

**TITLE: "I'm finally allowed to be me": Parent-Child Estrangement and Psychological Wellbeing.**

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**Abstract**

Estrangement from a family member is characterised by lack of trust and emotional intimacy, and often includes ceased communication and contact. Existing estrangement research suggests adult children report three main reasons for estrangement from a parent: abuse, poor parenting and betrayal. However, research into estrangement and experiences of psychological wellbeing is sparse. This study used semi-structured interviews to explore this with 7 female participants with experiences of parental maltreatment, aged 24-37. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis resulted in 4 main themes: experiences of contact; gaining agency; navigating relationships; and navigating estrangement. Results suggest estrangement can be experienced both positively and negatively in terms of psychological wellbeing. Positive experiences provide insight into maintenance of estrangement, and suggest processes of benefit-finding following stressful life events can be applicable to estrangement. Practice implications for those working with adult children include considering reasons for estrangement, and facilitating sense-making to assist with coming to terms with estrangement.

**Keywords:** Estrangement, Well-Being, Interviews, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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## Introduction

Family relationships, perhaps particularly those between parent and child, are often studied as though they are permanent and non-voluntary (Scharp and Thomas, 2016). However, recently researchers have begun investigating the often complex reasons family members provide for estrangement and the process of estrangement during adulthood. Estrangement from a family member is characterised by lack of trust and emotional intimacy, sometimes accompanied by physical distancing from an individual or wider family (Agllias, 2015, Agllias 2016). Physical estrangement refers to discontinuation of communication whereby contact with family member(s) ceases altogether. Carr et al. (2015) found a disconnection between reasons given by estranged parents and adult children, with parents often attributing estrangement to external factors and events, and adult children often attributing estrangement to intrapersonal issues. In the case of adult children, four recent studies reported similar main reasons stated for estrangement, summarised by Agllias (2016) as abuse, poor parenting, and betrayal (see also Carr et al., 2015, Scharp and Thomas, 2016, Scharp et al., 2015).

The experience of estrangement from a parental point of view indicates that when estrangement is conceived of as instigated by an adult child, it is often experienced by the parent as a traumatic event that is detrimental to their wellbeing (Agllias, 2011a, Agllias, 2013, Jerrome, 1994). There is some suggestion that for adult children, estrangement could also be experienced as a difficult loss and trauma, however, for those instigating the estrangement, some benefits may also be experienced (Agllias, 2018). Less is known about the experiences of estrangement for such adult children, but research exploring responses to other traumatic events suggests there may be both positive and negative outcomes in relation to psychological wellbeing. Research regarding the effects of parental maltreatment may be of particular relevance, given the reasons adult children tend to provide for choosing to estrange. Children experiencing maltreatment can encounter difficulties with regulating emotions, confidence, identity, trust and relating to others, and maltreatment can also influence stress response systems (Anda et al., 2006, Cicchetti and Toth, 2005), and these effects can have negative influences on wellbeing that continue into adulthood (for example, see Hagele, 2005, Hildyard and Wolfe, 2002, Sroufe, 2005). On the other hand, for adult children, removing themselves from situations which have involved, or continue to involve, parental maltreatment, there may be an experienced sense of positive wellbeing and a greater sense of agency (Agllias, 2016, Agllias, 2018).

While stressful and traumatic experiences can have lasting impacts, research has suggested that in some cases, experiencing stressful life events can result in a process of meaning-making or benefit-

finding, sometimes termed posttraumatic growth, which can lead toward positive change, including an increased sense of agency (Park, 2010). The key elements of benefit-finding theory propose that stressful/traumatic events can lead to shattering of an individual's world view, and this forces examination and reconfiguration of an individual's outlook, involving a process of comprehending and finding significance in the events (Joseph and Linley, 2006). This is facilitated by emotional and social support. Benefit-finding has also been shown to be associated with better mental health outcomes, and is linked to positive psychological wellbeing (Helgeson et al., 2006).

Furthermore, Dorrance Hall (2016) suggests that family members who are marginalised might learn to engage in strategies that promote resilience in order to cope with their experiences. For example, seeking social support, negotiating boundaries, and dealing with lived experiences of marginalisation and stigma. These strategies appeared to assist individuals in moving beyond solely coping with or recovering from experiences of marginalisation as they also involved elements of growth and taking control over their lives, which are essential components of psychological wellbeing. This was evidenced by findings suggesting that marginalised family members who enacted resilience developed an identity focused on wellbeing and a sense of personal agency.

Taken together, these findings suggest that adult children's responses to estrangement may be complex with differing effects on wellbeing. However, there is currently a paucity of research examining adult children's experiences of how they feel estrangement has affected them (see Agllias, 2018, for an exception). In order to explore this, it is necessary to consider an appropriate framework for exploring how a traumatic experience might affect subjective experiences of wellbeing. One such framework, previously used to examine the wellbeing of individuals who have undergone specific adverse experiences, is the construct of psychological wellbeing (for example, see Ryff, 2014). Ryff and Singer (1996) suggest that psychological wellbeing is comprised of six components: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (see also Ryff and Keyes 1995). Related concepts, such as resilience and meaning making, are captured within this model of psychological wellbeing by the components of environmental mastery and purpose in life, respectively.

The present study makes use of this overarching framework of psychological wellbeing to begin to explore estrangement, and extends existing work regarding those who are marginalised but still in contact. To date, little research has explored wellbeing and estrangement, and there is little that attends to meaning making and development of personal agency (see Scharp and Thomas, 2016, for an exception). To those ends, aspects of psychological wellbeing including resilience and meaning-making will be explored in this study with adult children who are estranged from one or more

parent(s). In order to place accounts of psychological wellbeing following estrangement into the context of individual experience and enable an in-depth understanding of circumstances, reflection facilitated by semi-structured interviews was used. We therefore asked:

What do estranged adult children with experiences of parental maltreatment report about their subjective experiences of psychological wellbeing prior to, and following, estrangement?

## **Methodology**

Given the focus on the individual experience of psychological wellbeing both before and following estrangement, a qualitative study using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was undertaken. IPA is concerned with detailed accounts of individual experience, rather than aiming for a state of data saturation or wide generalisation of results, studies are often conducted with a small number of participants (for example, Harland, 2016, Shinebourne and Smith, 2011).

## Sample

Northumbria University Ethics Committee provided ethical approval, and participants were invited to contribute through the researcher advertising the study on social media platforms, and sharing of this advertisement. No participants were personally known to the researchers. Seven adult children, six of whom were UK residents, and one former UK resident took part in the study. All were white, female, and within an age range of 24-37 years ( $M = 31$ ). All participants initiated estrangement from their parent(s) in adulthood, and were estranged from their parent(s) for between 1-10 years ( $M = 4$ ). Three participants were estranged from their father only: in each case, participants' parents divorced years prior to estrangement. One participant was estranged from her mother only, her father passed away prior to estrangement. The remaining three participants were estranged from both parents, all of whom were still living together at the time of estrangement. All participants related experiences of some form of abuse, neglect or maltreatment by parent(s) during childhood, and chose to estrange because of this. This included parental addiction, emotional neglect, emotional and physical abuse, and sexual abuse perpetrated by a parent and others. In addition to this, three participants mentioned experiences of betrayal by their father, relating to infidelity either while married to their mother or to a stepparent. The circumstances of these betrayals then led to familial disruption.

## Data collection

All participants took part in an in-depth, semi-structured interview. Two interviews were conducted face-to-face, and five interviews were conducted via Skype. The researchers did not perceive any differences between the two interview formats. An interview schedule was developed to explore participants' estrangement experiences and their related accounts of psychological wellbeing. The schedule was flexible enough to allow participants to introduce unanticipated issues and the researcher to vary questioning to explore participant experiences in greater depth (Smith et al., 2009).

The schedule focused on strengths in order to reduce the risk of harm when interviewing participants in relation to family estrangement (Agllias, 2011b). The questions therefore centred on aspects of Psychological Wellbeing (Ryff and Keyes, 1995) to help participants' focus on resilience and meaning-making, and to facilitate exploration of potentially positive outcomes of what are likely to have been difficult experiences. This included exploration of autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. For example:

How did the estrangement affect your ability to cope with day-to-day life? Has this changed as time has passed?

Interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes – four interviews were between 45-60 minutes in length, and three were between 30-45 minutes in length. All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. During the transcription process, all identifying information was removed or replaced with pseudonyms.

The lead researcher conducted all interviews, and was familiar with the topic material through previous involvement with a charity supporting people estranged from a family member. A pilot interview was conducted to ensure pertinent issues were identified as far as possible while remaining conscious of the idiographic nature of estrangement. The researcher's familiarity with the topic of estrangement allowed rapport to be established and enabled free flowing interaction with participants.

In recognition of the fact that talking about estrangement may be difficult for some, participants were reminded prior to beginning the interview that they could stop or take a break at any time. One participant did become distressed, however she indicated that she felt able, and wanted, to continue the interview despite this. Following each interview, participants were provided with an information sheet regarding external sources of support (such as counselling) in case they wished to access this in their own time. For interviews conducted via Skype, sources of support sheets were emailed to participants immediately following interview completion.

## Data Analysis

In line with the inductive approach central to IPA (Smith et al., 2009), each interview was dealt with in turn, beginning with the most detailed and complex interview. For each interview, the transcript was first coded, by focusing on experiential concerns of the research (for a more detailed exploration of the analysis process in IPA research, see Smith et al., 2009). Researcher reactions were recorded separately, in order to assist in facilitating awareness of any biases and assumptions, and allowing the focus to remain with the data. Developing themes were then noted, creating more concise categories that captured understanding of both participants' experiences and researcher interpretation. Themes were then clustered to create superordinate themes.

At this stage, the analysis process described thus far was repeated for each transcript in turn. As the first transcript involved a participant estranged from both parents, the remainder of transcripts relating to estrangement from both parents were analysed next, followed by transcript relating to estrangement from a mother, then estrangement from a father. Following this, tables of superordinate themes for each case were examined side by side and analysed for connections across cases. A set of superordinate themes applicable to all cases was then derived.

## **Findings**

Participants' accounts of estrangement and psychological wellbeing clustered around four superordinate themes: Experiences of contact (prior to estrangement); Gaining agency; Navigating relationships; and Navigating estrangement. All superordinate themes related to all participants, however, the degree of applicability was different. This was particularly evident for the women estranged from their father, compared to those estranged from their mother or both parents. Where these differences were apparent, this is noted within each theme.

### **Experiences of Contact (prior to estrangement)**

Participants all felt that both parental treatment experienced as a child, and continuing contact with their parent(s), affected them in a detrimental way. During childhood, the women experienced controlling behaviour from their parent(s), either explicitly stated, implicitly through unrealistic parental expectations of achievement, or feeling pressure to conform to defined familial roles: "I think I was a whipping post for the family sometimes [...] my responsibility was to be the person that took all the slack, or took all the abuse" (Helen, estranged from both parents).

In some cases, participants were, as children, forced to lie, hide aspects of themselves or their experiences, or otherwise deceive others in order to disguise familial problems such as abuse or addiction. This, in turn, led to difficulties with personal identity and agency, leaving a number of the women feeling they lacked ownership of their self and/or their lives. For example, Tara (estranged from her mother) related:

[there was] this kind of... false sense of reality, for my entire childhood [...] if my primary caregivers made me think that everything was all 2.4 children... and we had the perfect life. And suddenly, I realised that it was all a big lie, and so I had to... get to grips with that.

Participants also experienced difficulties knowing how to relate to others or form friendships. Being forced to hide experiences at home created difficulties relating to others in an honest and open manner. The women reported difficulties determining the quality and safety of relationships, or feeling fundamentally different from those around them.

because I hadn't learned how to have good relationships, I didn't know what they were. [...] my friends were all from institutions I guess like school... where you live with other people, so you don't... practice like... let's go hang out. (Helen)

For some, this resulted in feeling unable to express their true selves or identity, not only in the presence of their parent(s), but also in their wider lives and in adulthood. Susan conveyed difficulties with identity through lack of awareness or demonstration of personal boundaries:

I... possibly took some of my feelings into work, erm.. [...] if... I... will say to [partner] look was I out of line, and he'll tell me if I was, and he'll let me know that I need to apologise. [...] I had a bit of an issue though... [...] I do distinctly remember having a shouting competition...[at work].

Parental contact in adulthood also negatively affected participants, including feelings of intense emotional distress, often occurring immediately following such: "I'd come back and I'd be mute for like... two or three hours because I physically couldn't talk [...] or I'd cry that much that I would physically collapse and that sort of thing" (Megan, estranged from both parents). All continued to experience difficulties in relationship(s) with their parent(s) in adulthood, involving ongoing issues with parental behaviour, or reminders of distressing treatment during childhood. For example, parental difficulties in relating emotionally could result in participants feeling rejected or that their parents did not care. This reinforced difficulties connecting with their own emotions.

The women also expressed difficulties coping with distressing events experienced during contact in adulthood. For some, this entailed emotional and physical withdrawal, leading to feelings of isolation and disconnection, as well as difficulties with self-esteem and self-worth. Five women related experiencing mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, and borderline personality disorder, and/or struggled with behaviours such as self-harm or excessive drinking. Another woman expressed difficulty coping through deflection of emotional responses, for example projecting or acting out anger toward others:

I wanted them to be jealous. That sounds really mean as well but I don't care. I want them to be jealous of what I've got. I want them to see... d'you know what, you could be a part of this, and you've chosen not to be. Look at what you're missing. (Susan, estranged from her father)

Finally, participants reported difficulty relating to others, both within and outside the family. This was particularly experienced in sibling relationships, resulting from differential familial roles, differential parental treatment, or from parental maltreatment. The women frequently explained that discussion of emotions or difficult experiences did not occur in their family:

we don't really go into those sort of... how do we feel emotionally, and we never did really. As kids we never talked about kind of... how do we feel about this erm... that we're being dragged through by our parents. [...] we just probably kept it all inside. (Claire, estranged from her father)

In summary, these difficulties relating to contact provide insight into the participants' experiences of psychological wellbeing prior to estrangement particularly in relation to personal identity, agency and the impact on relationships.

### **Gaining Agency**

All participants related that estrangement affected their sense of agency in their lives, although this differed somewhat between those estranged from both parents or their mother, and those estranged from their father. Several women expressed that estrangement gave them a feeling of liberation or space gained in their lives, including gaining space to think, to change, or to be themselves, or a sense of freedom from distressing experiences, reminders of the past, or feelings of being controlled undergone while in contact with their parent(s).

Most participants (all excepting one) expressed a process of sense-making, whereby estrangement provided emotional space which aided recognition and understanding of difficult feelings they

experienced after parental contact. In some cases, the women conveyed generational patterns of maltreatment/abuse and/or estrangement:

my mum [...] she and her mum were estranged for quite a while, and her father was quite enabling of her mother. [...] my mum was the scapegoat. So instead of my mum combating that cycle, she's literally just redone the pattern all over again. So I'm the scapegoat (Tara).

Making sense of this pattern seemed to aid Tara making sense of the development of her own familial role, and resulting past experiences. This process of sense-making seemed to facilitate making sense of the self.

For Susan, who did not relate a process of sense-making, intolerance of the self was communicated indirectly through creating a polarised narrative, putting others down to lift the self up, and side-stepping responsibility. One example of this related to discussion of her stepsister:

I did my Masters... You know, you name it, I've done it [...] and I think I'm a better person because I've done that. Erm... you know, [stepsister]'s...in the long run, yeah she did go to university, hasn't got a job, still lives at home, can't hold down a boyfriend, worked at the back of...oh what's the name of the shop [...] she can't even hold down a job.

An important part of estrangement for those estranged from both parents (or their mother), facilitated by gaining space, was exploring and/or becoming their true self: "I get an overwhelming sense of freedom a lot of the time, because I'm finally allowed to be me" (Tara). One woman in particular expressed a sense of recommencing development that felt stifled or prevented during contact: "being removed from that, you kind of like think... well what... what am I? Like who am I... you know it's all this identity stuff" (Helen). All participants relating enabled exploration of self and identity explained that this led to improved self-esteem, feelings of self-worth, and agency.

Related to this, participants expressed a greater sense of possibility looking forward to the future, compared to how this felt while in contact. Estrangement was implicated in facilitating greater freedom to make life choices, such as feeling able to choose from a wider range of careers. The women also noted the importance of breaking the cycle of maltreatment, both by protecting their children (or future children) from contact with their parent(s), and through enabling change and addressing any personal difficulties experienced during contact, in order to facilitate becoming a better parent in the future:

...it's made me a lot more determined to break that cycle. I've said that I don't want either of my parents meeting my children when I have them, because I don't want the psychological damage that it causes me or for them (Megan).

Finally, some participants expressed difficulties in gaining agency, for example due to a sense of internalised stigma resulting from estrangement and societal views about the importance of family ties. Others experienced internalised stigma resulting from circumstances leading to estrangement, taking on a sense of shame relating to one's family, for example due to parental addiction. Two participants estranged from both parents also noted that lacking family left them feeling that they lacked a safety net in their lives, particularly relevant when exploring new options involving concerns that things might not work out: "Everyone else generally has family I suppose. That's kind of a taken for granted thing. You have family, and you can like... fall back on having family. It's a little bit...intimidating, kind of not having that" (Rachel). Having nothing to fall back on could result in additional anxiety, making exploring aspects of self and identity feel especially challenging. The women also explained that difficulties resulting from parental contact often continued to affect them after estrangement, and could take time to overcome. Continuing impacts of parental maltreatment appeared particularly evident for participants estranged from their father.

In summary, for the women in the current study, estrangement seemed to enhance their psychological wellbeing, specifically the sense of personal control or agency in their lives. A sense of space or liberation from the experiences of contact seem to facilitate several elements of this, including processes of sense-making (of both the estrangement and the self), exploring/becoming their selves, and expanding the opportunities available to them. Despite this, some participants continued to experience difficulties with agency post-estrangement, including lacking a safety net when making choices about their lives, and struggles with a sense of internalised stigma (due to continuing difficulties relating to experiences of contact, or due to estrangement itself).

### **Navigating Relationships**

All participants mentioned navigating post-estrangement relationships, with people they are not estranged from. For most, elements of estrangement led to improving relationships, through enabling authenticity and honesty about their lives:

I can just be honest... about stuff that's going on in my life... and I don't have to make up ... reasons [...] It's so much easier to not have any contact at all, and to be able to explain why you're not (Rachel).

Estrangement seemed to facilitate learning about appropriate behaviour and boundaries for their selves, leading to improvements in connection to others. Feeling understood, and gaining support was also particularly valued by all the women who discussed their estrangement with others.

Despite this positive aspect, most participants also mentioned ongoing difficulties with navigating relationships relating to their upbringing/experiences of contact as a barrier. These included ongoing difficulties with trust, emotional connecting, and behaviours or situations that triggered reminders of past maltreatment or upsetting situations. This could also result in an internalised sense of being unacceptable: “well... why doesn't he want to be my father, what's wrong with me... [...] would other people think the same things were wrong with me?” (Laura, estranged from her father). The women estranged from both parents conveyed actively working to overcome these difficulties. Others communicated awareness that these difficulties were still present. However, for Susan, estranged from her father, difficulties with relating became apparent during the interview through, for example, recounting behaviours relating to lacking boundaries, particularly with her young children (aged 5 and 9):

they'd seen the texts [from her stepmother] themselves, they'd seen the messages themselves when they'd come off the computer [...] we've gone through the... what they said... what he said. (Susan)

All participants thought that estrangement itself could act as a barrier to relating. They relayed multiple instances of secondary estrangements from other family members, resulting from initial estrangement from their parent(s). In some cases, these continued difficulties were related to communicating with relatives (particularly siblings) still in contact with estranged parent(s):

[it] effectively means I'm estranged from my brother, because he's young, and they're his primary caregivers. So... I can message him, like I've made him aware that he can speak to me if he wants to, but I don't want to push it because he lives with them. (Rachel).

In other cases, this seemed connected to overt statements of disapproval or even refusal to tolerate the estrangement by other relatives, leading to participants' decision to distance or further estrange from these individuals in order to preserve the parental estrangement.

Most of the women also mentioned difficulties dealing with reactions of friends, colleagues or other non-related individuals. For many, this appeared related to societal expectations that everyone should have a family, and contact with one's parents was important, or even essential, regardless of circumstances of estrangement or experience of contact. Estrangement was felt to be not widely understood, leading to feelings of alienation and a lack of understanding and relatability by others:

I lost a lot of friends around the time of the estrangement because they didn't understand it. And I couldn't... because it's not a normal thing, I couldn't explain it to them, and I didn't know anyone else that had gone through it (Tara).

Additionally, and in part due to these reactions, participants experienced feelings of invalidation and perceived unacceptability of estrangement:

I've thought it'd probably be easier to say that I was orphaned. Because... if you say orphaned, people just... don't even want to ask. [...] Whereas with estrangement, people kind of want to know... I guess it's for the gossip... (Megan).

This could also result from internalisation of these attitudes and an internal sense of importance of family incongruent with outward experiences of their family in reality.

A final aspect of navigating relationships recounted by Laura and Susan, estranged from their father, was estrangement as a conversation starter. For them, validation of their experiences appeared, in part, to be gained from anticipation of drama in relation to reactions of others or of possible future contact, coupled with expressed enjoyment of the apparent sensationalist nature of their estrangement:

it's such a... Oh My God story [...] so when people say something about their dad and they tell you a story... like I always win that conversation... it's an interesting story, and... it's a bit of an ice-breaker sometimes (Laura).

These women felt that reactions of shock and eager curiosity from others when recounting an event leading to estrangement was a positive experience.

To summarise, for most participants, estrangement had a mixed impact on psychological wellbeing in relation to navigating relationships. Many found that estrangement permitted a greater sense of authenticity and honesty, and enabled learning about boundaries and how to relate to others. The women particularly valued gaining support and understanding around estrangement, but discovered this could be scarce as estrangement itself could act as a barrier both through causing secondary estrangements, particularly in relation to other family members, and because it goes against societal expectations of family. Similarly to gaining agency, ongoing difficulties were experienced in navigating relationships which related to experiences of contact, such as difficulties with trust, emotional connecting, and reminders of past maltreatment.

## Navigating estrangement

For all participants, navigating estrangement was in itself a complex process and consisted of a number of different elements. All excepting one initially found estrangement to be a powerful emotional experience, including intense distress and upset, sometimes extreme stress and anxiety, and in one case strong fear of parental reactions:

I was so stressed about it, and frightened that they'd come and find me [...] it was really important that they had absolutely no way that they could contact me at all, like through anyone. So I was quite scared (Rachel).

For Rachel, extreme stress and distress initially led to disconnection and feeling that the estrangement was unbelievable or unreal:

immediately afterwards... erm.... it was almost kind of like out of body experiences, like I think after... when I moved, and then they didn't know where I was...

The duration of these reactions varied. For most, initial reactions were relatively brief, lasting a week or two, albeit with later recurring periods of intense emotions. For others, initial distress lasted for prolonged periods – for Tara, estranged from her mother, this lasted one-two years following estrangement, during which depression and anxiety accompanied, or perhaps resulted from, the distress experienced. Laura, who did not experience initial distress, reported that estrangement was gradual, evolving over time with reduced contact to a point where communication had now been absent for a period of several years.

After initial distress lessened, most participants felt estrangement removed the stress of contact, and linked this to removal of the experiences of contact discussed above. In addition to this, participants also reported improvement in their quality of life, where estrangement left them feeling “better” and was “positive” for their wellbeing. The women expressed relief over not having to navigate a difficult or damaging relationship any longer:

the stress of having to speak to them or see them... is completely gone, and I think... it's really difficult to describe actually, because it's such a big change [...] just not having to do it is fantastic... specifically in terms of seeing my dad (Rachel).

The women experienced varying reactions to the loss of their parent(s). Those estranged from both parents (or their mother) expressed a felt loss of the *concept* of their parent(s), coupled with realisation that in reality, the parent(s) they *actually* had fell short of being 'good enough' parent(s): “I think society has a... certain view of how... what parents are like. Erm... and it's hard to reconcile

that with what you're actually given." (Helen). The women conveyed grieving not their actual parent(s), but the loss of having to relinquish hope of their parent(s) being able to become the parent(s) they needed, both as children and into their adult lives. Laura and Claire, estranged from their father, reported difficulty reconciling the concept of a father with the reality of who their father had been in their lives.

Rachel, estranged from both parents, conveyed a sense of acceptance and finality about the situation. For Rachel, estrangement involved holding her parents accountable for the abuse perpetrated by making a police report. She felt that this action, coupled with the detrimental contact she had experienced meant reconciliation was impossible if she was to preserve her own psychological wellbeing. However, most participants expressed a sense of ambivalence, particularly those estranged from both parents or their mother. They felt strongly that estrangement was the most beneficial way forward for their psychological wellbeing, however, they experienced an equally powerful sense of the situation lacking finality. As the estranged parent(s) were still alive, and thus possibility of them changing in future not impossible, the women expressed difficulty reconciling feelings that change was unlikely, but not wanting to give up this hope entirely. A sense of continuing ties to their parent(s) was conveyed. Laura and Claire, estranged from their fathers, expressed feeling that nothing had really changed, suggesting a continuation of the absence of parenting experienced during contact. Only Susan, estranged from her father, mentioned the possibility of future reconciliation.

Finally, several participants communicated appreciation of estrangement's complexity. They related the need to protect their self, sense of agency, and wellbeing by maintaining the estrangement, while also conveying understanding of how their parent(s) might feel. For example, they realised their parent(s) might have been doing their best during the relationship, and may also feel a variety of emotions relating to the estrangement, but these did not negate the women's feelings, and that parent(s) own experiences could also have contributed to difficulties that occurred within the relationship. Helen (estranged from both parents) shared this about her parents' relationship:

I don't think they were wanting to be together particularly, and my dad certainly has made comments erm... that I have heard about my mother and... being stuck [...] they didn't sort of... they weren't... preparing to be parents, they weren't maybe the best parents or good enough parents, whatever the phrase is.

In sum, estrangement often initially led to intense emotional reactions. However, after an initial period of struggle, many participants felt that estrangement removed the stress of contact and

improved their quality of life and wellbeing. Estrangement also enabled a process of coming to terms with reconciling an internal sense of the importance of family with outward experiences of family in reality. For some, the loss of parent(s) could be grieved as a sense of finality was achieved, as there was “no going back”, while others experienced a sense of ambivalence as estrangement lacked the finality of other types of loss, and ties to parent(s) were still felt. Some also communicated an appreciation of the complexity of the estrangement situation, understanding and empathising with their parent(s) while relaying a need to continue the estrangement to preserve their wellbeing.

## **Discussion**

This study investigated participants’ experiences of psychological wellbeing prior to and after estrangement from their parent(s). As noted in the introduction, psychological wellbeing encompasses the concepts of autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Findings of the current study show that psychological wellbeing is negatively impacted during contact prior to estrangement. Following estrangement, the picture is more complex. The process of estrangement itself can remove the stress of contact and improve quality of life and wellbeing. Estrangement offers a greater sense of authenticity and for some people an enhanced sense of personal control or agency. However, there can also be intense initial feelings of distress after becoming estranged, and people experienced loss of the *concept* of their parent(s) in terms of societal expectations of parental behaviour. This resonates with Agllias’ (2018) findings, which suggest that estrangement can result in similar feelings of loss for all parties involved, irrespective of whether they have chosen the estrangement or been subjected to it. For some, estrangement continued to act as a barrier to relationship formation, and for many struggles with agency were still apparent.

These findings illustrate both the continuing difficulties with psychological wellbeing as well as the positives experienced by our participants after estrangement. In relation to this, we note two key findings of our work: Firstly, the effect of estrangement on people’s perceptions of agency and benefit finding.

The women expressed the feeling that estrangement allowed development of a greater sense of agency in their lives. This involved a sense of liberation from experiences of contact, and gaining emotional space, which could facilitate exploration of their identity and identifying the direction they wanted to take in life. Research into psychological wellbeing emphasises the importance of feeling in charge of one’s life, feeling life has purpose, and realising one’s potential (Ryff & Keyes,

1995). The assertion of the need to embrace one's own identity could represent a demonstration of resilience and agency in the face of the sometimes-stigmatising nature of estrangement. Valuing being oneself over familial acceptance when experiencing marginalisation can lead to an increased sense of personal agency, and individuals experiencing pride in relation to a formerly stigmatised identity (Dorrance Hall, 2016). Participants reported a process of sense-making, whereby estrangement facilitated making sense of, and starting to come to terms with, their experiences, paralleling research by Agllias (2015). Creating narratives around experiences can aid in reducing stigma (Scharp and Thomas, 2016), and sense-making might represent an opportunity for personal growth and self-acceptance.

The findings from the current study resonate with the work on benefit findings after traumatic life events. While such events can lead to initial stressful impacts, challenges posed to an individual's world views can, through a process of comprehending and finding significance in events, lead to reconfiguration of these views, personal growth, increased feelings of agency, and positive effects on wellbeing (Joseph and Linley, 2006). Importantly, benefit-finding has also been shown to be associated with better mental health outcomes and positive wellbeing (Helgeson et al., 2006), suggesting that this process could be of particular importance to dealing with difficult life experiences such as estrangement.

Secondly, we note the effect of estrangement in relation to the creation of new environments and ways of relating to others. A key finding here was that estrangement itself created opportunities for the women to improve their relationships with others. Navigating relationships was improved by the realisation of the importance of trusting, supportive relationships, and efforts made to maintain these. This was made possible as estrangement enabled greater honesty and authenticity about participants and their lives, a key element of agency and positive connections with others (Brown, 2006). Distance from family allowed people to move forward and establish new patterns of communication, improving resilience and psychological wellbeing through establishing healthier relationships with others (Collishaw et al., 2007, Dorrance Hall, 2016), perhaps even seeing these relationships as a form of chosen family. Thus, contrary to the predominant constructs of dysfunctional families, in which estrangement is portrayed as a negative and unnatural state for a family, for some, estrangement might represent a more functional family state (Allen and Moore, 2016), perhaps even resulting in redefining what it means to be a family (Scharp and Thomas, 2016).

Relationships continue to prove central to experiences of estrangement. Participants still felt that estrangement itself created a sense of internalised stigma (detrimental to a sense of agency) and was a barrier when relating to others. Agllias (2011a, 2018) suggests that familial relationships are

assigned societal meanings: as estrangement does not fit with these, those experiencing estrangement might feel isolated or unsupported. Experiencing guilt and shame about estrangement, and a sense of internalised pressure regarding the estranged relationship, might also be common for adult children (Agllias, 2016, Agllias, 2018) although the women recognised the value of understanding and empathy from others in relation to the estrangement, which might further aid in reducing feelings of internalised stigma and thus improve wellbeing (Brown, 2006).

An interesting new finding is that some participants viewed estrangement from their father as a conversation starter, rather than experiencing this as stigmatising. The difference in experience for these women might reflect a number of factors. Different societal expectations regarding a close relationship with a father (as opposed to a mother), particularly in Western societies, could be of particular relevance in the current study (van IJzendoorn et al., 1992). Some women estranged from their father had experienced parental divorce during childhood, with the father living away from the family home. It is therefore possible that estrangement from a father does not present the same challenges for these women in terms of their sense of agency, as they have already become accustomed to their father being more absent from their day-to-day lives. In addition to this, estrangement from a father appears to have been reported with the greatest frequency (Agllias, 2011a, Conti, 2015), and greater prevalence could reflect wider awareness, and therefore understanding and acceptance in society.

Finally, participants often felt pressure from external sources to try to reconcile (Scharp et al., 2015), which might be particularly problematic when contact has been detrimental to wellbeing and could explain difficulties relating to both gaining agency and navigating relationships expressed by women in the current study. Most participants conveyed a sense of ambivalence over the estrangement as a situation that lacked finality, ties to parents were still felt, and they did not want to give up hope that things could change. This suggests that estrangement is an involved, ongoing process, rather than a single event (Agllias, 2011a, Agllias, 2018, Scharp and Thomas, 2016, Sharp et al., 2015), and could be indicative of the ongoing nature of the relationship, even in the absence of contact (Agllias, 2018).

### **Theoretical Implications and Practical Applications**

The current study extends existing research into the experiences of estrangement in relation to the wellbeing of parents, by focusing on adult children. It finds support for existing research into the reasons adult children might be estranged from parent(s), and extends these findings by suggesting that estrangement can be maintained at least in part as it can be experienced as beneficial. The

current study suggests for adult children, detrimental aspects of estrangement appear to be mitigated by positives derived from gaining agency and space, removing the stress of contact, and processes of making sense of the past and the estrangement. This extends the research into benefit finding after stressful life events, by exploring how sense-making can help to improve wellbeing and lead to a sense of personal growth after estrangement - a different kind of stressful life event. In addition to this, it extends our understanding of resilience in this context by suggesting that for some adult children, resilience could be facilitated through taking an active role in estrangement from their parent(s) in order to be able to move forward and form new, healthier relationships and gain agency over their lives.

In terms of practice implications, the current study suggests that those working with, or undertaking research involving adult children estranged from one or more parent(s) could usefully enquire as to how they feel that estrangement might be affecting their psychological wellbeing. Consideration of the context of the estrangement, validating and normalising the estrangement experience, and taking a non-judgemental stance would also appear to be beneficial. This could facilitate exploration of a process of sense-making, aiding estranged adult children in coming to terms with the losses involved with estrangement and augmenting processes of benefit-finding. This could also help to mitigate difficulties that adult children communicate experiencing relating to ongoing difficulties resulting from their upbringing, and improve resilience and psychological wellbeing more generally.

### **Limitations and directions for future research**

This study examined a restricted age range (24 – 37) of white, Western, female participants, and captured participants' perceptions of experiences at a single time point. All participants experienced some form of parental maltreatment, therefore the findings might not be generalizable to other estrangement experiences. Furthermore, we did not examine the experiences of individuals who experienced parental maltreatment but remained in contact with their parents. Consequently, it is possible that some of the relational experiences communicated in this study could be associated with the abuse participants experienced, and might not relate solely to estrangement. As an aside, it is worth noting that there is relatively little literature exploring the experiences of parents who choose to estrange.

Future research into experiences of adult children could usefully address these limitations, for example by examining experiences of male adult children, experiences of participants with differing reasons for estrangement, and a wider age-range, perhaps considering a longitudinal approach to illuminate whether participant's perceptions of estrangement experiences change over time. Future

studies could also examine possible differences in estrangement and wellbeing experiences relating to which parent(s) are part of the estrangement.

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