is in the *whole* where each word "becomes transformed by the context within which it lies" (ibid: 114).

There is something intrinsically powerful and evocative in how a symphony of words might be composed to construct a person's experience, which is forever unfolding in time, always evolving, never static or fixed. Narrative inquiry offers an avenue to engage an audience and bring to life through multiple voices women's experiences of estrangement from a mother during motherhood by means of "artistic expression" (Clandinin, 2006b; Riessman, 2008, p. 9). As Frank (2012, p. 35) powerfully states, "[stories] are composed from fragments of previous stories, artfully rearranged but never original". And this is important because experience is forever in motion, ramifying, and the stories people tell about themselves are "life historical" with many

aspects of these histories of self, changing, as we do (Schafer, 1980, p. 35). Stories are reorganised and recreated with each telling. Through this study, I sought to create an opportunity to step outside of the continuous flow and immediacy of experience, to capture *it* as it flies, generating the possibility to *experience* the experience in a new way (Chiari & Nuzzo, 2009; Gadamer et al., 1980; Riessman, 2008).

An important aspect of narrative inquiry lies in the recognition that the "researcher does not *find* narratives but instead participates in their creation" (Riessman, 2008, p. 21). This position is familiar to me as a psychotherapist, where I am attentive to the intersubjective realm in seeing both client and therapist as active participants in what emerges in the therapeutic space (Benjamin, 2014; Mitchell, 1988). Likewise, narrative inquiry gave me permission to embrace my relationship with the research through an approach that advocates subjectivity. In doing so, it created space for understanding how my story shaped the conversations, explicitly and implicitly, as an active participant in their co-creation. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) describe these as *collaborative stories*, where through telling the stories of their participants, they ineluctably also brought their individual experiential histories, so that in their storytelling, "the stories of their participants merged with their own to create new stories" (Clandinin, 2006a, p. 268).

In striving to "[give] voice to the silence of estrangement" (Carr et al., 2015, p. 130), I saw narrative inquiry as opening "a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally

meaningful" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479). Personal experiences are presented and performed everywhere in storied ways of knowing and communicating within which the storyteller exists as both narrator and character (Kim, 2015; Langellier & Peterson, 2004). Furthermore, Langellier and Peterson (2004) highlight the centrality of storytelling within family life and culture, citing that "family is a human communication practice" (ibid, p.33). The relationship between family and how they perform storytelling in daily life demonstrates the suitability of narrative inquiry to researching family estrangement.

Accordingly, narrative can produce "an array of fascinating, richly detailed expositions of life as lived, well-interpreted studies full of nuance and insight that befit the complexity of human lives" (Josselson, 2006, p. 4). Thus, the personal narratives of life experience that people bring to the realm of narrative research offer its audience an enriching and extraordinary insight that is unique from other research approaches.

3.4 Gathering stories – A "Road Less Travelled"

(Peck, 2008)

Embarking upon a narrative inquiry path led me into new and unfamiliar terrain, where the journey itself was now part of the story. As I contemplated how participants' stories would be gathered, I saw tensions between the main methods used for collecting *data* and the philosophical and epistemological positioning of the research. A standard method used to collect data is that of the research interview, and to hear participants' stories, I would need to begin by asking people to tell them.

However, participants could be asked about their story in any number of ways and in different contexts, perhaps more so today, with the possibility to conduct interviews through different means where people are situated remotely, perhaps in inaccessible or even dangerous locations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

On the continuum between structured and unstructured interview approaches, I initially perceived I would be 'playing it safe' if I opted for a semi-structured interview. I was still partially caught up in a positivist mindset that I needed to have some sort of framework in the name of *validity*—a subject I will discuss later concerning trustworthiness. I reasoned that a kind of halfway house in the form of relatively structured-unstructured interviews would provide a conversational approach to enable participants to tell their stories in their individual way while also maintaining a focus with prompts and questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). However, the idea of a 'safe' approach was rooted in inexperience and my earnestness to be a *good* researcher, an implicit attempt to stave off being regarded as too *unscientific*.

In my role as a psychotherapist, though, I understood how stories could unfold in the therapy room—as a joint accomplishment between vulnerable, embodied persons with all sorts of hopes, fears and interests. With my own estrangement story in the background, it would certainly be true that within these conversations, I would likely be every bit as vulnerable as the participants, and my story would inherently form part of the intersubjective system created between myself and the participant (Langellier & Peterson, 2004). Similarly, perhaps the most important part of my researcher role was to hold the anxiety and tensions that would arise when visiting

such vulnerable places. And within that space, the betweenness, my-*self* as a psychotherapist could meet my-*self* as a researcher. Therefore, I shifted to seeing the interviews as another form of conversation; but a particular type of conversation—one that was established in “a climate that allows for storytelling”, between “two active participants involved in jointly constructing narrative and meaning” (Riessman, 2008, p. 23). In these kinds of conversations, interviews are less like *conducting* research. Rather we are in the *midst* of research with an-*other* (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Thus, narrative interviews I conducted sought to invite stories, rather than reports, through such conversations with storyteller-participants. Polanyi (1985) distinguishes that in telling a story, the storyteller is responsible for “making the relevance of the telling clear”. In contrast, reports are “typically elicited by the recipient” (ibid., p. 13). Gathering stories instead of reports means encouraging the storyteller “to take responsibility for the meaning of their talk” and shifting “the weight of the responsibility to the other in such a way that he or she willingly embraces it” (Chase, 2003, p. 273). Accomplishing this involved recognising that women’s estrangement experiences in motherhood were embedded within their lives. Therefore, I invited women to tell me their stories of estrangement and what it was like for them, both as daughters and mothers. This allowed their stories to “tumble out, with different events toppling over each other as if each event is so tied to all the others” where it is impossible to “talk about one without immediately bringing up the rest” (ibid., p. 280).

Another important distinguishing feature of this approach was the recognition of how power constantly shifts between narrator and listener, within which the “complex play of conscious and unconscious thoughts, feelings, fears, power, desires, and needs on the part of both the interviewer and the interviewee cannot be captured and categorised” (Scheurich, 2014, p. 73). Furthermore, I sought to diminish the disparity of power that can arise in such contexts by foregrounding openness and transparency concerning my estrangement status. Instead, perhaps creating a sense of camaraderie—of being in the *same boat*, so to speak, potentially also alleviating the shame so often associated with speaking about estrangement (Agllias, 2013; Jerrome, 1994).

The question of *how many* conversations was another important consideration. It was a question I felt frequently confounded by—an unfathomable quandary. Regardless of where I sought guidance, I encountered conflicting views in every direction. The guidance for narrative research generally suggested small sample sizes, but what was considered small (Creswell, 2013; Lieblich et al., 1998)? Originally, I envisaged 3 participants would strike a sensible balance between depth and word count constraints while holding in mind that the depth and richness of the stories were paramount to this study. However, at the point of approving my research project, the panel felt 3 participants would be insufficient, and the recommendation was to have 6-8 participants. In the absence of any tangible guidance and given the panel were more experienced than I, I increased the scope to six participants, in addition to myself.

3.5 The *original* storytellers

As I sought to elucidate more precisely whose stories would be told, I found what initially appeared as a straightforward task quickly became obfuscated by questions and decisions that would fundamentally shape the kinds of stories that would be told. Some facets were clearer than others, such as talking to women who have children and who are currently estranged from their mother—on the surface, it sounded simple. In speaking to women who were also mothers, the question arose concerning the age of their children. Could they be any age, fully grown, or would there be an age limit? Leaving this open to any age could result in widely varying age groups and allow for participants with potentially grown children themselves. It also stood to reason that if a participant's children were older, then their estranged mother would also be older, and this would shape the stories they would tell.

Furthermore, if the participants' children were adults themselves, they might be living more separate and independent lives. Similarly, being estranged from an ageing mother would bring the increased likelihood of health problems and mortality to the foreground. With the central focus of this study being on the experience of motherhood while being estranged from one's own mother, I felt this would be revealed more deeply and meaningfully at a time when participants were more immersed in motherhood. Conversely, I felt cautious about being overly restrictive, perhaps then circumventing the possibility to hear stories of how estrangement from one's mother evolves alongside different phases of motherhood. The challenge was finding the balance between these two positions so that I might hear stories across a

spectrum without sacrificing too much of either. As I carefully weighed this up, I reasoned that age eighteen seemed like a significant stepping-off point into adulthood. It is the legal age of responsibility in many countries for voting and drinking alcohol. It was the most comfortable place I could find a compromise on the question of age that I hoped would allow for stories from a variety of different points of motherhood.

Another question to address concerned the definition of mother. Initially, I had always assumed this would be based on a biological relationship—perhaps a somewhat socially scripted ideal that I was adhering to. That said, what about adoptive mothers or stepmothers? Recalling the discussion of family and the biological bond in the previous chapter, should mother be defined based on role or genetics? What if someone never knew their biological mother? Would that be considered a form of estrangement? The implications were vast and complex. While it would be worthwhile to explore estrangement from each of these positions, my interest was in the breakdown of a biological mother-daughter relationship. Moreover, it made sense to focus on biological ties because of the intergenerational thread running through this study.

These considerations eventually shaped the following as the definition of the storyteller-participants:

> “Adult women (18+) who consider themselves estranged from their biological mother, and have been for at least two years, and who have one or more biological children under the age of eighteen.”

I intentionally chose not to specify the direction of estrangement because I was interested in the lived experience, consequently, it did not matter who initiated the estrangement. Indeed, hearing stories from either perspective had the potential to offer more diverse insights into the experience. Existing research suggests that estrangement more commonly occurs from adult-child to parent (Agllias, 2015a, 2015b). With this in mind, it would be interesting to see if this tendency would be reflected here and how this might be understood in the context of the stories being shared.

Because estrangement is not usually something that occurs in a single event, it is a complex and often cyclical process (Agllias, 2016), at least two years since the estrangement began seemed like an appropriate timeframe. It was important to ensure the estrangement was not a recent event so some of the complex issues surrounding estrangement could be processed. Furthermore, given the sensitive and distressing nature of estrangement, it was essential that the storyteller-participants had been able to process something of their estrangement experience in therapy. As such, it was a requirement that they either were in therapy at present or had attended therapy at some point since the estrangement from their mother began.

3.6 Finding each other: The search for storytellers

Beginning the search for storyteller-participants was a combination of anticipation and apprehension. It felt like I had reached a moment of reckoning. What if nobody was interested in taking part in my research or in the research itself? I wondered what kind of stories I might hear and how it would feel entering such personally evocative territory. Despite my fears, there was a conviction deep within me that believed I was embarking on something worthwhile and important. From the outset, in publicising this study, I made it clear that I was estranged from my mother. An important aspiration of this study was to address the silence that typically surrounds estrangement and consequently, it felt fundamental that I was transparent about this and it would have felt disingenuous to conceal it. I hoped it might help others to feel more able to speak about their estrangement.

I started my search by creating a study page on the Call for Participants website (www.callforparticipants.com)—a platform for researchers and academics to publicise their research study and locate prospective participants. People taking part in research can enlist on the site and be matched to prospective studies. I replicated the details from my participant information sheet on my study page (see Appendix 2). Once verified and published, applicable participants already listed would automatically be notified about my study. A hyperlink was created for me to use to publicise my study independently elsewhere. I shared the link on my social media profile pages and, with the permission of group moderators, within several

estrangement specific social media groups. Many friends and colleagues also voluntarily shared and promoted the study on their social media pages.

Once published, to my surprise, I quickly received an influx of interest. Having originally assumed I might struggle to find six storytellers, I now had the unexpected concern that I might end up with more than I needed. The study page showed me how many times the study was viewed, and it notified me if someone expressed interest in participating. In the two-week period that the study page was published, twenty-six people contacted me about taking part and the page received 318 views. Subsequently, several people either did not follow up their initial contact or meet the criteria for the study, and those that remained were, serendipitously, the six participants I sought. Within the group, all the women identified as heterosexual and fortuitously, there was a mixture of ages between the women and their children. It would be interesting to see how the age of participants' children might highlight different aspects of their experiences.

Table 1 The storyteller-participants

Name (alias)	**Age bracket**	**Estrangement period**	**Children**
Christine	Mid 40's	12+ years	1 daughter (age 14)
Hollie	Mid 30's	2+ years	1 daughter (nearly 4) 1 son (age 6.5)
Lucy	Mid 40's	10+ years	2 sons (ages 13, 14)
Sarah (me)	Early 40's	10+ years	2 daughters (ages 10, 13)
Scout	Early 40's	2+ years	1 son (age 2.5)
Sophie	Early 30's	2+ years	1 daughter (age 2) 1 son (age 9)
*Suzie	Early 50's	6+ years	1 daughter (age 18/19)

*Suzie's daughter was 18 when she contacted me but had turned 19 by the time we met for the interview. On this basis, it did not make sense to exclude her from the study.

Each narrative conversation with the storyteller-participants lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Conversations were recorded digitally and later transferred to a password protected folder on my computer. I kept backup copies on an encrypted external hard drive that was also password protected. Meetings with the storyteller-participants were held in suitable and convenient locations that were local to them. For our conversations, I intentionally did not create an interview schedule in the hope to procure stories that were free to convey their reality as they would tell it. I listened closely to each story and sought to communicate that through my careful attention. I interjected when it felt appropriate to elaborate further on something that was said and to clarify my understanding (Gubrium et al., 2009; Riessman, 2008).

3.7 The ethical considerations

Once Metanoia had approved this research project, ethical approval needed to be obtained to ensure that this research would be conducted ethically (see Appendix 7). As part of anonymising the identity of storyteller-participants for confidentiality purposes, each was invited to choose their own pseudonym, and throughout, I took special care to disguise any potentially identifying information. I reiterated at the start and again when we met, that participants could withdraw from the study at any time and their data would be destroyed and no longer used in the study. Before commencing with the analysis, I checked again that participants were willing for me to proceed with their stories, and all responded that they were. From the outset, the

storyteller-participants were invited to collaborate in the research process by reading their transcript and the story that was subsequently written. At each stage, I would make contact first before forwarding on anything for them to look at, while reminding them that there was no obligation to do so. I found that all the participants were keen to be involved at each stage and I was struck throughout the research by both their commitment and engagement.

In response to the initial interest in participating in this study, the information outlined above was shared in an introductory email (see Appendix 4) accompanied by the information sheet (see Appendix 2). I checked they had read the participant information sheet before the interview, and at each meeting, I brought along a printed copy to re-read before signing a consent form together (see Appendix 3). Because the storyteller-participants were geographically dispersed, different meeting places were found that were considered appropriate. I took care to find locations that would offer privacy and quiet but were not isolated, so others were within reasonable proximity to ensure my safety whilst meeting with someone unknown to me. In most cases, the storyteller-participants themselves suggested somewhere suitable within their local area.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, I understood that talking about their experiences might produce difficult feelings. However, I felt confident that I could draw on my psychotherapy training and background to create a space that would be psychologically holding. I asked participants how I would know if they felt distressed and whether they would feel able to ask to stop or pause if needed. I was also ready

to make use of my therapeutic skills if needed, such as the use of stabilisation techniques as a means of “applying the brakes” (Rothschild, 2000, p. 112). Likewise, I was prepared to stop the interview if it became necessary to manage something overwhelming or traumatic.

At the end of the interviews, I took a little time to check out and to reiterate some of the earlier points around support and what happens next. I asked how they were feeling and what it was like to talk to me. We also discussed their plans for the rest of the day as a means of grounding them back in the present and revisited options for self-care and support should anything arise later on (Rothschild, 2000). I gave participants a thank you sheet (see Appendix 6), which included additional support information. For my personal safety, I had conveyed the timings and location of the meeting to a family member who I would contact when the meeting finished.

Conscious of my involvement and close personal relationship with the research, it has been vital to give proper attention to my self-care throughout the process. I have sought additional support from my therapist, clinical and research supervisors, and family and close friends. I have been careful to nurture myself outside of the study, recognising the emotional impact of being so tied to the material. For instance, through my yoga practice, taking regular breaks during the write-up to walk in the countryside with my dogs and engaging in activities that I find beneficial.

From an ethical perspective, there were also considerations for me concerning my participation and the absence of anonymity for myself and my mother in this process.

For me, I felt strongly that being open in talking about my own estrangement experience was fundamental as a means of confronting the hidden nature of estrangement and the associated shame that so often encompasses the experience. Furthermore, I considered the potential impact on my mother and how it would be for her to read this research. However, she is aware of much of what is disclosed in this study through the interactions we have had over the years and of course, events that led to our estranged relationship status. I believed it would be easier for her to connect with my experience of our relationship in a written format as this might be less emotive for her. The thesis would also contain an additional level of context and reflection that were likely missing in our interpersonal exchanges. This has proved true. Significantly, I would like to add that through conducting this study, I too have shifted position in relation to her, and this has enabled me to subsequently resume a level of contact with my mother that I did not think would be possible after so many years.

3.8 Re-*presenting* stories through a Dialogical "*Narrative Analysis*"

Stories fill us with life. They animate, they instigate, they invigorate. Because of my desire for this research to privilege the stories themselves, I connected deeply with Frank's (2012a, p. 4) idea that, "A commitment to letting stories breathe means that stories should have the first word". However, this commitment also fuelled the tensions I perceived between what might conventionally be viewed as qualitative analysis, even in a narrative context, and adopting an approach that would allow these stories to have the space to *breathe* on the page and with the reader. But also,

what did it mean to *let a story breathe,* and in the context of research, would it be taken seriously?

Like any storyteller, I aspired to engage the reader. But that was not all. I also sought to invite the reader into a *relationship* with the stories told. Much of what I encountered in narrative analysis appeared to be on the level of the researcher thinking *about* the story, a position I distinguished as conducting an *analysis of narrative*. Like Frank (2013), I considered this kind of engagement with stories as a form of "technical" interrogation that would eventually diminish the richness and power that a story can hold simply to content. Furthermore, those kinds of approaches lead to the extrapolation of categories, themes or patterns. Once more, I was back at abstraction—a place I did not want to be. While such approaches have their place, I felt they did not belong here in the context of this study. Stories derived from excessively technical examinations have the potential to smother the kind of nuanced storytelling that gives life and meaning to human experience (Frank, 2013, p. 22).

With this in mind, the approach I sought necessitated engagement from *within*, taking an inside-out perspective, in contrast to an analysis that would stand from the outside. Through this, a heartfelt invitation could be made for a dialogic relationship with the listener to bear witness and to think and feel *with* the stories as opposed to *about* them (Smith & Sparkes, 2006). Hence, this approach is rooted in an idiographic stance (Allport, 1962) whereby the researcher-storyteller performs a *narrative analysis*, rather than an *analysis of narrative* as described above, thinking

and feeling *with* the stories (Holstein et al., 2015; Holstein & Gubrium, 2012). As stories are always told within dialogues, a *narrative analysis* endeavours to connect discrete voices and to galvanise them, while remembering, it is people who possess the ability to tell stories—they cannot be told on their own. Accordingly, the approach in this study has been based on dialogical narrative analysis (DNA) to allow these stories the freedom to *breathe* as living things (Frank, 2012b).

Frank (2012b, p. 43) asserts that, "for the analysis to remain truly narrative, each story must be considered as a whole; methods that fragment stories serve other purposes". In keeping with this philosophy, I analysed each story holistically, taking each as a whole and interpreting the text in the context of other parts of the narrative (Lieblich et al., 1998). From a holistic inside-out stance, I contemplated each complete story and focused on being *with* the content. This enabled me to foreground the meaning of each part of the story in light of what emerged within other parts, in the context of the story as a whole and alongside parts of my own story. In this manner, the analysis of the stories took place in the midst of their writing, "as a craft, not a procedure" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012).

I listened carefully and reflexively to how each story spoke to the original interest of this research, and through an intensive, iterative process, I re-*presented* three of the participants' narratives as individual stories. The three stories I decided on spoke to me in a way where I could use my insider-researcher position to enhance the understandings contained within them and weave in parts of my own story. As I explain later, I had to find a creative way to use all the *data* I had, and the other three

stories had some common features that presented itself as helpful for creating a fictional piece.

As my arguments developed through the writing, I continued to refine my work as necessitated by each individual story. Hence, the analysis manifested through the writing and the decisions bound up in how the story fitted together. Such forms of writing *are* a way of "knowing" whereby the process of writing is a means of discovery and analysis, a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000). Through this approach, I engaged in critical reflexivity as a "valuable creative analytical practice" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 481).

Drawing on my experience as a psychotherapist, I sought to shift perspective as I analysed each story through a kind of trinocular, or three-way, vision, to help me think about what might be going in the mind of the other, in my mind and in the betweenness of both minds as the story unfolded. Additionally, in places, I included ideas from the theoretical framework for this study by incorporating attachment and relational theory into my interpretations and writing. I am aware this might seem contrary to my philosophical stance; however, these ideas were offered in the spirit of one of a possible number of representations that could be proposed rather than being presented as the final word. Such propositions are intended to be held lightly, which I believe is concomitant with my philosophical orientation and the dialogical position of *unfinalisability* where there is no ending or final truth to be discovered (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012).

Throughout the analysis, I carefully considered the crucial questions posed by dialogical narrative analysis (Frank, 2012b, p. 33):

1. What multiple voices can be heard in any single speaker's voice; how do these voices merge, and when do they contest each other?
2. What makes stories distinct from other forms of narration; what counts as a story, and what does not?
3. Why is someone choosing to tell a story, among other expressive possibilities? What particular capacities of stories does the storyteller seek to utilise?
4. What stakes does the storyteller have riding on telling this story, at this time, to these listeners? Or, put another way, how is the storyteller holding his or her own in the act of storytelling—in other words, seeking to sustain the value of one's self or identity in response to whatever threatens to diminish that self or identity?
5. What is the storyteller's art, through which she or he represents life in the form of a story? And what form of life is reflected in such a representation, including the resources to tell particular kinds of stories, affinities with those who will listen to and understand such stories, vulnerabilities including not being able to tell a good story, and contests, including which version of a story trumps which other versions?

As I transcribed each conversation in multiple rounds, these questions were being revisited in my mind. I began with an unpolished transcription of each complete interview, including all the words and main features of the conversation—laughing,

crying, pauses (Riessman, 1993, p. 56). I then refined these transcriptions by including false starts, notable intonations and utterances such as “uhm”. The storyteller-participants were then invited to read their transcripts, should they wish to. They all responded that they were ok with the transcript accuracy and content, with one participant choosing not to read hers at this time, although she wished to continue in the study. I then immersed myself in listening to each audio to hear and think about the story, how it felt, what it was telling me, and what it was not telling me. At this point, I started to write, making notes of my thoughts, impressions, and different aspects of the conversation that were striking or notable in some sense.

The next step was to begin writing the three individual stories, with my own as a thread that was complexly interwoven throughout each. As their stories emerged through my writing of them, the emphasis freely shifted between the original storyteller and myself as a co-storyteller. It was here, through the process of writing, that the bulk of the analysis occurred as an artistic expression and yet, a profoundly intricate process of oscillating between different positions and working from the inside-out, as I developed my interpretations in the re-*presentation* of what I perceived about their experiences. Throughout the writing process, I reflected on the questions posed by dialogical narrative analysis while holding in mind other considerations. For instance, what type of story was being told, who the protagonists were and what happens to them, *how* was the story told, the kind of language used and how different elements of the story related or contradicted one another (Willig, 2013). Another feature of the analysis was to reflect on the context and how, jointly, the story was shaped in an interplay of how each person “listens, attends, interrupts,

encourages, digresses and initiates" (Mishler, 1986, p. 82). In this sense, I was a researcher-storyteller, "for whom the product of narrative research is the story itself" (Willig, 2013, p. 147).

With three of the six stories re-presented as independent chapters, for the three remaining stories, I sought a creative way of bringing their voices together to expressively convey their estrangement experiences. Among these participants, I saw certain shared characteristics between their stories which presented the possibility to illuminate some distinctive issues concerning their estrangements. I was struck by the potential of incorporating fiction to tell their stories in an accessible and meaningful way. A fictional format presented the possibility to observe the complexity of estrangement from a different position, by inviting the audience into a new and yet familiar world that could be both enjoyable and emotionally charged to engage with while conceivably also prompting the reader to reflect on their own life (Leavy, 2016).

Using fictional representations offers a bridge to alternative modes of expression in scholarly writing, one that aspires to authentically portray human reality and grasp the nuance of lived experience (Banks, 2008a). In this sense, fiction is a tool for helping research accomplish these aims by going beyond conventional writing and enabling "writers and readers to remain open to new interpretations" (ibid., p. 161). Fiction can illuminate the understanding of human experience in ways that are not available in other forms of writing in research. As Leavy (2016, p. 19) explains,

> “Fiction grants us an imaginary entry into what is otherwise inaccessible. The practice of writing and reading fiction allows us to access imaginary or possible worlds, to re-examine the worlds we live in, and to enter into the psychological processes that motivate people and the social worlds that shape them”.

Indeed, it could be argued that the work of researcher and novelist are not as dissimilar as might be believed especially given that, “the material writers use in fiction comes from real life and genuine human experience” (Leavy, 2016, p. 21). Similarly, scholars and fiction writers alike conduct extensive research to achieve *verisimilitude*—authentic portrayals of lived experiences. Accordingly, for the final chapter, I carefully wove together a fictionalised re-presentation of the accounts of the three remaining participants, containing their own words as far as possible. Through this, I sought to harness the unique capabilities of fiction as a means of accessing and communicating the experience of estrangement in a manner that would be relatable, thus inviting the audience into the characters' inner lives.

The inclusion of a fictional piece as part of conducting a narrative analysis was also inextricably linked to my philosophical positioning, where there was no quest for *truth*, which might be at odds with those who take a more conventional stance in seeking to uncover such truths. Thus, my final story was a fictionalised compilation of three participants’ stories written in the form of a fictional chapter from a book. Through an imaginative blend of fiction and non-fiction, I endeavoured to produce a vivid story of estrangement in a context that I hoped would be poignant, engaging and illuminating to the reader (Leavy, 2016).

3.9 Looking toward trustworthiness

"There are no facts, only interpretations." — Friedrich Nietzsche

A fundamental challenge of all research concerns how it can be assessed regarding what makes for *good* quality research. I was conscious a narrative inquiry approach to this research would introduce challenges in terms of how the output of this study might be assessed. Other complications were introduced through my personal relationship with the research. In certain research contexts, such as those leaning more toward positivist paradigms like grounded theory and where the aspiration is to obtain *objective* knowledge, this would be considered undesirable. However, much depends on the position that is adopted in the conceptualisation of good qualitative research.

To help address these challenges, Tracy (2010) produced a set of eight criteria of qualitative quality—a worthy topic, rich rigour, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical, and meaningful coherence. These criteria were intended to be flexibly applied based on the context of an individual study. There are many similarities between Tracy's (2010) proposed criteria and Leavy's (2016, p. 79) suggestions in Figure 2 below:

Traditional Evaluative Criteria in Qualitative Research	Traditional Criteria Transformed for Fiction as Research
Validity	It could have happened; Resonance
Rigor	Aesthetics; Use of literary tools
Congruence	Architectural design; Structure; Narrative congruence
Transferability or Generalizability	Empathetic engagement; Resonant or universal themes/motifs
Thoroughness	Ambiguity
Trustworthiness	Resonance
Authenticity	Verisimilitude; Creation of virtual reality
Reflexivity	Writer's personal signature

Figure 2 Traditional qualitative evaluative criteria transformed for fiction as research

Leavy (2016) proposes an adapted list in the right-hand column above that is specifically for fictionalised re-presentations in research, which could also be applied in the narrative context of this study as all writing "is only more or less 'fictional'" (Banks, 2008b, p. 156). As advocated by Leavy (2016) and Tracy (2010), I have customised their suggested criteria for this specific study as a means for myself and readers to be able to evaluate the quality of this research and its findings:

1. *The creation of a virtual reality*: Are there rich descriptions? Can you envision the people and places portrayed? Is the mood expressed clearly? Do the descriptions resonate as truthful? Do they feel authentic?
2. *Sensitive portrayals and empathetic engagement*: Are there rich character portrayals that ring true? Whose perspective guides you through the story? How does the narrator shape your perspective? Do you feel an emotional

connection to the characters? Do you feel empathetic towards them? Have they exposed you to new ideas, experiences, or perspectives?

3. *Meaningful narrative coherence*: Does the storyline make sense? Is narrative writing used well to summarise and provide additional pertinent information? Does the ending provide closure and/or ambiguity—as linked to the research purpose? Are expectations met or challenged in ways that make sense? Do all the pieces of the narrative fit together?
4. *Contribution*: Have you learned something new? Has reading this increased your awareness about an issue or issues? Do you understand something about the topic covered differently or more fully?
5. *Resonance*: How did you respond to the text? Did you find the story engaging? Did the story resonate? What did you gain from the story (self-awareness, reflection, education about a particular topic, enjoyment)?

In addition to using the criteria above, the storyteller-participants remained involved throughout the research process. They were invited to read their stories and meet to share their impressions with me concerning how it was portrayed and what it was like to see their story through the eyes of an-*other*. The purpose of this was not necessarily to challenge or verify my interpretations, although naturally, that was a possible side-effect of this process. Rather, these stories were the product of a co-constructed experience and I sought to create the opportunity and space to reflect together as part of the *narrative analysis*, and perhaps in doing so, this would shed light on something that was previously out of view. Furthermore, it was also important because it offered a means to test the appropriateness of the above-mentioned

quality criteria with the original storytellers themselves. In other words, to understand if the story felt authentic, made sense, whether it evoked an emotional connection, exposed them to new ideas and how it resonated.

3.10 Summary

This chapter has chronicled the philosophical underpinnings of this study and described the journey this research has taken through the methodological maelstrom toward a path of narrative inquiry. I have given an account of the methods used to define and locate the original storytellers for this study, and the related ethical considerations. I provided a description of how their stories were gathered and how I have engaged with them through *dialogical narrative analysis* and subsequently re-presented them in a manner that seeks to be a sensitive and creative portrayal of people and their experiences.

Chapter 4. Performing motherhood: A new lens.

4.1 Meeting Hollie: A 'special' journey

Hollie was the third participant I met. I had not managed to find a way to combine our meeting with one of my UK trips since moving to France, so it was the first trip I made solely for the research. I felt a little anxious booking my flight, sensitive to the logistics being at my expense and if plans needed to change, I would bear the cost. It represented a considerable commitment to the research. There were moments where the cost seemed high. Not just financially, but time away from my family, together with the parts of my story evoked through the conversations. However, such moments were counterbalanced with a sense of doing something important and worthwhile.

The day before our meeting, partly to be considerate but also feeling some anxiety about the trip, I dropped Hollie an email ahead of our appointment and to let her know I was looking forward to our meeting. After confirming everything was alright, Hollie later emailed again with a problem because her husband could no longer collect the children from school. We were due to meet at her office, and she suggested we meet earlier in the afternoon or later at her home. This stoked my anxiety and created a quandary. A lot of issues raced through my mind. I had travel time to consider, being dependent on transport services. Meeting at Hollie's home could have been interesting and given other insights into her life, but I wondered how the context would have influenced how her story was told, especially with children in

the background—that was aside from any ethical considerations. While deliberating on my response, Hollie found a solution, and we agreed I would come to her office as planned. I was relieved. As I prepared for the trip, flying in and out of London the next day, the significance of capturing these stories struck me as I grasped once again the effort involved.

The flight went smoothly, and I concentrated on preparing to meet Hollie. My mind had created the image of a confident career woman as I understood she was someone in authority at her workplace. Was that an impression I reached by myself, or did she say as much? I was not sure. Nevertheless, I knew how hard it was to build and maintain a career while raising children *and* without the support of a family to help manage everything. Yesterday's email exchange concerning the school pick-up offered a glimpse of that and prompted me to wonder to what extent our stories would collide in this respect. When I arrived, Hollie's office reception was expecting me, and I was met with a friendly greeting which helped me relax. The office felt laidback and was trendy in appearance. I settled into a comfortable, bright meeting room furnished with sofas. Hollie entered soon after.

4.2 When early relationships go awry

Hollie, an alias she chose, is in her mid-to late-thirties and lives in London. As we did introductions, she appeared easy-going and friendly; I quickly warmed to her. Hollie is married to Ben, a name I assigned and has two children; a son aged six and a half and a daughter who is nearly four. She also has a sister who is five years younger than her, whom I have called Suzie. As we settled down to get started, Hollie opened

the conversation by letting me know that this time, she has been estranged from her mum for “two- and a-bit years”. The way she added “this time” resonated with me. There were times where I would limit contact with my mother and have episodes of no contact. I found it hard to maintain a permanent distance though, because I hoped things would be different and I struggled with the conflicts that certain social discourses, such as *only having one mother*, would provoke. This struggle is reflected in the research literature where estrangement is characterised as a cyclical process with family members moving in and out of contact with each other (Agllias, 2016). For this reason, estrangement can be something that tends to develop over time.

Hollie quickly pointed out that she and her mother had never had a good relationship and that having children was the *trigger* for their estrangement initially. It was not clear what she meant by “trigger” when she said it right at the beginning, but my ears pricked up. I felt a surge of anticipation. Would she understand something of my own experience? Part of me hoped so. It had been painful going through this alone. Having children was a pivotal moment for me in opening my eyes to the agonising realities of the relationship with my mother, recasting how I looked back on my childhood. Saying no more at this stage, Hollie paused, ostensibly orienting herself, ready to begin telling her story:

> “So, sort of starting at the beginning, I suppose…”

It made sense. To tell the story from *a* beginning, not necessarily *the* beginning, but to locate *a place* from which to start. This did not mean the story would be whole, with a coherent beginning, middle and end. As Clandinin and Connelly (2006a, p. 400) observe, “People do not tell full-blown stories from the beginning to the end; tellers leave most of the story to the imagination of the listeners, who fill in blanks, pauses, and silences with stories of their own”. I felt conscious, too, of how my story would shape the way the blanks would be filled. As I re-*presented* Hollie’s story here, interspersing it with her dialogue, I noticed that I instinctively rendered her words in the form of stanzas. When I reflected on why I did this, I realised there was a poetic quality to her speech, and this was my way of conveying these subtler aspects that to me, epitomised *Hollie*.

> “I had a, a difficult childhood, err, err, a chaotic childhood.
> My father's alcoholic, although I'm not estranged from him, actually.
> And my mother, I think, now, looking back on it,
> had some kind of narcissistic personality problem.”

I was struck by how Hollie’s voice became deeper and lower while registering a familiar surge of shame, the one that springs forth for me whenever I acknowledge aloud how hard my childhood had been. I wondered if Hollie was implicitly communicating a version of her shame through this change in tone (Ginot, 2017). It felt like an exposing opening statement, while at the same time, it felt honest and clear. Maybe it was easier to just come out and say how difficult your life has been at the beginning rather than build up to saying it. If she had not known I am estranged

from my mother, and a psychotherapist, would she have been less open? Conceivably. She continued:

> “Um, so, whilst I understand she really wanted to be a mother,
> actually, *being* a mother was very difficult for her, for lots of reasons.
> Partly, I think, her,
> but also, circumstance.
> So, she'd herself had a difficult childhood,
> and so on and so forth,
> um, she had, she was the eldest of four children,
> she had a brother that died when he was 10,
> and a mother who I think essentially had a breakdown,
> and as the eldest, had to do a lot of caring.
> She had a sister who was 14 years younger than her,
> who I think, essentially, she had to mother,
> and she was sent away to boarding school, you know,
> there were lots of things in her life that I think were really hard”.

The sequence of our conversation was striking, from Hollie’s opening with her “difficult, chaotic childhood” to her mum having a “difficult childhood” where “lots of things in her life… were really hard”. I thought about how making sense of her mum’s experience may have helped her make sense of her own. I felt equally conscious that to assuage shameful and painful experiences, people tend to offer explanations and grounds for others’ behaviour and treatment of them. Unquestionably, her mum had

suffered too, and as Winnicott (1990) would say, “Home is where we start from”. In this sense, it is inevitable that to some extent, we are shaped by our early relational experiences with those closest to us and during such formative years, how could it be otherwise? I understood from psychotherapeutic practice that the unresolved effects of traumatic early relationships have the potential to be transmitted intergenerationally (Teyber et al., 2011). They have the potential to become unconsciously *enacted expressions* that, likewise, deeply mark the children of those who suffered (Ginot, 2015). And Hollie seemed to know her experiences growing up had left *their* marks.

> “So, it was neglect rather than abuse,
> although, I mean, emotional abuse but not, you know,
> never kind of physical abuse or anything sexual.
> It was a lot of, sort of neglect and kind of,
> and just being absent.
> I remember things now, looking back,
> particularly when I was little,
> and you would go to school and not have,
> like uniform or food,
> and you know, things like that,
> so, I'd be really hungry.
> Not necessarily knowing what I’d do.
> Sorry”.

Hollie wept. Instinctively, I passed her the packet of tissues I had packed just in case.

Why was she sorry? —I thought.

She seemed to be apologising for crying. Hearing her “sorry” tugged at me, and although I did not act on it, I felt a pull to silence it. These were understandably upsetting and painful memories. I wondered if this was a relational pattern for Hollie. I noticed Hollie had switched from first to third person as she described going to school without a uniform or food. Her already soft tone became even softer, and tears now flowed. I imagined her as a small child, at school without a uniform, hungry and bewildered—a heartrending image. The change from *I* to *you* could have been something dissociative (Howell, 2013). In other words, a means to create distance from something too painful. It gave the impression of something Sullivan (1953) described as a “*not me”* experience. In my experience in my practice, such dissociated “not me” experiences are often suffused with shame (Howell, 2013). Caregiving that is harmful through neglect, abuse or inadequate nurturing can confront a child with an untenable situation where the source of safety is simultaneously the source of threat (Fairbairn, 1994). How can a child reconcile this psychically? I wondered how Hollie reconciled it.

She explained:

> “My mother was constantly threatening to kill herself,
> or to leave us, or you know,

said she was going to die or... you know,

at the time I just thought that that was something that your mother did,

but I realise now that if I'd said anything like...

I mean, I don't obviously say those things,

but if I'm not feeling well,

they [Hollie's children] look really worried".

I could hear that Hollie understood the profundity of her mother's threats through her own position as a mother. Momentarily, she began to picture herself saying these types of things to her children before breaking off. When she resumed speaking, I noticed Hollie did not finish this train of thought and continued on a slightly different path. If this had been psychotherapy, I would have encouraged her to finish the first thought, creating the opportunity to say what was previously inhibited or dissociated (Bromberg, 1994). Such moments of hesitation characterised my uncertainty between the boundaries of psychotherapist and researcher. Ordinarily, I know I would have probed further. Perhaps she was self-censoring or unable to allow herself to think beyond that point. Possibly, in parallel, the same was true for me. However, by not interjecting, Hollie showed me that through the reactions of her own children, in less threatening circumstances, she recognised the enormity of her mother's words as she looked back on them. I wondered about the effect it had on her as a child.

I recalled the occasions my mother would threaten to put me into a care home to control my behaviour. She had told me horror stories about such places. My mother was a deeply troubled woman, easily overwhelmed and dominated by difficult

emotions. From Hollie's description, her mother had similar emotional difficulties, exacerbated by the strain of an alcoholic husband who could not keep a job. It was clear that neither of these women were able to provide the kind of supportive and nurturing environment that was needed. On the contrary, Hollie described a mother who lived on a knife-edge, at the threshold of her tolerance. With unreliable parents at the helm and a mother whose mental state was clearly fragile, Hollie was in an intolerable position for a child whose primary need is for safety. How does a small child manage such instability and fear when faced with a mother threatening to kill herself or abandon her child? Perhaps this explained Hollie's earlier "sorry". One way a child might try to acquire a sense of inner security is to unconsciously contract their own needs in place of *others*. They might become afraid to excessively burden *the other* or develop the idea they are too much for others to cope with (Beebe & Lachmann, 1998; Bromberg, 1991).

Another solution is to take on a caregiving role to safeguard themselves and the family from collapse. Did Hollie assume such a role as a child? When she first ceased contact with her mother, she said, "I was so used to taking care of her, and I just didn't know how to be around her if I wasn't doing that". My mind turned to the variety of tensions one might experience in deciding to discontinue any kind of relationship with one's mother—to exclude one's mother from one's life altogether. Maybe for some, it is an easy decision to make. It was difficult to imagine that being the case, no matter how destructive the relationship might be. For me, it was not easy. I have been riddled with such tensions. They have not disappeared, but I have

learned to live with them with greater acceptance. Hollie seemed to endure similar conflicts of her own.

> “I feel like I'll be really relieved when she dies.
> Not because she's having any impact on my life now really,
> but just, because I want the hope that it'll be different
> to just, be completely extinguished.
> And then I feel like I’ll have this sense of being able to move on.
> Just that added closure,
> because whilst I do rationally accept that she's not going to change,
> and I don't know if I’ll ever be in contact with her again,
> at least, if she's gone, then it's just done.
> I don't know”.

I recognised Hollie’s sentiments. A wish to be liberated from the multitude of pulls drawing her—and me—in different directions and stirring up unwelcome, painful feelings. Beneath her words, I detected a less discernible message. One that appeared to implicitly communicate the *burden* she carried as a child and to some extent still does in adulthood—namely, the role of caregiver on behalf of her family. It was a responsibility Hollie felt unable to shed completely, despite her efforts and the act of cutting off from her mother. She seemed to envisage her mother’s death because “then it’s just done” as the only way to be *truly* liberated from any sense of obligation and guilt. It was conspicuous through her expression of feeling “really relieved” and “able to move on”. I felt a buoyancy to her words when she said them

and as they reverberated in the room. It was so palpable that I immediately became aware of how freely I was breathing as if I had not been just moments before. But the sense of relief was accompanied by disappointment and loss, of hopes and wishes that will never be met.

> “I don't need to hope anymore or wish,
> or think maybe it'll be different,
> or could I do something different or...
> I think it'll be; I don't know.
> I'll just feel free.
> But again, you can't say that to people”.

Intermingled with disappointment was a resounding “*need”* to no longer “wish” or “hope” for a different kind of relationship. There was a heaviness that came with that sense of longing. Over time, from my own experience, I knew how it could weigh on a person. I contrasted this with her desire to be "free" and how she thought *others* would perceive this. There was a compounded sense of isolation, of being alone. Such sentiments about one’s own mother were perceived as unthinkable or prohibited in wider society and the overarching narratives that prevail concerning close familial relationships, particularly between mothers and daughters (Bojczyk et al., 2011; Bromberg, 1983; Fischer, 1981).

> “I think, you know, it's really difficult in society.
> It's really unacceptable, this kind of idea of not talking to your parents.

It feels really cruel, I don't know".

The acute tensions Hollie held about choosing to have no relationship with her mother were understandable and reminiscent of my own story. A big part of the struggle seemed to be the amplification of these tensions through the lack of comprehension that the relationship with one's mother might be unsalvageable at best, and at worst, is damaging to the self. I could not help but think how different Hollie's story would have been if she did not know I was estranged from my mother also. Maybe she would not have revealed her innermost thoughts of relief to be *finally* free of any obligation. But here, between us, there was an implicit acceptance that not all relationships with our mothers can be *endured*. That it is ok to walk away for one's own sake, as painful and difficult as it is to accept we will never have the mother we deserved (Winnicott, 1960).

4.3 Performing mothering: Doing it *differently,* for *them*

There is no one way to describe the experience of being a mother except to say it alters a person's life in fundamental ways. The same was true for Hollie. It opened up new layers of meaning that she could only see through the eyes of becoming a mother. Entering into this stage of life for the first time brought her focus back to family, throwing new light onto the relationship with her mother, both then and now. The arrival of Hollie's first child coincided with her mother's second husband leaving her mother for another woman. Hollie recalled being at the hospital after just giving birth to her son:

“When I had my son,

when we were in hospital,

she [her mother] came to the hospital,

but was hysterically crying about the fact her husband had left her,

and that was two hours after I'd given birth.

To the point that the midwife had to come and say,

‘Look, could you ask your mother to wait in the relatives' room,

because she's standing outside your door,

crying on the phone to her therapist,

and everyone thinks your baby has died’

And these other mothers are getting distressed,

because they can see this woman,

hysterical in the corridor.

She's holding my son who's two hours old and she's saying,

"Oh, he's left me for this woman.

How could he do that?"".

Feelings of anger rose in me in hearing how this momentous and joyous occasion was eclipsed by her mother’s crisis. It was a familiar pattern. Not just for Hollie. My response was reminiscent of my mother’s comparably selfish behaviour. There was a tinge of incredulity in Hollie’s voice as she described the scene in the hospital. In my head, I deciphered it to denote something like, “*even at a time like this it has to be about you”*. It was hard to distinguish whether my reaction was from my own

experience or because of Hollie's. I knew I could not entirely separate them. They were intertwined.

At the same time, it was her mother's first grandchild. Within society, it is presumed that becoming a grandparent is a wondrous occasion—a watershed moment. While for many it is, I considered whether reaching this time of life might likewise induce other kinds of existential anxieties. This might have played some part, unconsciously at least. Outwardly, it did not seem to be about that kind of existential crisis and for Hollie, her mother's behaviour was not *new*. It was as if the arrival of her first grandchild did not fully register. But then it would not. What struck me about the similarity between Hollie's mother and mine, was that whatever was happening in their lives at that moment, it would eclipse *everything* else. Both were the walking equivalent of a black hole sucking up everything around them, absorbing all the space. And it was always the same story. It did not matter how big or small the "*crisis"*. The needs of Hollie's mother repeatedly surpassed the needs of her daughter's. Hollie's needs just melted into the background. Out of sight.

My thoughts returned to Hollie's earlier comment that her mother had a narcissistic personality problem. I felt inclined to agree, albeit not as an impartial observer, particularly as aspects of Hollie's mother resembled my own. I knew my mother suffered deep narcissistic wounds in childhood that she never dealt with. Maybe this would transpire to be a relational pattern between mothers and daughters who later developed an estrangement. I then remembered Hollie saying she did not know how to be around her mother if she was not "taking care of *her*". It prompted me to wonder

what becoming a mother *meant* to Hollie, and I found myself asking, “What's it like, then, this, that you're a mother as well...”?

> “Yeah, I think that part of it is really hard because,
> you know, it suddenly becomes...
> your mother then suddenly,
> I'm sure you had it too, becomes...
> almost like you need parenting again when you're having your own child.
> There's this need to be looked after,
> because you're looking after so much that you are kind of then missing”.

I did *have it too*. I felt a shared sense of *knowing,* as if we both intuitively understood what Hollie was saying without the need to put it into so many words. On some level, we were members of an exclusive group that automatically brought us closer to one another's experience. I recognised that familiar longing for one’s mother, the kind of mother we needed, emanating from Hollie and the sadness that rippled beneath her words. It was striking how Hollie now included me in her experience by saying, “I’m sure you had it too”. It hinted at her sense of feeling alone. I wondered if it was an unconscious appeal to know she was not alone and whether my unconscious responded. It felt nice to be included. To not feel so alone. Then, I remembered Hollie had said she finds “it incredibly difficult to let anyone help”, and whether she felt ashamed of her neediness for her mother and including me in that neediness might have offered a means to alleviate those feelings. There was something else I noticed we both “*had”* as well—a powerful need to do *it* differently—to be a different kind of

mother. Perhaps the kind *we* would have liked to have. But not knowing precisely how? And afraid. Afraid of repeating the same mistakes.

> “Yeah. And I think I parent very consciously,
> like you know, so I know I don't have the model.
> I know I have a big chance of repeating what she's done,
> you know statistically.
> I suppose, I consciously think about my parenting all the time.
> How I react, what I say.
> How I treat them, how I discipline them,
> how I... all those things.
> Like, try really, really hard not to be her”.

Hollie was worried about unintentionally repeating the past with her own children. Without a dependable “model” for parenting, she was somewhat adrift in her role as a mother. As a grown adult, she recognised the extent to which she had not known and experienced the sort of care and nurturing a child needs to flourish. In hearing how *consciously* she parents, it felt exhausting to be incessantly cross-examining herself concerning her children. It sounded like enormous energy was being expended on an unrelenting crusade to “not be *her*”. I had an image of Hollie in my mind, armed with her vigilant and conscious awareness, seeking to neutralise and outmanoeuvre her unconscious, which lurked, threatening to repeat “what *she’s* done”. I bore something of a similar nature. A sometimes-beleaguered feeling of having to work harder than others around me for the same outcome and yet with considerably less support. It

was not self-pity. But there were times where it felt exceptionally sad. Sometimes, unbearable. It was the pain of those wounds that motivated me, though, and I think Hollie as well, “not to be *her*”. The idea of my children feeling the way I felt was even more painful for me than experiencing it for myself. Hollie was acutely aware of her suffering growing up, and it was clear she could not bear the idea of her children suffering a similar fate either. In contrast to her mother, Hollie was not imprisoned by the wounds she carried. Instead, she was driven to confront them as a way of breaking the cycle of hurt that was being passed along through the generations.

> “Yeah, because I know the risk is huge.
> And in fact, that's why I went to therapy this time around,
> which I've been in for about two or three years now,
> just because I read this book called...
> what's it called? I can't remember now.
> It was about motherhood, basically, and saying like,
> unless you really process what happened to you as a child,
> unless you really process your own story,
> and really understand it and are at peace with it,
> you're almost inevitably going to pass on some things to your own children.
> And I felt like I hadn't,
> and so that's why I thought I’d go again,
> and I traced a therapist who is,
> very kind of, specialist in childhood trauma”.

I was reminded of Winnicott's (1960) idea of the "good enough mother" in relational psychoanalytic thinking. It was an idea that captured me and helped alleviate some of my fears because I realised, I did not have to be the *best* mother in the world to raise children who felt loved and nurtured. I only needed to be *good enough*. I had the sense this was what Hollie wanted to be able to offer her children. However, she could not see how to do that unless, in therapy, she processed her own story, her "childhood trauma". I admired her courage. Before her children, Hollie "still would have put her [her mother's] needs before my own". She had been unable to prioritise herself, never believing she "was enough of a reason" to seek help.

> "I think I'm very bad at doing things for myself,
> even getting therapy was for my kids, you know.
> Even me getting therapy was for them, you know.
> That was the reason I had to do it.
> And I think being estranged from her,
> you know, if I think about it,
> I think I did it for them."

Hollie's children gave her that all-important reason that until now had been missing. As I listened, there was a pang of sadness alongside something else, which was more like the feeling I get when a movie ends well. Not that this was a fairy tale ending with a happily-ever-after. The sadness was because Hollie could not get therapy simply for the sake of *herself*—she was not enough of a "reason". However, the fact that she could do it for *them* punctuated the story with hope. By "getting

therapy" and "being estranged from *her*", Hollie was doing what a mother ordinarily does and protecting her children. It was what her mother had been unable to do. My story was paradoxically different and yet, alike. I wanted to shield my children from having the same emotional and psychological afflictions I felt burdened by, which affected my life and relationships. So, to be a *good enough mother*, as Winnicott (1960) put it, I understood I needed to attend to my *wounds* in therapy. And like Hollie, I am not sure if I would have done it *for me*. But we both "did it for them".

4.4 A childhood "reframed"

The recollection most of us have of our childhoods shifts through space and time. With new experiences come new insights and perspectives. So, how we make sense of our childhood experiences at the time probably will not be how we see them later, looking back. Perhaps this also has to do with the way children make sense of the world around them, which differs significantly from how an adult, with their more mature psychological organisation, construes their experiences (Schore, 2002). When Hollie was a young child, it was something like this for her. By only having the experience of her own family to go by, she thought life was more or less like this for everybody. Early on, she did not have the emotional development and maturity and sufficient life experience to distinguish between her family and other people's. As she grew older, though, Hollie started to become more aware and notice there were differences.

> "Because you don't realise
> when you're a child

what's normal and what's not,

because everything's contained

within this microcosm of your household,

you know, it's only when you get older

you start to notice

that you might be a bit different".

In hearing Hollie's distinction between "what's normal" and "what's not", I was immediately returned to that earlier sense of shame about the self that arises from feeling *abnormal* or different to others. Something also caught my attention in the way Hollie remarked on starting to notice she "might be a bit different". It was a subtle emphasis on the word "*bit"*. Although subtle, there was this effect of downplaying something about how it was to feel different. It made me wonder what it was like for her. My train of thought came full circle, back to shame, acutely aware of the profoundly uncomfortable feelings about our-*self* that shame induces. Kaufman (1989, p. 16) described shame as a "wound made from the inside", and I think this sentiment captures its innermost, hidden characteristics. Perhaps a part of Hollie felt a need to understate her experience of being different to others, because of all emotions, shame is probably the least tolerable to endure. I was curious about Hollie's experiences growing up, about what she noticed.

"My mother would never be on time.

She'd be hours late, all the time,

if she ever had to pick us up from somewhere.

Wherever it was, we'd always be the last ones with someone going,
"Oh, you know is your mum actually coming",
or you know, having to stand for hours waiting outside things for her.
She was just kind of, not... we were just so low down the priorities,
I suppose".

I could not imagine what those times must have been like for her as a child. How was it for her that her mother was so late? As Hollie pointed to being low down on her mother's priorities, the word that sprung into my mind was *neglect*. It seemed her mother was impervious to what others would think of her turning up hours late for her child. Perhaps as impervious as she was to the arrival of her first grandchild. As an adult, Hollie could not understand the massive anxiety she would feel about being late for things herself, particularly when picking up her children from childcare. In therapy, she traced it back and connected it with those experiences of being left waiting so many times as a child, unsure when and if her mother would come for her. On connecting her anxiety to her mother's lateness, Hollie added:

"So little things come back to you, don't they?"

They do, but it did not feel like a *little* thing, and I felt slightly perturbed by it being described as such. Instead, I found it somewhat dismaying to hear about the way she was neglected. Perhaps this, too, was representative of a tendency to minimise the impact of the negligence she experienced. It also gave me the sense that Hollie had not fully taken on board the extent to which she was mistreated by her mother. That

was not to say she had not on some level. After all, they were estranged. But one could also see being estranged as a means of escaping from her pain—maybe pushing it further away, indeed, on some level, that was true of my experience. I wanted to separate myself from the hurt. Estranging was my response based on an amalgamation of things—shielding my children, protecting myself from a damaging relationship and a way to anaesthetise myself from the realisations I had about my childhood when I became a mother. It was hard to say how closely this resembled Hollie's response. Regardless, becoming a mother was a pivotal turning point for her, as it was for me.

> "But I think having children has sort of,
> it's like ripped open the plaster off everything
> that I'd sort of spent my whole life packing away,
> and in some ways,
> that's brilliant because you need to do it,
> and in other ways,
> it's really hard,
> obviously, because it's hard stuff.
> But it's, yeah,
> having children's definitely been the thing,
> I think, that's made...
> that's been a turning point
> in my kind of relationship with it, somehow.
> It's just reframed it".

A plaster being “*ripped open*” conjured powerful imagery. Hollie spoke in her usual soft voice, but strangely, it was as though her words screamed of how becoming a mother had exposed hidden wounds that were profoundly raw. How she thought about her childhood abruptly changed, it was “reframed”, fundamentally altering her relationship with it and, by extension, her mother. She now saw her experiences not only through the eyes of an adult woman but from the position of a *mother* as well. It was a momentous shift that called everything into question. There was a dialectic between seeing what is under the plaster as a good thing, or “brilliant”, as Hollie put it, but also “really hard”. They were different ends of the spectrum. The metaphor of a plaster started to feel inadequate based on the injury, or should I say *injuries*, that lay beneath. It would need to be a pretty big plaster and a strong one. I wondered if the wounds ever really heal. Maybe eventually, but I suspect it would take a long time. There is no real escape from the past, though, and it is always with us in the here and now in some guise or other. Hollie encountered this too. As she thought about the beautiful moments she has with her children, she revealed:

> “Yeah. It is like reliving it again, really.
> It's like, every moment,
> almost every lovely moment I have with my kids,
> sometimes, I catch myself off the back of it,
> going "Oh", you know like it's a reminder.
> It really takes those moments and it...
> not loads but, I don't know,
> it does put a different spin on it sometimes”.

It was a constant back and forth between *now and then*. On some level, her children and the life she was providing for them as a mother also served as a reminder of what she did not have growing up. I wondered about the tensions this also evoked for her inwardly. On the one hand, this was right and how it ought to be and, on the other, perhaps an incredibly painful reminder of her losses, or should I say, our losses.

4.5 Afterword

Hollie was surprised when she read her story. She expected something different. Although unsure exactly *what* to expect, she nonetheless thought it would be more detached or clinical than the story she received. Her expectation mirrored how Hollie felt she had told her story—in quite a removed and rational manner. Yet, when I listened to her telling it, that was not my experience. Just as when Hollie read my version of her story, that was not her experience either. They were interesting paradoxes. Instead, Hollie experienced the story as “very touching”, and likewise, I felt touched by her response. After reading her story, she shared how she felt “really seen and understood”.

Hollie found that seeing her story portrayed through my eyes had also offered her a different perspective on her experiences. Certain parts had made her think, such as the moment she automatically switched to the third person without realising as a means of creating distance from something difficult. She noted how in some sense, her story “had become a script” and that she just “rattles it off in places”. Different things had made her think and she was taking these into her personal therapy to

reflect on further. Most of all, she recognised there will always be pain, and there will always be sadness surrounding her estrangement from her mother.

As we reflected on her experience of taking part in the study, she disclosed how talking to me about her estrangement felt different because she knew that I had been there. Knowing I, too, was estranged “had definitely made it easier to say things” that she might not have otherwise said. While I had made my estrangement known explicitly, I also wondered about what was exchanged at an implicit level of knowing and how that shaped our conversation. Writing Hollie’s story had been an incredible journey for me as well and I feel privileged to have been allowed to do so.

Chapter 5. A “split” family: Estranged from the start

5.1 Meeting Lucy

Lucy and I arranged to meet in the lounge of a hotel—a place where we could have coffee and find a private spot for our meeting. I suggested a place near Lucy which looked like it would suit. I was apprehensive, though, about how the setting would influence the telling of her story. Finding suitable places to come together was always difficult, particularly when travelling from France. I carefully deliberated over the options, and although a hotel lounge was not the most private location, I also considered that other people within the vicinity might actually feel safer for Lucy when meeting someone unfamiliar—an open space might offer the sense of an escape route, thus creating a sense of control and reassurance. Moreover, through our previous conversation on the phone concerning the research and Lucy’s involvement, I had gained an initial sense of Lucy and whether such a venue would be manageable from the perspective of being able to offer the level of containment necessary for our conversation. There was also something about trusting that Lucy was a resourceful human being—she had a career, was raising a family and so on—who was capable of ensuring her own well-being and as such, if the setting was not okay, we would address it.

I wondered if I was worrying excessively. The pervasive presence of my own story and the wounds that accompanied it reinforced my desire to *look after* Lucy as part of this process. I was also aware of something else beneath that was harder to grasp. It

felt like guilt. I wondered where that was coming from. Intuitively, I sensed it was connected with speaking about something that was ordinarily unspoken, something painful and shameful. I felt guilty for opening this up. For breaking the silence. For exposing the shame. And for the effect this might have on Lucy. I think underneath, these anxieties existed with all my participants, but only now, was I aware of their presence.

I could not escape the knowledge that no matter what story would be told, there would be pain, loss or shame in there somewhere. At times, I was so focused on *theirs* that it was easy to overlook how mine would also be evoked. A part of me felt a need to compensate for bringing these shaming and painful experiences into the open. Yet, in my experience as a therapist, I have found that through listening deeply to such experiences, the “dark emotional convictions of shame” can be “brought out into brighter spaces where compassionate acceptance is the rule” (DeYoung, 2015, p. xv). I questioned whether my unconscious was acting out against breaking the tacit code of silence that ordinarily cloaks being estranged from one’s mother. In unison, there was the sensation of motherly protectiveness, perhaps positioning this research as a *metaphorical baby*. Curiously, it occurred to me that I might have been estranged for a long time from this figurative *baby*. Maybe it is only now that I am starting to see how much care it needs.

Lucy arrived, and we did our introductions before stocking up on coffee so we could settle down to talk. She appeared bright and friendly and was in her early to mid-40s with a soft voice. There was a similar softness in her demeanour as well, which I

immediately warmed to. The hotel lounge was busy, but it quickly blended into the background. Soon we were in a separate bubble together. I recapped the things we discussed previously on the phone about the study, reminding her we could stop any time, and she listened carefully. As I continued to speak, I sensed it was time to stop talking and, instead, to listen. I felt something similar in other interviews, inducing an impulse to hurry through the preamble. I wondered whether I was responding to some implicit *need* to speak the unspoken coming from the *other*. I also wondered what it meant to talk with someone who was likewise estranged from their mother. I know I felt less alone in hearing these other stories, ostensibly helping my own healing process, even if this had not been an aim of the research. And this was what Lucy said she hoped for—that sharing her story would support others in her position.

5.2 Them and us: Becoming a "split" family

Lucy hesitated. She seemed unsure where to begin. It was an interesting contrast to the need to speak I had sensed moments before. Then again, when faced with talking about something that has had such a significant bearing on your life, where do *you* start? Lucy sought to clarify what I would like to know, as if concerned about wasting my time with irrelevant details. It momentarily brought to mind the clients I have worked with who are concentrated on doing *therapy* right. They often seek to please others and to make the therapist happy. I wondered if this signalled something about how Lucy relates to other people. Perhaps there was a tendency to strive to gratify the *other* or be seen as *good*. Regardless, I wanted to hear Lucy's story as she would tell it. Equally, I felt conscious of not leaving her adrift, so I offered some

ideas to get going. Lucy responded by starting to tell me about her relationship with her mother:

> *“So, I never had a good relationship with her, erm I was the oldest child, I've got a younger brother and, and I think there was all sorts of things that went on... I think my erm, my dad probably married for the wrong reasons, his dad had recently died in a car crash erm, and he, he, he adored me, my dad, and I think my mum was jealous, erm and my mum told me many, many years ago that my dad just idolised me when I was born, as a baby, and so she decided that the next child was going to be hers, and that's what she told me. So, my brother was born three years later, and she basically said she'd given up on me, and erm...”*

Lucy had not said much, and at the same time, it felt like there was *much* in what she had said. My mind was alight with the numerous different threads that had opened up. In hearing Lucy say her mother had “*told”* her these things, I immediately wondered when and how it was that she came to disclose something like this to Lucy. At the time, I thought, “*surely not when she was a child?*”. I queried this with Lucy, and she explained that in her late twenties or early thirties, she suffered from depression and decided to go and talk separately to her mother and father, who had divorced when she was sixteen. It was then that Lucy’s mother told her that she had “given up on her” when she was an infant. Those words, *given up*, made Lucy sound like a lost cause. They felt infused with things I could not fully grasp. Yet, Lucy was barely three years of age by the time her brother came along.

Despite Lucy never having had a “good relationship*”* with her mother, I wondered what she made of this revelation at the time. I had the impression of her mother essentially turning her back on Lucy from that point forth. As though there would be an *off* switch. It was a shift that appeared to relate to the relationship that had developed between Lucy and her father, who “adored” and “idolised” her as a baby. In hindsight, I wondered *who* used those words. Did they come from her father, her mother or Lucy? Lucy interpreted her mother’s response as jealousy. Conceivably, it was. Even so, as an explanation, it seemed to leave much out of the picture. There was an extremity in how her mother reacted that had made it possible to emotionally disengage from Lucy. Moreover, that gives rise to the question of whether her mother had emotionally connected with Lucy in the first place.

In considering the way Lucy and her father bonded early on, I wondered how that was for Lucy’s mother. Maybe she felt rejected, replaced or perhaps futile? Possibly her mother craved the kind of attentiveness she saw Lucy receiving from her father. I wondered about the quality of her parents’ relationship. Lucy hinted her father might have made different choices if tragedy had not struck in his life at the time. Was this something he recognised early on in their marriage too? Furthermore, the way Lucy’s mother decided “the next child was going to be hers” felt perturbing. The children sounded like possessions, owned by one or the other parent, rather than a shared responsibility. Additionally, it implied Lucy was her father’s and not her mother’s.

> *“And erm, and my mother, that's what my mother told me then, is that she decided that I was lost to her and that my father had sort of commandeered*

me, and erm, that therefore, the next child was going to be hers, so that was my brother, that was three years later."

"Commandeered". The use of the word jolted me. It suggested that Lucy was taken away from her mother by her father, and again, it reinforced the sense of children as *possessions* rather than *beings*. Perhaps this idea of "belonging to", in fact, originated with her father's actions rather than her mother's. I wondered what else there was to know beyond what I initially perceived as a *doting first-time dad* based on how he apparently requisitioned Lucy. For some, a baby can also be a means to soothe oneself from difficult feelings, the loss of his father perhaps, or fulfil some other unmet need.

I wondered how it was for her mother that Lucy was seemingly "commandeered" by her father. In my mind, it conjured quite a lonely image. Like being exiled, perhaps. Such vernacular was infused with connotations of exclusion and abandonment. I was interested in the question of how her mother "*decided*" so definitively Lucy was "*lost* to her" when she was so young. Lost to her. These words were doused with something more profound than the words themselves could reveal. I heard a proclamation inhabited by heaviness and sadness, seemingly tempered by loss. My thoughts returned to wondering about the attachment bond between her mother and Lucy as an infant. From what Lucy described, it was possible that an avoidant attachment relationship developed between Lucy and her mother. If so, Lucy would have been less responsive to her mother, potentially actively rebuffing attempts to connect with her (Wallin, 2007). I imagined this would have fuelled tensions if a more

receptive attachment relationship was forged between Lucy and her father. If this was the case, perhaps her mother found herself rejecting Lucy on the basis of feeling rejected in the first place.

When Lucy had her own children, she told me how she suffered from postnatal depression. I wondered if Lucy's mother unknowingly struggled with this too. If so, this would have indeed affected her ability to bond with Lucy when she was born, and I doubted whether it would have been recognised at that time. Even today, where it is ostensibly more accepted, new mothers often feel ashamed and are reluctant to openly acknowledge how they are feeling (McLoughlin, 2013). Lucy admitted she felt unable to disclose her struggles the first time she suffered from postnatal depression. Yet, postnatal depression can have a major life-long impact on the relationship that forms between a mother and child (Myers & Johns, 2018). If Lucy's mother did experience postnatal depression, without support, she most likely would have found it immensely difficult to reconcile how she was feeling on her own in order to form a meaningful bond with Lucy. Furthermore, seeing Lucy develop a close connection with her father might have further alienated her and potentially compounded any pre-existing feelings of inadequacy and shame.

I could relate to these struggles through my mother's inability to bond with me, which I believe originated when I was a baby. However, my mother was consumed by her anguish, having been left by my father for another woman, and I was to be a perpetual reminder of his rejection—something she tried to make me complicit in. As I reflected on Lucy's and my own experience, what struck me most about them was

the sadness. They were inherently chronicles of loss. And it was the loss of something unique and irreplaceable. I could not help but think about the imprint this kind of loss leaves on a person—its permanence, its profoundness. The sort of imprint that deeply marks and yet, is not necessarily discernible to the outside world.

> *“And that's how I remember growing up, so, when the four of us went out, my mother would never hold my hand, she would always push me away, and erm, I used to sort of make it a little competition to see if I could hold her hand, and if I did it would only last for like a minute or two, and then she'd let go, erm, so, it was a very split family, it was my mother and my brother, and me and my father and erm, I couldn’t, she, she wasn't affectionate to me if I tried to cuddle her she’d push me away, and I remember that from when I was quite small. Yeah, I was erm, yeah, I just, I spent all my time trying to sort of win her affection, get her attention, erm, and rarely got anywhere really. Erm, she used to hit us both, erm, with a wooden spoon, and she used to hit us across our knuckles and on our thighs, erm and then when I was a teenager, she started giving me the silent treatment from time to time”.*

Hearing Lucy as a small child desperately seeking her mother’s affection and attention tugged at my heartstrings and poked at my own wounds. While I did not have the same experiences as Lucy, I did have a sense of what it was like to not feel wanted by my mother. To feel rejected. It was hard to imagine Lucy being repeatedly rejected by her mother in her bids for affection and the effect of this on her. How does one so small make sense of this? I thought of the clients who pass through my

consulting room and the kinds of things they internalise about themselves through neglect or shame-inducing encounters such as rejection.

I recalled how Kaufman (1989, p. 16) described shame as “a wound made from the inside, dividing us from both ourselves and others”. I felt this was true for myself. It prompted me to ponder whether the closeness Lucy had with her father was indispensable to moderating this kind of wound. In parallel, it was strange to think that their close relationship might have also contributed to her mother’s rejection of her. Regardless, Lucy could not have understood the reasons for her mother’s reactions toward her. Even as an adult, it was difficult to comprehend. However, the split that was created in the family was clear with her mother and brother on one side of the divide and Lucy and her father on the other.

It was only later that I wondered what kind of relationship her father formed with his son, Lucy’s brother. Was it as distant and rejecting as Lucy’s relationship with her mother? Conceivably, a degree of distance would exist if her mother *commandeered* the next child. It seemed that Lucy’s father, knowingly or not, participated in maintaining the divide that was created within the family or else, it could not have been maintained as such. I sense this quality of Lucy’s mother somehow redressing the balance by appropriating the next child, and yet the divide within the family somehow felt uneven and by no means balanced. With her father working full-time and her mother assuming the role of primary caretaker, there was the dissonant flavour of Lucy spending most of the time *behind enemy lines* with her mother.

Surmising it this way was disconcerting to me. However, I could not fail to notice the distinct sense of *them and us* in the way the split was enacted within the family.

5.3 Becoming estranged or always estranged

Lucy left home at age eighteen to do her nurse training. She chose somewhere that out of all the places, “was the furthest away from home”. The relationship with her mother seemed to continue in much the same way.

> *“So, it would, generally it would be okay, I did, from time to time I would do stuff for her that I thought would please her and might bring us closer together. Erm, I helped her get a new job, I lent her some money to pay off a car loan, erm I booked a weekend away, erm just little bits, you know? Things like that and it did help, but [coughs] the relationship became just quite difficult and, I, I never really, I just... She never wanted to come up and visit me, even when I was a student nurse, and erm, I just constantly felt, yeah, rejected, I guess. And every now and then, something would flare up, and we'd have a row and then she wouldn't speak to me and, and so gradually over time...”*

I perceived an interesting juxtaposition between Lucy’s distancing herself from her mother by going as far away as she could physically and her efforts to be closer emotionally with her. Locating herself physically at a distance automatically created barriers to having the kind of closer relationship she described trying to cultivate through her actions. Perhaps unconsciously, Lucy needed her mother to surmount these obstacles to be able to have confidence in her intentions. I also wondered

whether it also unintentionally served to underpin Lucy's expectation of disappointment—ultimately, because that is what she had known. Nonetheless, I could relate to the dialectic in pursuing closeness whilst maintaining distance. I had unconsciously adopted a similar position. It would be a constant battle between my human need for closeness and the vulnerability this entailed when my mother inevitably acted in ways that would hurt me. And so, the cycle would repeat as I struggled to find an impossibly safe distance between the two.

It seemed Lucy might have been caught up in something similar for a time, where she held onto the hope that her relationship with her mother would change, that they might be closer if only she could "win her affection". It was a familiar loop. I would have little to no contact with my mother for a while, and then, someone would initiate contact, and the young part of me who craved *a mother* would resurface. Somehow, despite experience telling me otherwise, I would hoodwink myself into thinking it might be different. I do not know what I thought would have changed, really. I think I believed that if I changed, she would too. But, of course, it did not work like that and, another version of the same disappointment and pain would be replayed. And so, the cycle of becoming distant again until next time continued.

Through Lucy's actively seeking to "win" her mother over, it seemed that Lucy perhaps perceived her mother's behaviour toward her as a response to her own. In effect, if Lucy tried harder to be a *better* daughter, she might decipher the code to being more deserving of her mother's love and attention. Maybe this is what Lucy offered me a glimpse of earlier when we started our conversation, and she sought to

clarify what I wanted her to talk about. The psychotherapist part of me wondered whether, at a deeper level, perhaps not even consciously, Lucy believed that her mother's rejection was her fault. These kinds of explanations can easily form as a child attempts to give meaning to painful relational experiences. As immature beings, children have a much more limited capacity to make sense of what is happening. In the midst of shameful experiences of rejection, a child can easily arrive at damaging conclusions about their self-worth, especially when they do not have sufficient experiences to the contrary by which to recalibrate (Ginot, 2015). It seemed, though, that as the wounds of rejection continued to be inflicted in adulthood, Lucy reached a point where she found herself deliberately and progressively withdrawing in her exchanges with her mother.

> *"So, the distance sort of grew and grew over... gradually over time. So, I guess, I mean then, the complicating factor though was that erm Adam* [a pseudonym], *my husband, was someone I went to school with. So, we didn't get together until we were 26, but his mum lives around the corner from my mother or did at that time. Or not far away anyway. So, whenever we went to visit his mum, we ended up having to visit my mother as well, which... So, we probably visited her more than I would have liked. We'd go down for the weekend, and we'd spend one day with one and one day with the other.*
>
> *Erm and then gradually over time with our phone calls I decided that I was gonna stop telling her anything personal, because it just, it would just get thrown back in my face, she would criticise me, or... So, our phone calls, and*

phone calls were really difficult because she was very regimented about when I could and couldn't call, so I had to call on a given date and time, erm and we had to take turns to phone. And if I phoned at any other time, she'd get cross, she'd get angry with me".

In the preceding dialogue, I was struck by how Lucy described Adam's mother living in the vicinity of her own as a "complicating factor". In this context, it was apparent that Lucy felt several tensions surrounding these visits, particularly based on the fact she was "seeing her more than [she] would have liked". I wondered if she had voiced this to her husband and how it would have felt for Lucy to do so. If my instincts were correct about Lucy's tendency to seek to please the *other,* that potentially would have been quite a difficult thing to do. I felt deeply aware of the omnipresent pressures of social responsibility that I all too often succumbed to, so perhaps Lucy felt obligated to go, like a moral duty as a daughter. Moreover, there was the persistent and inescapable part of Lucy that by admission still endeavoured to "win" her mother's affections. However, the physical and emotional chasm that existed between Lucy and her mother started to expand more palpably after the arrival of Lucy's first child, Max.

"And just before I had Max, I was actually pregnant with Max, but she didn't know, she said, 'I've decided I'm not coming up to visit you in Birmingham ever again'. And I was actually thinking, 'I know that you'll change your mind because actually, I'm pregnant', Erm, but she didn't really.

So, when I had Max [a pseudonym], I knew my dad would have been up like a flash to come up and visit, erm, but my mother had no sign, no interest in coming up and I, I actually had to ask her to come and see Max. Erm, so she came up about four or five days after he was born, erm, and she wasn't gushing and everything, but it, erm she had no..."

At first, Lucy thought the arrival of Max would herald a turning point with her mother. Though not by design, of course, I wondered about the image of presenting her mother with a grandchild as the ultimate means to "win" her over. That a baby would perhaps bring them together and give them something to bond over. It would be a natural wish to have. The timing was difficult as well because the year before, Lucy lost her father unexpectedly to a heart attack. She knew he would have been there straight away to share the occasion. Contrary to her expectations and hopes, Lucy was met with the customary disinterest from her mother when Max when was born. It would have been impossible for Lucy to conceal her disappointment. When Lucy described how she "actually had to ask her [mum] to come", her accentuation of "*actually*" was permeated with something quite painful. I felt it deep within my stomach, intermingled with my own painful losses.

This time, Lucy's disappointment took on a distinct flavour, one that had a more bitter quality although well-seasoned with anger too. I was acquainted with the kind of reservoir of rejection and disappointment this plumbed into. It was not surprising to discover that Lucy suffered from postnatal depression following Max's birth or that

she believed her depression was probably related to the relationship she had with her mother.

> *“I thought that it might bring me and my mum closer together, erm, and maybe it did a little bit. I mean, occasionally I went down with Max when he was a small baby, and I'd go and have the afternoon with her, and I'd always sort of had this, you know, image of having lunch with my mum, going shopping, and we'd never really done that. So, I thought that might happen, erm, but it didn't really, erm, she still had no desire to come up and visit us, erm, so I guess I thought it would make things, improve things, but it didn't”.*

Lucy’s former confidence that when she became a mother, her own mother would want to be closer was crushed. In the spirit of crushed hopes, our worlds certainly collided. Akin to the images Lucy depicted, I dreamt of the possibility of shopping trips with my mother and lunches together. They seemed like such ordinary experiences to share with one another. I, too, yearned for a *normal* mother-daughter relationship, and its absence left a gaping hole. Although I never had these experiences, I *missed* them—that loss again. Together with the loss Lucy and I endured, the unintelligible question of “why” lurks hauntingly in the background.

With Lucy’s second son being born just fifteen months after Max, her hands were full adjusting to family life. Her mother initially offered to come and help Lucy, only to retract this when the offer was taken up. Lucy recalled how “*she'd changed her mind, erm, that she, erm, didn't want to be at my beck and call and if I thought that she was*

going to go up and down the motorway for her, I'd got another thing coming, and who do I think I am?".

The one-sided nature of their relationship and her mother's lack of effort to spend time with them was taking its toll on Lucy and reached a tipping point.

> *"I just decided I was going to make a stand. I'd had enough. So, I said to her at the beginning of the year, 'I'd really like you to come up and visit sometime over the summer'. Because she'd used, she'd used so many excuses about erm, it being dark or erm, the wrong weather or, just like the wrong leaves on the track, you know..."*

For seemingly the first time, Lucy spoke up about her mother's reluctance to visit her and this time, she did not back down. She remarked that it felt like a "battle" every week to bring the topic up with her mother. I had the sense of Lucy having to fight incredibly hard for something many would imagine being an *ordinary* thing for a mother to do—to visit her daughter and help with the grandchildren. By her own admission, Lucy did not normally confront her mother about anything without eventually conceding apologetically. This time was different. Lucy did not relent, and this created an ostensibly intolerable position for her mother, given how Lucy had always been the one to back down and apologise even if she did not feel at fault.

> *"So, the next phone call was supposed to be her phoning me, and she just never phoned me. And I decided that I'd, for years and years, she'd given me*

the silent treatment and I'd always gone back, I was the one that had gone back to her and grovelled and apologised and, and I thought, 'I'm not doing it now. I'm a grown woman, I've got my own family', and erm, so I decided I wasn't going to, so erm I heard nothing off her for 17 months."

This marked a considerable shift in Lucy's position in relation to her mother. The reflexive performance of her part in the same scene that was repeatedly re-enacted between them unexpectedly halted. I wondered what had made this shift possible at this moment. One could surmise that it was because she reached the tipping point inasmuch as every person has their limits. However, I anticipated she had probably been at the tipping point many times before when she distanced and yet, the cycle had continued. While I could not know with any certainty, two ostensibly important elements stood out to me in her dialogue above.

The first was her statement, "I'm a grown woman". Bearing in mind the dynamic between Lucy and her mother was founded on the parent-child relationship, it was to some extent inevitable that these roles would be reprised in adulthood. I wondered how often Lucy, as technically speaking a "grown woman", had found herself propelled back to a younger, smaller version of herself in the midst of her mother. The way she declared she was "a grown woman" struck me as the first time she truly owned it as a position she could claim in relation to her mother. And in doing so, Lucy was potentially able to step into her adult-*self,* who could stand up to her mother in a way she had not been able to previously.

Immediately following this and closely related to the first statement, Lucy added, “I’ve got my own family”. It sounded like Lucy was now oriented in a different direction. Perhaps no longer feeling dependent on her family of origin to provide her with a sense of affiliation to others. Lucy had started her own family, and they needed her. I was struck by the symbiosis between these two discrete yet interlinked statements where there was an interaction between the two positions of being a “grown woman” and having your “own family”.

When I met Lucy, she had been estranged from her mother for ten years. Max and his younger brother were now fourteen and thirteen, respectively. As I thought about the story of Lucy’s estrangement from her mother as a “grown woman”, I could not escape this overwhelming sense that they had, in many ways, been estranged for much longer. The emotional neglect and rejection Lucy experienced from the moment her mother decided “*the next child was going to be hers*”, prompted me to think that perhaps one could say their estrangement had already happened a long time ago but, back then, Lucy was not mature enough to reconcile it. Now she was.

5.4 History repeats itself, but it does not have to…

Before having children, Lucy expressed concern about how she would be as a mother given her experience in relation to her own mother and what she later shared about her mother’s experience of her mother too. Over time, through the generations, it appeared as though there had been a cascade of wounds passed from mother to daughter, from mother to daughter, and who knew how far back this stretched. It brought to mind what is understood, in my field of psychotherapy, as

intergenerational transmission, a concept that is especially pertinent regarding the establishment of the attachment bond between mother and child (Fonagy & Luyten, 2009; Schore, 2000). Lucy's fears were understandable. However, they also reflected that she had insight into the potential that she would unconsciously and reflexively follow suit.

> *"Erm, and then I guess the only other thing that I, I was really, really worried before I had the boys that I would repeat the cycle, erm… Of, erm, I would be like my mother was to me, to my children. Erm, and I spoke to my dad about it before he died, erm, a couple of times, because you know I think you do base your parenting skills on how you've been parented, and possibly your mothering skills on how you've been mothered, and my dad was a lovely dad when I was a child, but obviously he worked full-time and so I was just really worried that I was going to... Very worried about how I would be as a mum, erm, and yeah. I spoke to my dad, and my dad was like, 'Well yeah, I can see why you think that' [laughs]. And my mother used to say to me a lot when I was a child that, 'Oh my mother was this, my mother was that. My mother wasn't very nice, and I swore that if I had children, I would never do the same', but she did do exactly the same thing. So, there was that worry in my head that I was going to do the same thing, erm..."*

I recognised Lucy's fears, having held similar ones about my own capacity to *mother*. I, too, had a steadfast determination not to do the same with my own children. To be a different kind of mother. Perhaps the kind of mother I would have liked to have.

Despite my intentions, there were times where I was painfully aware of how lost I felt in my ability to mother, having never received adequate mothering myself. I recall feeling disembodied in my new role, making it up as I went along. Lucy's fears were compounded because she knew of her mother's vow and that regardless, she *did* end up repeating the behaviour of her mother with Lucy. Unsurprisingly then, she worried about the potential inevitability of unconsciously repeating the behaviour of her mother. That it might be out of her control as something now etched into her way of being. And then Max arrived, her first son.

> *"So when I had Max, I really, really struggled, and I think, I don't know what it was, but I, I suffered quite badly with postnatal depression, but I wouldn't admit to it erm, because I wanted this baby for so long and I'd lost a baby, and I'd had... erm fertility treatments, so a baby was like so precious, but I felt nothing for him when he was born and erm, and it… the delivery was quite difficult and then, of course, 10 days after he was born was the first anniversary of my dad's death. And I think just the whole thing. I was, I expected to feel this rush of love for my child, and I didn't feel it at all. And erm, I was really, really low but I, I didn't tell anybody…."*

I imagined the shock Lucy must have felt when Max was born and her feelings of love and affection toward him did not manifest. It must have been devastating. Particularly given how much she wanted a baby and the fertility treatment she underwent to make this possible. In my consulting room, when clients do not act or feel how they believe they are supposed to in certain situations, they often ask,

"What is wrong with me?". Predicated on the above dialogue, specifically the expectation she would *"feel this rush of love",* Lucy appeared to struggle with similar questions. It was noteworthy that Lucy ascribed her depression as postnatal even though, as Lucy acknowledged, Max's arrival coincided with the first anniversary of her father's death. I wondered to what extent her depression was indeed *postnatal* or might have been connected to the loss of her father, as well as the loss of her mother.

Against the backdrop of anxiety that she would repeat her mother's behaviour, Lucy's absence of feeling and affection toward Max must have felt cataclysmic. Considering what Lucy had shared about her relationship with her mother, it was even more striking to hear about Lucy's struggle to bond with Max. In terms of what to make of this, the interrelation between Lucy's experience with Max and that of her mother with Lucy called into question how it was for her mother when Lucy was born. Lucy was surprised to discover she was pregnant with their second son only seven months after Max arrived.

> *"And erm, we had Jack [pseudonym], and I was crazy in love with Jack as soon as he was born, madly and passionately in love with him and erm, what I had never felt like this before was amazing, and then we went on holiday when Max... So Max would have been 17 months old, and Jack was about four months, and we'd become this split family, where Adam was doing stuff with Max, and I would do stuff with Jack, because I was still breastfeeding Jack and erm, and we went on holiday to Devon, and erm, Max was poorly*

while we were away, had some vomiting bug, and he didn't want me, he, all he wanted was his father, and I sudd…, I suddenly thought, 'This is just, this is history repeating itself'."

The contrast in how Lucy described feeling when she had her second child, Jack, was striking. From feeling nothing when Max was born to being *"madly and passionately in love"* with Jack. I wondered if this mirrored something of what happened to Lucy's mother when her brother was born. There was certainly a discernible parallel between the relationship Lucy's mother had with her and with her brother, and the one that had formed with Lucy and her sons. The divide that Lucy experienced in her family growing up had been, in some sense, recreated, where Adam was doing things with Max while Lucy took care of Jack.

Understandably, the context had influenced the inadvertent emergence of such a split, with it starting to develop in less perceptible ways during Lucy's second pregnancy. Lucy reported that "*Adam would always bath Max*" so she could have a rest. Even considering these contextual aspects, there was a notable disparity between how Lucy felt when Max was born, in contrast with when Jack arrived. When Max showed a stark preference for his father while he was sick on holiday, Lucy abruptly realised that despite her best intentions, a version of history was being repeated within her family. As I think about it now, I wondered how this was for Lucy and how she felt about Max's reaction. I considered whether Max's rejection of her in favour of his father might have echoed her mother's rejection of her attempts to seek affection. In some sense, how could it not have resonated? Lucy knew how painful it

was to feel unwanted and rejected by her mother, and so, she absolutely did not want to repeat the past with her family. And so, Lucy took steps to consciously work with Adam to shift and restore the balance between the relationships within the family.

Lucy intervened. She prevented the cycle of history from repeating itself in some form or another. The question of why some people can find it within themselves to shift gear from a path that might otherwise have been unconsciously mapped for them is a question I often ponder. How is it that my mother could not? That Lucy's mother could not, even though she sought not to be as her mother had been. Yet, Lucy could. I could. This is not intended to cast blame. Each of us has our limitations. But it is an intriguing and important question, to which I am sure there is no conclusive answer.

5.5 Afterword

When Lucy read her story, it was different to what she thought it would be. Although she was not sure what to expect, she did not think it would quite be like this. The comparisons that were interwoven into the story between both of our experiences were especially interesting to her. I felt conscious of my presence, and I did not want it to feel like an intrusion. However, Lucy did not seem to feel that and instead, she felt comforted seeing parts of my story alongside hers. Also, having an insight into my experiences helped her understand where some of my possible interpretations might have come from.

Lucy commented that she liked the parts of her story that I focused on and the way it was told. There were many things that resonated or made her think, such as wanting to please and the role of her father in maintaining the split in the family. She recognised he had been complicit in some sense, and that has been hard to come to terms with. The idea that her mother might have suffered from PND when she was born had never occurred to her before and provoked conflicting feelings. If she did, it did not let her mother off the hook. After all, despite Lucy's struggle with PND, she actively sought to repair her relationship with Max and having this recognised within the story ameliorated the sense that her mother might be absolved of responsibility for her behaviour. Lucy also shared how reassured she felt by what had been written concerning her initial difficulties bonding with Max. It had been a guilty secret surrounded by much shame for Lucy, so the compassion and understanding in the write-up of this experience was something she found deeply comforting.

Although telling her story had been hard, Lucy described feeling "really chuffed" and "proud" to have taken part in this study. She remarked that she really liked receiving my message asking if she would like to come up with her own pseudonym. Being able to give herself a name of her choosing felt empowering. I really appreciated Lucy sharing that with me. We often never know the significance of such seemingly small gestures, and clearly, this one had been important.

Chapter 6. A story of intertwining paths

Before meeting Scout (a pseudonym she chose), I could not know in what ways our stories would converge. Throughout my life and before undertaking this research, I had rarely encountered others in my position who were estranged from their mother. It has only really been since conducting this study that I have discovered so many more people are affected by estrangement than I realised. In some sense, it reinforced what an isolating experience estrangement can be. Perhaps in ordinary daily life, it was hardly surprising that I had not come across others in a similar position since I rarely told anyone about the state of the relationship with my mother. But encountering someone who had another significant aspect of their life in common with me, especially *this* one, was indeed a considerable surprise—one for which I was not prepared.

From our initial phone conversation, I had developed an impression of Scout as someone quite formidable. It was something about the tone of her voice and in the way she spoke—I sensed a quality of self-assuredness. She had the air of someone quite commanding. I pictured someone not easily daunted by things and who spoke their mind, perhaps in the way an older person might because they have been there and done that, so not much fazes them anymore. At the same time, the practitioner part of me also recognised appearances were often deceiving. That what was presented outwardly can be designed to conceal something to the contrary that exists inwardly. I could not know if this was the case, but at the very least, what I did know, was that I felt some apprehension before our meeting. That was not unusual,

though. On some level, there was always an undercurrent of discomfort, as each conversation would bring me face-to-face with different aspects of my own estrangement story, and I could not know which parts of mine were going to emerge through an-*other's*.

As I sat with my discomfort, I recalled a reference Scout had made to her experience in research and how familiar she seemed with the process. My ears pricked up at this, and predictably, my sense of vulnerability as a novice researcher surfaced. Before meeting Scout, I listened carefully to these vulnerable parts and to what was being stirred up. It helped me be aware of what I need to pay closer attention to in myself, but sometimes there can also be clues about what the other person potentially evokes in those they meet. It reminded me of the concept of pretransference because many factors will have entered the relationship since our first phone conversation, which will have influenced the picture constructed of the other ahead of our meeting (Gilbert & Orlans, 2011). Perceptions can be shaped by so many elements like tone of voice, accent, your name, culture, gender and the context of the conversation. Certainly, I had an image of Scout from our phone conversation as someone with a strong presence and powerful energy, which I can find intimidating. It prompted me to wonder what kind of image Scout might have formed of me.

6.1 On mothering you, mothering me, mothering myself

Despite my usual apprehensiveness, I looked forward to meeting Scout. I had the sense that she had a story she was ready to tell and, therefore, would not need much

encouragement to take the lead in telling it. Upon meeting Scout, once again, I was aware of her presence. She was around my age, and as before, I noticed there was an energy about her. Not in the sense of something positive or negative, but more like something vibrant and alive. Her eyes were bright, and her effervescence was reflected in her face and in her voice, which was strong and clear, the same way I heard it when we spoke on the phone. As we settled down to talk, beverage to hand, I was aware that some of my earlier feelings still lingered. After my usual introductory preamble, we were ready to start. Without much prompting, Scout began:

> *"So, yeah, I am the youngest of three, three girls, err so my mum has, and I'm, there's a significant age difference between us, so my mum had the first two, and then I was six years after the others, so there's a bit of a generation gap between us. And my mum is ... She must be... so she'll be around her early 70s now, and erm, is quite an intriguing woman, on, on her own sort of level, and came, came from an awful lot of poverty, very working-class woman, was the eldest daughter of six, raised most of those children, had quite a traumatic childhood, I think on a lot of different levels, and when she was 16, her family all converted into becoming Jehovah's Witnesses".*

Stunned, my heart seemed to stop momentarily. Did I hear correctly? "Jehovah's Witnesses". Was Scout raised in a Jehovah's Witness family, like *me*? For a few seconds, I was reeling. I knew I had to slow myself down to see what would unfold in Scout's story. Inwardly though, I registered a surge of anticipation that we might have this in common, that *'I'* was not alone. Being raised a JW—shorthand for Jehovah's

Witness—had often made me feel like an alien, existing in a world that I was not entirely a part of. On top of that, most people viewed the JWs as strange, which made me feel even more out of place. As a child, I remember the painful awkwardness of being quizzed about their beliefs. Yes, *their* beliefs. Even then, I was not convinced, despite my efforts to try to play along. I was meant to have *faith*. Well, I did not.

As I picked myself up from feeling somewhat *slam-dunked*, and before hearing those ominous words, I had been struck by how Scout introduced her mother. She had begun by describing this “intriguing” woman with “quite a traumatic childhood”. There was something in the quality of her voice as she spoke. I thought I could discern subtle flavours of admiration together with a hint of protectiveness. Silently, I wondered how it was to talk about the relationship with her mother in this context. By this, I mean a space orchestrated to speak about a deeply personal and important relationship that was broken. I detected the presence of my old friend *shame*—we are, of course, well-acquainted. In thinking about what our conversation might unearth for Scout and how this would manifest through her story, I wondered if it was only *my* shame I was sensing. As I contemplated Scout’s insight into her mother’s early life experience and the imprints that this might have left behind, I was intrigued by her endeavour for this to be understood so soon, at a point where Scout was ostensibly *setting the scene* for her story. It was a curious way to position things, and I wondered what it might mean.

Bringing the adversity her mother had suffered to the fore seemed like it could be a communication of something important about their relationship and the position that she potentially took up in relation to her mother. I had the sense that surreptitiously, Scout wanted to establish that her mother was not a *bad* person. Maybe this was the protective flavour I had picked up on. It would be understandable for difficult and conflictual feelings to arise when discussing her mother and their relationship. In my consulting room, many clients feel guilt, as if they are betraying their family by talking about their experiences. At the edge of my mind, I wondered as well about a possible fear of being judged, perhaps a not so distant relative of shame. From my experience, the JWs were an exceptionally judgemental bunch. Behind the scenes, I would quip that the 'J' in JW stood for *judgement*, not Jehovah. I would not have been surprised if Scout had encountered that too.

> *"I think I was the most empathic and intuitive, and my elder, my next sister up from me is on the autistic spectrum, my eldest sister is a very competent and pragmatic person, but I was always the intuitive and empathic one, and, and, and so for my mum, I was always somebody who kind of und... emotionally understood her, which always put me in a difficult position, which I didn't understand as a small child, but I think she didn't have a lot of, erm, she didn't have a lot of support, it didn't come from many places, she was in quite a rigid structure with the religion, she came from a very difficult family, I don't, I think she struggled to form friendships in lots of ways, she has learning difficulties, dyslexia and dyspraxia which she never really got a handle on coming from poverty and then she didn't have a lot of education".*

There was a profound sense of compassion and understanding that Scout had concerning her mother's past and difficulties. As she explained what her mother had been through, it was as if she showed me this empathic part of herself that she had described—in other words, the part that emotionally understood her mother so well. As an image of her mother gradually started to come into view, I noticed that not much of Scout was visible as yet. It seemed that there was perhaps a tendency for Scout to be closely attuned and responsive to the emotional states of her mother within their relationship. I felt impacted by the weight of such a demand that would have been inadvertently placed on a small child. I wondered about the cost of this too. Devoting such close attention to the emotional needs of the *other* can be at the expense of accessing one's own inner states. On reflection, I was curious to know if Scout offered herself the same level of compassion and understanding. I hoped so.

Through the story being told and how she had started telling it, Scout's empathic nature seemed to speak primarily to her mother's needs. In the way she described her intuitive and empathic qualities as a child, it was as if she believed she had been born that way. It was hard to discern the extent to which this belief about herself might have developed in response to her environment. Perhaps all that can be surmised from developmental theory is that children unconsciously adapt to their caregivers to optimise their chances of maintaining a sense of well-being (Ginot, 2015). That is not to exclude genetics and a possible predisposition toward these qualities, and gene-environment interaction studies have shown there is a bidirectional influence between these two elements (Manuck & McCaffery, 2014). However, like most infants, Scout would have depended on her mother to thrive and

survive. Yet, her mother had become increasingly isolated and deprived of emotional connection. Maybe the late arrival of a baby presented a fresh and much sought-after opportunity for her mother to connect and bond. It was hard to say.

> *“So she's sort of in this space, and then to have the, the youngest one who was very emotionally capable even from being quite tiny, so I think in a lot of ways she was quite reliant on me, and then as I, and even educationally I was the one who helped her really develop her reading and writing, once I started learning my reading and writing, so there was this kind of, maybe a co-dependency from really quite early, erm and then, of course, I got to err preteen time, I started to really evoke my own sense of identity, which was quite hard in that environment, notwithstanding the religious environment to cope with. So, I really started to, erm differentiate myself really, and so I, so I’ve reflected on it many times and started to think, that, that you know there’s a necessary and normal struggle for any sort of teen with their parent at that time and girls with their mothers, but with all those other factors, I think, for my mum, it was a, it must have felt incredibly rejecting on an emotional level, even though she couldn’t name it”.*

It was powerful to hear Scout use the words “reliant” and “co-dependency” to describe the relationship she had with her mother as she was growing up. Those words had floated through my head at one point. It was as if Scout plucked them right out of my mind. It was profoundly moving to imagine Scout as a child in what seemed to be a reversal of roles. Here was a child helping her mother, an adult, with her

reading and writing rather than the other way round. I thought about how children need to idealise their parents, to behold them as possessing wizard-like powers as more robust, wiser, more knowledgeable and capable beings than themselves (Kohut & Wolf, 1978). Yet, this young girl, in many ways, was apparently the more capable of the two. The image of Scout helping her mother in this way seemed bittersweet. A benevolent act, and at the same time, it seemed painful to me on a number of levels. My curiosity was later piqued concerning how it came to be that Scout helped her with her reading and writing. Was it that her mother asked? If it came from Scout, I wondered what compelled her to do that. It felt like a meaningful question.

As Scout described starting to differentiate herself as a teenager and the struggle to forge her own identity, once again, I was struck by her empathy regarding how this must have affected her mother. But perhaps the most striking aspect, once again, was the absence of Scout's struggle and how she was *affected*. There did not seem to be much room for her. Rather, her energy seemed primarily invested in the direction of her mother. As I reflected on this in hindsight, I wondered if Scout could only make room for herself by breaking out of a dynamic that absorbed so much of her. However, I also sensed a force within Scout that seemed to mirror something I recognised in myself. A kind of resolve. My resolve was rooted in a powerful desire not to end up wasting my life and potential in the way I perceived my mother had. This had been a driving force propelling me forward. Maybe Scout, too, was driven by something similar. At sixteen, when Scout had a non-JW boyfriend, this marked the beginning of many different cycles of estrangement with her mother. Scout married young, primarily as a means to alleviate the tensions she struggled to

reconcile in navigating from the JW world to one that was unknown and where she was essentially on her own.

> *“So, I did that and then got to my twenties and thought, "Oh, hang on, what am I doing? I not, I don't seem to really be doing anything." So, I went off and s.., and sort of decided I was going to go travelling and try and just find out who I was and what I wanted to do, and at that point, with my mum, she left my dad... I was off doing things that she kind of admired, as I was doing things that were interesting, going places, and then again, she always had this part of her that was quite interested in innovative things… So that was, that wasn't too difficult a time period, you know, and it also reverted back to that point, you know, I was parenting her a lot while she left my dad, she didn’t really know how to do it, didn’t really know how to live on her own, and she didn't know how to fill in forms for jobs, she didn't even know how to go to the divorce lawyer and find out how to get money, so I did all of that with her”.*

It was intriguing that her mother chose to leave her father when Scout decided to go travelling on a journey of self-discovery. Perhaps even more intriguing was knowing her parents were now back together, albeit after seventeen years apart. I noticed, though, that not much was said about Scout’s father, other than he struggled with emotions and was seemingly on the autistic spectrum. I wondered what was going on for Scout’s mum at this time when she left her husband. Immediately after that, I wondered why I was wondering so much about Scout’s mum. Possibly there was some kind of *parallel process* (Bromberg, 1982), in other words, a shared

unconscious identification with what I perceived as Scout's preoccupation with her mother's position. At the same time, I recognised the push-pull that I was so often caught up in with my mother and how my empathy toward her plight was at times like a vice holding me back from my own life.

It was interesting that Scout herself highlighted it "reverted back" to a parental role in her relationship with her mother when she left her father as if to recognise her role in their relationship. I recalled something Scout had said earlier that her mother, as the eldest child, ended up playing the role of mother to her five siblings. In which case, I wondered, who mothered her mother? Maybe she inadvertently found, or moulded, the kind of mother she would have liked in Scout. There was an irony that Scout was the *baby* of the family, though. However, to have raised five siblings, her mother clearly had resources. Yet, when she left Scout's father, there was a helplessness which, from this vantage point, did not seem congruent with the image of a woman who on many levels *was* capable and who Scout herself also saw as "innovative".

Once more, in the midst of all this, I was aware that I had lost sight of Scout. I wondered what this meant. Maybe it was representative of something perhaps connected with Scout's own capacity to prioritise herself. Thinking about it later, I wondered how it must have been for her, drawn into supporting her mother, from afar, I assumed. In which case, it was curious to think about how the break-up between her parents, in a sense, facilitated a closer connection between Scout and her mother. There was another aspect that Scout mentioned, which is how her mother "admired" what she was doing, that there was "almost a kind of awe". In hearing this,

I noticed a familiar scratchy feeling of discomfort under my skin, as I was reminded of my mother's awe at my accomplishments quickly to be overshadowed by envy and bitterness regarding her own life. Likewise, Scout described that she *"always felt a really strong sense of jealousy"*, which she attributed to her mother "being quite stuck in her situation, not [finding] her freedom, and… that there was a big part of her that maybe could have had a very different life". It was a tragedy—a loss. A loss made worse by the fact it was a living loss, except it was not really living. At least, this was how I saw my own mother's existence, and I sensed Scout felt a similar kind of tragedy concerning her mother's life.

Maybe I admired Scout and how understanding and empathetic she was toward the losses and disadvantages her mother suffered. I had struggled to be so understanding with my mother. Instead, anger had been my defence. It seemed like quite a mature position—perhaps another example of Scout being *the grown-up*. On another level, I wondered if Scout's compassion for her mother obscured the pain of her own profound sense of loss, *"of not having the mother that [she] needed"*. Perhaps it had offered a means to soothe herself, but did it also become a shield from other feelings—complicated feelings such as anger, grief and pain? For Scout, *"the worst of the estrangement began"* when she came back from travelling, and it became clear that Scout *"no longer wanted to be her parent and take on those responsibilities."*

"What I realised much later was, there was, there was also part of her that believed that it was a bit like a Rumspringa[1]*, I would go off, do these things that in the world, they were never bad, and then I would come back to being a Witness… and she believed somewhere that I was gonna go get some stuff out of my system and come back, get married, have children and it would all be okay…*

She would be very critical, and it was in the tone of... coming from that Witness background, the shunning, the estrange… the deliberate estrangement is designed out of love from their perspective, that if I do this to you, and you fail in living, you will be forced to come back to the fold, and that's better for you, so the, the harder I can make it for you, and the more likely you are to fail, the more loving therefore this actually is, it makes no rational sense but…"

There was this idea that Scout would come to her senses and *"come back to the fold."* As if it was a phase she was going through and that her mother was going to get her daughter back. I was indeed familiar with the JW strategy that we must be cruel to be kind. For me, all that ever did for me was reinforce the hypocrisy of their so-called Christian stance as a forgiving and loving organisation. And clearly, it made no sense to Scout either. Rather, what stood out was the cruelty that those who ostensibly should love and protect you would actively make it more difficult for you in

[1] **Rumspringa**, also spelled Rumschpringe or Rumshpringa, is a rite of passage during adolescence, translated in English as "jumping or hopping around," used in some Amish communities (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rumspringa)

the pursuit of seeing *"you fail in living."* Scout admitted she put up with *"a lot of emotional cruelty"* for a long time *"because [she] was frightened of the estrangement, [she] was frightened of losing that connection."* I resonated with that. It *was* frightening. Yet, perhaps what was even more frightening than that was the thought that her mother, a person she ought to be able to depend on and trust, would seek to capitalise on her fear to prevent her from living her life in the way that she chooses.

6.2 On loss, sacrifice and the fundamental job of a mother

Being born into a JW family, growing up in that environment and then later leaving it behind was an enormously hard and scary step to take. It meant starting my life over from scratch. I knew from personal experience. And estrangement was an inevitable consequence of choosing to leave, except in this context, it affected me at a micro and macro level because I risked losing more than one relationship. Depending on how indoctrinated they were, it could mean losing most, if not all, of your support network, including family and friends.

Upon discovering Scout had been a JW as well, I found myself in some turmoil. I wanted to interject there and then with "me too!". Something stopped me, though. A fear that I would be trespassing on someone else's story, that I would be hijacking it somehow—that I had no place here. It was an old script. Perhaps it was safer to be hidden, while deep down also wanting to be *seen*. I wondered if Scout also struggled with something comparable, as in, maybe it was hard to find her place amongst all these *others* and *their* needs that had seemingly eclipsed hers. At least until she claimed her freedom, but that was not without its repercussions. Maybe we both

struggled in permitting ourselves *to be*. To be released from the compulsion to assuage a deep-seated guilt for choosing a different path.

Even though I did not speak up about my JW background during Scout's telling of her story, I inadvertently let her know in subtle ways. I could tell that she could tell that I had inside knowledge. She even alluded to it at one point. I did not take up the invitation. I sensed this might have been somewhat disconcerting for her. Somehow my silence felt worse than speaking up might have. I suspected it fuelled my sense of shame and it did not feel authentic. And I knew it had interfered regardless. Retrospectively, I wondered if it was '*I'* that was the more disconcerted. Irrespective of my inner tangle, she continued:

> *"I think, as what happens with a lot of fundamentalist religions, which I'd class the Jehovah's Witnesses to be and that's what, you know, I think for a lot of people, they're either a cult or any kind of a control group are fundamentalists in some way, so many convertees in can be even more sort of militant than people who were born in, I think and erm, and also it's a religion where there's not a great deal of status for women, the status relies on their relationship to the men".*

Scout was not just describing her experience. It was mine too. My mother had converted along with her family as a *vulnerable* young woman. I emphasise vulnerability because I often felt that those who entered the JW organisation tended to be in a place in life where they needed something to anchor them and manage

their sense of vulnerability. Being part of the JW structure appeared to offer those in that position a sense of belonging and safety. When Scout pointed to the status of women in the organisation, that had always infuriated me from quite a young age. I struggled to reconcile the idea that, essentially, women were second-class citizens. This also coincided with a time when more liberal ideas concerning identity, equality, and power emerged through various discourses. I imagined this would have been problematic for Scout as well, possibly for the same reasons, but there was something else too:

> *“There is a prolific problem with paedophilia within the Jehovah’s Witness organisation, and I have been, I have been a victim of sexual abuse. Now, throughout my childhood, I've attempted to raise this, and that had always been pushed back, erm and then at that point, at the ending of the connection with my mum, around my late twenties and the beginning of my early thirties, I thought, "Right, okay, I actually now want to do something about this." I decided to go make a formal complaint to the police and started to action a case against it and erm in doing so, I knew that the police investigation would return to my family and start to ask some questions”.*

I felt the significance of Scout’s revelation, of her sharing something so important and painful with me. As I thought about the myriad ways that she could have told her story, I wondered whether the tacit knowledge of our shared JW experience might have played a part in her being able to reveal this. Conceivably. She could have easily chosen not to disclose it. But then, a crucial piece of what happened to her and

how it affected the relationship with her mother would have been overlooked, just like before, when she was a child. I had the sense that this made it all the more critical that it was *not* excluded from her story. When the abuse started, she was around age six, which prompted me to belatedly wonder how this might have related to her preteen struggles to differentiate herself where she found herself at odds with her mother. Particularly as her attempts to reach out had fallen on deaf ears. I perceived a painful injustice that Scout was so understanding and emotionally available to her mother and then to wonder who was authentically there for her. Who was protecting this little girl? I could not help but feel that actually, she was, by pursuing the police complaint. In doing so, though, Scout depended on her mother to acknowledge that she had told her what was happening all those years ago.

> *“It was a very traumatic thing that she had to acknowledge because she had to not only acknowledge that I was abused, which is a very traumatic thing for a parent to have to acknowledge about their child, but she also had to acknowledge... which I think was a much harder thing for her to do, is that I had also previously talked about it with her, and she had, erm pushed it away and had forgotten that she had done that. And that was quite hard for her to do. She did eventually acknowledge that, and I could see how incredibly painful that was to do, for her, and she did it”.*

Following her mother's acceptance that the sexual abuse was a reality, Scout described the sense that her mother had done what was necessary and did not want to revisit it any further. Consequently, her mother quickly returned to a position of

“let’s forget and let’s move on”. Scout was right. It *was* a “traumatic” thing to acknowledge. But not just for her mother. For *Scout* too. I felt strongly that Scout’s trauma ought not to be obscured by her mother’s. And I felt angry that it seemed to be the case. I wondered if some of the anger I was feeling was on behalf of Scout, as I realised her anger was notably absent. Because she understood how hard it was for her mother to be in that position, I wondered if it then became impossible to make room for other potentially more difficult feelings concerning her mother’s behaviour to emerge. After all, compassion and anger do not make for easy companions. It is not uncommon in my work for people to talk about anger when really, they mean rage. Many perceive anger as an unacceptable emotion, so rage does not even enter the vernacular.

Understandably, many people are afraid of accepting their feelings of rage or anger. Alternatively, they are experienced as destructive impulses that threaten their existence, so they develop ways to cover them up (Neborsky & Labije, 2018). Or else, one risks being confronted with some potentially intolerable realities. Whether this might have happened for Scout, I could not say. However, the question on my mind was how she made sense of a reality where her mother pushed it away and *forgot* something so horrifying that happened to her daughter. Or perhaps harder still, that her mother had not done anything about it. How does a child resolve something like that for themselves? That felt like the most painful part. This was the kind of pain, grief even, that might cause one to disintegrate, if not deflected or subverted, to prevent the tidal wave from subsuming them. I wondered if Scout had felt this on some level and had devised a way to escape the full extent of these painful feelings.

Simultaneously, in the background, I was conscious of how my historical anger pertaining to my mother's failures permeated the air, blurring the boundary between Scout's experiences and my own. Intriguingly, when it came to these two feelings of compassion and anger, the inverse was true in my case. I could much more readily connect with the anger I felt toward my mother—this had been my means to conceal the agony that had lain beneath. Ostensibly, in the same way, Scout's compassion might have served to hide her pain. It has taken many years for these two to become uneasy companions. Knowing that she was a mother herself, I wondered how this was for Scout and how it affected her as a mother:

> *"I think the thing that really hit me the most was I remember my mum saying, and parents say it don't they, "You'll understand. When you have children, you'll understand. You'll understand". And I remember very definitely feeling when I had my son, and thinking, "Do you know what? I understand less". I even less understand how you did those things now, erm because I, there's nothing that could consciously lead me to... It's kind of that, erm I felt a very primal kind of wolf-like sense of protection. There is nothing, I mean it even, I, I stood up against a whole system which that... you know I lost my... It wasn't just losing the family; I lost my community. I lost my belief system. I lost, you know, a huge amount. But I did it, just for myself. There is no, there is nothing that would, that I wouldn't stand up against for a child".*

There were no words for the profundity of the loss and the sacrifice Scout described. It penetrated deeply into my soul. Not only because of the resonance they held

personally. But because they described something fundamental and primitive in their own right that was not just lost, it was *missing*. I have thought about this many times since I came across Balint's (1992) description of what he called *the basic fault*, which is the feeling that there is something inherently wrong within that needs to be put right (ibid, p. 20). I have heard this sense of being faulty many times in my consulting room, and I have speculated about its origin, particularly concerning what it is like to *not* have a mother who would stand up in the way Scout described, for their child—or at least to have a felt sense that a person is *there* in a very tangible way.

> *"So, so, it helped me kind of... I, I think for the first time, I had always seen her as very capable and innovative, all these things that I have mentioned and I think for the first time, it made me realise actually, erm, how weak she is… And, for me, I'm suffering, I'm, I'm recovering this reality of who I am and my life, and this is who I am, and this is, this is how it affected me, and this is how I've overcome it. So, this is who I am now. There's no choice. I've had to become this person because I've had to overcome something… And, you know, all of those things, but it kind of pales into insignificance to the fundamental job of a mother, which is to protect the child. Or at least if you don't protect, if you're not able to protect, because there are things we cannot protect our children from, that you are there for them, to enable them to heal when it's needed, and she wasn't able to do either of those things".*

When Scout had a child of her own, her strong primal feelings of protection toward her son and how she experienced her role as a mother fundamentally shifted how she saw her mother's behaviour with her. Scout now saw a woman who was not as capable as she believed. It was a solemn realisation, laced with disappointment. Her mother had *failed* to protect her. However, on some level, it seemed somehow worse because not only had she failed, but there was also nothing to compensate for such a failure. She did not take responsibility, nor was she there to support Scout when she needed it. It seemed like a kind of double blow that was, consequently, doubly painful. Scout had to come to terms with the reality of who she was and what had happened on her own.

Scout's words, "the fundamental job of a mother, which is to protect the child," penetrated right into me. That, too, was my conviction, and I recognised the wolf-like instinct she described, only I pictured that as a tiger-like part of me protecting my young. It was curious that we identified with these animals. Primitive almost. That sense of Scout being alone and navigating through it resonated with me. There had been no internalised version of a wolf-like protector to accompany her on the journey. Although she was now a mother herself, I could not help but notice she had seemingly not rushed to have children. I wondered if that was intentional or whether it was just how life had worked out.

> *"Despite not having a great deal of money or having a lot of support, there were things I did in preparation for parenthood actually that made a difference. Deciding to do a lot of therapeutic work, so that when I was ready, and I also*

worked really hard to find someone... I had lots of opportunities, different people, but I actually didn't settle down until I was about 40. I had, I had him when I was 40".

From the preparation she described undertaking, it was clear Scout took her role as a mother seriously. When the time came, the priority for her was "to just be really present to his feelings". It sounded like the kind of mother she would have liked—*me too*. One thing that particularly struck me was her desire to "want to know who he is". This seemed important to Scout—that she did not have a sense of who *she* wanted her son to be. Her desire was for him to develop into his own person that she could get to know, not a version or image that she had created. This contrasted with what Scout had felt growing up. Her mother could not grasp who *she* was, nor did she seem to want to know this *other* person, her daughter. Her mother struggled to make sense of Scout because of her choices. By departing from the JW path, Scout had become an outlier. Later, when she finally settled down and had a child, Scout started to make a bit more sense to her mother because now she followed a formula her mother recognised, which made her more relatable. However, that was not how Scout wanted to be *known*.

Like most stories, this one is unfinished. There was more to know, and of course, I still would have liked to know more, although I felt grateful; Scout had already shared so much. I was reminded of something Bromberg (1991, p. 399) said, "'There's more to me than meets the eye' is as much a battle cry and a cry for help as it is a statement of subjective reality". Perhaps this came to mind now because I felt this

was what Scout had been saying to her mother, on some level, and I hoped that through the telling of her story, she would feel that bit more *known*.

6.3 Afterword

I looked forward to meeting Scout again discuss her story, although, I felt conscious that my inner tangles during our interview were now out in the open. Interestingly, I felt relieved by this. It was fascinating for Scout to read about this because she had not been aware of it during our interview. However, she had registered our shared knowledge of the JWs, and so, she noticed she had refrained from contextualising any JW-specific terminology in the way she would ordinarily help others understand. She expected that estrangement and a JW upbringing were closely linked, and so from that perspective, my familiarity with the JWs was not something entirely surprising.

Scout saw participating in this study as an opportunity to tell her story, especially because of the shame attached to someone who does not have a close intimate relationship with their mother. She described receiving her story as like “a gift to see how one is perceived” by another. She found the positioning of her mother in relation to her particularly intriguing, as she comprehended the extent to which her life had centred on an abusive person over herself. The observation concerning the lack of her father’s presence in the story, notwithstanding the focus of the research, resounded because Scout herself had recently been reflecting on his role in her life. The idea of being mature beyond her years, of sounding older and wiser, also connected with something she recognised in her interactions with other people.

Scout described being heard as deeply healing—giving light and air to these painful, shameful parts so they can be more readily accepted. Reading her story back and being seen was like saying she was not too ugly to be caught sight of. I found this incredibly moving, and I left our conversation feeling like I, too, on some level, had been seen.

Preface to Chapter 7: 'A family lost, and a family found'

As outlined in Chapter 3, the following chapter in this story is a fictionalised re-*presentation* of the stories of three storyteller-participants, Sophie, Christine and Suzie (their chosen pseudonyms). The setting for the story is entirely fictional, however, most of the dialogue is adapted from their transcripts, together with other descriptive background parts to their stories. The only exceptions are where identifiable portions of the original dialogue have been altered to protect participants from being potentially recognisable to readers. Through this fictionalisation, I have attempted to creatively portray their stories and provide insight into the estrangement experience through a different style of re-presentation.

Through this intertwining of fiction and non-fiction, readers will have the opportunity to observe the complexity of family estrangement through another lens—a nuanced lens that offers access to the experience in a way that I hope will be vivid, engaging and enjoyable to read. The use of fiction in research can provide a powerful means to gain entry to *real-life* experiences through the main characters of the story while bearing in mind that "real life is the stuff of fiction" (Leavy, 2016, p. 25).

Although all three women in the story identify as estranged from their mothers, however, Sophie and Suzie, despite being estranged, were in the position of facilitating their mothers' continuing a relationship with their grandchildren. Consequently, some limited contact between the participants' and their mothers was maintained but this was purely so that a relationship could be maintained with the

grandchildren. Additionally, Christine and Suzie were in the position of being excluded from any inheritance as a result of their estrangement. The story attempts to convey the dilemmas and conflicts that this kind of situation produces for these women, where they are effectively leapfrogged by their own mothers and the primary interest was in fostering a relationship with the grandchildren.

Chapter 7. A family lost, and a family found

Sophie glanced at the clock. Midday already. She wondered how time could inexplicably slow down on some days and then on others, it could simply evaporate. Today though, time slipped through her fingers like sand. Being the mum of two small children, Sophie's days inevitably started early. Weekdays comprised of the morning rush to get Archie and Lulu up, ready and off to school and nursery. After wrangling over getting dressed or brushing teeth, it sometimes felt like she'd already done a day's work by the time they were out the door.

But time had not deliberately sped up today. Instead, her mind buzzed with other thoughts. The exchange with Archie yesterday about being able to see his cousin Joshua still gnawed at her. It weighed on her, like a huge rock. She exhaled deeply, old wounds smarting. *"At least I have therapy this afternoon,"* she thought to herself while releasing yet another deep breath. There would be plenty to talk about.

Two o'clock approached. Sophie arrived promptly and took a seat in the small, comfortable waiting room, ready for her appointment with Iris. Several years ago, when Sophie's relationship with her parents and her older sister, Alice, collapsed, she decided she needed to talk to someone. That was when she first came to see Iris.

After a break of nearly a year from therapy, Sophie had returned to see Iris again. It was following the birth of her second child, Lulu, last year, that being estranged from her family had reignited feelings of anger and pain. A wave of the baby blues swept over Sophie in the wake of the void of where her mum and family should have been. Their indifference to Lulu's arrival intensified Sophie's feelings as she struggled to comprehend their behaviour. This was their grandchild, for goodness' sake. And

she was their *daughter*. Surely, this would give them the impetus to want to make amends for what they did? Sophie couldn't ignore other families that she saw gathering around their daughters and their newborns. It made her sick at times. Then she would feel guilty for feeling envious. But they seemed to be everywhere, taunting her, as a perpetual reminder of what she didn't have.

Iris emerged from her office, interrupting Sophie from her ruminations. She beckoned Sophie to enter the bright, airy consulting room. Sophie always felt like she could breathe more freely here. The room was modern, furnished with two comfortable sofas facing each another. Between the sofas, at one end, were French doors overlooking a well-tended garden area. Sophie's gaze often drifted outside during sessions. They quickly settled into their respective places. Iris sat back and looked carefully at Sophie, head slightly tilted, her green eyes curious. Sophie recognised this was her cue to start.

"So, at the weekend, Archie came to me and asked, 'Why can't I see Joshua?" Sophie began.

"This is his cousin, Alice's son?" Iris confirmed.

Sophie nodded and continued, "There are times where I find it so painful to actually say *no* to him again that I try and brush it off and change the subject into something else, and I feel like I'm doing him a disservice really, by not telling him the full extent… I mean, when he's older, obviously, I will be able to sit him down and say this is exactly what happened…."

Iris regarded Sophie, her expression soft as she said, "There's only so much you can explain and for him to understand at his age."

Sophie’s eyes glistened as a swell of tension immediately mounted in her chest. Everything felt close to the surface today. She let out a heavy breath, releasing some of the pressure, and replied, “Exactly. And that's why also it's so difficult because it's not like I can explain it once and then it’s done. Because I've allowed them in to basically try and build a relationship with my children, even though they've made it very clear that they're not really that bothered about Lulu, and they don't want to build a relationship with me. And I'm having to revisit it over because they are talking about Joshua to him, telling him how he is.”

Iris listened, noticing the rise of tension in Sophie. A few moments passed before Iris quietly said, “It sounds very hard that you have contact with them for the sake of your son, but not for you.”

A lump formed in Sophie’s throat. She tried hard to swallow it down, not wanting to give in to what lurked below. She was used to putting on a front. She did not want to give *them* the satisfaction of thinking she was not coping without them in her life.

Her thoughts drifted back to what happened four years ago. Sophie’s relationship with Archie’s father did not last long—it had been an abusive one. But life had turned around, from being a single mum to finally settling down with Adam. It was a dream come true for Sophie when they bought a house together. She never imagined she would be a homeowner. Even so, she could not shake the gnawing sense that her family were not as happy for her or that they might even be jealous. But she tried to push that nagging feeling aside, as she was accustomed to doing.

Sophie’s mum was close with Archie. She helped take care of him when Sophie was a single mum. Archie visited his grandparents often. When he was around five, on one such visit, Archie unexpectedly came out with, "Nanny, can you put a pencil

up my bottom?" Certainly, it was a strange thing to say, but then, young children sometimes do say peculiar things. It was difficult to know what to make of it. Her parents laughed it off at first and acted as if it was funny for him to say that.

Sophie heard about it through her sister, Alice. Since she lived next door to their parents, she was involved in everything, much to Sophie's exasperation. In a light-hearted tone, Alice told her what Archie had said.

At the time, Sophie thought, "*Okay, it's a bit weird, but you know, I'll have a chat with him about it.*" Which she did, and as far as she could tell, everything was fine. She had a close bond with Archie, so if anything was up, she would have known.

It was the start of the school summer holidays, and Archie left to spend two weeks with his dad. Sophie was oblivious to the darker thoughts that were percolating behind the scenes in the minds of her parents and Alice. That was until a text message from Alice arrived.

It read, *"We've been speaking about what Archie said, we think it's really not very good. We're really worried about it. We need a family meeting to discuss it."*

This was typical—her family interfering, imposing their point of view on her. For years, she had let them dictate to her, gripped by self-doubt and afraid to disagree. But since being with Adam, Sophie had more confidence. She had started to grow a backbone.

Sophie was angry. They had not even talked to her—after all, she was *only* Archie's mother. This was standard. Her views were generally sidelined, for they knew better than her. It was patronising. *They* had decided there was something to worry about. *They* were calling a family meeting to talk about *her* son. Surely, what she thought, as Archie's *mother*, is what should have mattered first and foremost.

Sophie resolved not to be drawn in and told them, “Thank you very much for bringing it to my attention. I don't feel we need a family meeting to discuss it. I'll deal with it as I think I should.”

But Alice and Sophie’s parents refused to back off. They started telling her what to do, trying to control things, so Sophie kept her distance even more. Then, her dad warned, "If you don't speak to us about this, then social services are gonna get involved." And Alice started to insinuate that Sophie did not know what went on whilst Archie was at his dad’s.

Giant leaps were being made from this one thing Archie had said, to the idea that potentially somebody was doing something to him at his dad's. Despite their threats, Sophie stood her ground, refusing to be coerced. She simply repeated, "His behaviour hasn’t changed. Nothing's changed. Thank you for bringing it to my attention. I'll deal with this from now on.”

The next thing she remembered was the phone call from social services. Her parents had reported it, and a full investigation was launched. How could they? Sophie felt humiliated and betrayed—by her *own* family. She was Archie’s mum. It was an act that epitomised how little they trusted and respected her judgement.

A shudder ran through her body as she recalled that time. None of her family was there to support her through the investigation. They just sat back and allowed it to happen. Her trust in them was destroyed. She stopped her family from seeing Archie. It felt too dangerous. What if he said anything that they did not feel was right? Would it go back to social services? She was scared she might lose her son.

Suddenly Iris interjected, “Where did you go? You seemed lost in thought.”

Sophie had disappeared. “I was thinking about what happened with Archie, my parents and social services and the situation now, with them seeing Archie.”

Iris regarded Sophie expectantly as if pressing her to say more.

“It’s just, since then ... so they have been seeing Archie, and they see him maybe once every fortnight, but they don't bother with my daughter. They give Archie birthday and Christmas cards, but they don't give Lulu anything at all. So, my thing is, hang on a minute, I've got two children. If you're not going to acknowledge both of them, don't bother to acknowledge even one of them, you know.”

“And what is that like for you? That Lulu is left out,” Iris probed.

A heaviness washed over Sophie. She paused before responding, her voice quieter now, “Yeah. Really painful. And I don't ... Yeah. I'm just, I just don't know where to go with it.”

Iris nodded and said, “Tell me about the pain. Is it familiar to you?”

Almost instantaneously, Sophie realised it was. She was the youngest of three, the half-sister to her older siblings, Ben and Alice. Their dad lived nearby, so they regularly spent time with him as children. For Sophie, her brother and sister had this whole other life away from her that she was not a part of. Her own father had not even signed her birth certificate, so their relationship was non-existent. Sophie was adopted by her mum’s partner when she was two, and he was the only dad she had ever known.

The lump in Sophie’s throat returned, larger now. “And you know I can remember when my sister was pregnant with her second, and she said, *‘Oh, I really want a big family like it was really lovely for us to grow up in a three’.* And I was thinking, *‘No, it*

wasn't. I was always left out, but you would never remember that. You would never know that.""

The lump in her throat started to swell as waves of loss washed over her. Sophie continued, “With my parents, surely, it's their right to try and have a relationship with me. I can't understand why they think it's just acceptable just to go, ugh, Sophie, she doesn't matter, just get her out of the way, and we'll just continue going along the road with Archie. Why do you think you can just hurt me and do what you want and then kick me to the side and carry on with Archie? Yeah, I just ... I just, I just don't know, really.”

She shook her head and looked down. She did not want to let the tears escape. A heaviness weighed in on her chest. Her mum always taught her that the best form of revenge was to carry on and be happy. And she always tried to do precisely that. But beneath it all, she felt like she was crumbling. Like she crumbled every day.

“Are you aware of what’s happening for you when you share this with me now?” Iris asked, noticing how tightly Sophie was clasping her hands in her lap.

“I feel sad,” Sophie replied in a small voice.

“How do you know you are feeling sad, right here, right now?” Iris delved.

“I can feel it in my throat and chest. My body feels tight. Tense.” Sophie responded.

Iris asked, “So what are you going to do with that sadness?”

Sophie looked away and swallowed hard.

Iris added slowly, “You don’t have to swallow it. You don’t have to keep all that sadness inside.”

Sophie tilted her head further forward as the grief welled up in her chest. Her face tightened as pressure built up behind her eyes, and she tried once more to hold onto the sadness.

“Just cry,” Iris said in a warm, caring tone.

Sophie could no longer hold it in, nor did she want to try to. She let out a sob as the tears now flowed down her cheeks.

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Sophie woke the next day feeling brighter. She slept well last night, exhausted after her session with Iris yesterday. Adam offered to drop the kids at nursery and school today, so she had a morning to herself for the first time in a while. Refreshed and energised, she looked forward to seeing Suzie and Christine this afternoon. Maybe that was also lifting her spirits.

The unlikely trio had become close friends when they met a few years ago through Sylvie, a mutual friend. A group of them had been invited over to Sylvie’s home for the day to participate in a free image consultation—Sylvie was training as a personal stylist. Not feeling much like socialising or being particularly image-conscious herself, Sophie had nearly begged off going that day. Thankfully, Adam, her partner, insisted it would do her good, and so, reluctantly, she went. Now though, the thought that she might not have met Suzie and Christine made her recoil. They’d become such good friends; she couldn’t imagine how she would cope without them. Not least because, uniquely, they were each estranged from their mothers.

Sophie liked to host, it filled her with a sense of contentment, and she didn’t need much of an excuse to bake. Countless people had remarked that she could make cakes professionally. Maybe she would at some point. Knowing how much Christine

and Suzie enjoyed her carrot cake, she had no problem deciding what to bake today. As she busily collated the ingredients from their allotted places distributed within the various kitchen cupboards, a text message pinged on her phone. She saw mum's name on the screen. Her jaw tightened as she mindlessly started adjusting the ingredients she'd already placed out on the worktop. Sophie picked up the phone and glanced at the message.

"When can we see Archie and Lulu?" read the message.

Rattled by the message, Sophie shook her head as she plonked the phone down on the worktop. Her face clouded over as she strained to refocus her attention back to the task of baking. She questioned the wisdom of allowing her parents to see Archie, especially when they made no effort to have a relationship with her. Sophie knew perfectly well that Lulu's inclusion in the text was conciliatory, aimed only at preventing any kind of riposte from Sophie. The last time her parents came over, they sat in the house for ten minutes before taking the children out—the most awkward ten minutes ever. And Sophie basically put on a show, offering fake smiles and appearing calm. She'd made the house spotless so they couldn't go back and report, "Oh god, it was a mess. Sophie's clearly not coping."

She didn't feel the need to put on such a show for Suzie and Christine. The house certainly wouldn't be spotless today. There were no airs and graces around them. She could be herself. They could be together with no need to fill the silence. She liked that. It felt easy, unlike with previous friendships, which had felt precarious and superficial. But then, in the past, she'd struggled to set healthy boundaries, partly to avoid any kind of conflict for fear of being rejected. Her therapy with Iris had helped

her to understand and work on her vulnerabilities and fears. Perhaps Suzie and Christine were more accepting because they had similar struggles with their families.

Sophie paused from her baking, a weight sitting on her chest. Her eyes drifted to the kitchen window as she stared out, absently toying with her necklace, thinking about her own family and how much she had needed to keep her guard up around them. She recalled many instances of her mum stirring the pot between her and Alice. Mum would complain about Alice to Sophie, mostly about being taken advantage of, and then she would also go back to Alice and moan about her. It was clear to Sophie how she and Alice were frequently being pitted against one another by mum. The one difference being that they mustn't upset Alice. The same didn't apply to Sophie, though. They were allowed to upset her. But Alice has always had a very volatile kind of personality. Even as teenagers. Everyone walked on eggshells around Alice, and mum always had a reason they couldn't upset her.

The oven pinged, letting her know it was at temperature. The sound cut Sophie off from her thoughts as she realised she had barely started on the carrot cake. *"Right,"* thought Sophie giving a quick shake of her head, *"I'd better get on, or it won't be ready in time."*

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The doorbell rang. It was Suzie. Punctual as ever. She was never late. Sophie opened the door and smiled warmly when she saw Suzie standing there, a slender woman in her early fifties with short brown hair. She didn't look her age, and she had the vivacity of someone younger.

"Hello darling, how the hell are you?" said Suzie in her usual straightforward manner whilst pecking Sophie lightly on the left cheek first and then the right. "Here, I

brought you some of that Aloe Vera stuff you like," Suzie added as she passed the paper bag with the bottles in it to Sophie.

"Oooh, you didn't have to, but that's lovely, thank you", Sophie replied as she took the bag from Suzie and gently placed it down, trying to keep the bottles upright.

They both turned at the sound of a car pulling up on the driveway. Christine beamed and waved through the car window as she parked beside Suzie and switched off the engine. She leant across and rummaged to gather her things from the passenger seat beside her. Christine was from a Greek Cypriot background on her father's side. Think of the film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, Christine would say half laughingly and half with exasperation, only worse.

As she made her way up the driveway, Christine called up, "Hey guys, sorry if I'm a bit late. It's been a bugger of a morning." Looking slightly flushed, she shuffled in through the front door, wiping her feet on the doormat while blowing kisses to them both in mid-air. "It's flipping good to be here. How's everybody doing?" she inquired, slightly raising her eyebrows as her gaze flickered back and forth from one to the other.

"Hmm, up and down," Sophie murmured over her shoulder as she started making towards the kitchen. "Anyway, come on in, let's get settled and then we can have a proper talk."

They gathered themselves and followed Sophie into the homely, sunlight bathed kitchen. Christine propped her handbag on the back of one of the dining chairs as Sophie grabbed the kettle and filled it.

"The usual?" Sophie asked, gesturing toward the cupboard where the teas and coffees were stored.

They both nodded in response as they found seats at the wooden table set on one side of the room overlooking the patio doors to the garden. Sophie took out a box of various teas from the cupboard above the kettle along with three matching mugs.

Taking in a deep breath, Suzie savoured the aroma of Sophie's endeavours. "Hmm. You been baking again, Sophie? Smells good."

"Couldn't resist. Carrot cake."

"You're spoiling us, I think," giggled Christine with a little wink.

"One of you fetch some plates for the cake, will you?"

Suzie's eyes lit up as she rose and headed to where the plates and cutlery were stashed. "I'm on it. Anything else you need?"

"Just something to slice and serve it with if you can," Sophie replied, pouring the freshly boiled water.

Soon, everyone was settled at the table. Suzie served them each a good helping of cake, and Sophie brought the teas over. Suzie and Christine started on their slices of carrot cake.

"Hmm, this is delicious, Sophie. I could demolish the lot!" exclaimed Christine with a wicked glint in her eye. She had such a penchant for sweet treats.

"So good. To hell with diets, I say." Suzie agreed as she spooned an extra-large fragment into her mouth.

While the women worked on devouring their slabs of cake, intermittently washing it down with mouthfuls of tea, Sophie filled them in on what Archie said at the weekend and on her session with Iris. Eyebrows pinched together, a pained expression clouded over her face as she continued, "So, it's really difficult to kind of

work out what's best. But it's almost like I'd want Archie to have that clean-cut. I don't feel like he would miss out on anything from them."

Christine paused mid-forkful and shook her head. "Makes sense, Sophie. I'll never forget that Christmas, spending the morning with my family, and on the sofa, there was a massive pile of presents for my niece and Elodie barely got anything. And I just, after that, I just, I couldn't do it, I couldn't do it to her".

"Gracious. So sad. How old was Elodie again when you stopped her seeing your mum and dad?" Sophie asked.

Christine tipped her head back slightly, her long dark wavy hair hanging off the back of her chair, as she looked up and thought for a moment. "Let me see, she hasn't had a relationship with them since the age of five. She doesn't really remember them. I'm so glad she didn't have that contact because I've seen the impact it's had on my nieces, and it's not positive."

"That's my worry too. And with Lulu, because they've made it very clear that they're not really that bothered about her. It upsets me, it, it devastates me. Upsets is the wrong word. Yeah. Every time. Every time." Sophie's voice cracked as the tears welled up. Christine tore off a paper towel and passed it across the table to Sophie who dabbed her eyes.

Suzie shifted uncomfortably on the wooden dining chair and adjusted the seat cushion, her jaw clenched. "Oh, I'm sorry, I just get so angry," said Suzie, glaring. "Not with you, darling," she quickly added as she reached out and gently patted Sophie's hand that was resting on the dining table. "Just at what we've all been through—still go through."

"I know," replied Christine simply. "How are you doing, Suzie and how's Ava?"

“Oh yeah, me? I don’t think I’ve told you the latest…” Suzie trailed off, looking troubled.

“What’s happened?” Christine asked with a look of concern.

Sophie sat up straighter and blinked. “Is everything okay?” she asked in a low voice.

“Three guesses. I doubt you’ll need them.”

Sophie wrinkled her nose and offered, “Well, based on what we know of your mum, it’s got to be about money.”

“Bingo.”

“And...?” probed Christine, fidgeting.

“So, Ava went to see my mum,” began Suzie. Ava, Suzie’s daughter, continued to have a relationship with her granny after Suzie stopped having contact with her mum. Ava was around age 11 or 12, so Suzie didn’t want to force Ava either way, she left it up to Ava to decide. And now, Ava was technically an adult, so it was different to before.

“When she came back, I knew there was something on her mind, and I was worried. I thought I'm not going to ask her, you know, she'll tell me if she wants to. And then she came and said my mum had said, ‘Don't tell, don't tell your mother but I’m gonna give you this money’, and it was twenty-five thousand pounds.”

Christine flushed. “Good gracious!”

“That is such a lot of money. What’s she gonna do with it?” Sophie added, her eyes widening.

“Yeah, giving money like that to a teen who wants a new car, to go on holiday with her friends. I’m trying very hard not to tell her what to do with it. It’s a big sum of

money, life-changing. Anyway, she's put it into my account for now because she's worried that she's going to spend it all. Mum would be delighted by the fact that it's caused a lot of friction between Ava and me. There's been moments where Ava's said, 'That's my money. I want to buy a new car', all of that sort of stuff. Yeah, it's a source of friction."

Sophie's faced softened. "That must be so hard for you, Suzie."

Suzie shook her head and looked down. "Dreadful. That's such a lot of money. Worse that she gave it to Ava and said, 'Don't tell your mum I've given you that.' So that's what she's like. She's a liar and likes to divide people."

"All this tension around money. It sounds horrible. I'm sure it must be dredging up other stuff too," said Christine as she reached out and gently rubbed Suzie's arm.

Eight years ago, at age 75, Suzie's father was diagnosed and died very quickly of terminal cancer. The shock had been enormous. His parents had lived to age 99, so everybody expected he would live a long time too. After he died, Suzie believed that her mum just couldn't be bothered pretending anymore to like her. Suzie always felt like a black sheep, a scapegoat, while the golden child accolade went to Anna, her older sister.

Growing up, Suzie would hear the go-to phrase, "Oh, don't be so sensitive, Suzie. Oh, don't be so difficult. You're really difficult." Occasionally, she could almost hear her mother standing behind her, tutting in disapproval. She could be tremendously critical of everybody. She hated everybody. She hated anyone she worked with, anyone, any of Suzie's friends, any of Suzie's friends' parents, any of dad's friends, she hated the women who worked in Marks & Spencer's, the Royal Family, anyone on TV. She didn't like anybody. But her behaviour had impacted Suzie enormously.

Suzie felt inadequate and struggled throughout her life with extremely low self-esteem. She would take minimum wage jobs and undercharge for her work. Later, Suzie figured her mum probably hated herself mostly.

Suzie would drop Ava over to see her mum, and her mum stopped inviting Suzie in for a cup of tea. She'd just leave her standing on the doorstep. Suzie would come away feeling gritty after seeing her mum. She couldn't cope with that feeling every time she saw her. Her mental health couldn't take it. On top of that, some years after her dad had passed, Suzie discovered mum had swindled her out of her inheritance. Dad had made a will, which Suzie had seen, saying he left his half of everything split equally between Suzie and her sister. She thought the money was sitting in a trust for her until she discovered that mum had used a will made in 1972, which left everything to her.

"I'm feeling a bit like you, Sophie, wishing mum was completely cut out of our lives. But I feel torn about that too." Suzie pauses and takes a couple of sips of her tea.

"When she's given me money in the past, it has come with dictates. It was always, you know, 'After all I've done for you,' would be what she would say. You know, I've done more than everybody's else's parents have done because I've given you money, so… I worry about Ava being in that position."

"It's like she uses it as a weapon," Christine noted, her lips pursed.

"Exactly. And that's the trap. She holds all the power, and she's changed her will. I worry that she's will do the same to Ava and disown her if she doesn't play the game and behave how she wants her to behave. This is a conversation I've had with Ava. I've said, 'Granny expects certain things. So be very careful. You know, if you fall out

with her, because a fallout at this stage could mean, in a mercenary way, that you get nothing, and Anna gets it all.'

"So, I don't know. I don't know if that's the wrong thing or the right thing to do. I don't want Ava to, to have a relationship with my mum, but I also just don't want to blow her chances of getting the money that I should have had. Because Ava would have had it in the end anyway. I don't know. That's my dilemma. I'm all over the place with that one." Suzie ran a hand through her short brown hair. Her brows were drawn tightly together.

"I wish I had the answer, Suzie. I really do. I'm not sure there is a right or wrong thing to do. Now I feel angry!" Sophie blustered. "You know what they are, don't you, our mums?" Sophie asked rhetorically, her tone deeper now.

"What's that?" queried Christine with interest.

"Narcissists," Sophie said flatly. "They are only interested in themselves. I mean Suzie, your mum rarely, if ever, showed any affection to you, and she critiqued every mistake. And Christine's mum made her feel responsible for her wellbeing and thought it was okay to tell you she wouldn't have been bothered about not having children.

"Oh, and let's not forget my mum! Well, aside from pitting Alice and me against one another, heaven forbid if I don't fully comply with every whim of hers! Sorry for the rant, ladies. It's something that came up in my therapy. Well, it explained a lot to me about my mum." Sophie stopped, looked a little flushed.

Smiles started to slowly creep up on Christine and Suzie's faces. Their eyes crinkled as they started laughing. Sophie couldn't help but chuckle too as they exchanged knowing looks between them.

“Crikey, what a bunch we are! I mean, it’s so screwed up. Seriously, you can’t make this stuff up. We could have our own TV series – you know, like that one Modern Family, but ours would be called *Dysfunctional Families*,” joked Christine as she mopped tears from the corners of her eyes.

“It’s depressing when you think about it,” countered Suzie, her laughter trailing off.

“That’s why we have cake,” Sophie remarked as she rose to refill the kettle. “And each other,” she added, glancing back at them both.

“Oh yes. Tell me about it,” agreed Christine. A line suddenly formed between her brows. “It’s interesting what you said, Sophie, about them being narcissists. My dad has always been a narcissist as far as I’m concerned, but I’d never considered my mum might be.”

“What do you think now?” Suzie enquired.

“There are elements, and I think it's more about her personality of being quite selfish and not having money, and my dad was very successful in business, and I do think that's part of it. But there’s something else. I’ve never really told anyone about it. Flipping family secrets.”

Sophie quietly returned to the table with another round of teas. Suzie and Sophie sat still, like statues, poised to hear what would come next.

“Mum was married previously, which was a big no-no for my dad because that goes against all the traditions, cultures, and everything else. So, they hid a lot of this from us because they didn't want us to know. It's quite complicated, and these stories always are. They're never cut and dried. Anyway, she had a child from her previous relationship. When I was very young, we used to meet this young man called Tom at my grandma's house. It was just a friend. I didn’t know who he was. Then, as I got

older, I realised he was my half-brother. I thought, how could she do that? He was five when she gave him up. It had a huge impact on him, massive."

No one spoke. The air felt heavy, weighed down by the confusion and pain of the abandonment of a young child.

After some minutes, Christine continued, "When I had Elodie, I thought how could you? I remember looking at her, thinking, this is it, I can't take this back now. I have this tiny thing, and I have to look after it, so no matter how I feel, I have to love her because it's only fair. How could you ever give your child up for somebody else? And that's something I still, to this day, I cannot get past. How you could ever do that."

Sophie shook her head. "Goodness me. It doesn't make any sense, does it? I couldn't imagine doing that to my child. Never."

"I know she had traumas in her childhood with her stepdad. He was very physically abusive. I'm sure these things affected her. Crumbs, the things she would share with me as a small child. So inappropriate. I was trying to understand and reconcile this woman in her 30s, and I wanted to protect her when I was eight years old, which was ridiculous." Christine winced at the thought. "I think I need more cake, may I?"

"No need to ask. Help yourself," replied Sophie.

"It's quite a contrast, your mum," Suzie started, "I mean, she overshared a lot of personal things while keeping this big secret of your half-brother."

"Hypocrisy." Christine sneered. "It was hypocrisy, and guilt was a big thing, which isn't that surprising really, and lies. There were a lot of lies and a lot of cloak and dagger. I was never sure what I was allowed to say and what I wasn't allowed to say.

I remember right into my 20's thinking, '*I don't even have opinions because I daren't have them'*. That was a big thing."

Sophie's hand moved to her chest, covering her heart, her throat thick. "You know what's sticking with me as we're talking? Why did our mums repeat their pasts with us? I mean, on the one hand, I can understand why my mum behaves the way she does. My nan is exactly the same, and I have no contact with her because of it. And they're all exactly the same.

"My other half jokes, he says, 'How have you managed to get out of this and not be like that?' But then that scares me because then I think, am I like that? Is that gonna be me? But then I look at my children, and I can't ever imagine ever treating them this way..."

"And that's when it doesn't make any sense again," interrupted Suzie.

"Exactly." The response came in unison from Christine and Sophie.

"If anything, I work so much harder at being a mother. I sit and think, 'How will this affect Elodie?' I've tried not to overshare with her like mum did with me, and then I worry sometimes now because she's a teenager, that do I maybe not share enough with her?" Christine gave a small sigh while slowly shaking her head.

"All this self-doubt! We'll drive ourselves mad! If we're not already." Sophie exclaimed, somewhere between half-grimacing and half- wanting to laugh at the situation again. Sometimes you either laughed or cried.

Suzie half-smiled and added, "Yep, I've tried to be different. Every now and then, it's like my mother comes out of my mouth, you know, it's like she's inside of me sometimes. Then I see the look on the other person's face. I hate it. Because I can, I

can remember her just... I could just see people when she spoke to them. Everybody."

They sat silently. Absorbing one another's words. Private thoughts taking them to exclusive places.

The sound of the front door opening jolted them back from their reverie. Adam was home from work, and he'd picked up the kids.

"Mummy!" cried Archie running into the kitchen.

Lulu murmured the same toddling after him but not quite fast enough to keep up. They both rushed into her arms. Sophie's eyes sparkled as she held them both, showering them with kisses and greeting them with the same level of excitement.

Christine' and Suzie's faces broke into wide grins. The sadness behind their eyes momentarily gone while they enjoyed the commotion of two little ones reuniting with their mummy.

Each of them silently thinking, *"This was how it should have been."*

Chapter 8. Reflections on telling stories

8.1 Introduction

In this final chapter, I reflect on the research journey that has been undertaken, the discoveries that the gathering and re-presenting of these stories have led to, and how engaging with the narratives of the storyteller-participants has developed my understanding of being estranged from one's mother in motherhood. As I consider these, I reflect on what these stories convey in the context of the existing research literature and in relation to the theoretical framework of relational and attachment theory within which this research is situated. Interwoven throughout the discussion are reflections on my tripartite position as a narrative inquirer, psychotherapist and participant, and my philosophical orientation, further showing I have sought to *hold* these distinct yet intersecting positions throughout the research process. I conclude by reflecting on the methodological approach for this study, its strengths and limitations, together with the implications for therapeutic practice.

8.2 Stories of estrangement

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.

They may not mean to, but they do.

They fill you with the faults they had

And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn

By fools in old-style hats and coats,

Who half the time were soppy-stern

And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.

It deepens like a coastal shelf.

Get out as early as you can,

And don't have any kids yourself.

(Larkin, 1979)

As I thought about how to start writing about my reflections on these stories of estrangement, Larkin's (1979) poem above, "This be the Verse", came to mind. I find a kind of painful reality that dwells within Larkin's words which felt like it spoke to this research and the stories I heard along the way. On a personal level, it spoke to me about how the 'fucked-up'-ness and 'misery' gets handed on, though I never accepted that as a fait accompli. I believed I could grow and heal, partly inspiring my journey to becoming a psychotherapist. This resolve was mirrored back to me within the narratives of the six women that I met. One could say we had managed to *'get out'*, as Larkin (1979) put it. Except, we were not deterred from having 'kids', as advocated in his parting line.

8.2.1 The conundrum of breaking the intergenerational cycle

The stories I heard revealed a collective sense of striving to be a different kind of mother to the one we each had. However, this desire to be, not only different but to give what was missing for us, often came laden with its own set of uncertainties and fears. For instance, Hollie feared inadvertently becoming her mother and endeavoured to safeguard from this by parenting exceptionally conscientiously—a well-intentioned strategy that meant she second-guessed herself almost relentlessly. Understandably, she resented the beleaguered sense that she worked that much harder at parenting than other people. Although, she willingly paid the price to prevent her children from feeling the way she did as a child. I recognised Hollie's struggle in my attempt to navigate motherhood. In that respect, Hollie was as lost and confused as I—both endeavouring to find our way without a reliable map and an inbuilt compass that neither of us trusted.

Similarly, Lucy feared replicating her mother's behaviour and grappled with self-doubt. One can only imagine what it was like when her first son Max, conceived through fertility treatment, arrived, and that much-anticipated rush of motherly love did not materialise. It was devastating to feel nothing, and, in its place, a deep sense of shame developed. It was completely different when her second son was born, and surreptitiously, a familiar split from her childhood arose in her own family. When she realised what was happening, Lucy directed more energy into her relationship with Max, not wanting him to feel the kind of rejection she repeatedly felt from her mother.

Scout also mothered attentively, wanting to be present for her son, to know who he was, instead of constructing something she demanded. Having been relied on as a child to provide emotional support to her mother, rather than the other way round, their inversed relationship had necessitated that she foreground her mother's needs over her own. Combined with a Jehovah's Witness (JW) upbringing, Scout had no real sense of who *she* was when she decided to break away from the JW life and her mother's demands. This drove Scout to prepare herself before becoming a mother, actively seeking to overcome her past traumas through psychotherapy so that she might not 'hand[ ] on misery', as Larkin (1979) put it.

As a small child, Christine was subjected to hearing about her mother's past traumas. It was disturbing, and as an eight-year-old, in another reversal of roles, it made her feel as if it was her job to protect her mother. She was so profoundly affected by what she heard that oversharing became a worry for her as a mother. Now her daughter is older, she frets over whether she overcompensated and withheld too much.

For Suzie, her childhood was "spent feeling like [her] personality was wrong". It was confusing to be told her feelings were wrong when that was how she felt, and then to be labelled as *difficult* and *oversensitive*. It greatly impacted her self-worth. Suzie did not want her daughter to feel that way, so she purposely sought to make space for her feelings and to validate them in a way hers were not.

With her two young children, Sophie could not imagine behaving as her mother had toward her. She tried to build a close relationship with her children that involved

listening to them, contrary to Sophie's experience where she felt of no consequence. Her mother and sister's voices were always stronger, superseding hers. That was until she found a supportive relationship and her self-confidence grew, giving her the strength to make a stand.

Interwoven throughout their stories, and mine, I saw an intergenerational thread of what my psychotherapist-self would describe as forms of relational trauma (Berthelot et al., 2015; DeYoung, 2015; Schore, 2009). From Suzie and Scout, whose mothers came from unstable and deprived backgrounds, to Hollie's mother, who suffered the trauma of losing her brother at age ten and being sent away to boarding school, and the physical abuse that Christine's mother endured at the hands of her stepfather, while Lucy's mother grew up in a neglectful and unloving home, through to Sophie who deemed her mother a narcissist, like her mother before her. Similarly, my mother grew up in an abusive and unstable home. And so, the cycle had continued from mother-daughter to mother-daughter. Until now.

A question that both intrigued and troubled me was how we each managed to interrupt the cycle rather than unconsciously continuing to repeat these patterns with our children. While I cannot claim to have found the answer to this conundrum, there was something about how profoundly impacted we were by our experiences, and the thought of passing these on to our children seemed unbearable. I wondered whether this helped break the spell, impelling us to change a potentially otherwise unconsciously preordained relational roadmap. It seemed significant that we each made a *conscious* decision to not repeat the past and looked to psychotherapy to

help heal our wounds. I also wondered to what extent estranging might have offered us a concrete means of breaking these patterns.

8.2.2 Estrangement as a relational issue

In their unique ways, each narrative was suffused with relational injuries resulting from the kind of misattuned responses that create a "discrepancy between a child's emotional needs and the capacity of people in [her] environment to respond to them" (DeYoung, 2015, p. 24). The cumulative effect of such repetitions of disconnection coalesces into lasting damage that can be understood as traumatic in a relational sense, and this could be heard within the stories re-presented in this study. Whether it was the unrequited love that Lucy experienced with her mother, crushing her sense of self through repeated experiences of rejection, or the constant feeling of worthlessness from being disregarded and told that her feelings were wrong like Suzie experienced growing up.

The emotional cost, either through blatant emotional abuse or sustained and harmful misattunements, was excruciating. These effects are mirrored in related research to the extent that adult-children have been shown to estrange because of unresolved issues concerning early abuse, poor parenting or a sense of betrayal (Agllias, 2015b). Thus, in the context of the theoretical framework for this research, from an attachment and relational perspective, a child's longing for a loving connection and lack thereof, has an enormous effect on long-term emotional wellbeing (Ginot, 2015; Schore, 2009; Wallin, 2007). The impact of continued misattuned interpersonal interactions into adulthood was reflected throughout these stories, where each

participant saw an improvement to their mental health by stopping contact with their mothers. This was also echoed in my story, where disconnecting offered a way to protect myself from the wounds the relationship otherwise inflicted.

Based upon the relational disturbances contained within these stories, it was unlikely that the attachment bond that formed between mother and daughter would be characterised as what Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth (1978) would define as a *secure* attachment. More likely, an insecure attachment formed, such as an avoidant-dismissing or ambivalent-preoccupied attachment style, and in some cases, potentially a disorganised-unresolved attachment—although this is usually associated with a profoundly fragmented sense of self leading to the development of more serious psychiatric disorders (Berthelot et al., 2015).

Interestingly, one estrangement scholar has suggested there might be a greater tendency to estrange when an avoidant-dismissing attachment forms (Agllias, 2016). Although initially I thought the same, I now question this. My thinking now leans more toward an ambivalent-preoccupied stance based on the level of distress felt and preoccupied state of mind concerning the attachment relationship with the mother (Fonagy & Target, 2007; Wallin, 2007). Substantial research in the field of attachment, affective neuroscience and intergenerational transmission show how relational patterns as emotional states are implicitly shared through right-brain-to-right-brain communication (Schore, 2009; Van Ijzendoorn et al., 1997). Crucially, these interpersonal blueprints are not static and remain open to the influences of other significant relational experiences throughout life (Mitchell, 1988; Wallin, 2007).

Consequently, those with insecure models of attachment can *earn* secure attachment in adulthood.

Drawing on my experience and knowledge as a clinical psychotherapeutic practitioner, I therefore make sense of these stories of estrangement as having relational origins and as a relational issue. Indeed, in a review of the mother-daughter relationship in a psychoanalytic and developmental theoretical context, Shrier et al. (2004, p. 105) highlighted how:

> "[From] early on, mothers and daughters are engaged in *mutual identification* and a *mutual reciprocal* process of high and evolving levels of responsibility for one another and empathy to one another's feelings. This relationship serves as a precursor and template for women's evolving relationships with others."

The central role of relationships thus emphasises the idea of a self that remains a *self-in-relation*. Consequently, I understand the traumatic effects of estrangement as needing relational attention with a reliably attuned other. This does not necessarily mean within the mother-daughter relationship, however, it could be through other forms of secure relationships, such as that offered in a psychotherapeutic context.

8.2.3 A dual perspective—being a mother and a daughter

"Every mother contains her daughter within herself,
and every daughter her mother, and that every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter".

(Jung, 1969, p. 192)

For me, becoming a mother had played a significant role in my decision to cease contact with my mother. We already had a distant relationship, one that I found difficult to manage and that had a detrimental effect on me. I remember clearly when my first daughter was born and the powerful desire I felt to protect and nurture her. As a mother I looked back on how my mother behaved toward me growing up and I saw them in a different light—a process that was also highlighted in the research (Fischer, 1981). Though, I found it shocking to realise the extent to which my mother neglected and disappointed me. While she was in my life, affecting my emotional and mental well-being, I felt unable to be the kind of mother I sought to be. I needed to be present for my daughter—she was the priority—and that was the most potent incentive available to stop all contact with my mother.

I wondered how motherhood was experienced by other women who are estranged from their mothers. Was it as pivotal for them as it was for me? Did it alter their perspectives on the relationship with their mother now that they knew what it was like to be a mother? Furthermore, despite having a powerful incentive to estrange from my mother, I was aware of the many conflicts I still experienced, and this prompted my curiosity to understand how it was for other women in a similar position.

Within the stories I heard, it appeared I was not alone in undergoing a shift in perspective after having children. In many respects, Hollie's experience resembled mine, particularly through how having children, "ripped open the paster off everything". Becoming a mother completely reframed how Hollie saw her childhood and her relationship with her mother. It exposed deep wounds—including ones that were previously out of sight. As Hollie sought to be emotionally attuned to her children, she found it too painful when her mother consumed so much of her emotional resources and continued to wound her. Her conviction to not repeat the past with her children gave Hollie the incentive to estrange from her mother—it was *for them*.

Similarly, when Lucy became a mother, her longings for her mother to be closer to her, to win her affections, were activated once again. She found herself reliving her mother's rejection once again, except now it encompassed her children as well. Her mother's continued disinterest now that Lucy had children of her own appeared to instigate a shift in her—the realisation that there was nothing she could do nothing to win her mother's affections seemed to release her from the false hope that her mother would eventually show her the love she longed for.

Scout also underwent a major shift when she became a mother. She recalled her mother telling her, "You'll understand. When you have children, you'll understand. You'll understand." However, Scout's response now that she had a child was, "Do you know what? I understand less". Her reaction resonated deeply for me. Her words evocatively described the bewilderment and disorientation she felt concerning the

behaviour of her mother—perhaps we had all felt something similar in looking back on our experiences. Not only as a daughter, but now through the eyes of a mother as well, Scout felt more acutely let-down by her mother's failure in her "fundamental job" as a mother—to protect her.

From the dual vantage point of a daughter and a mother, Scout's poignant remark that she now "understood less" was further echoed within the stories of Sophie, Christine and Suzie. For Sophie, who could not comprehend her mother's actions concerning Archie but especially, that she would readily use Sophie as a stepping-stone to maintain her relationship with him. And Christine, as a mother, struggled to reconcile the family secret and how her mother was able to give up a child in order to marry her father. There was the sense that if you did not fit the family norms and expectations, you were disposable, and this was not something Christine could abide by. Whereas Suzie had always felt like the black sheep of the family, repeatedly having her feelings refuted and chided as over-sensitive. Her mother's harshness toward her made no sense to Suzie, who as a mother, would not want her daughter to feel dismissed and unimportant as she herself had.

It is interesting to think about these perspectives in the context of Scharp and Thomas' (2016) two competing discourses: the discourse of relationship endurance (DRE) and the discourse of temporal contingency (DTC). The stories presented here suggest the mother-daughter relationship is more influenced by the DTC, where the quality of the interactions and the relationship prevail over the idea that we are forever tied either biologically or through a shared history. However, it is not a

position that is taken up free of internal conflict. Acting contrary to the DRE is often accompanied by a host of feelings that are difficult to manage, to the extent that some will only feel relief when their mother is no longer alive.

8.2.4 Thinking the unthinkable—a dialectic between loss and hope

Since many of the storyteller-participants' mothers were ageing and reaching a time in their life where health becomes an issue, there were occasions where the question of death arose in our conversations. How would it be if one's mother died during their estrangement? It was a question most had contemplated—me included. Hollie envisaged feeling relieved and liberated from her inner conflicts concerning their relationship. The hope of things being different one day would finally be extinguished, and Hollie believed she would feel genuinely free to move on with her life. Her feelings about the idea of her mum dying were not something she could ordinarily voice to others, suggesting she felt in good company talking to me. Having had similar thoughts at the idea of my mother dying, I tacitly understood something of how Hollie felt, and it was not something I had openly acknowledged either. Likewise, Lucy and Suzie also imagined feeling a sense of relief while also recognising other complicated feelings would likely arise.

It reminded me of the difficulties many who are estranged have with this type of loss, as shown in the research literature (Agllias, 2011; Boss, 2010; Doka, 2002). I had the sense that for my storytellers, the pain associated with estrangement was on some level less to do with the loss of the relationship itself, since maintaining the relationship often did more harm than good, and that it might be more to do with

abandoning hope—that is, the hope for the *idealised* relationship a daughter might envisage having with their mother. Lucy also came to mind and her longing to be closer with her mother as she described the image that she always had of them having lunch and going shopping. With research showing the mother-daughter emotional bond as, usually, the strongest of family ties (e.g. Boyd, 1989; Chodorow, 1999; Fingerman et al., 2020), one might wonder about the hidden story of trauma that might be wreaked on a child's yearning for loving attachment. Indeed, shame was emphasised as a significant theme in the estrangement literature (Agllias, 2011; Allen & Moore, 2017; Scharp et al., 2015), and shame is an acute interpersonal experience that takes root in relationship and can therefore be healed relationally (DeYoung, 2015).

8.3 Reflections on the methodological terrain

As a relational psychotherapist, researcher and participant, I used narrative inquiry as my methodological approach because "[narratives] allow researchers to present experience holistically in all its complexity and richness" (Bell, 2002, p. 209). It was an approach that felt meaningful to me in the context of relating human experience in a way that submerges us within different subjective worlds. Therefore, I sought a methodology congruent with my epistemological and philosophical position that would best re-*present* the experiences of the participant-storytellers in the context of the research question outlined in Chapter 1, **'How do women with children experience being estranged from their mothers?'**

However, walking the narrative path has not been straightforward. Unlike with other approaches, I was confronted with less clarity regarding how to proceed with the analysis, and I found this to be both a curse and a blessing. A curse as in I frequently felt lost and without a clear sense of direction of how the analysis should proceed. But a blessing because it offered the possibility to chart my own course through unfamiliar terrain. Naturally, the analysis relied heavily on me, as a narrative inquirer, to interpret the stories I was re-*presenting,* and there were times where my relationship with the material made the writing quite painstaking.

Throughout the analysis, I felt conscious of how invested I was in their stories and I cogitated over to what extent my so-called understanding might thwart other insights from coming to the fore. This was juxtaposed with the knowledge that no complete understanding exists, and so, there was no final answer to be reached on the matter. Moreover, the process of writing confronted me with innumerable intersubjective entanglements between my experience and theirs. The challenge of re-*presenting* the complexity and layeredness of a person's subjective experience within the constraints of language weighed on me. At times, too, my writing would feel like an abstraction, and arguably despite my resistance to this, it would always on some level be reductionist.

Obviously, there are various criticisms of narrative inquiry, with some suggesting it is more of an art than research (Lieblich et al., 1998). Although, I do not see research and art as completely discrete. I would submit that research is a craft. The same has been said of science and psychotherapy (Schore, 2012). Regardless of the

limitations of stories for telling *the truth*—and this is not what narrative inquirers seek—their gift is in creating openings through the story told—a version of '*a'* truth. Within any research scenario, I believe, "[our] limited perspective leaves us likely to be at least partly wrong" (Stolorow et al., 2008, p. 114), and therefore, it is,

> "Only in playful dialogue [that] we have the opportunity to overcome this severe limitation of the solitary apprehension of anything and allow more truth, trust-as-possible-understanding, to emerge" (ibid).

8.4 Strengths and limitations of this study

The stories of the six women who volunteered to participate in this study cannot be seen as representative of all daughters who are estranged from their mothers. The aim of this study was not to produce a generalised understanding of the estrangement experience in the context of the mother-daughter relationship. Rather, through following the path of narrative inquiry, I sought to use stories as a means of constituting the lived experience of being estranged from one's mother while at the same time as one *is* a mother. However, narrative inquiry is not suitable for all forms of research, such as working with larger numbers of participants where the time commitment would be unfeasible due to the quantity of data involved in capturing, transcribing and analysing the stories (Lieblich et al., 1998).

Moreover, the co-created stories that emerged cannot be taken as an end in themselves. Undoubtedly, many stories remain untold, which would illuminate the experience in different ways. Even the stories written here would have been entirely

different had they been produced by someone else since it is not possible to extricate the “prefabricated meanings that derive from our own view of the world” (Fink, 2010, p. 265). Nor is it necessarily desirable to do so, particularly in narrative inquiry. Accordingly, I strove to engage in deep, transparent reflection, so that the writing could be understood “as co-constructed knowledge, not only in terms of *what* we have discovered, but also in terms of *how* we have discovered it” (Etherington, 2017, p. 3 italics in original). Providing such information concerning the contexts in which the stories were created and located also provided a means to increase the rigour of the writing. Similarly, I openly acknowledged my position as a researcher-participant and the inevitability that particular perspectives may unconsciously be privileged over others (Trahar, 2009). This could be viewed as a limitation in terms of how my participation might have detracted from other features contained within each narrative. However, within all qualitative research one could argue that “participants can never be quite free of the researcher’s interpretation of their lives” (Bell, 2002, p. 208), the difference here was that I sought to transparently “lower the barrier between researcher and researched” (Etherington, 2017, p. 3).

As previously highlighted, it was notable that the women who participated were British-born, white, and a mixture of working and middle class, notwithstanding Christine who was of Greek-Cypriot heritage from her father’s side. Hence, culturally, it was not a diverse representation of participants, and this constrains the understanding of estrangement within different cultural contexts. It is a limitation of this study and a more general limitation to be addressed within estrangement research. However, to situate my own experience and explore that of others in similar

positions, it seemed appropriate to begin this exploration within a culturally familiar context.

I believe the foremost strength of this study was in the distinctiveness and power of its methodological approach—one not previously used in estrangement research. Together, myself and the storyteller-participants were engaged in an endeavour to give life and meaning to the lived experience of estrangement through the power of stories. Narrative inquiry allowed for the creation of new insights into the emotional experience and effects of estrangement from a mother, along with the deeply held meanings that adult daughters, as mothers, might attach to their experience.

8.5 Implications for therapeutic practice

This study has shown that estrangement is a complex relational issue that often leaves those amidst an estrangement struggling to find others with whom they can feel genuinely understood. Even within psychotherapeutic practice, a lack of understanding can have important implications for treatment. This was highlighted in a study by Blake et al. (2019), who explored the experiences of estranged individuals in counselling and found that therapy helped most for those working with practitioners who were knowledgeable about estrangement. Indeed, research in the field of psychotherapy supports this finding by showing the fundamental importance of the quality of the relationship between the client and therapist in successful treatment (Norcross, 2011). Thus, knowledge of estrangement as a lived experience can help psychotherapists make interpersonal contact with their estranged clients to alleviate their suffering and to help them heal relationally. The understanding displayed by

practitioners can therefore play a crucial role in developing the kind of interpersonal connection that allows for establishing an environment that promotes self-acceptance, growth and change with clients who are experiencing estrangement.

Additionally, the stories re-*presented* in this study offer practitioners an *insider view* into the inner lived experience of estrangement from the perspective of adult-daughters who were estranged from their mothers. Through the subjective truths of their experiences portrayed within a contextualised setting, practitioners can be more informed and aware of the ways in which maternal estrangement affects women's lives. This knowledge and insight can help practitioners to flexibly and actively support clients with the varied aspects of their intrapersonal and interpersonal estrangement experience. Within these stories, deep intergenerational wounds were revealed as the participants sought to reconcile their own position as mothers with children estranged from their own mothers. Hence, practitioners can not only be more attuned and aware of the traumatic experiences that may touch a person's life in the context of mother-daughter estrangement, but similarly, they can be more conscious of the kinds of struggles and conflicts that may manifest when such a complex relational breakdown occurs.

By recognising estrangement as a wound with relational origins, practitioners can be sensitive and alert to the potential of relational trauma within the attachment system and the intense underlying shame that is often camouflaged by many disguises (Cozolino, 2014; Schore, 2014). Psychotherapists need to offer their engaged emotional presence and encourage estranged clients to move from disconnected

narratives to felt narratives while finding “empathic recognition from an emotionally significant other” (DeYoung, 2015, p. xv). Through talking, therapists can help give shape to the intense feelings and annihilating impact that this kind of lack of attunement and relational breakdown can produce within a person. Thus, through genuine and sustained understanding, the relational traumas of estrangement from one’s mother can have the opportunity to be accepted and repaired.

In addition to the contribution of this research at a psychotherapeutic level, there are also implications at a wider, societal level. Through what is conveyed within these stories, certain societal ideas and constructs concerning family and the parent-child relationship, particularly in relation to *the mother*, are being challenged. Indeed, it is not uncommon in everyday vernacular to hear discourses like, “*you only have one mother*” or “*family is everything*”. However, alongside challenging such discourses, what also emerged within the stories in this study was the damage that these messages can inflict on women with mothers who have had a lasting and detrimental influence on their lives. Consequently, the nature and durability of the mother-daughter, and by extension the parent-child relationship, is necessarily called into question.

8.6 Future research

As observed in the literature review, this study has been the first to explore a specific parent-child relationship by looking specifically at mothers and daughters. However, stories are yet to be told for the remaining dyads of mother–son, father–daughter, and father–son. Additionally, there is a need to explore family estrangement more

widely, within different family structures and across different cultures to understand how estrangement is experienced in other contexts. Other directions would be to explore the intergenerational effects of estrangement, especially for those who might inherit being estranged from family members, and the impact of the death of an estranged family member.

8.7 Final thoughts and reflections

"To look hard at something, to look through it, is to transform it, convert it into something beyond itself, to give it grace."

(Wright, 2011, p. 13)

From a personal and professional standpoint, conducting this study has been a momentous journey from start to finish. Both hearing and being part of the stories that I encountered on this expedition has deepened and altered my relationship with my own story and taught me things about my experience that I had not fully appreciated before. During my writing, there were many moments where I felt profound respect for the courage, resilience, and strength I saw in these women. I admired their resolve and how, with their children, they sought to be more responsively attuned and create a connection that was missing in the relationship with their own mothers. Yet, immersed in their stories, I was also aware of my compassion and empathy for their acutely painful losses, the traumas, and the sadness and anger of a grief process. Noticing these different feelings emerge as I engaged with their stories connected me more deeply with my unrequited childhood longings and disappointments. It enabled me to weave a more powerful narrative of

compassion concerning my early unmet relational needs. This has been both the hardest and the greatest gift this research has bestowed on me.

Throughout conducting this research, I felt deeply conscious of the connection I felt to my participants as well. Suddenly, I was no longer alone with my experience and instead, six others accompanied me. It was comforting to know. I wondered to what extent this unconsciously fuelled my drive to do this study. I believe it was reassuring for my participants to know that I, too, was estranged from my mother and that there were others participating in the study. All were keen to read each other's stories when it is finished. Bringing these women together in this way feels like a worthwhile contribution on its own, and I know what sharing their stories has meant to each of them.

From a professional vantage point, as a narrative inquirer and psychotherapist, I have found that while distinct, these two positions intersect in many respects. We speak of a two-person psychology in psychotherapy, whereby experiences occur within a two-person relationship involving the intrapsychic and the interpersonal. Similarly, as a narrative inquirer, the foundations of research are forged on the same relational perspective of a dialogue between two voices. As with psychotherapy, research "is always partial, not total, and leaves many things out" (Fink, 2010, p. 261). Thus, knowledge is only ever fleeting, selective, re-*presented*—a frozen extract of life.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Call For Participants Advert

60 min(s) to complete

Sincere Gratitude

Interview

United Kingdom

Metanoia Institute

Until recently, there has been limited research focusing on family estrangement. This study therefore seeks to explore the experiences of adult daughters who do not have an ongoing relationship with their mother, which may or may not be through their own choice, and who have since become mothers themselves.

Find out more online

Poster printed on 01/08/2019 Study expires on 29/09/2019

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

METANOIA INSTITUTE & MIDDLESEX UNIVERSITY

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (PIS) & CONSENT FORM

Date: 15 July 2019 **Version**: 1.2

A mother without a mother:
Women's experiences of maternal estrangement in motherhood

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

The purpose of this study

You may be familiar with the quote, *you can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family*[2]. For some, this epitomises the complexities of family relationships and the reality that we have no control over the family we are part of. There has, however, been a growing awareness that family relationships are not always close, or indeed permanent.

Until recently, there has been limited research focusing on family estrangement. Research has largely tended to concentrate on the prevalence and causes of estrangement, particularly between parents and adult children. However, existing

[2] Lee, H. (1960), To Kill a Mockingbird

research has not, to date, considered estrangement from the perspective of one specific parent-adult child dynamic.

This research will address this gap by looking at the experiences of adult daughters who are estranged from their biological mothers, while also being mothers themselves. This research is planned to be completed by Autumn 2020.

Why you have been approached for this study

You, along with 5 other participants, have been approached to take part in this study because you yourself, are an adult-daughter (over 18 years of age) and are currently estranged from your mother[3] and this has been the case for at least 2 years. Furthermore, during the time of being estranged from your mother, you yourself were/are a mother to one or more children (under 16 years).

In addition, you have indicated that you are interested in taking part in the research and you either currently have, or have had, a period of psychotherapy during the time of your estrangement.

As we have discussed during our initial conversations, you feel it is unlikely that you will be caused distress by discussing your experiences in relation to your maternal estrangement.

Your participation is completely voluntary

It is up to you to decide whether to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. Should you withdraw, your data will be destroyed and no longer used in the study.

What happens if you decide to take part?

We will agree on a quiet and neutral place to meet near to your home, where you will take part in an interview with me that will take around one hour. This interview will be digitally recorded and later transcribed. All your material will be fully anonymised to keep your identity confidential throughout.

Once the interview has been transcribed, I will share a copy of this with you by email for you to check and confirm you are satisfied that what was discussed represents

[3] This will be your biological mother who was also one of your main caregivers in childhood

your story in the way you intended. If there are any changes you would like to make, we can discuss this together.

Again, at a later stage, I will offer to share a copy of the output from the study by email. This is for you to read and share your reflections with me on how I have interpreted and represented your story.

The possible disadvantages and risks of taking part

There is no known risk in participating in this research. However, as I explained when we spoke, should you become distressed in the process of sharing your experiences, I will stop the interview. In this instance, I will make use of my skills as a therapist to ground you and bring you back to the present moment and your current surroundings. Together, we will decide whether to continue the interview or to end at this point. Depending on the stage we are at in the interview, it may be possible to include your data in the research or you may choose to withdraw your data.

The possible benefits of taking part

It is hoped that participating in this study through sharing the story of your experience will help you as being able to speak openly about your experience offers a powerful way to process and make sense of your experience. However, this cannot be guaranteed.

It is hoped that what emerges from this study will be of interest to Psychotherapists, Counselling Psychologists and other clinical practitioners who work with individuals and families who are experiencing maternal estrangement.

It is also an aspiration that this research will be of interest to other support services who are engaged in working with families. These could include maternity services, social workers, health visitors, doctors, education and legal services.

Most importantly though, it is hoped this research will benefit individuals and families who are themselves experiencing maternal estrangement and who wish to understand more about their experience and how this may affect them and their present-day intimate relationships.

Confidentiality

All information that is collected about you during the research will be kept strictly confidential. Any information about you which is used will have your name and address removed so that you cannot be recognised from it.

All data will be stored, analysed and reported in compliance with the Data Protection legislation of the United Kingdom.

What happens to the results of the research study?

This research will be published as part of my postgraduate dissertation, which is likely to be published in late 2020. If you would like me to do so, I will be happy to send you a copy of the paper. Please let me know if you would like me to do this.

I plan to disseminate the findings of this research at conferences, research journals and/or other publications.

Please be assured that you will not be personally identifiable in any report or publication.

Ethics Committee Approval

The Metanoia Research Ethics Committee has reviewed and approved this study.

Contact for further information

If you need any further information, you can contact either myself, Sarah Barcham or my Research Supervisor.

Researcher: Sarah Barcham

Address: Metanoia Institute, 13 Gunnersbury Avenue, Ealing, LONDON W5 3XD
Email: sarah.barcham@metanoia.ac.uk
Telephone: 0208 579 2505

Research Supervisor: Dr Lucy Blake

Address: BSc (Psychology), M Phil (Social and Developmental Psychology), PhD (Social and Developmental Psychology)
Email: Lucy.Blake@edgehill.ac.uk

Thank you for taking part in this study

You will be given a copy of this information sheet and a copy of the signed consent form to keep

Appendix 3: Participant Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Participant Identification Number:

Title of Project: A mother without a mother: Women's experiences of maternal estrangement in motherhood

Name of Researcher: Sarah Barcham

	Please initial box
1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated .....…… for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. If I choose to withdraw, I can decide what happens to any data I have provided.	☐
3. I understand that my interview will be taped and subsequently transcribed	☐
4. I agree to take part in the above study.	☐
5. I agree that this form that bears my name and signature may be seen by a designated auditor.	☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Researcher (Sarah Barcham)	Date	Signature

1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher

Appendix 4: Initial Participant Email

Dear [Participant],

Thank you for your response to the advertisement for research participants on the Call for Participants website, and for your interest in this research study.

I am undertaking this research as part of my doctoral training in Counselling Psychology and Integrative Psychotherapy at Metanoia Institute/ Middlesex University. From an estranged family myself, I have an interest in the issues faced by daughters who are estranged from their mother, while being mothers themselves.

Please find attached an information sheet about the study which details the purpose of the study, its duration and what will be required of you should you wish to take part. Please note that participation is entirely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any point.

Please have a read through of the information and if you wish to proceed with taking part, please contact me again with your phone number and whereabouts in the UK. I will then arrange to call you at a convenient time to have an initial discussion about the process and next steps.

Best wishes,
Sarah Barcham

Appendix 5: Initial Phone Screening

I will have an initial phone conversation with each potential participant to discuss the following points:

- Explain what the research project is about and what being a participant will involve (e.g., interview, checking transcript, reviewing / commenting on the analysis) and provide an opportunity for the potential participant to ask questions about the research
- To confirm if the participant is willing to take part in the research and check that they meet the inclusion criteria for the research (e.g., over 18, estranged from biological mother 2+years, have biological children < 16 years, previous therapy)
- To ascertain if the participant has any concerns that discussing their estrangement experiences will be distressing for them. Although it is not a requirement that participants have had therapy, I will ask if they have previously had or are currently having any therapy in relation to their maternal estrangement so I can understand whether it is an experience they have reflected on in a therapeutic context or not
- Discuss arrangements for the interview (e.g., potential venues) and other important issues such as self-care after the interview (e.g. making plans to do something afterwards).

Appendix 6: Thank you sheet

METANOIA INSTITUTE & MIDDLESEX UNIVERSITY

A mother without a mother:

Women's experiences of maternal estrangement in motherhood

Thank you for taking part in this study.

Your participation will help us to understand more about the experiences of adult daughters who are estranged from their mothers, and what this experience is like while being a mother for yourself. It is hoped that this could help professionals provide better support in future.

What happens next? The interview will be transcribed, and I will send a copy of this to you by email. This will give you an opportunity to review what you have shared and provide any feedback or comments about things you might want to clarify in the dialogue. Following this step, I will do an analysis, which I would like to share with you as well. This will help me to be sure I have accurately captured and reflected your story.

The findings of this study will be shared with professionals who support families and individuals through publications in relevant academic journals, presentations at conferences and other potential sources such as books and articles.

Are you OK? Discussing your experience might have felt upsetting. We have provided details of some support groups you might find helpful. Once again, **thank you, for your valuable contribution to the study.**

Stand Alone provides information and support to individuals who are estranged from a family member. 💻: www.standalone.org.uk	
Samaritans is a 24-hour confidential listening and support service for anyone who needs it. ☎**:** 116 113 (24 hours) jo@samaritans.org	**Mind** provides advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem ☎**:** 0300 123 3393 or text 8643 www.mind.org.uk

The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy has an 'Ask Kathleen' service that provides confidential guidance and information on what to do if you have any concerns about your therapy or your therapist:

☎: 01455 883300 and select option 3, ask@bacp.co.uk

Appendix 7: Ethical approval letter

METANOIA INSTITUTE

13 Gunnersbury Avenue
Ealing, London W5 3XD
Telephone: 020 8579 2505
Facsimile: 020 8832 3070
www.metanoia.ac.uk

Sarah Barcham
Doctorate in Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy by Professional Studies (DCPsych)
Metanoia Institute

28th July 2019
Ref: 11/18-19

Dear Sarah,

Re: A mother without a mother: Women's experiences of maternal estrangement in motherhood

I am pleased to let you know that the above project has been granted ethical approval by Metanoia Research Ethics Committee. If in the course of carrying out the project there are any new developments that may have ethical implications, please inform me as research ethics representative for the DCPsych programme.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Sofie Bager-Charleson
Director of Studies DCPsych
Faculty of Post-Qualification and Professional Doctorates

On behalf of Metanoia Research Ethics Committee

Registered in England at the above address No. 2918520

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