A PORTFOLIO OF ACADEMIC, THERAPEUTIC PRACTICE AND RESEARCH WORK INCLUDING AN INVESTIGATION OF FATHER ABSENCE.

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Throughout this portfolio names have been replaced with pseudonyms and identifying information has been changed or omitted to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of clients and research participants.
INTRODUCTION TO THE PORTFOLIO

Introduction

This portfolio represents the culmination of three years counselling psychology training. It contains a selection of academic, therapeutic and research papers written during these three years and aims to reflect my personal and professional development as a counselling psychologist. Each dossier will be considered in more detail below but first I intend to provide the reader with some background information which I hope will set my academic work, personal and professional development in context.

Background

Looking back it feels as though I have always been passionate about psychology, but I think my interest was first sparked as a teenager. Being educated at a highly academic, single-sex boarding school it was perhaps inevitable that I would encounter eating disorders. With several of my friends becoming seriously unwell, I can recall being curious as to why this had happened to them, dipping into the teen-literature on the topic and discovering psychology. During my remaining years at school I began to explore what becoming ‘a psychologist’ entailed.

My journey toward becoming a counselling psychologist began in earnest when I elected to study undergraduate psychology at the University of York. However, although this made for an interesting three years, it was not the sort of psychology I was looking for. The foundations of the course were in ‘hard science’, the biology of the brain, cognitive
psychology, and animal experiments, and whilst it provided me with a rigorous training in these fields, I felt that I still did not have the approach to understanding the subtleties and nuances of individual experience I desired.

After graduation I worked for two years in the field of severe and enduring mental health, hoping that work in a therapeutic context would bring me closer to what I was looking for. I had roles in inpatient and community settings, both of which were firmly located within the medical model of psychiatry. As time went on I found this model increasingly closed-minded and restrictive and felt that it did not always meet an individual's needs. Moreover, it seemed that individuals were being offered 'sticking plasters' – temporary solutions in the form of medication or hospital admission that did not seem to approach their core difficulties or bring about change in a lasting way. Becoming increasingly dissatisfied and eager to continue my personal development, I came across counselling psychology with something of an 'aha!' Counselling psychology seemed to encompass much of what had seemed missing in my previous work and training and hold values more closely allied to my own. In particular I was drawn by, and remain attached to the focus on the therapeutic relationship and humanistic principles of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard. The interested reader will find a detailed exploration of my development as a counselling psychologist since this initial 'aha!' in my final clinical paper (Therapeutic practice dossier).
The portfolio is divided into three sections, comprising an Academic dossier, Therapeutic practice dossier and Research dossier, all of which reflect my personal, professional and academic development over the course of training.

**Academic dossier**

The academic dossier contains three essays selected from those I have written during the course of training. As with the training more generally, essay writing has felt like a multi-faceted process, encompassing theoretical learning, facilitation of my clinical practice as well as fostering my personal development. Moreover, on reflection I can see how the essay topics I chose fed into my ongoing research endeavours.

The first essay is an exploration of the ways in which attachment models facilitate our understanding of identity development in young adults. At the time of writing the essay I was just starting my first clinical placement - a student counselling service. For many of my clients, identity development was a stage salient issue and the understanding gained from this essay was indispensable. Furthermore, this was my first exploration of attachment theory which was to become an ongoing thread throughout my work.

The second essay considers psychoanalytic theories of romantic partner choice. Throughout my training I have encountered clients who are in some way struggling in their romantic relationships, and it has been useful to have a framework within which I can try to make sense of their choices and struggles. This particular essay was also of value on a personal level, increasing my awareness of the choices I and those around me
have made. Moreover, an understanding of how early experiences shape our choices proved valuable for my second piece of research, helping me consider how young women’s experiences of father absence might have affected their subsequent romantic relationships.

The final essay examines the concept of cognitive avoidance, the role this plays in the development and maintenance of depression and its impact on therapeutic work with depressed clients. When I wrote this essay I was several months into my final placement in a specialist clinic for people with recurrent depression. At this point I had encountered a number of clients who were reluctant or unable to identify their thoughts, which seemed to pose a dilemma when working cognitively. With the aid of both supervision and the reading for this essay I was able to consider ways to overcome this stumbling block.

**Therapeutic practice dossier**

This dossier relates to my therapeutic practice and encompasses descriptions of my three clinical placements and my final clinical paper. Information regarding the context, type and duration of placement, as well as client population and supervision is given in the descriptions of placements. The final clinical paper is a personal account of my development and nascent identity as a counselling psychologist and my theoretical approach to practice as it stands at the end of training.
Research dossier

This dossier contains my first year literature review, and two qualitative research reports from the following two years of training. My research has focussed on the theme of father absence, with in depth exploration of ‘both sides of the coin’ - young women’s experiences of growing up without a father and men’s experiences of living apart from their children.

I was initially drawn to this topic out of personal curiosity, but a preliminary review of the literature revealed that historically research into father absence had focussed on the effects on boys and the smaller body of research into girl’s experiences seemed to draw mixed conclusions. I have only corrected this piece of work for spelling and grammar because I hoped to show how far my skills as a researcher have developed over the three years of training. Moreover, the months in which it was written were particularly challenging at a personal level, and the quality of my literature review serves as a personal reminder of the importance of self-care in achieving quality work.

In the second year I continued to focus on young women’s experiences of growing up without a father (due to divorce or separation), having noted a lack of research in the literature attending to how generally reported trends looked in phenomenological terms. Due to limited numbers of participants I chose a case study approach which allowed me the luxury of exploring young women’s experiences in some depth. Throughout this project I was struck by the participants’ phantasies about their fathers (e.g. no longer caring for them) and experiences of their father’s parenting after separation or divorce.
This was the impetus for my third year research into men's experiences of living apart from their children following separation or divorce. I have viewed this as the second part of the same project and consequently it felt important to use the same method of analysis in order to allow comparability between studies. Looking back at the two parts of project I am aware that perhaps inevitably each has been shaped by the theoretical model I was practising at the time – there are more interpretations in my second year research and a more cognitive approach taken to the third year piece.

As aforementioned, my skills and enthusiasm for research has grown over the three years and I have been keen to incorporate research into my developing identity as a counselling psychologist. This has been particularly salient during the last year in which I have felt greatly moved by the injustices I have perceived some divorced fathers to be subjected to, and it now seems that research may be another way to assuage the sense of moral compunction that is one of the things that brought me to counselling psychology.
ACADEMIC DOSSIER

Introduction to the Academic Dossier

This dossier includes three essays selected from those that were submitted during the three years of training. The first essay explores the ways in which attachment models help us understand the process of identity development in young adults and how this understanding might facilitate counselling psychology practice. The second essay considers psychoanalytic theories of 'romantic partner' choice and how these dynamics may play out in the therapy room. Lastly, the third essay examines the concept of cognitive avoidance, the role this plays in the development and maintenance of depression and its impact on therapeutic work with depressed clients.
In what ways (if at all) do attachment models help you to understand the process of identity development in young adults? How might any understanding gained from these models prove useful in the practice of counselling psychologists?

Identity development has come to be recognised as one of the critical developmental tasks of late adolescence and early adulthood. The term 'identity' can be conceptualised in terms of a person’s values, attitudes and beliefs that define them as an individual. Erikson suggests that it is only in adolescence that individuals “develop the prerequisites in physiological growth, mental maturation and social responsibility” to undertake the identity formation process and that this is “the psychosocial aspect of adolescing” (1968, p.91). Significant life events commonly occurring in early adulthood, such as leaving home or choosing a career are particularly salient in terms of identity formation. Development of a coherent identity is commonly associated with positive markers of psychological development and adjustment, for example higher self-esteem, lower rates of reported loneliness after leaving home and greater dating competence (Allen et al, 1994). The development of identity has been identified as a core therapeutic issue in the counselling of late adolescents (Enns, 1991), although issues surrounding identity formation may occur across the lifespan. Consequently an understanding of the process of identity development could be seen as essential for counselling psychologists. It has been suggested that the family environment is the most influential on personality development, and is the primary context for identity exploration and development in young adults (Bowlby, 1973; Brighton-Cleghorn, 1987). Attachment models may therefore be valuable for gaining an understanding of the identity development process.
Attachment models came to the fore in the 1960s with the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. An attachment can be defined as a positive, enduring emotional bond of substantial intensity (Schultheiss & Blustein, 1994), and attachment models grew from a focus on the bond between infant and primary caregiver. An attachment object (e.g. mother) functions as a safe haven from which a child may venture forth to explore the environment and to which it can return in the face of uncertainty and danger. Although the idea of parent as a “secure base” came from studies of infants (e.g. Ainsworth & Bell, 1970), it has a resonance for young adults exploring the world and their identity from the secure grounding of parental attachment.

In the early years of life an infant’s attachment to an individual is inferred from the infant seeking proximity to that person, particularly in times of uncertainty or danger. In adolescence, an individual’s attachment to his parents weakens as attachments to other adults, groups or institutions, and sexual attraction to age-mates strengthen (Bowlby, 1969). Attachments are believed to persist throughout life, although attachment behaviours become less frequent and intense with age, and symbolic communications, for example phone calls or letters, become increasingly effective at providing the same comfort (Leondari & Kiosseoglou, 2000).

A key feature of Bowlby’s theory of attachment is the internal working model, which demonstrates the significance of attachment relationships on the identity formation process. Bowlby (1973) states that each individual builds working models of the world
and of him or herself within it, with which to perceive events, forecast the future and plan one’s own behaviour. Models are developed through experiences of interactions with others, which in childhood is primarily the attachment figure, and the model is imposed like a template onto future interactions. Although working models tend to be stable, they can be influenced by further relationship experiences (Main et al, 1985). Crucially, an individual’s model of self will contain an impression of how acceptable/unacceptable they are in the eyes of key attachment figures, which in turn has an impact upon how they construe their own image – a concept similar to Rogers’ notion of children moving away from an organismic valuing system, to introjected beliefs (Merry, 1995). In this way the model of the attachment figure and of the self are complementary and mutually confirming. For example a much-loved child feels loved not only by his parents, but confident of being an essentially loveable person and therefore secure that he will be received well in future relationships. Bowlby asserts that once these beliefs are “woven into the fabric of the working model” it is unlikely that they will ever be seriously questioned (1973, p.205). It would appear that individuals establish a latent understanding of who they are, based on interactions with early attachment figures. This understanding will no doubt be of particular significance to the identity development process.

A second feature of an individual’s internal working model is a notion of the availability of key attachment figures. Bowlby (1973) explains that to be truly available does not mean to be actually present, but to be accessible and potentially responsive. Bowlby states that “when an individual is confident that an attachment figure will be available to
him whenever he desires it, that person will be much less prone to either intense or chronic fear than will an individual who for any reason has no such confidence” (1973, p.202). Confidence in the availability of attachment figures is gradually established from infancy until adolescence. Furthermore, the expectations developed during these years tend to persist relatively unchanged across the lifespan. Bowlby’s assertions imply an internalisation of the “secure base” experienced with early attachment figures.

On the basis of these principles, Bowlby suggests that “there is a strong case for believing that an unthinking confidence in the unfailing accessibility and support of attachment figures is the bedrock on which stable and self-reliant personality is built” (1973, p.322). A self-reliant person is described, somewhat paradoxically, as one who knows that standing behind them are one or more trusted figures who will come to their aid should difficulties arise. Psychoanalytic theorists have traditionally supported the opposing view, that emotional separation from one’s family is key to psychological development. However, Winnicott (1958) suggests that whilst the individual gradually develops the capacity to be alone, “even so, theoretically, there is always someone present, someone who is equated ultimately and unconsciously with the mother...”. This statement seems to support Bowlby’s hypothesis that although an individual may have achieved a degree of independence, attachment figures, whom we may associate with our early caregivers, remain important.

The understanding gained from Bowlby’s model thus far is that attachments persist across the lifespan, and that our experience of attachment figures directly influences the
individual's self-concept. Equally, experiences of the attachment figures' consistent availability endow the individual with a secure base from which to face life's challenges. In terms of the identity development process, it would seem that these experiences set the foundation stones of identity and prepare the ground for further development to take place.

Extrapolating from the idea of a secure base giving an infant confidence to explore his environment, one might assume that in young adulthood assurance of a secure base would encourage the individual towards greater levels of independence and autonomy. These early theories of Bowlby's have indeed been borne out in the literature. For example Leondari and Kiosseoglou (2000) explored interrelations between attachment patterns and psychological separation from parents, and the contribution of these to adaptive psychological functioning in a group of Greek students. Results showed that secure attachment facilitates healthy separation from parents, and that both secure attachment and healthy separation are positively associated with measures of well being. This state of "autonomous-relatedness" (Bowlby, cited in Murphey et al, 1963) is evidently conducive to psychological well being, and has also been found to foster identity development. Allen et al (1994) conducted a longitudinal study of adolescents in which displays of autonomy and relatedness towards parents were found to be strongly linked to measures of ego-development, a construct that reflects the individual's characteristic ways of imposing meaning upon their experiences of themselves and their relationships. Similarly, Minuchen (1974) states that when interactional patterns within a
family encourage a sense of belonging and of being separate, optimal identity development is encouraged.

Whilst achieving a state of "autonomous-relatedness" is certainly an important factor in the identity development process, the literature suggests there is another important factor to be considered. Erikson (1968) stated that ego identity formation occurred through a process of personal exploration, a theory operationalised by Marcia (1980) with the identification of four distinct identity statuses: identity achievement, identity foreclosure, identity moratorium and identity diffusion. Identity achievement is associated with the best psychological outcomes (Schultheiss & Blustein, 1994), describing an individual who has committed to an identity after a period of active exploration. It is implied in the literature to be the goal of the identity formation process, however it is worth considering whether identity achievement really is the 'holy grail' or whether individuals are able to tolerate certain inconsistencies within their identities. Equally it should be noted that individuals may not remain in the identity achievement status permanently – at anytime the occurrence of significant life events may trigger a re-evaluation of identity.

Schultheiss and Blustein's study (1994) provides evidence in support of the need for personal exploration in order to reach identity achievement. Parental attachment, psychological separation and ego identity status were measured in a sample of American university students, with results showing that women who experienced a modest attachment to, and some degree of attitudinal independence from their mothers, were most likely to avoid the diffusion, moratorium or foreclosure statuses. Conversely,
women who had a strong attachment to their parents were likely to fall into the foreclosure status (commitment to identity without active exploration), the implication being that strong attachment precluded exploration.

Personal exploration is certainly significant to the identity development process, and evidence exists to suggest that adolescents who exhibit more extensive identity exploration have parental relationships in which both individuality and emotional closeness are expressed (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). This brings us back once again to Bowlby, who stated that self-reliance is the product "... of a family that provides strong support for its offspring combined with respect for their personal aspirations, their sense of responsibility, and their ability to deal with the world. So far from sapping a child's self-reliance, then, a secure base and strong family support greatly encourage it." (1973, p.362).

Whilst the evidence appears fairly conclusive regarding the importance of attachment relationships and personal exploration in the identity development process, it is worth noting the limitations of the research in this area to date. All the studies cited were based on white, two-parent families, the majority of whom were American. This is in no way representative of all families and it is uncertain whether the same conclusions would apply to one-parent families, or families where the child acts as carer to a parent for example. Equally, it is unlikely that results of the studies are applicable across cultures. In the one Greek study cited (Leondari & Kiosseoglou, 2000), the results of the study were not as expected, perhaps because the measures used did not tap into the construct as
anticipated, since they were normed on a different cultural population. None of the studies consider the importance of attachment figures other than parents, despite the importance of other figures in adolescence being noted in the literature (e.g. Bowlby, 1969). The majority of the studies were cross-sectional which do not allow for causal inferences to be made. Finally, in many of the studies the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) was used. Stroufe et al (1999) point out that caution should be exercised when using this as a measure of history, since currently no empirical evidence exists as to the accuracy of reported early memories on the AAI. Equally, the AAI asks people to reflect on their early memories, although there is no evidence that adults have verbal access to experience from infancy.

Developing a coherent sense of self is critical to psychological well being, since identity is rooted at an individual’s very core and consequently affects functioning in all arenas. Given the fundamental nature of identity, an understanding of its development is vital for counselling psychologists, and attachment models present one way of conceptualising this process. Equally, knowledge of attachment theory is directly relevant to the use of several models of therapy, for example Transactional Analysis or systemic/family therapy.

Attachment models are useful in providing one perspective on how a sense of self is developed (i.e. through internal working models), and can give the counselling psychologist pointers to the possible aetiology of identity difficulties in later life. Historically, the importance of attachment relationships for psychological adjustment
have been noted – for example Freud’s final theory of anxiety asserts that “missing someone who is loved and longed for is the key to an understanding of anxiety” (1926). More recently, attachment theory has been used as a framework for understanding risk and protective factors in development (Nakash-Eisikovits et al, 2002). Bowlby (1973) linked insecure attachment styles to depression and anxiety, and conversely secure attachment has been negatively correlated with personality pathology and positively correlated with healthy functioning (Nakash-Eisikovits et al, 2002). It is important for the counselling psychologist to note however, that early experience does not cause later pathology in a linear way. Except in very extreme cases, early anxious attachment is not viewed as psychopathology in itself or as a direct cause of psychopathology, but as an initiator of pathways probabilistically associated with later pathology (Sroufe et al, 1999).

As Erikson (1968) asserted, personal exploration is critical to the healthy development of identity, and most exploration takes place in a family environment which supports and encourages this. Of course, not all families provide this ideal, and where pathology is introduced to the family environment, for example alcohol abuse or parental depression, rigid roles may be adopted by family members in order to maintain the equilibrium of the family system (Nardi, 1991). Identity exploration is curtailed by rigidly adhering to any role, and whilst in time the particular family circumstances may change, it may be difficult for an individual to move away from the adopted role. An important function of the counselling psychologist in this case could be to act as a secure base from which personal exploration may now occur.
The understanding gained from attachment models is useful not only for the counselling psychologist’s client work, but may also allow a deeper appreciation of their supervision experience. Doppelt (1999) states that an individual’s experience of supervision for therapeutic work will be mediated by the experience of early attachment relationships. This phenomenon could also be couched in terms of transference, but in terms of attachment theory it implies the presence of working models being used to interpret current relationships.

In conclusion, let us consider Bowlby’s metaphor for personality development. Bowlby (1973) describes a railway system, with individuals initially travelling along a single main route. This soon forks off into a range of distinct routes, each of which diverges to some degree. Provided divergence does not become too great, there is a chance that the route an individual has taken will converge with the main track in time. In order to understand an individual, we need to look at the route they have travelled, and in particular, the individual’s experience of attachment relationships along that journey.
REFERENCES


A Psychoanalytic Understanding of ‘Romantic Partner’ Choice and Implications for Counselling Psychology Practice.

Intimate relationships have been posited to be a major source of fulfilment and distress in adulthood (Gross, 2002). This claim could be born out by the mountain of articles in women’s magazines alone, which suggest a preoccupation with the search for the perfect partner and how to survive difficulties in relationships. Similarly the huge success of television programmes such as Sex and The City, which revolved around the search for ‘Mr Right’. However, this is no modern-day preoccupation as works of literature demonstrate that love and the search for a romantic partner have been pertinent topics for millennia. These cultural trends are reflected in counselling psychology practice, with a great many clients bringing to therapy issues around relationship difficulties. In order to work effectively with such clients, it would seem pertinent for counselling psychologists to have a theoretical awareness of the potential dynamics of romantic relationships and why specific partners might be chosen. In this essay I intend to outline a psychoanalytic explanation of these issues, with illustration from my client work. I shall also consider the implications for the therapeutic relationship, in particular the counter-transference.

Why do we seek relationships?

Attachment theorists suggest that alongside procreation, attachment is one of the strongest motives for becoming a couple (Troupp, 1994). Attachment behaviour is characterised by the choice of a specific attachment figure with whom one has a powerful, enduring emotional bond, a bond most instantly recognisable in that between
mother and infant. The need for a secure base with an attachment figure continues from childhood throughout life, and those without a secure base are described “rootless and lonely” (Bowlby, 1979).

Many comparisons have been drawn between the behaviour of lovers and that of mothers and babies. The physical language of love is present from birth (Lemma-Wright, 1995), for example kissing, embracing and hand-holding, but there are also similarities in the intense, absorbed interactions of lovers and mothers and babies. Consequently, theorists propose that romantic love is a re-finding of feelings experienced towards the original love objects of childhood (Freud, 1914), and “a return to a parent-infant style of tenderness and caring” (Bowlby, 1979).

One might question why we desire to re-find these early feelings. The answer may lie in the profound infantile experience of mother as a ‘transformational object’ (Bollas, 1987), someone who fulfils the baby’s internal needs, but also has the power to transform the external environment to meet the baby’s demands. Bollas suggests that it is the memory of this early relationship experience that fuels our search in adulthood, for something that contains the promise of changing both our internal and external worlds. It has been suggested that a romantic partnership is the first opportunity since childhood for an exclusive two-person relationship, in which there is close physical intimacy and the opportunity to experience giving and receiving bodily satisfaction (Pincus, 1962). A loved one may therefore be someone who contains this aforementioned ‘promise’. Freud (1914) states that the love object is invested with all the mystique of the lost objects from
the past - all ones unfulfilled longings from childhood are transferred to the beloved, who is consequently experienced as a reincarnation of all that is potentially good (Lemma-Wright, 1995).

**Falling in love – Idealisation.**

The process of idealisation is central to the quest for love (Lemma-Wright, 1995) and can be explained by the Kleinian concept of splitting (Klein, 1930). Initially seen in infancy, intolerable feelings are split off and projected into the mother, who is then experienced as a ‘bad’, persecutory figure. At the same time, baby has warm feelings towards mother, who provides food and comfort. In order to reconcile these contradictory feelings, baby responds to mother as if she were two different people – ‘good’ and ‘bad’. Similarly, in the early stages of a relationship, we project all the good parts of ourselves into the loved one, creating an idealised image of them.

"O! she doth teach the torches to burn bright.

It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night

Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop’s ear;

Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!"

(Romeo & Juliet, Act I, Scene V, Lines 47-51, Shakespeare)

The sense of elation that commonly accompanies falling in love derives from ones love being returned. Indeed the more intense the exchange of projections, the more in love the couple feel themselves to be (Troupp, 1994). At this stage of a relationship lovers seem to
see each other through rose-tinted spectacles, avoiding all the less perfect ('bad') aspects of the other.

A loving relationship – Disillusionment.

In the beginning, lovers may feel very close, almost as if their two separate beings had merged into one (Troupp, 1994). However, if the relationship is to develop into a mature, loving relationship a degree of separation must be endured. Again, this resonates with the experience of the infant, who comes to realise it is not omnipotent and its mother is a separate being. In taking a step back we are able to see our loved one with more clarity and, since nobody is perfect, we see them ‘warts and all’. In surviving disillusionment we must reclaim the projections, which we invested in our partners in the earliest stages of the relationship. What is lost therefore, is nothing of the reality of our partners, rather our phantasy images of them.

At this stage some relationships fail, since one or both individuals are unable to tolerate the others shortcomings. Enduring relationships are those in which the couple are able to develop an ambivalent relationship, tolerating both their partners’ ‘good’ and ‘bad’ aspects. It is this ambivalence which distinguishes those who are in love from those who are loving (Lemma-Wright, 1995). Kleinian theory is pertinent here, since a move from idealisation to ambivalence characterises a shift from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position.
"My mistresses eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red:
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow upon her head...
...And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare."

(Sonnet 130 abridged, Shakespeare)

At this point I should like to review the parallels between the process of falling in love and the common development of a therapeutic relationship. In the early weeks of therapy, the client, although perhaps distraught, may feel hopeful about the process of therapy. The therapist may be experienced, in the transference, as a ‘transformational object’, someone who can bring about positive life changes. However, as the weeks progress and miracles fail to occur, they may feel disillusioned with the process and realise their therapist is far from perfect. In time one hopes this disillusionment will be survived, the client will move towards the depressive position and achieve a degree of separation, perhaps finding the time between sessions easier to tolerate.

Further parallels exist, for example in the emergence of erotic feelings which are not uncommon in therapeutic relationships. Lemma (2003) points to the intimacy, intensity and regressive features of the analytic experience as holding “the potential to arouse powerful, and often erotically charged, feelings in both patient and therapist” (p.247). Traditionally, erotic transference has been viewed as a form of resistance in therapy.
Freud (1915) proposed that erotic feelings represented the patient’s attempt to disrupt the therapeutic work by recruiting the therapist as their lover. More recently, Rosenberg (1999) pointed to the quality of these feelings as problematic for both patient and therapist, stating that since “psychotherapy offers an opportunity for the re-working of parent-child dependency issues, it follows that its erotic components will carry the illicit quality characteristic of incestuous feelings” (p. 134). This traditional view has been refuted by some who suggest that if there is resistance present it is more likely to be located in the therapist who may be anxious about the development of such feelings (e.g. Mann, 1997). Lemma (2003) highlights the seductiveness of being the object of a patient’s idealisation, and notes that if left unanalysed, these reactions can “seriously compromise our therapeutic effectiveness” (p.248). Increasingly however, the potentially positive qualities of the erotic transference are also being acknowledged, for example the transformational qualities of the erotic (Mann, 1997). Furthermore Kernberg (2000) suggests that if these sexual feelings can be tolerated, accepted as not being gratified in the analytic situation, then mourned and worked through, this will facilitate the patient and therapist’s process of separation.

**Why have I chosen you?!**

Although the processes I have been referring to thus far have been unconscious ones, we have yet to fully explore the significance of individuals’ internal worlds, populated with important figures from childhood. Indeed Pincus (1962) proposed that romantic partnerships are “the direct heir of childhood relationships”.

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Following Freud, Melanie Klein was one of the earliest psychoanalysts to elaborate a theory on romantic partner choice. She stated that deep unconscious motives contributed to the choice of “love-partner”, although these motives may be very much disguised in manifestation (Klein, 1937). Klein (1937) asserts that “the feelings of a man towards a woman are always influenced by his early attachment to his mother”, and similarly, a woman’s impressions of her father play a predominant part in her choice of partner. This is not to say we are motivated to choose a partner who is always similar, or indeed the polar opposite of our mother or father. Klein explains that it is the impression the child had of the loved one and the phantasies connected with them that he wishes to rediscover, noting that the unconscious mind associates things on grounds other than those the conscious mind is aware of. I shall now explore the ways in which these impressions can influence partner choice.

Repeating old patterns.

“A thing which has not been understood inevitably reappears;
like an unlaid ghost, it cannot rest until the mystery has been
solved and the spell broken” (Freud, 1909)

Lemma-Wright (1995) states that if we have ‘unfinished business’ with characters in our internal world, the tendency to repeat patterns from the past is intensified. The propensity to replicate early relationship patterns is seen in everyday transactions with others and may also be played out within the therapeutic relationship. However, romantic
relationships are the closest adult equivalent to the original emotional closeness with our parents, thus strongly reactivate experiences from childhood, both good and bad (Pincus, 1962). Although we may consciously wish to start afresh, the strong unconscious ties to the first love-objects may determine a choice of partner, with whom an earlier situation can be compulsively re-enacted (Pincus, 1962). Raphael-Leff (1991) suggests that during a couple’s preliminary ‘scanning’ of each other, there may be unconscious communication, a ‘sixth-sense’, by which we may intuit a partner who will meet our unconscious needs.

Hannah¹, a client of mine, described a childhood with a “bullying” father who “picked on” her and constantly put her down. Hannah recounted many episodes of her father’s violence, for example being belted or having all her possessions thrown into the backyard. She also explained that her father was unfaithful to her mother, visiting prostitutes and having affairs. Hannah has had one long-term relationship, with Bob, the father of her two children. From the outset, Bob seems to have been a less than ideal partner - Hannah has spoken of Bob staying out late drinking with other women, returning home to row viciously with her, sometimes escalating into violence. Hannah says that she and her daughters left Bob on one occasion, although he pursued them, persuading them to return. Bob broke off the relationship several years ago, although they are still in contact regarding their daughters. Hannah speaks about Bob with some anger, calling him “a bully”, yet seems to retain some attachment to him and describes finding herself calling him regularly.

¹ All names have been changed to preserve confidentiality.
In trying to understand Hannah’s situation, given the aforementioned theory, we must start by acknowledging Hannah’s turbulent and unresolved relationship with her father—the “thing which has not been understood” (Freud, 1909). Her choice of Bob as a romantic partner may be a way of fulfilling her unconscious drive to re-enact the dynamic she had with her father. Hannah’s conscious desire to ‘start afresh’ is seen in her leaving Bob, and in the way she speaks about him today, although the unconscious pull towards him seems to remain.

Troupp (1994) clarifies that legacies of past relationships are brought into the present in the hope of resolution. However, Klein (1937) reminds us that despite the unconscious desire for repetition, new relationships will never be merely re-enactments of earlier ones, since they will always involve fresh elements. Similarly, Raphael-Leff (1991) states that although a partner may be chosen for their suitability to re-enact a role from the past, they are merely a ‘stand-in’ for the original character, therefore doomed to fail. Troupp (1994) suggests this process is like acting out the same play hundreds of time, each time with a different ending. In this way there is the possibility of re-working early patterns, and arguably where psychotherapy may be useful. In order to change patterns one needs an awareness that these patterns exist, an awareness that psychotherapy may be able to provide.

“He’s the angry one”.

As aforementioned, in the early stages of a relationship we project traits onto our partner, but for the relationship to develop, these projections must be reclaimed (Troupp, 1994).
To do so, one must acknowledge that these projected traits are inherently parts of ourselves. This reclamation holds the potential for psychological growth as we come to accept more aspects of ourselves. However, one can imagine this being a more difficult task if they are traits you don’t want to acknowledge.

Psychoanalytic theorists assume that the characteristics of one’s partner are selected on the basis that they reinforce, rather than challenge defence mechanisms keeping unconscious threatening feelings or phantasies at bay (Lemma-Wright, 1995). Raphael-Leff (1991) suggests that lovers may enter an “unconscious contract” - a partnership between two figures’ phantasy worlds rather than between two real people. Several collusions which may occur in the partnership are defined, one of these being “choice by complementarity” (Raphael-Leff, 1991). A partner is chosen who is perceived to complete one’s own personality by enacting the hated or feared aspects of self one cannot claim. Troupp (1994) illustrates this with the nursery rhyme, Jack Sprat:

“Jack Sprat could eat no fat, his wife could eat no lean. And so
betwixt them both, you see, they licked the platter clean.”

We could imagine that Jack Sprat has projected his greed into his wife who enacts this for him, whilst he enacts her more restrained aspects. She states that if we are unable to reclaim our initial projections, partners construct increasingly polarised and restrictive roles for each other, and may begin to feel the burden of being ‘the greedy one’, for example (Troupp, 1994). These unconscious contracts may also cause conflict within the
relationship – Jack Sprat may scorn his wife’s greediness, yet unconsciously relish the opportunity to vicariously live out his disowned greed through her behaviour. Further illustration of this communication at different levels is given by Berne (1964) in his descriptions of Transactional Analysis and ‘games people play’.

In her discussion of marital therapy, Pincus (1962) states that one of the opportunities afforded by this type of collusion is for unconscious aspects of the client’s personality to be revealed in their partner. This parallels the discovery of disowned aspects of the client’s personality through the counter-transference in individual therapy. In working with Hannah for example (see above), I might have experienced bullying feelings in the counter-transference, and wondered whether she needed me to enact a disowned part of herself, perhaps loathing traits in herself which reminded her of her father. I might also wonder whether her experience of Bob as “a bully” was in part due to unconscious collusion. In time I might have found a way to present these ideas to Hannah through interpretation. Both in romantic and therapeutic relationships, the opportunity for growth lies in reclamation of the rejected trait which has been held by the other partner until reclamation is possible – ‘working through the transference’.

‘Babes in the wood’.

Social psychology suggests that people often choose partners who are similar to themselves on observable measures such as IQ or political views (Troup, 1994). But how is this reflected in our unconscious choices? Pincus (1962) explains that some people chose a partner with whom they can closely identify, allowing them to strengthen their
own self-image, but also avoid difference. For some, difference may be perceived as challenging and dangerous as it might lead to conflict, and partners may tacitly agree not to bring these difficult emotions into their relationship (Troup, 1994). The couple may project the ‘bad’ parts of themselves into the outside world, creating a split between themselves as ‘good’ and the rest of the world as ‘bad’. Subsequently the pair cling together for protection against what they perceive to be a hostile world. An intense fear of separateness may also be manifested in this way - in denying difference, individuation may be avoided (Pincus, 1962). In the consulting room, this fear of difference may be experienced as compliance, as the client strives to avoid conflict with the therapist.

Attachment

As aforementioned, Pincus (1962) proposed that romantic partnerships are “the direct heir of childhood relationships”, and attachment theorists assert the nature and quality of early attachment experiences sets the precedent for the nature and quality of the attachment experienced between romantic partners (Gross, 2002). Bowlby (1979) suggested that a person who suffered breaches of attachment in childhood may not recognise a reliable attachment figure in adulthood. Such people must therefore seek recognised patterns of attachment, echoing the ideas explored above regarding repeating old patterns. It should be noted that the tendency towards a certain style of attachment in relationships, is relevant not only to romantic relationships, but everyday friendships and indeed the therapeutic relationship. If we accept Bowlby’s (1979) assertions, then we must question how the client who has never experienced a reliable attachment figure will perceive the therapist. It may take some time before the client is able to acknowledge that
the therapist is offering a different style of relating to that experienced with the primary attachment figures of childhood.

Research has been carried out to test the nature of the relationship between early attachments and subsequent romantic attachments, with mixed results (e.g. Geher, 2000; Collins et al, 2002). In my opinion these studies fail to take into account the full complexity of romantic partner choice, making no reference to the notion of unconscious processes. For example, in talking about individuals who had “negative relationships with their opposite sex parent”, Geher (2000) suggests that “for such individuals, it may be advantageous to seek partners who are discernibly different from their opposite sex parents in terms of openness, agreeableness, neuroticism, and closeness”. He implies our choice of partner is entirely within conscious control, and my response would be, “If only it were that simple!”.

Psychoanalytic theory demonstrates that a romantic partnership is not just the sum total of the two individuals, but a complex interaction between two individuals’ internal worlds, shaped by their past experiences. As a counselling psychologist it would seem vital to have an awareness of how these complex interactions may be played out, not least because this dynamic may also be experienced in the therapeutic relationship.
REFERENCES


The role of cognitive avoidance in the development and maintenance of depression, and its impact on therapeutic work with depressed clients.

Cognitive therapy rests on the assumption that individuals’ affect and behaviour are largely determined by the way in which they structure the world (Beck et al, 1979). It is the meaning an individual attaches to an event or situation that causes distress, rather than the event itself, and changing these beliefs or cognitions is central to the alleviation of distress and the process of bringing about enduring emotional and behavioural change (Beck, 1995). Cognitive therapy therefore requires the therapist and client to identify problematic cognitions or patterns of thinking. This occurs at assessment in the process of goal setting and creating a preliminary case conceptualisation, but also throughout the therapy as the client is required to monitor ‘negative automatic thoughts’ throughout the week to report and discuss in the sessions themselves. A client’s active collaboration with this process has been reported to bring about impressive shifts in mood and behaviour (e.g. Kazantzis, et al, 2000), but what happens if a client is unable to access or identify their thoughts, perhaps saying, “I’m just not thinking anything!”

Avoidance

The term ‘avoidance’ describes keeping away, refraining or escaping from something. Within a cognitive framework, the term has been attached to behaviour, cognition and emotion, to describe the avoidance of distressing situations, feelings or thoughts. For example, an individual may avoid using a lift if they experience anxiety in small, enclosed spaces. Avoidance may be explicit and intentional in this way, or may occur
outside an individual’s awareness (Moore and Garland, 2003). For example, an adult may habitually avoid the expression of emotion, having learnt as a child that emotional expression is socially sanctioned. Within a psychodynamic framework, such avoidance may be constructed as repression, whereby conflict-arousing impulses or desires are thrust out of consciousness into the unconscious (Drever, 1952). Several studies have validated a multi-dimensional conceptualisation of the construct of avoidance (e.g. Blalock and Joiner, 2000), naming cognitive avoidance and behavioural avoidance as discrete dimensions.

**Cognitive avoidance**

Cognitive avoidance describes an individual’s attempt to manage their moods by trying not to think about distressing situations, or specific upsetting thoughts. Examples of such avoidance may be not thinking about an uncertain future, or not trying to puzzle out difficulties within a relationship in the hope that they will resolve themselves (Ottenbreit and Dobson, 2004). Consequently, individuals who habitually employ cognitive avoidance pose a problem for therapeutic work which requires reflection upon ones thoughts. Cognitive avoidance would seem particularly problematic for cognitive therapy, which explicitly requires identification and examination of distressing thoughts, both within sessions and between sessions in homework exercises. The masking of negative thoughts is difficult, not least in hindering the therapist’s attempts to create a cognitive formulation or empathise with the client’s distress.
Cognitive avoidance is reported to be characteristic of many of the most common presentations in psychologists' consulting rooms, for example anxiety disorders (Barlow, 2002), depression (Blalock and Joiner, 2000) and obsessive-compulsive disorder (Salkovskis, 1996). It therefore seems pertinent to have an understanding of the impact of a client's cognitive avoidance on the therapy and therapeutic relationship, and ways in which it may best be worked with.

**Cognitive avoidance and depression**

Whilst cognitive avoidance is not characteristic of depression alone, it is my intention to primarily focus this essay on the impact of cognitive avoidance on therapeutic encounters with depressed clients. In part, this focus reflects my personal bias, since I currently work in a specialist service for clients with recurrent depression and hope to provide illustrations from my own practice. However, evidence also suggests a significant relationship between cognitive avoidance and depression. Historically, Ferster (1973) suggested that depression is characterised by the avoidance of aversive internal and external stimuli, which serves to increase an individual's passivity. More recently, Blalock and Joiner (2000) found that those who employed cognitive avoidance as a coping strategy showed increased symptoms of depression, and indeed state that avoidant forms of coping are depressogenic. Similarly Hayes et al (2005) report that those who avoid their negative thoughts show less improvement in their depression than those who process their thoughts.
The client I wish to present, Jessica\textsuperscript{2}, is a fifty-year-old married woman, who gave a history of three episodes of severe depression over the last three years. At assessment she explained that she was currently feeling well and willingly spoke about the behavioural strategies she had adopted to maintain her sense of well being, for example attending the gym. Although she spoke in general terms of several issues that continued to trouble her, Jessica seemed unable to access or identify specific thoughts, either in session or during homework tasks. Jessica would appear to withdraw when asked about her thoughts or would respond, “I don’t know!”

Coping responses

The sizeable literature on coping strategies in the field of health psychology may help elaborate the relationship between cognitive avoidance and depression, and seems to echo a cognitive conceptualisation. In this field, coping is defined as an individual’s orientation to a problem and the type of activity used to respond to the stressor (Cronkite and Moos, 1995). Leventhal et al (1980) suggest that when someone becomes unwell, their appraisal of their illness influences their response, which in turn affects the outcome.

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{c}
Event → Appraisal → Response → Outcome
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Moos and Schaeffer (1993) classify coping responses into two categories: (1) cognitive vs. behavioural and (2) approach vs. avoidance responses. Within their framework, ‘cognitive avoidance coping’ encompasses responses aimed at denying or minimising a

\textsuperscript{2} All names have been changed to preserve client confidentiality.
crisis and/or it’s consequences, or accepting a situation because of the belief that circumstances cannot be changed. In the case of an automatic thought (‘event’) which is appraised as distressing, the individual who responds by denying or suppressing it may feel temporary relief, but will subsequently be revisited by that same thought and the associated distress (Abramovitz et al, 2001). Moreover, the negative thought will remain unchallenged and the problematic thinking style and associated low mood unchanged. The acceptance of situations appraised as unchangeable is reminiscent of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975), historically linked to the development and maintenance of depression.

A maladaptive coping response

Whilst depression has been proposed as a long-term outcome of cognitive avoidance, Moore and Garland (2003) elaborate more immediate consequences. Most obviously, problem situations remain unaddressed and the individual’s problem solving skills may be under-developed or unpractised. Furthermore, by avoiding articulating or working on personal problems, the individual may be chronically deprived of the satisfaction or mastery this can bring. Ultimately, such avoidance prevents erroneous negative self-evaluations being reappraised, and an individual may continue to believe they have little control over their difficulties for example.

It has also been proposed that where cognitive avoidance is the predominant way of coping, an individual’s mood may be highly labile (Moore and Garland, 2003). When not presented with any particular problems, an individual may appear bright in mood and
seem to be coping well. However, if avoidance becomes impossible to sustain, the individual’s mood may crash and extremely negative thinking may emerge. This was the case for Jessica, when her two children left home. In the weeks preceding their departure, she maintained that she was coping well and reported a positive mood. However, Jessica refused to be drawn on the topic of her children leaving, except to describe the activities they were leaving to pursue. In the weeks that followed their leaving, Jessica’s mood plummeted as she was no longer able to deny the loss and emptiness she felt. Negative thoughts were now readily accessible, for example, “my role as a mother is over” and “I’ve lost my purpose in life”.

**Development of cognitive avoidance**

Given the deleterious consequences associated with cognitive avoidance, it seems unlikely that an individual would adopt such a coping style. Moore and Garland (2003) suggest that in some instances, cognitive avoidance may have been an adaptive strategy in the context in which it emerged, enabling an individual to deal with highly aversive experiences. For example, a child of neglectful parents may feel they have little control over their situation and come to ignore their own unfulfilled needs, since acknowledging them may be too distressing. The successful use of strategies which avoid or provide relief from distress is highly reinforcing, and will ensure that such strategies continue to be used, despite changes in context. Moreover, ‘distraction’ techniques may be advocated by therapists hoping to teach clients to refocus their attention and alleviate their distress in the short-term (Beck, 1995). It is when cognitive avoidance is maintained, preventing
thoughts from being identified and worked through that the strategy becomes less adaptive.

The way an individual appraises and responds to their emotions may also be learnt from cultural models (Moore and Garland, 2003). Falicov (2003) notes that Western culture emphasizes positive emotions and feeling good about the self as the normal and healthy way of being. In such a cultural milieu, individuals may be less tolerant of negative thoughts and emotions. Furthermore, cultural differences are reported in the way that depression is understood (Karasz, 2005), with Western cultures tending to construct it as an illness or disease. By appraising depression in such a way, it places it outside of an individual’s control (Ogden, 2000), potentially eliciting a sense of helplessness.

Depression is commonly reported to occur more frequently in women than men (e.g. Stoppard, 2000), and this may in part be accounted for by the coping strategies they employ (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001). In many cultures, the role of the ‘good’ woman is constructed as placing others’ needs first (Falicov, 2003), and in some cultures traditional gender roles are adhered to, which encourage passivity, submission and hard work in women (Um and Dancy, 1999). Whilst there is mixed evidence that women use cognitive avoidance more often than men (Blalock and Joiner, 2000), Crowley-Jack (1991) suggests that women’s attempts to fulfil such ideals results in “a silencing of the self”. This may be interpreted as avoiding thinking about their unmet needs. Similarly, feminist writers have reflected on some women’s lack of power to change their circumstances (e.g. Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001), which may be interpreted as a position of helplessness.
Manifestation of cognitive avoidance in therapy

A therapist’s recognition of a client’s cognitive avoidance is vital for effective therapeutic work to take place. In acute depression, avoidance tends to be more evident in gross behaviours and more readily acknowledged by the client (Moore and Garland, 2003). Although cognitive avoidance tends to be more subtle in chronic depression and may occur outside the client’s awareness, it may be observed in the client’s behaviours from the very first session. At assessment, the client may report their problems chaotically, jumping between topics in order to avoid the distressing thoughts associated with each problem. Clients may also be reluctant to acknowledge their problems, or like Jessica (see above), be unwilling to describe their difficulties in specific terms. By speaking of difficulties in general terms or moving quickly away from them, the individual continues to maintain their psychological equilibrium by avoiding the distress associated with their negative thoughts.

In general, cognitive avoidance works directly against clients’ engagement with any task involving the possibility of distress or negative thoughts. Thus clients may be hard to focus and non-compliant, for example with homework exercises (Beck, 1995), or respond with lengthy silences or frequent “I don’t knows” (Newman, 2002). Fundamentally, cognitive avoidance manifests itself in the clients struggle to identify negative automatic thoughts during the course of therapy. Distressing thoughts may have been rapidly suppressed preventing detailed processing of the thought and consequently the client may be unaware of the exact nature of the cognition (Beck et al, 1979). Equally, clients may describe the distress they are experiencing, but not the specific thoughts associated with
this. In the case of Jessica, she might have spoken of the upset of her children leaving home, but not been able to identify the thought, “I’ve lost my purpose in life”. Furthermore, if I had tried to uncover what it was about her children leaving that upset her most, I might have received a prickly response. Clients may perceive therapists' attempts to uncover the thoughts they have guarded against as unhelpful and potentially damaging (Moore and Garland, 2003). If the client has been using cognitive avoidance to manage their depression (i.e. avoiding stressful thoughts to prevent their depression worsening) the therapist's interventions may seem enormously threatening. In addition, if clients begin to access their negative thoughts and associated emotions, they are likely to feel worse before they feel better, potentially damaging their faith in the therapeutic process and reinforcing beliefs about the uncontrollability of depression.

**Impact on therapeutic relationship**

Given the way a therapist’s interventions may be perceived by a client who has employed cognitive avoidance (see above), it seems likely that the therapeutic alliance will be threatened. Moore and Garland (2003) recommend anticipating this threat and avoiding the client’s premature termination of therapy by educating the client about what to expect during therapy.

A further threat to the therapeutic alliance may be the therapist’s response to the avoidant client. Newman (2002) notes that a client’s opposition to the therapist’s attempts to help them change, puts the therapist’s professionalism and character to the test. He refers to the therapist’s frustration at the client’s apparent resistance and the difficulty in
maintaining a caring, confident and hopeful stance. Similarly, Westra (2004) describes therapists feeling helpless in their efforts to move the client forward and feeling as if they are working harder than the client. During my time with Jessica I could strongly identify with these feelings, particularly since I was new to the cognitive model and only held a fragile confidence in my ability to employ it successfully. The therapeutic relationship may be negatively impacted when the therapist’s frustration results in a pejorative conceptualisation of the client as ‘unmotivated for change’ (Miller and Rollnick, 2002).

Is it always cognitive avoidance?

It seems important at this stage to reflect briefly on other causes of resistance in therapy which may be mistaken for cognitive avoidance. Padesky (1995) notes that some clients fear revealing their thoughts in therapy as previous traumatic interpersonal experiences had developed beliefs such as, “people will reject me if I let them know who I am” or “it is dangerous to say too much”. Equally, a client’s developmental stage may be of relevance. Wilson (2001) suggests that an adolescent’s expression “I don’t know” communicates their profusion of feeling, their identity in flux and their opportunities yet to be explored. Furthermore, a client’s expectations of therapy and their socialisation to the cognitive model may also influence their responses (Beck, 1995). Most fundamentally however, therapeutic change may be perceived by the client as a difficult and frightening process during which they may respond in ways that support the status quo (Newman, 2002).
Working with cognitive avoidance

Newman (2002) urges therapists not to “be so in awe of the persistence and power of their client’s resistance that they become too passive and unstimulating of change” (p.174). He clarifies that therapists should not be overly directive with resistant clients, but equally should guard against being too accepting or indeed resigned to their client’s way of being.

Identifying the exact nature of a client’s cognitive avoidance may reveal valuable information which can be worked into the cognitive case conceptualisation. For example, in my work with Jessica it became evident that she was avoiding her negative thoughts for fear that they would trigger an episode of depression. Ironically, this very strategy was maintaining her negative thoughts, and worsening her mood.

Encouraging the client to identify their beliefs about expressing or acknowledging negative thoughts seems fundamental in moving the therapy forward. Having identified these thoughts (e.g. “thinking distressing thoughts will worsen my depression”), the client may be facilitated in exploring the pros and cons of maintaining this coping strategy, or the pros and cons of challenging their negative thoughts. Westra (2004) advocates the use of ‘motivational interviewing’ with clients at this point in therapy, enhancing their motivation to change by understanding and resolving ambivalence. From this perspective, the ‘unmotivated’ client may be reconceptualised as undertaking the important task of exploring their options, rather than being resistant to change. Perhaps most significantly,
adopting this stance may empower both therapist and client, fostering a constructive therapeutic alliance.

Having explored the client's beliefs about expressing their negative thoughts, Padesky & Greenberger (1995) suggest collaborating on a 'small steps approach' which allows the client to gradually reveal or expose themselves to their distressing thoughts. Equally, this may be constructed as a behavioural experiment, with the client predicting what will happen if they express their thoughts and testing this out within the therapy (Moore and Garland, 2003).

Final thoughts
The research evidence seems to show a clear link between cognitive avoidance and the development and maintenance of depression. Whilst many of the empirical studies could be criticised for their use of white, middle-class participants, and frequently recruiting from student populations, their results seem to resonate with both personal experience and observation in the therapeutic arena. Although ignoring distressing thoughts is appealing at times, it doesn’t make them go away. Indeed, if this were the case, how easy the job of the therapist would be! Unfortunately, as both the literature and my own therapeutic encounters testify, working with clients' cognitive avoidance can be extremely challenging. However, it is the therapist's responsibility to use the tools available to them to facilitate the client's growth and movement, and this may be more easily achieved if the therapist is able to retain a constructive conceptualisation of the client and their coping strategy.
REFERENCES


THERAPEUTIC PRACTICE DOSSIER

Introduction to the Therapeutic Practice Dossier

This dossier contains descriptions of the three placements I have worked in during the three years of training. These were a student counselling service, a GP surgery and a hospital-based specialist psychological therapies service. The dossier also contains my Final Clinical Paper, an account of my development as a Counselling Psychologist during the course of training.
DESCRIPTIONS OF CLINICAL PLACEMENTS

First Year Placement: Student Counselling Service

November 2003 – June 2004

During my first year of training I spent two days a week on placement at an Institute for Art and Design in the South East of England, working in the Student Counselling Service. The Counselling Service was integrated into the wider student services provision, and there were also links with the local GP practice and community mental health team. All staff at the Institute were made aware of the Counselling Service and were at liberty to recommend to a student that he/she make use of the Service. However, students were not formally referred to the Service but referred themselves at daily drop-in sessions. Here they were seen by the trained counsellor on duty, before being allocated to one of the team for counselling. There were three counsellors employed by the college, each working to their own chosen theoretical orientation. My supervisor took a humanistic approach to client work and our weekly supervision sessions. I too worked humanistically in this placement. Whilst there were no limits on the number of counselling sessions a student could have, the pressure of numbers meant a tendency to focus on short-term work. Students were commonly offered 4 – 6 sessions in the first instance, dependent on the perceived severity of the presenting problem, with the opportunity to review and extend the contract as necessary. Students varied widely in age, from school leavers to post-graduate students, and being a well respected Institute, drew students from throughout the UK and abroad.
In the second year of training I worked in a Psychological Therapies Service within a Primary Care Trust in South West London. This Service was part of very large Mental Health NHS Trust. The Service covered two local GP surgeries and referrals were primarily received from GPs and occasionally from Health Visitors. The Counselling Service in these surgeries was of longstanding and well respected, and consequently the GPs made frequent use of it and the referrals were mostly appropriate (i.e. clients with mild to moderate mental health difficulties). The Service employed a counsellor who worked psychodynamically and a clinical psychologist, both of whom were limited to short-term work. I worked psychodynamically in this placement, received psychodynamic supervision, and had the flexibility to take clients for longer periods. Initially, clients were required to ‘opt-in’ to therapy by completing and returning a form requesting an assessment appointment. Clients were then assessed by either the clinical psychologist or counsellor and then either offered a course of therapy within the surgery or referred on to somewhere more appropriate for their needs, for example the local CMHT or Sure Start programme. The GP surgeries were in a deprived area of London and consequently many clients presented issues associated with poverty or social deprivation. There was some ethnic diversity amongst the local population, including individuals who had come to the UK as refugees.
Third Year Placement: Specialist Psychological Therapies Service


In the final year of training I worked in a NHS Specialist Psychological Therapies Service which provided Secondary Care to a large area of urban Surrey. The Service was trust-wide and referrals were received from local GPs, Community Mental Health Teams (CMHT) and Primary Care Mental Health Teams. The Service incorporated psychotherapy and family therapy, as well as clinics for those with recurrent depression or obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). It was within these two clinics that I worked, alongside two psychologists and a clinical nurse specialist, all of whom worked cognitive-behaviourally on a short-term (twelve session) basis. I also worked within a cognitive-behavioural framework, receiving weekly supervision, but had the flexibility to take some clients for longer periods. Initially, clients were required to ‘opt-in’ to therapy by completing and returning a form requesting an assessment appointment. Clients were then ‘screened’ for their suitability for the service, and either offered a course of therapy within the clinic or referred on to somewhere more appropriate for their needs, for example psychotherapy or for group work.

The population served by this service was relatively affluent and predominantly Caucasian. However for me the work remained diverse since here I had the opportunity to participate in running an OCD group and also liaise closely with the local CMHT, attending several clients’ Care Programme Approach (CPA) meetings.

NB. Process reports and client studies were written at regular intervals in each of the three clinical placements and logbooks kept as a record of completed client work.
Adventuring around a new continent: An account of counselling psychology training

During the last three years, the process of training to be a counselling psychologist has frequently been likened to a journey. Recently I have been reminiscing about my early experiences of independent travel, back-packing around Europe in the months after leaving school. This particular journey broadened my horizons, was a time of personal growth, and whet my appetite for future exploration of hidden corners of the continent, which I anticipate being a lifelong pursuit. As I approach the end of my counselling psychology doctorate, I have a similar feeling. During the three years of training I have been exposed to new cultures, customs and languages, have learnt and experienced a great deal, not least through personal challenges encountered along the way, but perhaps most importantly have started down a road along which there is much yet to discover.

On my return from Europe it was evident to friends and family that part of my journey had involved a process of personal change. Some changes were immediately evident, for example a suntan, a new laid back demeanour and extra weight gained from a diet of pasta and ice cream. However, others were more subtle and only emerged as I retold the story of my travels. Indeed I myself only became aware of some of the changes or growth that had occurred as I reflected on the defining moments of my trip in narrating my story. And so it is as I near the end of my counselling psychology training and sit to write this
I hope to give an account of my theoretical approach to my practice as a counselling psychologist as it stands at the end of the three years of training, and provide some sense of how I have arrived here by recounting some of the shaping experiences and key snapshots from my journey.

It seems appropriate to start by giving the reader a brief introduction to my current approach to practice, in the same way that my friends got an instant impression of me as I returned from my travels which was later explained and elaborated. At the end of three years of training I find myself working most comfortably within the principles of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). However, I hope I bring to my work a flexible and creative approach which reflects a commitment to the principles of counselling psychology. Moreover, I am making use of psychodynamic theories to inform my practice, both in understanding the complexities within the therapeutic relationship and making sense of the possible impact of the client’s early experiences. I hope to elaborate on the choices I have made in the following paragraphs, but before I begin, it feels important to set my journey in context by reminding the reader where I set out from.

### Setting out

In many respects my journey towards becoming a counselling psychologist began several years before I began the doctoral course. I completed my undergraduate studies at the University of York, and whilst this was a necessary precursor to my current training, it could scarcely have been further removed from the ethos of counselling psychology. The focus was on ‘hard science’, the biology of the brain, animal experiments and indeed I
finished the course with a lengthy paper on the genetic basis of obesity. Following this I worked for a couple of years in the field of severe and enduring mental health. I had roles in inpatient and community settings, both of which were firmly located within the medical model of psychiatry. The work revolved around activity (‘doing’) and it was all too easy to perceive the clients as ‘other’ and adopt the position of an expert. At the time I very much enjoyed my work although I sensed the limited potential of my particular role and the closed-minded, restrictive culture in which I was working. However, it was only during my first weeks on this course that I became aware how totally immersed I had been in that particular culture and way of thinking. Consequently I remember the sensation of my horizons broadening as I encountered the new culture of counselling psychology and the possibility of another way of being. Bill Bryson captures this sensation as he speaks of his first adventures outside America, “an unfamiliar mixture of excitement and exhaustion... everything seemed so vivid and acutely focused and new. I felt like someone stepping out of doors for the first time” (p.5, 1991).

I would not want to imply, however, that I was ill-equipped to begin this journey. My time in York had prepared me with sound academic skills, and during my years in employment I had become practised in developing relationships with clients who, by nature of their mental health difficulties, were difficult to engage. Equally in my community-based role I had learnt to advocate on behalf of my clients, and had become aware of the sometimes conflicting agendas of different professional groups. Moreover, some of my time had been spent working at The Retreat, a hospital established in 1796 by the Quaker William Tuke, the first pioneer of ‘moral treatment’ (Borthwick et al,
2001). This ethos of breaking away from established traditions in order to value the individual seems to resonate with the modern-day values of counselling psychology. Perhaps most crucially however, I had begun to feel like I had come to the end of the road in my previous roles and was ready for a new adventure!

The first hurdle: Learning to ‘be’

One of the greatest challenges I faced at the start of my training was shifting my focus away from ‘doing’ (with or to) towards ‘being’ with a client. My previous roles had revolved around engaging clients in activity or looking for practical solutions to their crises, for example resolving housing or benefits issues. As I began my first placement I can recall being daunted at the prospect of spending an hour in a room with someone without my habitual props of paperwork, prescribed activities, or even the prospect of breaking for a cup of tea. It felt like a leap of faith to trust the humanistic values that by simply providing the core conditions would be sufficient to promote positive change (Merry, 2002). During my first two placements I worked hard at accomplishing this, continually reminding myself to engage with listening as fully as possible, rather than looking for answers or practical solutions. I suspect that in the earliest months I may have over-compensated, actively listening, empathising and reflecting, but shying away from challenging clients and perhaps even becoming too passive.

Despite working hard to curb my tendency towards action I was aware, and still am on occasion, of “a strong pull to revert to type” (Casement, 1985) when under pressure. In some instances this has occurred when I have felt ill-equipped, for example in my first
placement, a student counselling centre, when a client revealed that she had been self-harming. This was the first time I had been told this in my new role as counselling psychologist, and I can recall feeling anxious and uncertain of what to do. On this occasion I did revert to type, responding as I would have done in my previous work context where self-harming was downplayed and dealt with matter of factly. Reflecting in supervision, I was able to see how in doing so I had deprived the client by not engaging empathically with her account of her experiences. This is the only time I am aware of giving in to the “strong pull” but I have certainly been aware of it on other occasions. I suspect that other instances relate to when my faith in the ability of the model to meet the clients’ needs has been shaky.

It seems appropriate to pause here to acknowledge how much I have learnt from my supervisors in each of my placements. On the journey of training, I have experienced my supervisors as seasoned ex-patriots – fully assimilated into the local culture, customs and language (of the therapeutic model), yet able to recall what it was like to have newly arrived. My supervisors have acted as guides, sharing their own experience and learning. My second supervisor was particularly helpful in teaching me to give myself time to think within therapy sessions. Initially I felt under pressure to respond quickly in a therapeutic situation, keeping up a pace more suited to social interaction. However, with time I began to slow my pace and feel more comfortable leaving silences and taking time to think. Observing my supervisor doing numerous assessments I was impressed at his slow, measured pace, and the fact that clients didn’t seem uncomfortable with his lengthy pauses. Moreover, he encouraged me to break eye-contact with my clients, to give myself
greater thinking space. This was initially very difficult to do, again due to the break from social norms, but more recently I have found myself doing just this. Consequently I have found I am better able to gather my thoughts before offering them to the client.

Following my first year of training, my faith that the 'core conditions' alone were sufficient to bring about change did not grow. However, I did establish that these values of empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence are values I feel are fundamental to the development of a therapeutic relationship, and values I wish to uphold in my practice. Furthermore, I can see that the experiences in the first two years of training were essential in tempering my encounter with cognitive behavioural therapy. I felt some reluctance in approaching this model, not least because I had invested so much energy in moving away from structured or prescribed activity in my interactions with clients, and CBT seemed to require me to undo all this work. However, having been working within the model for a year, I feel that I have reached a place of equilibrium. I feel that this model has freed me to engage in activity, which I feel instinctively drawn towards, but my experiences in the previous two years have taught me to think about how I might use activity creatively in order to value the client's individuality, or indeed put activity to one side where simply offering the client empathic understanding seems more appropriate. In this way I hope to avoid the manualised stereotype of purist CBT, which in my opinion, risks disregarding the client's individuality and the full complexity of their distress.
Theoretical models: The guidebooks

Over the past three years we have been invited to engage with various theoretical models of therapy, which have served as guides to the new cultures and languages we have encountered. I have remained mindful that whilst it is important to underpin one’s practice with theory, theory is “no more or no less than a metaphor” (Lemma, 2003) and therefore ought not to be adopted as doctrine nor applied in a rigid manner. Quite naturally, some theories resonated more with me than others, and it is those I have found most meaningful that I have subsequently adopted and am using to inform my clinical practice. Again I have remained mindful of the delicate balance between preserving my own integrity (i.e. using theories which I believe in) and combining theories in an epistemologically coherent manner (i.e. not cherry picking on a whim).

Attachment theory

Since revisiting it in the first year of training, attachment theory has been pivotal to both my academic work, forming the basis of essays and my research endeavours, and informing my clinical practice. Child development had been taught at undergraduate level, but this primarily focused on the development of language, cognitive abilities, and the relative influences of nature vs. nurture. Consequently, rediscovering attachment theory came as something of an ‘aha! moment’ as it seemed to be more meaningful and to hold more potential for understanding the significance of client’s early experiences than the mechanisms by which they had learned to read for example. Attachment theory also seemed to facilitate an understanding of an individual’s development across the lifespan, for example the process of identity development in adolescence, which has
proven useful when working with clients at a varying life stages. Furthermore, Bowlby’s (1973) theories seemed much more flexible than the models of development I had previously been introduced to (e.g. Piagetian theory), and thus more suited to valuing individual experiences and individual difference inherent in the ethos of counselling psychology. This openness to individual difference is captured in the metaphor Bowlby (1973) used to describe personality development. He spoke of a railway system with individuals travelling along distinct routes, each with different points of divergence. He suggested that in order to understand the individual we must look at the route they have travelled and in particular the individual’s experience of attachment relationships along that journey.

Psychodynamic theories

At the outset of training, the vast body of psychodynamic theories appeared to be the most foreign culture I was going to encounter on my journey. Indeed I can recall marvelling, somewhat anxiously, at those of my cohort who had some previous psychoanalytic training and could already speak about clients in a language that I did not understand. However, as I learnt to translate and came to understand the meaning of these foreign words, I discovered that psychodynamic models of therapy had much to offer.

Despite the historical rift between the two schools (Lemma, 2003), psychodynamic theories sit comfortably alongside attachment theory in my mind. The major assumption both bodies of theorists make is that the way an individual views the world and his or her place within it is fundamentally shaped by early experiences, and in particular those with
the key figures of childhood (e.g. parents, caregivers, siblings etc). Although different language is used to propound these theories the central tenet appears to be fundamentally the same. Distilling key assumptions from major bodies of work has allowed me to fit different schools alongside one another; however, I am all too aware that the richness and complexity of the theory is lost in translation. This assumption regarding the significance of early experiences is one I have adopted, both because it makes intuitive sense to me and also resonates with my growing body of client experience. Whether it has been the agreed focus of therapy or not, I have found it useful to conceptualise clients presenting concerns in terms of their early experiences. One example is with Holly⁴, whose presenting issue was ‘night terrors’. With further exploration it appeared that the vivid and grotesque nightmares Holly reported were the result of a lifetime of repressing turbulent emotions which had been rejected and sanctioned by her mother during childhood. Moreover these emotions seemed to feel particularly dangerous to Holly given her father’s history of bipolar disorder.

Cognitive Behavioural theories

In approaching cognitive behavioural therapy, I was uncertain whether I would be able to continue working in this way, but was pleased to discover that this assumption carried over into the cognitive model. Cognitive theorists also assert the importance of early (or earlier) experience, in the development of dysfunctional assumptions (Beck, 1995) or maladaptive schema (Young, 1990) for example. Consequently I have continued to conceptualise clients in terms of their early experiences, often thinking in psychodynamic

⁴ All names and identifying information has been changed to preserve the confidentiality of clients described in this paper.
terms, before translating these into more ‘user-friendly’ cognitive terms to share with the client. In this way I feel I have established a way of working that achieves both personal and theoretical coherence. Whilst writing I have pondered whether my tendency to give the ‘easy words’ to the client is patronising. I hope that on the contrary it diminishes the power imbalance, allowing the client to collaborate with me in constructing a shared understanding of their situation, rather than being held at a distance by jargon or lofty interpretations.

Increasingly I have found myself drawing together psychodynamic ways of thinking and cognitive ways of working. Although perhaps an unlikely coupling given their epistemologies, these do not sit too uncomfortably alongside one another in my mind, and indeed I have found that concepts can be translated, albeit approximately, from one model to another. At present I am working in a clinic for people with recurrent depression, and one of the most recently emerging ideas is that of the ‘compassionate mind’ (Gilbert, 2002). This rests on research evidence that suggests that self-critical thinking maintains or indeed triggers depression in the absence of a compassionate mind, which allows the individual to show themselves care and acceptance (Gilbert & Irons, 2004). This seems to equate to a critical superego (Freud, 1933) in psychodynamic terms, and may be understood to develop in a similar way. For example, one of my clients, Anne’s depression appears to be maintained by thoughts such as, “I just need to work harder”. Although these thoughts may be perceived as constructive and not obviously ‘negative automatic thoughts’ (Beck, 1995), these thoughts drive Anne to work excessively hard, looking after family and friends, and depleting her personal resources.
During the course of therapy, Anne has identified that these thoughts were internalised during childhood – Anne feels that she could never match up to the precedent set by her older brother and her parents would urge her to work harder, neglecting to praise her relative successes. In this way, Anne’s thoughts could either be interpreted as a harsh superego, or understood as an underdeveloped compassionate mind. Working within the cognitive model, I have been exploring with Anne ways in which she might challenge her ‘core beliefs’ (Padesky & Greenberger, 1995) and practical ways in which she might treat herself more compassionately. In this way we are addressing both short-term, activity based work, as well as longer-term work on her deeply held beliefs. Anne has reported a sustained lift in her mood and is taking tentative steps towards treating herself more caringly, which seems to suggest the efficacy of this approach.

Given my adoption of psychodynamic concepts to inform my practice it seems important to clarify why I haven’t also adopted this as a way of practising. Although I feel I have taken on board some key psychodynamic principles and theories, a severe shortage of client hours during my psychodynamic placement means I have little practical experience within this model. This was a particularly difficult and frustrating experience - I felt as though I had invested time reading the guidebooks to a country, poring over maps and anticipating my time there, but when I arrived in the country, never making it out of the airport. As a result I would feel dishonest stating that I could practice psychodynamically since my knowledge is primarily theoretical.
In drawing a parallel between theoretical models and a traveller’s guidebook, I have hoped to capture my sense that whilst theory is informative it should be held lightly, in the same way that a country’s guidebooks provide information but don’t detract from the traveller’s lived experiences. Throughout training I have tried to hold an openness to finding things different in practice than in theory, reflecting the humanistic determination to build theory from experience rather than twisting experience to fit the theory (Merry, 2002). This is also a position occupied by post-modern psychoanalysts, who acknowledge that no one theory holds the truth since “truth is always relative or co-constructed, never fixed” (Lemma, 2003). I hold a similar perspective on taking a purist approach to therapy or practising strictly within one model alone. Whilst I acknowledge that much good work is done by practitioners who take a purist approach to their work, my sense is that there is a risk of becoming entrenched and defending one’s position to a cost. Casement (1985) notes that “strong adherence to a particular school… can become intrusive”, keeping the therapist from respecting the client’s individuality and becoming fully in tune with them. Moreover, I would argue that no one theory is able to capture the complexity and uniqueness of each individual and therefore an ability to draw on numerous theories is essential, notwithstanding the need to maintain personal and epistemological integrity.

**Process and personal growth**

Another way in which I am using psychodynamic theory to inform my clinical practice is in understanding the process of therapy. Until very recently, relatively little attention has been given to the therapeutic relationship by cognitive theorists, and psychodynamic
ways of thinking have provided me with a framework within which I have understood the
dynamics of the therapeutic relationship. As a basis for understanding the work of
therapy and the therapist’s role I have used Bion’s (1967) conceptualisation of the
therapist containing and transforming the client’s raw communications until such time as
the client is able to internalise the capacity to manage feelings within themselves.

Developing the capacity to use myself within therapy has seemed the slowest process
during training, perhaps because it has developed through the gradual process of personal
growth. Whilst I was able to read and understand the concepts of transference and
countertransference, it was not until I experienced these for myself, both with clients and
in my own personal therapy that I truly grasped them. Although I do not routinely make
transference interpretations, I am trying to use my awareness of these dynamics to
facilitate my work. For example at present I am working with a client, Jane, who came to
therapy two years after her husband’s sudden, unexpected death with ‘complicated grief’
(Worden, 2003). She explained that she had relied on her husband to “look after” her and
that she felt very insecure without him and afraid for the future. In working with Jane I
am mindful of the potential for my replacing her husband as someone who looks after
her, and whilst I would not wish to encourage this dependence, I am also aware of the
risk of severing our relationship and replicating her husband’s sudden death.

During the course of training I have become increasingly interested in intersubjectivity,
not least through the pursuit of two interpretative phenomenological research studies.
Ogden (1994) refers to intersubjective reality within therapy as “the analytic third” and
plays on Winnicott’s famous quote by saying “there is no such thing as an analysand apart from the relationship with the analyst”. I have found these perspectives helpful when trying to pick apart what occurs between me and the client in the therapy room. This seemed a knotty task in my first year of training, not least because it was new to me. My first placement was within a student counselling service, and my identification with my clients there due to our shared life stage and student status, made the task all the more complex. I continue to find this a difficult task, and over the past three years I have learnt the importance of preserving quiet time for myself to think and mull over my work. However I am very aware that I am not always able to puzzle out what is occurring between me and the client, even with the aid of supervision, but I imagine that even as I continue to grow in this area, there will always be times when I will be caught out! Nevertheless, I persist with these puzzles because whilst difficult, I have also found the understanding of relationship dynamics to be most enlightening and facilitative of clinical practice.

Reflecting on the journey

Reflecting on the journey of my training as it comes towards it end, I feel as if I am as much looking forwards as back - looking at where I have been, but also how I hope to move on post-qualification. In looking back I can see the vast amount of ground we have covered, and can see how I have incorporated aspects of the different cultures encountered into my nascent identity as a counselling psychologist. I am interested to note that I have adopted the group identity of ‘counselling psychologist’, yet feel very different in my approach to practice than even my peers on the course. Bill Bryson (1991)
comments similarly, "it fascinated me that Europeans could at once be so alike... and yet be so endlessly, unpredictably different from each other as well"

One facet of my personal identity is a counselling psychologist who practises using cognitive behavioural therapy. As aforementioned, I felt drawn to the activity inherent within this model, but this was not only because it appealed to my personal preference. Working first in the humanistic and then within the psychodynamic model of therapy I had experienced frustration that neither model appeared to have the flexibility to meet the needs of some clients. My perception was that clients who came to therapy in crisis needed something tangible for immediate containment that neither humanistic nor psychodynamic models seem to offer. For example, Shelley, a client who presented with depression exacerbated by her abject poverty might have benefited from some early sessions problem solving which may have contained her until she felt able to explore her internal struggles. As it happened I was working psychodynamically and Shelley quickly dropped out of therapy after we touched on material regarding her relationship with her mother, which although pertinent seemed too much for Shelley to manage given her immediate housing crisis. These observations have prompted me to recall Maslow (1954) who proposed that individual’s can only attend to their ‘higher-order needs’, including self-actualisation, when their ‘lower-order needs’, such as safety, security and comfort have been fulfilled.

During my training I have encountered a number of clients with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), and in my final year of training worked in a specialist clinic for those
with OCD. Research evidence suggests that CBT is the most appropriate form of therapy for people with OCD (e.g. Salkovskis & Kirk, 1989; Roth & Fonagy, 2005), and on the basis of my clinical experience, I would have to agree. Whilst practising humanistically I worked with a client whose difficulties were obsessional in nature, and despite working together for nearly a year she made only the most marginal progress. I am willing to accept that this may in part have been due to my inexperience (she was my first client), but I maintain that it was also in part due to the therapeutic model. This year I have noted for myself the marked improvement of clients with obsessional or compulsive difficulties with whom I am working cognitive-behaviourally.

Before starting my training I witnessed first hand the damaging effects of an imbalance of power between client and caregiver. Consequently I have been keen to avoid this in my therapeutic encounters and is another reason I have felt drawn to the cognitive behavioural model which espouses a ‘collaborative relationship’ between client and therapist (Beck, 1995). The transparency this encourages and the sense of client and therapist actively participating on a shared task seem to diminish the power imbalance. Nevertheless, some imbalance of power in therapy is inevitable, but in openly offering what they can bring to the therapy, the therapist is able to acknowledge their “authoritative competence” (Lemma, 2003).

Having spoken about my practice of CBT, it feels important to clarify that my adoption of this model has not been wholesale. As aforementioned, my experiences during the first two years of training brought me to the model with a determination to continue valuing
client’s individuality and therefore I have not been practising CBT in a manualised way. I have also been aware of avoiding some of the language used by some cognitive behavioural practitioners which does not sit comfortably alongside my values as a counselling psychologist. For example “it is necessary to manipulate the individual’s behavioural and rumination strategies in a way that enhances the potential for belief change” (Wells, 1999). I return again to my intention of holding theory lightly and embracing flexibility and creativity within therapy in order to value the individual’s experience. As Casement (1985) reminds us, “theory should be the servant to the work of therapy and not its master”

Final thoughts
Approaching the end of my training, one of the things that is most clear to me is how much there is yet to learn. Although this is at times a daunting prospect, at others it feels exciting and hopeful. In previous roles I felt that within a year I knew them inside out, perhaps as if I had spent a year living solely in a village. By contrast the field of counselling psychology feels more like a continent, and at the end of training I feel as if I have visited the main cities, broadly mapped the terrain and yet there is a great deal yet to explore. I am beginning to develop a sense of areas I might like to explore in greater depth, or new territories I might like to discover, but I am reminded that ‘becoming’ is a process which begins, continues and is never completed (Bion, 1975).
REFERENCES


RESEARCH DOSSIER

Introduction to the Research Dossier

This dossier comprises the three pieces of research completed during the three years of training. The first is a literature review exploring the effects of an absent father on girls' psychological development. The second piece is an interpretative phenomenological case study analysis of young women's experiences of father absence. The final piece of research is an interpretative phenomenological analysis of men's experiences of living apart from their children following separation or divorce. The two interpretative phenomenological pieces may be viewed as two parts of one, larger project.
The effect of an absent father on girls’ psychological development: A literature review

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ABSTRACT

The father absence literature was reviewed to clarify the effects of father absence on girls’ psychological development. Social changes over the past fifty years in Western society and the subsequent changes in attitudes towards fathers were outlined. Representations of fatherhood by psychoanalytic, attachment and sociobiological theorists were explored. Research data revealed an effect of father absence per se. Whether this effect was positive or negative was dependent on moderating variables, such as quality of father presence, girl’s age, personality and relationship with her mother. Directions for future research are suggested.
THE EFFECTS OF AN ABSENT FATHER ON GIRLS' PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT: A LITERATURE REVIEW.

Introduction

Single-parent families have become increasingly common over the past forty years. In the 1960s 90% of children spent their childhood and adolescence in homes with two biological, married parents, whereas by the 1980s this was only true for about 50% of children in the UK (Wadsworth, 1986). Whilst to some extent this may reflect social change and more flexible attitudes towards marriage and co-habitation, the facts remain that one in three marriages in the UK ends in divorce (Hartnup, 1996), and one in six fathers is not living with any of his dependent children (Clarke, 1997).

Father-absence literature has important social implications; for example in assisting child custody decisions (Stevenson & Black, 1988) and informing social policy makers (Silverstein, 1993). Following divorce 84% of children live with their mothers in a single-parent home (Cherlin & Furstenburg, 1994), yet studies have failed to find negative consequences of awarding fathers custody of their children (e.g. Gardner, 1982). Indeed, one study claims that “ awarding the custody of an adolescent daughter solely according to the sex of the parent may be based on tradition but not on established benefit to the daughter” (Stephens & Day, 1979, p.199). However, this situation looks set to change with the Government promising “a radical overhaul of the failing family justice system” (The Guardian, 3rd April 2004), the details of which are to be set out in a green
paper this summer. It is expected that changes will favour fathers and focus on children's best interests.

Traditionally it has been assumed that optimal conditions for child development are within a 'nuclear family'. However more recent research suggests that competent, well-adjusted children can develop in a wide variety of family forms (e.g. Bornstein, 1995). Indeed, in some instances paternal absence may have positive consequences for child development, and a cluster of father-absent girls may develop into exceptionally competent individuals with few behavioural problems or psychological disorders (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Yet it is noted that for the majority of children, the loss of a father, whether through death or divorce, is accompanied by psychological reactions, such as anger, guilt and anxiety, which may have long-term developmental effects (Hartnup, 1996).

With father absence on the increase, it seems important for counselling psychologists to have a clear understanding of the variety of roles fathers can play in child development, and the potential consequences of father absence. Similarly, counselling psychologists should have an awareness of the variables that might moderate the effects of father absence, and how psychotherapy might mitigate these effects. We are highly likely to encounter clients whose fathers have been absent, and a working knowledge of the relevant literature could inform practice and guard against the assumption that father absence is inherently bad.
In today's society there are many ways one can become a parent other than as part of the traditional two parent family model, including those that exclude fathers entirely from the process, such as single women or lesbian couples using invitro-fertilisation and choosing not to maintain a relationship with the biological father. Equally, there are families where the father is physically present, but is emotionally absent from his children. Several studies show that the effects of father absence differ according to the cause of absence (e.g. Hetherington, 1972). In this review I will limit my focus to the absence of fathers due to death, divorce or separation, who do not interact with their children on a regular basis and consequently do not play an active role in their development. I shall also be examining the effects on girls' psychological development. Whilst I was drawn to this topic by personal curiosity (See Appendix 1), I soon found that conclusions regarding the effects of father absence on girls were unclear. Some researchers concluded that girls, unlike boys, were unaffected by father absence (Levy-Shiff, 1982), whereas others suggested that the effects on girls manifested themselves differently and emerge later in development (Perkins, 2001). It would seem that girls' experiences of father absence are qualitatively different to those of boys' and it therefore seemed prudent to focus this study on just one sex.

Before looking at the effects of father absence, it seems pertinent to examine who fathers are and what roles they can play in a child's development. Historically, fathers have been underrepresented in the literature (van Ijzendoorn & De Wolff, 1997), and were described as the "forgotten contributors to child development" (Lamb, 1975). Little is known about the economic, social or personal characteristics of fathers because of the difficulty of
identifying fathers as a group – conceptions can be easily concealed, or may be unknown to the father (Clarke, 1997). Anthropological studies have revealed that models of fatherhood differ cross-culturally, and it has been suggested that after the moment of conception, the role of the father can be seen as a social construction (Doherty et al, 1998). Fox (1967, p.39) suggested that “the basic social unit of man” is a mother and her children, and societies differ in the extent to which fathers attach themselves to this unit. For example, in Botswana the role of the father is taken by the mother's brother (Engle & Breaux, 1998), whereas fathers in parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo provide more direct care to their babies than in any other known society (Hewlett, 1992). The style of father-child interaction also differs cross-culturally. In her review of fatherhood, Gertrud Mander (2001) suggests using terminology to reflect the wide variety of roles fathers play according to their social context. She proposes “versions of fatherhood” instead of the normative “role of the father”.

Having identified that roles played by fathers differ cross-culturally, it seems important to clarify which ‘version of fatherhood’ I am researching. The focus of my literature review is girls’ biological fathers in western culture, the majority of research coming from America and the UK. The role performed by fathers in their children’s development in western culture has changed significantly in the last fifty years, reflecting changes in social norms. I shall begin by elaborating this point, before reviewing theoretical models of fatherhood, and finally examining the available research data regarding fatherhood and father absence. I have decided to review the literature in this order, as previous studies of father absence have been criticised for not acknowledging the psychological processes
which affect development in father-present situations. This has been likened to "studying the effects of gravity by observing objects after they have fallen" (Kotelchuck, 1976).

**Social change and shifting attitudes towards fathers**

At the turn of the last century, whilst Freud was propounding his version of the father's role, patriarchy remained largely uncontested. A father was the head of the family and the provider. He exercised authority and control over his household, including his wife and children, and in turn could expect obedience and respect. This model of fatherhood evokes images of bearded gentlemen in family photographs, working to the prototype of God the Father (Mander, 2001).

Before the 1940s, fathers had little involvement with their children on a practical or emotional level. During this era baby-care experts made little or no mention of a father's role in infant care (Smith, 1995). However, the Second World War acted as a catalyst for social change, with traditional gender roles being challenged. Women entered the workplace as well as running their households, whilst the men were at war. This triggered a weakening of the patriarchal society (Mander, 2001). Fathers began to be acknowledged as having a role to play in child development (e.g. Winnicott, 1944), and as capable of taking on some caring tasks. However, they were viewed as "emergency carers" who were not as good as mothers, and whose clumsy attempts to be useful were patronisingly tolerated (Smith, 1995).
By the 1970s, academic studies had begun to focus on a father's involvement with, and feelings towards his child, and leaflets aimed specifically at fathers were available in antenatal clinics (Smith, 1995). Indeed, it had become fashionable for fathers to “release their inner caring mechanisms” (Smith, 1995, p.21). The emergence of the “new man” in the 1980s signalled a significant break with past models of fatherhood and opened new sets of socially sanctioned ways of fathering. Fathers were encouraged to be close, caring and emotionally committed to their children (O’Brien & Jones, 1995).

As aforementioned, the Second World War was one of the catalysts for changing attitudes towards fathers and their role in child development, but several other factors were also involved. The first of these is increased paternal attendance at births. Prior to the 1960s, fathers were not allowed to attend hospital births, and home births were usually attended by another female relative or friend who acted as carer, leaving the father somewhat redundant (Newson & Newson, 1963). Today, however, fathers are encouraged to attend their children’s births, and to take an active role, continuing as a carer after the mother’s discharge from hospital. Paternity leave is now acknowledged in many workplaces, although it is usually of shorter duration than maternity leave (Beail & McGuire, 1982). It is thought that the child’s birth is a bonding experience for the family unit and research shows paternal attendance at birth to be associated with subsequent involvement with the child (Smith, 1995). However, these results may be confounded since one might assume that fathers choosing to attend births are already those more likely to be interested in being involved with their children.
Nowadays men have longer paid holidays, giving them more time to spend with their children (Lewis et al, 1982), and greater sharing of childcare reflects the view that children are the joint responsibility of their parents, not just that of the mother (Beail & McGuire, 1982).

The French sociologist, Evelyne Sullerot comments that women have taken control over reproduction by controlling their own fertility with modern contraceptives, and in many countries women also have the right to decide on abortion (Sullerot, 1992). She also notes that during the 1990s divorce laws were simplified, making it easier for women to request and obtain a divorce. At present, custody of any children from a marriage is usually awarded to the mother, and children born out of wedlock ‘belong’ to the woman (Sullerot, 1992). Consequently, Sullerot concludes that fatherhood has become conditional – after the birth of the child, fathering is more dependent on the father’s relation to the mother than to the child.

It seems that as a result of these social changes fathers have become more actively involved in family life than they once were, yet their exact role remains unclear. Björnberg (1992) suggests that “fatherhood has been eroded and men lack role models when it comes to developing modern fatherhood”.

Representations of fathers in academic literature – Psychoanalytic theories

There seems to be little disagreement amongst psychoanalytic theorists regarding the primacy of the mother’s role, whether it is object-relating, containment or attunement.
Traditionally, the role of the father in female psychosexual development relates to the Electra complex, whereby a daughter competes with her mother for her father’s love (Freud, 1933). This was seen as a critical factor in identification, and resolution of this complex was necessary for psychological adjustment. However, Mander (2001, p. 145) asks, “how can we insist seriously on the continued validity of the [Electra] complex, when many children have never experienced their parents as a couple”? Children are able to grow up in single-parent families, and it seems that the bond between parents is no longer essential, so long as the mother functions well in her maternal task and is adequately supported by others (Mander, 2001). Although widely disregarded nowadays (Gleitman, 1995), the issue of penis envy, a pivotal point in the Electra complex, should not be ignored. If a girl grows up in the absence of a father, how will this envy develop or manifest itself?

Other roles for the father have been suggested by psychoanalytic theorists. For example, Winnicott (1944) states that the father is not only essential in providing moral support for the mother, but also in teaching his child skills and widening his world view. The importance of a harmonious marital relationship is also stressed by Winnicott, who proposes that the union between parents provides “a rock to which [the child] can cling and against which he can kick” (p. 83). In a similar vein, it has been suggested that fathers relate the unit of mother and child to the objective world, and that a father’s interaction with an infant brings pleasurable stimulation and the interest of the outside world (Forrest, 1963). However, this may not be as relevant today as family life is very different. For example many mothers also go out to work and infants’ childcare
experiences commonly expose them to the 'outside world'. Winnicott has also been criticised for not dealing with the meaning of parenting experiences for fathers, approaching them always in relation to the mother (Beail & McGuire, 1982).

According to psychoanalytic theorists, one of the main purposes of fathering is in fostering autonomy and aiding the individuation process (Target & Fonagy, 2002), and consequently it has been suggested that the nature of a child's relationship with his/her father is characterised by separateness and detachment (e.g. Wisdom, 1976). As regards fathers' impact on their daughters' development, it has been proposed that in order to separate from the mother a girl must connect with her father, gaining self-confidence and the ability to play a masculine role in the outside world (Mander, 2001). This view has struck a chord with feminists who question the need to adopt "masculine ideals of autonomous individuality" to avoid regressing to identification with the mother (e.g. Benjamin, 1990). Recognition of difference and mutuality in relationships is recommended as an alternative.

**Attachment theory**

Bowlby's theory of attachment follows the trend of many of the early post-war psychoanalytic theories by focussing on the relationship between mother and child (Bowlby, 1969). This relationship is described as an attachment, with the mother acting as a 'secure base', from which the infant can explore the world. Bowlby does, however, make reference to fathers, suggesting that initially their function is to protect the developing mother-child relationship, preventing the mother from feeling overwhelmed.
by the child’s needs and demands, which might lead to rejection of the child (Trowell, 2002). Bowlby suggests that where the father plays a major part in his child’s upbringing, attachment behaviours will be directed towards him too. With fathers being more involved from birth nowadays, these attachments are being formed more strongly earlier (Hetherington & Parke, 1999). As with psychoanalytic theorists, Bowlby stated that a father’s relationship with his child encourages healthy separation from the mother (Trowell, 2002).

Although Bowlby describes it as being usual for a child’s mother to be its principle attachment-figure, he cites evidence which suggests that this role can be taken effectively by others, providing the substitute behaves in a “mothering way” towards the child (Bowlby, 1969). That is, the substitute responds to the child’s signals and approaches, and interacts with the child in a lively way. Indeed, Bowlby goes on to describe mothers who are physically available to their children, but not responsive or socially interactive with them. In these cases, fathers, who are perhaps less available but more responsive, have become the primary attachment figures.

Fox et al (1991) demonstrated that a child’s attachment to its mother is only slightly correlated with its pattern of attachment to its father, suggesting fathers develop independent relationships with their children. Target and Fonagy (2002) suggest this relationship is both additive and unique. Secure attachment to fathers has been found to foster confidence and competence in children; for example, predicting behaviour at school and interactions with peers (Suess et al, 1992). Moreover, Bowlby proposed that
fathers act not only as attachment figures, but also as children's playmates and teachers (Bowlby, 1969).

Attachment theory stresses the dynamic interaction between a father, his own history, and the way he represents and behaves towards his child (Target & Fonagy, 2002). For example, Steele et al (1996) found that a father's representation of his own attachment history has almost as much influence on the child's security of attachment as that of the mother. Traditionally, studies of a father's influence on his children involved measures of attachment which seemed to show men in a poor light compared to women (Lamb & Lewis, 2004), and it is only more recently that researchers are trying to establish more patricentric research themes (Palkovitz, 2002).

**Sociobiological theories and feminist revisions**

Sociobiological theory has been used by social scientists to debate the evolutionary adaptiveness of different styles of human parenting behaviour. Silverstein (1993) describes this debate as being originally informed by early research into primatology, which emphasised fixed, biological differences between male and female primates. Male primates were said to have a biological predisposition to be uninvolved with their offspring since this allowed them to mate with many females – a reproductive strategy favoured by natural selection (Silverstein, 1993). These males were referred to as “cads”, in contrast to males who mate with only one female and become involved with their offspring, termed “dads” (Draper & Harpending, 1988). However, in a review of primate research, Haraway (1989) argued that the “scientific facts” produced by primate research
were dramatically affected by the historical context, sex, race, class and marital status of the researcher. Consequently, early primate research reflects a white, male, Western, capitalist bias (Silverstein, 1993). One example of this bias is the interpretation of results in Harlow’s classic studies into the importance of contact comfort in infant rhesus monkeys (e.g. Harlow & Harlow, 1972). In these studies, monkeys were bottle-fed either by a wire mesh surrogate or by a cloth-covered surrogate, with the result that contact comfort was more important than lactation to the infant monkey’s sense of attachment and security. Phares (1993) comments that although the surrogates were gender neutral they were referred to as “mother” surrogates, revealing the researcher’s assumptions about the importance of female rather than male parents. She goes on to suggest that the studies’ results could in fact have been interpreted to downplay the importance of mothers and to enhance the perceived importance of fathers (Phares, 1993).

Haraway (1989) suggests that the entrance of large numbers of women into the field of primatology in the 1980s shifted the focus of research, and the feminist revision of primate theory has now become generally accepted as mainstream research (Sperling, 1991). This new research has shown that male primates’ involvement with infants is characterised by tremendous variability (Silverstein, 1993), and that parental involvement is dependent on numerous contextual factors (Smuts, 1987). Traditionally, it was thought that male parental investment remained minimal until the paternity of infants was more or less certain – the paternity hypothesis (Trivers, 1972). However, a further theory was developed which accounted for cases where high levels of paternal investment were seen – the reciprocity hypothesis (Smuts, 1985). This suggests that high male care of infants is
most likely when females can offer substantial benefits in exchange; for example, mating opportunities and female friendship. Silverstein (1993) proposes that the reciprocity model is as relevant for human fathering as it is for non-human primate behaviour, as it begins to address the multitude of social and contextual variables that influence paternal involvement. It has, however, been criticised for being cold, and neglecting to mention the benefits of being in a relationship; for example, emotional connectedness and personal satisfaction from sharing with others (Phares, 1993). Hypotheses such as this one help establish a clear picture of the relative flexibility or rigidity of human behaviour, which is essential for the creation of effective social policies.

The impact of fathers on child development

As aforementioned, fathers have become increasingly involved with their children’s care over the last fifty years. Only 38% of mothers reported receiving help with childcare from their husbands or partners in the 1950s, whereas the figure was up to 82% in the 1990s (Smith, 1995). These results seem encouraging, since a father’s frequent and positive involvement with his child from infancy is directly related to the child’s well-being and cognitive and social development (Cabrera et al, 2000).

It seems important to comment here on some limitations of the data regarding fathers’ involvement with childcare. Lummis (1982, p.55) has suggested that “most evidence for the role of the father in history is little more than anecdotal...usually a surface response... to what is believed to be the social norm”. Equally, fathers may have been reluctant to admit to too much involvement in childcare or domestic activities in the past,
and due to shifting expectations of fatherhood, may now be reluctant to admit too little (Burghes et al, 1997). Much of the data on fathers comes from reports by mothers, and it has been argued that this might reveal more about the woman’s marital satisfaction than about her husband’s actual behaviour (Lewis et al, 1982).

Despite the reported increased involvement of fathers with their children, a Mori poll reported in The Guardian (10 April 1997) showed that 20% of children could not recall sharing an activity with their fathers in the previous week, and 80% wanted their father to spend more time with them. O’Brien and Jones (1996) describe weekends and holidays as times when fathers and their children may ‘catch up’, with time spent together increasing by three hours at the weekend. Activities at these times were oriented around shopping and leisure activities, with fathers reportedly spending more time playing outdoors with their children than mothers did (Brannen et al, 1995). There is some debate, however, whether the data always bear out this stereotype of paternal behaviour (Lewis, 1982).

Although both boys and girls are more likely to turn to their mothers for advice, a quarter of young people named their father as the person they would turn to first with worries about money, their mother or sport (O’Brien & Jones, 1996). Similarly, research has shown that fathers can buffer the child against the adverse effects of a rejecting or incompetent mother (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

One important way in which parents influence their children is in the development of gender-role behaviours (Hetherington & Parke, 1999). Fathers, in particular, have been observed to promote gender-typing; for example, playing more roughly with sons and
showing more sensitivity towards daughters (Kelley et al, 1998). Fathers may also encourage dependent behaviour and passivity in girls, which might explain why some father-absent girls are more assertive than their father-present peers (Levy-Shiff, 1982). Research has shown that even as children grow older they are encouraged by parents to behave in gender-stereotypical ways (Hetherington & Parke, 1999). On a related note, social learning theorists have suggested that the way in which girls develop the skills required for interactions with males is at least in part through interactions with their fathers (Hetherington, 1972). Later in life, this is reflected in security and culturally appropriate responses in those girls who go on to develop heterosexual relationships (Biller & Weiss, 1970).

One recent study I have read confirms my own impression that the nature and quality of a father-daughter relationship will affect the girl’s self-perception. Perkins (2001) identifies six distinct father-daughter relationship types (doting father, distant father, demanding/supportive father, domineering father, seductive father, absent father) and describes how each of these impact upon a girl’s self-perception and lifestyle. Although the results of this study struck a chord with my understanding of father-daughter relationships, the sample used (women attending a small private liberal arts college) was in no way representative, and a non-standardised measure was used in data collection. Perhaps this is an area for further research.

There are many ways in which a father might influence his child’s development, yet in the majority of cases he will not be acting in isolation, and the dynamics between mother
and father will also have an important impact upon the child. Indeed, Marks and Lovestone (1995) argue that the child perceives the father directly, but also through the eyes of the mother. Much as Winnicott (1944) proposed (see above), it has been established that when parents are satisfied with their lives and marital relationships, their children are more likely to be well adjusted (Lamb et al, 1987). One explanation for this is that parental satisfaction affects the style of interactions within the family, with ‘satisfied’ parents promoting a coherent and constructive atmosphere in the home (Lewis et al, 1982). Psychoanalysts might suggest that it is the attitudes of each member of the mother-father-child triangle towards each other that is the most influential factor. For example, Williamson (2004, p.207) suggests that for a woman to “arrive at a satisfactory psychosexual or gender identity”, there needs to have been an erotic, incestuous element (metaphoric, not literal) in her relationship with her father. This relationship will be greatly influenced by the mother’s attitude towards her partner and daughter, and whether the mother is able to allow this erotic element.

**Father absence**

Having gained some understanding of the nature of fatherhood and the impact fathers can have on their children’s development, I shall now return attention to my research question: what are the effects of an absent father on a girl’s psychological development?

One of the first studies to address effects of father absence on girls’ psychological development was produced by Mavis Hetherington in 1972. Prior to this, research into the effects of father absence had focussed on boys, and that which did exist on girls
showed inconsistent results (Hetherington, 1972). Hetherington (1972) studied adolescent girls attending a community recreation centre, who were categorised into three groups – those with intact families, those whose fathers were absent due to divorce, and those whose fathers had died. All girls were white, had no male siblings, and were categorised as lower or lower-middle class. The girls’ behaviour in the recreation centre was observed, as was their non-verbal behaviour in interviews with male and female interviewers. Data were also gathered from interviews with girls, their mothers, and from four psychometric tests. Hetherington’s results revealed that both groups of father-absent girls were more dependent on female adults than the father-present girls, and that father-absent girls reported feeling more insecure around males. However, this insecurity was manifested in different ways as daughters of divorcees sought more attention, proximity and physical contact from men, whilst daughters of widows were observed to avoid men. Greater effects were observed the earlier the father absence had occurred in the girl’s life.

Hetherington (1972) concluded that girls respond differently to father absence than boys, and that the main effect of father absence on girls is an inability to interact appropriately with males. Hetherington proposed that father-absent girls lacked opportunities for constructive interaction with loving, attentive fathers, resulting in inadequate skills for interacting with males. These results seem to support social learning theory. No deviations from sex-typed behaviour were found in father-absent girls, however, suggesting that fathers do not play a significant role in gender-typing of girls.
Before continuing to explore the effects of father absence, it is important to note that a major moderating variable is the quality of the father’s presence prior to death or divorce. Before a divorce there may be a high level of marital strife within a household (Hartnup, 1996), and whether a child gets drawn into this as mediator, or angrily withdraws from the situation, there is a risk that ongoing emotional development will be hindered (Mander, 2001). Similarly, Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1999) suggest that the presence of a disengaged, rejecting or deviant father in a conflictual, non-divorced family will be more destructive than the absence of a father in a mother-headed home with a caring mother and adequate resources. This idea is echoed in a metaphor used by Angela Phillips (1995, p.9), who describes fathers as trees – “they can be beautiful, provide shade, be a place to climb and play or they may need to be uprooted because they are undermining the foundations of your house.”

**Immediate and short-term effects of father absence**

Hetherington’s seminal work indicates that the effects of father absence differ according to the reason for absence (Hetherington, 1972). In the case of a girl’s father dying, an immediate effect will be the experience of grief or mourning. There has been some debate in the psychoanalytic literature regarding the nature of a child’s grief, indeed whether they can mourn at all (Worden, 1991). Some theorists assert that mourning cannot take place until there is complete identity formation – that is, towards the end of adolescence (Wolfenstein, 1966). Others suggest that the quality of a child’s mourning is different to an adult’s, in the most part due to their stage of cognitive development (e.g. Worden, 1991). Until object constancy is achieved, a child will not be able to understand
the loss (Bowlby, 1980), and it is not until between five and seven years old that a child will be able to understand death from a cognitive perspective (Worden, 1991). Worden (1991) cautions that children or adolescents who fail to adequately mourn the loss of a parent often develop symptoms of depression in later life, or problems forming close relationships.

The way in which a father’s death occurred may also lead to different outcomes for the bereaved daughter (Berlinsky & Biller, 1982). The experience of losing a father after a prolonged illness may be quite different to a sudden death in a car accident, for example. Similarly, some losses may be socially stigmatised; for example, suicide.

The period after a divorce may be an extremely stressful time for all involved, not least because a child may be feeling the loss of one parent. The research literature suggests that boys have a particularly tough time in the two years following divorce (Demo & Acock, 1988), whilst girls appear to adjust more quickly (Dunlop, 1995). However, this is not to say that girls do not have short-term adjustment problems. Girls tend to internalise their dissatisfaction, unlike boys who engage in aggressive and non-compliant behaviours (Mott et al, 1997). Studies have also shown that girls may suffer more in the long-term than boys, with difficulties emerging later in adolescence or during college years (Perkins, 2001). Studies focussing on the short-term may have missed these effects, making incorrect assumptions about girls’ adjustment after parental divorce.
Long-term effects of father absence

Life-course adversity models are commonly referred to in the father-absence literature, proposing that it is not father absence, per se, that has a negative impact on children’s development, but the other stressors associated with it; for example, economic hardship, conflictual family relationships and decreased parental monitoring or control (Ellis et al, 2003). Certainly divorce is associated with a marked drop in income in families where mothers retain custody (Hetherington et al, 1989), and economic hardship is a consistent negative predictor of children’s developmental progress (Mott et al, 1997). However, studies that have controlled for these variables still show an effect of father absence on child development; for example, an Israeli study of children whose fathers died in the Yom-Kippur War (Levy-Shiff, 1982). The author explains that Israeli society positively accepts such deaths, and that the Ministry of Defence provided extensive financial and emotional support to these families. Significant effects of father absence were found in both boys and girls in this sample, suggesting that there is in fact an effect of father absence in and of itself. One variable not controlled for was the effect of change in the mother’s behaviour and child-rearing attitudes after her husband’s death. A more recent study, which does control for this variable, still found effects of father absence and indeed suggested that measures of life-course adversity predict poor outcomes because they covary with timing of father absence (Ellis et al, 2003).

Several studies suggest one of the effects of father absence on adolescent girls is lowered self-esteem (e.g. Stephens & Day, 1979). This has also been associated with general feelings of anxiety, powerlessness and a limited sense of control over one’s life
(Hetherington, 1972), and father absence has been described as a risk factor for the development of psychopathology (e.g. Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Psychoanalytic theorists have attributed this to an apparent absence of an ‘internal father’. For example, Lacan (1949) argued that the failure to internalise the father results in psychosis. In a review of studies on parental death and psychological development, Berlinsky and Biller (1982) note that the largest number of papers deal with emotional disturbance, and suggest this may reflect researchers’ expectations for those experiencing early parental death – the researchers’ expectations could affect interpretation of results or limit the study’s focus. However, it is increasingly being acknowledged that competent, well-adjusted children can develop in a wide variety of family forms (Bornstein, 1995), and this is being reflected in the focus of more recent research. Older studies have also been criticised for not controlling for other stressors, such as socio-economic variables, with some suggesting that father absence alone “carries no appreciable psychiatric risk for children” (Rutter, 1980). However, Cronk (2004) found that father absence significantly increased a girl’s vulnerability for separation anxiety disorder, even when other variables were controlled. These results seem to support the evidence cited above that indicate that father absence, per se, does have an effect.

Following parental divorce, children commonly experience a drop in school performance and are two to three times more likely than their peers from intact families to drop out of school (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). A study of girls reports similar findings – lower achievement test scores and lower IQ scores in the father-absent group (Grimm-Wassil, 1994). However, in times of stress, children benefit from structured, predictable
environments such as schools, and academic achievement is associated with fewer behavioural problems in both boys and girls (Hetherington, 1989), although one might question cause and effect here.

Hetherington’s (1972) early study reported “disruptions in interactions with males” in father-absent girls, and more recent research has described a similar pattern of results. Ellis et al (2003) state that greater exposure to father absence is strongly associated with an elevated risk for early sexual activity and adolescent pregnancy, and Bowen (1996) describes father-absent women as reporting higher levels of ‘problematic sexual behaviour’ than women from intact families. Hetherington (1972) showed very different responses from daughters of divorcees and widows, and it therefore seems surprising that despite controlling for other moderating variables, many subsequent studies have failed to mention the nature of the father absence (e.g. Ellis et al, 2003). A relatively recent study that categorised girls according to nature of father absence replicated Hetherington’s (1972) results (Kleinman, 1998).

As aforementioned, these results have traditionally been attributed to limited opportunities to interact with males (e.g. Hetherington, 1972). An alternative social learning model is that greater duration of father absence is associated with greater exposure of daughters to their mothers’ dating and repartnering behaviours (Ellis et al, 2003). One might tentatively suggest that divorcees might engage in ‘dating and repartnering’ sooner than widows, hence the difference in their daughters’ behaviour. Ellis et al (2003) also suggest an evolutionary model to explain the results of their study,
which proposes that girls detect and internally encode information regarding parental reproductive strategies during the first five years of life. This information affects the development of motivational systems, which make certain types of sexual behaviour more or less likely in adolescence. Girls whose early family experiences are characterised by father absence tend to develop the expectation that male parental investment is unreliable and unimportant, and consequently they engage in early sexual activity and are oriented towards relatively unstable pair-bonds (Ellis et al, 2003). A psychoanalytic explanation is offered by Wallerstein (1991), who explains that the basis for establishing intimate, trusting relationships with the opposite sex is the internalisation of a successful parental relationship. She suggests that the internalisation of a failed relationship may be modified by subsequent experiences of parental remarriage, a good experience of parenting, or by psychotherapy.

**Moderating Variables - Personality and genetics**

As assumptions regarding the effects of divorce on children have changed over the decades, so has the focus of research in this area (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Researchers have moved away from studies guided by deficit models of divorce, and towards exploring the diverse patterns of adjustment in divorced families and variables moderating these outcomes. One important variable is the child’s genetic make-up and personality. Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1999) explain that stresses associated with their parents’ marital transitions tend to exacerbate problems in already troubled and poorly-adjusted children. On the other hand, children with easy temperaments, high levels of self-esteem and an internal locus of control, to name but a few desirable
qualities, are more likely to evoke positive responses from others and to be able to adapt to new challenges and stressful life experiences (Hetherington, 1989). Indeed, Hetherington (1989) suggests that these children may be enhanced in future social problem-solving and adaptability, having encountered and coped with moderate levels of stress under supportive conditions. However, although poorly adjusted children are most vulnerable to the effects of divorce, a study had revealed that the risk of adjustment problems in adolescence or early adulthood remains high even when controlling for problems evident prior to divorce (Chase-Lansdale et al, 1995).

Children displaying externalising behaviour problems (i.e. aggressive, disruptive or oppositional behaviour) are at elevated risk for a variety of negative psychosocial outcomes in adolescence, including early sexual activity, teenage pregnancy and becoming a single parent (e.g. Woodward & Fergusson, 1999). In turn, these parents may transmit a genetic disposition towards externalising behavioural problems to their children. Therefore Ellis et al (2003) conclude that girls from father-absent homes may be at elevated risk for early sexual activity because of higher genetic loading for externalising behavioural problems. However, this intergenerational transmission may also be understood as children learning patterns of behaviour modelled by their parents.

**Child’s age at absence**

There is some uncertainty whether young children or older children and adolescents are worse affected by the loss of a father (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Inconsistencies in studies’ results have been attributed to flawed methodology, since
children’s age is often confounded with time since father absence, or the child’s age at
time of assessment, for example (Emery, 1998). What does seem certain is that responses
to father absence differ according to the individual’s age, not least because the role a
father plays in his child’s life is very different at different stages of the child’s
development. Equally, as aforementioned, the way a child understands the loss of its
father is highly dependent on its developmental status and cognitive abilities (Worden,
1991). For example, a very young child will be less able to accurately appraise the
absence, the motives and feelings of its parent(s), and its own role in the absence.
Wallerstein et al (1988) suggest that a young child may blame itself for the absence, fear
abandonment by both parents, misperceive parents’ emotions and behaviours, and
harbour fantasies of reconciliation. Whilst the loss of a parent may create intense anxiety
for a young child, over time they may have fewer memories of this experience
(Hetherington, 1989). Whilst adolescents may be better able to deal with and understand
a loss, and their subsequent emotions, they may continue to be more consciously troubled
by their memories of the event (Wallerstein et al, 1988).

Mothers and other family members
As aforementioned, effects of father-presence may be moderated by a child’s mother and
her attitude towards her husband. The same has been noted in studies of father absence,
beginning with early studies into the effects of father absence on boys, with Clauson
(1966) arguing that the mother’s expressed attitude towards the absent father was
possibly more important than the absence itself. Similar effects can be seen in
Hetherington’s (1972) study, where divorcees reported hostile attitudes towards their
former husbands and negative attitudes towards marriage, whilst widows reported positive attitudes towards marriage and their lost husbands. These attitudes were reflected in the daughters’ memories of and feelings towards their fathers, supporting the argument that women can lessen the deleterious effects of father absence by casting their former husbands and their relationships with them in a positive light (Hetherington & Parke, 1999).

Mothers may also moderate the effects of paternal absence by changing their general attitudes, or specific attitudes towards child-rearing. In all families a child’s adjustment is associated with the quality of the parenting environment (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999), and a period of “diminished” parenting is commonly found after divorce (Hetherington et al, 1982). For example, depression, anxiety, emotional lability, irritability and health problems are all found in women post-divorce (Hetherington, 1989), and one might reasonably assume a similar reaction in widows. Many of these problems seem to dissipate as a mother’s emotional state improves, although this may take up to two years to occur (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). However, control and monitoring of children’s behaviour is reported to remain low, increasing the risk of externalising disorders in adolescence (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1988).

Finally, it has been suggested that single mothers may provide a less role-differentiated role model for their daughters (Amir & Sharon, 1979). Whilst this is an interesting point to consider, my feeling is that in today’s society, versions of motherhood vary widely irrespective of marital status, and we should be cautious of making such generalisations.
Much of the research into the effects of father absence has studied girls without male siblings, presumably to replicate Hetherington’s (1972) study and to control for the effects of a resident male in the home. However, I have come across one study reporting such effects with father-absent girls with older brothers showing more aggression and less dependency than those with sisters (Berger et al, 1971). Supportive sibling relationships could potentially buffer a child from the effects of father absence, whilst an antagonistic relationship between siblings may add another stressor to the family situation. It seems that more research is needed in this area.

The effects of grandparents, in particular, grandfathers, have been more thoroughly examined in relation to father-absent girls (e.g. Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986). Grandparents may offer support to both their granddaughters and their own divorced or widowed daughters, yet Hetherington (1989) notes that there is little evidence that grandparents play a potent role in the social, emotional and cognitive development of their grandchildren unless they live in the home. She concludes that the effects of grandparent support are mediated by changed maternal behaviour in response to such support (Hetherington, 1989).

Since 72% of women and 80% of men remarry life in a single parent household might be viewed as “a way station rather than a destination” (Hetherington, 1992, p.1). The effects of stepfathers on previously father-absent girls are complex and whilst undoubtedly interesting, I feel the topic is separate from my area of research.
Conclusions and further research

Children from father-absent families are two to three times more likely to receive psychological interventions than their peers in intact families (Howard et al, 1996), yet research into the outcomes of such interventions is meagre (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). This seems to be an area for further research. Equally, all of the research literature I read on effects of father absence employed quantitative research methods. Given that each girl’s experience of father absence will be different, it seems only right that these individual differences are acknowledged and explored – surely a case for qualitative research.

In response to my research question (see above), it seems that there are no straightforward answers. It has been demonstrated that there are significant effects of father absence in and of itself on girls; for example, sexually precocious behaviour, reduced school performance and a heightened risk of psychopathology. However, the effects of father absence will be different for each individual girl, dependent on the many moderating variables, some of which have been discussed above. Hetherington (e.g. 1989) uses a ‘stress-coping-vulnerability’ model to account for these different outcomes, and says of children’s responses to parental divorce, “depending on the characteristics of the child… available resources, subsequent life experiences, and especially interpersonal relationships, children in the long run may be survivors, losers or winners...” (Hetherington, 1989, p.13). This statement brings me back to my assertion that a knowledge of the father-absence literature is essential in informing counselling
psychologists' practice; for example, reminding us of the many variables that moderate the effects of father-absence and may contribute to our client's particular difficulties.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX 1: REFLECTION ON THE USE OF SELF IN THE RESEARCH

My interest in the effects of father absence, and in particular the effects on girls’ psychological development, stems from my concern for several members of my family. In one instance a father went missing leaving two adolescent daughters – the father was alive and well but never made contact, except with congratulations on the birth of his first grandchild. In the other case a father died young and very unexpectedly of a heart attack, leaving behind three daughters, aged two, six and ten. In each case one girl’s psychological development was negatively affected, and it was these girls who attracted my attention and concern. How easily I adopted the view that father absence was inherently bad!

As I began to explore the literature I found my horizons broadening, and I was able to re-consider my assumptions. With only one girl in each family seeming to be negatively effected, and the others appearing unscathed, the case for moderating variables suddenly seemed more convincing. As I read further, I continued to test out the research results and theoretical assumptions against my own experience of father-absent girls. Of course not everything in the literature was to be found amongst my friends and family! However this process enabled me to compare my intuitive understanding of father-daughter relationships and the effects of father absence against the literature, noting and reflecting on any inconsistencies. On several occasions this highlighted where either the researcher or I was being judgmental or assumptive.
Father-daughter relationships are something I have given much thought to over the past year. In placement I have worked with clients for whom problems stem from ongoing difficulties with their fathers, confirming that the quality of father-presence is significant for psychological adjustment too. Similarly, in my personal therapy I have had cause to reflect on the importance of my relationship with my own father, and indeed how this compares with and is mediated by my relationship with my mother in my intact family.

However, the spotlight really fell on the significance of fathers at the beginning of June this year when out of the blue, my best friend’s Dad died of a heart attack. In supporting my friend and her family through this bereavement, I have had plenty of time to discuss the role played by this father, what he meant to his daughters, and how his absence is, and will continue to be felt. Having known my friend’s father for thirteen years I too have mourned his death, perhaps to a greater degree due to the parallels with the death of my own relative. At times I have found the balance between personal and academic uncomfortable, not wanting to feel voyeuristic or as if I was capitalising on my friend’s tragedy for the purposes of my research. However there is no escaping the fact that these recent events are now part of my life experience and consequently have been one of the things that has shaped my research.
Outline

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Published quarterly, beginning in January

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Young women’s experiences of father absence: An interpretative phenomenological case study analysis

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With increasing numbers of children being brought up in single-parent families, it seems important to understand the potential effects of father absence on children’s development and in particular, sources of individual variation. This paper presents an in-depth case study analysis of three young women’s accounts of growing up without their fathers. The study aimed to explore young women’s recollections of growing up without their fathers and the impact they perceived this to have had throughout their lives, in particular on their experiences of romantic relationships. An interpretative phenomenological approach was adopted in order to capture the essence of their individual experiences. Several core themes were found to characterise their collective experiences of father absence. These included a desire for a paternal-type relationship, the impact of father absence on identity development and difficulties in forming intimate relationships, including romantic relationships. Implications for counselling psychology practice are also discussed.
Introduction

Increases in extra-marital childbearing, relationship breakdown and repartnering over the last thirty years have led to less permanence in fathers’ relationships with their biological children (O’Brien, 2004). Such demographic trends are changing the shape of contemporary families. For example, across Europe there has been a decline in the proportion of ‘nuclear’ families (couples and dependent children) (Eurostat, 2000) and Britain has the highest proportion of children being brought up in single-parent households in Europe (The Sunday Times, 23rd January 2005). O’Brien (2004) notes that fathers who repartner typically cease to reside with the children of their first relationship, and one study suggests that one in six fathers is not living with any of his dependent children (Clarke, 1997). Although it has come to be recognised that well-adjusted children can develop in a wide variety of family forms (e.g., Bornstein, 1995), with such high frequencies of father absence in contemporary families, it seems important that its potential effects on children’s development are understood.

The role of a father

Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda (2004) assert that the role of a father is shaped by historical, cultural and family ideologies. It seems pertinent to clarify at this point that this research will focus on a white, western model of fatherhood over the last twenty years. Early
conceptualisations of fatherhood proposed a unidimensional role of ‘breadwinner’ and provider, and whilst this role remains significant (O’Brien, 2004), a more diverse model of fatherhood is now recognised, with fathers playing roles such as companion, teacher, moral guide, protector and spouse (Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda, 2004). Furthermore, it is because of the many roles fathers play that their absence may be harmful, as these roles go unfulfilled or inappropriately filled in father absent families.

Bowlby’s (1969) theory of attachment pays particular attention to the significance of early relationships and therefore provides a theoretical framework within which the role of a father might be understood. Although Bowlby’s theory primarily focuses on the relationship between mother and child, he also noted that fathers may act as key attachment figures, whose importance can be demonstrated alongside or independently of the mother (Bowlby, 1988). Key attachment figures are required to be available, accessible and potentially responsive (Bowlby, 1973). A secure attachment to fathers has been found to foster confidence and competence in children, for example, predicting behaviour at school and interactions with peers (Suess et al., 1992). Moreover, the nature of childhood attachments is thought to shape and influence adult relationships, and the way an adult makes sense of these attachment experiences may influence thinking and psychological and emotional development (Trowell, 2002). A father’s relationship with his child is also seen to encourage healthy separation from the mother (Trowell, 2002), which may be of particular significance in adolescence and early adulthood.
Psychodynamic theories also stress the importance of childhood relationships on development. For example Winnicott (1986) proposes that parental availability and reliability form the basis of the ‘holding environment’ deemed necessary to support and facilitate an infant’s maturational processes. Psychodynamic theories may also prove useful in understanding how early parental experiences may affect a young woman’s subsequent romantic relationship experiences. It has been proposed that romantic love is a re-finding of feelings experienced towards the original love objects of childhood (e.g. Freud, 1914) and furthermore, Klein (1937) proposes that a woman’s impression of her father plays a predominant part in her choice of partner. She explains that it is the impression the child had of the loved one and the phantasies connected with them that she wishes to rediscover, noting that the unconscious mind associates things on grounds other than those the conscious mind is aware of.

Reported effects of father absence

As aforementioned, the effects of father absence are thought to be tied to the roles the father fulfilled within the family unit (Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda, 2004). Economic stress (Pearson & Thoennes, 1990), feelings of perceived or actual abandonment (Kelly & Lamb, 2000), and the deleterious consequences of pre- and post-divorce marital conflict (Kelly, 2000) are just some of the reported effects of father absence. Dunn (2004) states that the risk of problems in children’s adjustment following family transition increases but notes that there is great individual variation. For example, Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1999) report a subset of girls being enhanced by their experiences of father absence, whilst Ellis et al. (2003) assert that greater exposure to father absence is strongly
associated with early sexual activity and adolescent pregnancy. The causes of such individual variation seem important in understanding the effects of father absence and yet these seem to have been overlooked in the majority of research to date. The relationship between father and child both before and after his departure from the family home may be one such factor (Dunn, 2005). Equally, it is suggested that since fathers and children form parts of complex social systems (the family) in which each member affects others reciprocally, directly and indirectly, it is important to view them within this framework (Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda, 2004). It may be that qualitative research methods are able to capture some of this individual variation and add to the current understanding of father absence (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

Several studies have noted the emergence or re-emergence of difficulties associated with parental divorce many years after the actual divorce occurred. This may be as children confront new developmental tasks, in particular the demands of adolescence and young adulthood (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999) or as individuals begin to negotiate intimate relationships (Bray & Hetherington, 1993).

Relevance to Counselling Psychology

Close personal relationships, such as those between parents and children, provide the context in which individual lives develop (Flouri & Buchanan, 2002). Counselling psychologists (albeit depending on their theoretical orientation) are highly interested in knowing about a client’s early relationships and frequently the work of therapy is for a client to come to understand the impact of their experiences within these relationships.
With father absence on the increase, it seems likely that father-absent clients will be encountered in our practice as counselling psychologists, whether at the time of first absence or decades later. It therefore seems pertinent to try and gain an understanding of girls’ meaning-making around experiences of growing up without a father and the range of both positive and negative experiences that the term ‘father absence’ encompasses, so that we may have a base of knowledge on which to draw when working with clients.

In brief, the present study aims to explore young women’s recollections of their experiences of growing up without a father, and their understanding of the impact their fathers’ absence may have had on them, throughout their lives and the way they are today. In particular, the study focuses on young women’s romantic/sexual relationships and how they perceive these to have been affected by their experiences of father absence. The overarching goal of this research is to inform counselling psychology practice, in particular, work with father-absent girls and their relatives.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were three young women aged between eighteen and twenty-one, whose fathers had been absent since they were twelve years old or younger. In order to focus on one form of absence, this was defined as the father being physically absent from the girl’s home due to divorce or separation. Age criteria were set so that the study focussed on the
experiences of women at one particular stage of life and development. Equally, participants would all have been coping with the absence of their fathers for a significant number of years, and in the majority of cases, their fathers would have been absent prior to the onset of their sexual development.

Participants were recruited at a university in south east England via posters placed around campus and group emails sent by departmental administrators on behalf of the researcher. More information is provided about participants in the analysis section.

*Interview Schedule*

Data were collected through interviews, using a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix 4). The schedule was developed by the researcher with the research aims and literature pertaining to father absence in mind and following discussion with a key informant. The key informant was an independent researcher who had experienced father absence. She provided an ‘insider’s’ opinion on the appropriateness and sensitivity of the interview schedule. Questions were designed to be open-ended and non-directive in order to elicit participants’ unique experiences and were carefully constructed to avoid ‘leading’ participants by implying a particular construction of father absence was held by the researcher.

A pilot interview was carried out, following which a component was removed from the interview schedule (constructing the participants’ genograms at the start of the interview) as it was felt to be time consuming and distracted from the collection of more
phenomenological data. Subsequently, participants were merely asked to describe their family structure.

Procedure

After ethical approval had been obtained (see Appendix 1), two participants were interviewed on University premises and one participant was interviewed in her family home. Interviews lasted for between 40 and 90 minutes. Prior to the day of interview, participants were provided with an information sheet (see Appendix 2) and at interview, given an opportunity to ask any questions they might have. Participants then signed a consent form (see Appendix 3) and completed a demographic information questionnaire. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Given the sensitive nature of the research topic and the potential for participants becoming distressed, interviews were conducted using a basic counselling-style format following the recommendations of Coyle (1998). Participants who appeared in any way distressed by the material discussed were to be advised on accessing further support at the end of the interview, and provided with details of appropriate counselling services. In the event, none of the participants became distressed.

Analytic Strategy

The transcripts were analysed using an idiographic approach, whereby transcripts were analysed individually to produce detailed accounts of young women’s experiences after intensive engagement with the data. Whilst there is a long history of using case studies in psychology, such studies remain uncommon and are perceived as an important, but
neglected psychological domain (Smith et al, 1995). Yin (1989) asserts that case studies are intended to demonstrate "existence not incidence" (Smith et al, 1995:64), and furthermore that such detailed examination of a particular feature cannot be done either statistically or with larger sample sizes.

Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 1996). IPA aims to explore the participant's experience from his or her perspective, capturing some of the quality and texture of that individual's experience in order to develop an 'insider's perspective' (Conrad, 1987). It is assumed that through intensive engagement with the data and the participant's perspective, that meaningful interpretations can be made about the participant's experience and thinking (Smith et al, 1997). IPA seemed an appropriate method of analysis given the study's focus on young women's 'experience' of father absence. Equally, IPA is regularly employed in case study analysis (e.g., Knudson & Coyle, 2002).

Data analysis involved repeated readings of each transcript, with notes being made of interesting points or associations related to the research topic. Transcripts were read again and emerging themes tentatively named, with names chosen that seemed to characterise key points within the participant's account. These relatively fine-grained themes were then examined and amalgamated into super-ordinate themes where this seemed meaningful. Throughout this process, transcripts were referred to for evidence in support of these themes, in order that emerging themes remained grounded in the participant's account.
IPA recognises the dynamic interaction between participants' accounts and the researcher's interpretative framework (Smith et al., 1999) and the effect this has on the final research product. It is therefore necessary to reflect on the researcher's interpretative framework in relation to the research topic and the way in which this framework may have affected the analysis. The interpretations of the researcher will have been shaped by her role as Counselling Psychologist in training, currently practising psychodynamically, and as a young woman herself who, in both personal and professional arenas, has encountered many young women with absent fathers. Rather than being seen as detrimental, the analysis of participants' accounts within such an interpretative framework could be viewed as making constructive use of the researcher's "informed subjectivity" (Osborne & Coyle, 2002:310). By way of validation, all interpretations were checked by an independent researcher and unwarranted or idiosyncratic interpretations removed. Similarly, all major interpretations are accompanied by quotations from participants' transcripts, enabling the readers to judge their persuasiveness for themselves. Other criteria that have been identified for evaluating qualitative research, such as commitment and rigour, can also be applied to this study (Yardley, 2000).

In the quotations presented in the analysis, ellipsis points (...), are used to indicate omitted material and information within square brackets has been added for clarification. All names and identifying information have been changed to protect the participants' confidentiality.
Analysis

The following cases are organised according to the richness of data they contain. In order to avoid repetition, only the themes which make the third case unique have been elaborated.

Case study one: Hannah

Hannah is a twenty year old, second year business student at a university in the south east of England. Hannah grew up in a small town in south east England. When she was two years old, Hannah’s father moved abroad for work, and only saw the family during school holidays. Hannah’s parents separated when she was seven years old, after which her father “disappeared”. She has had no contact with him since the separation, except for a birthday card on her eighth birthday. Due to her husband’s disappearance, Hannah’s mother has been unable to get divorced and has had no subsequent relationships.

Account of experience with father: Loss, destruction and fear of his return

Hannah gave the impression that her father’s disappearance had caused the family great suffering and that they had been living with the consequences ever since. She reported that the disappearance of her father was accompanied by financial hardship and repossession of the family home. Hannah’s family were forced to move into council accommodation, which she described as “awful” and seems to have been a source of shame: “I was embarrassed, I think, because of where I was living”. In the last year Hannah’s mother has been able to buy her own home and Hannah highlighted the
significance of this: “We’re away from the point where we’re in a council flat cos this is what our father’s done, we’ve started afresh”. However, she also conveyed a sense of uneasiness that whilst her parents remain married, her father could return and destroy their lives again. She said: “the life we’ve built up now could just come crashing down again... if he comes back I don’t know what he would do”.

This fear of her father returning seems to have been present throughout Hannah’s life. For example, she said: “I’d always think he’s going to turn up on our doorstep... I used to have nightmares that he was going to come back and kidnap me”. Hannah explained that because her father had disappeared, leaving two children, he had been listed at the Home Office so her mother could be informed if he returned to the country. Nevertheless, Hannah recalled thinking: “he could have got through the system, disguised himself or, especially cos we don’t know if he’s got a foreign passport, cos they were looking for a British passport”. It seemed as though Hannah perceived her father as a ‘bogeyman’ coming to get her, or a cunning criminal evading the system. Perhaps these images grew out of her painful experiences, and in the absence of a strong relationship or real sense of her father to counterbalance them. At interview she stated: “it was never a hope he’d come back, I can assure you that”. This sort of strong reaction may be interpreted by psychoanalytic theorists as reaction formation. They might suggest that Hannah did in fact desire a relationship with her father, but that this desire was rejected as too dangerous (making her vulnerable to further hurt) and defended against with a fearful image of her father’s return.
Subsequent relationships with men: Mistrust

Hannah described finding relationships with men difficult following her experiences with her father. She stated: “the trust in men has completely disappeared”. Hannah grew up in “a very female house” and went to an all-girls school. Here she developed a relationship with one of the male teachers, saying: “I had an absolute favourite teacher, he was a graphics teacher... he was wonderful, in my eyes he couldn’t do anything wrong”. She described him as a “role model” and suggested: “because I didn’t have a father, looking for something like that in a teacher is maybe what you naturally do”. However, when she was sixteen, this teacher was unexpectedly sent to prison and Hannah described feeling as though another man she had trusted had “suddenly gone”. This sense of loss seemed to echo Hannah’s experience with her father and compound her mistrustful feelings towards men.

At sixth-form college Hannah struggled to make friends with boys. For example, she said: “I could not accept that... guys could be friends without hurting me”. She described finding it “really hard” and, although she was able to establish friendships, intimacy seemed more difficult. Hannah said: “I was friends with them, but you know when there’s that barrier of someone coming, knowing all about you, I wouldn’t let any guy near me”.

This wariness and struggle with intimacy has also characterised Hannah’s romantic relationships. For example, she said: “it took me a very long time to trust [my boyfriend]... it was the opening up, letting people come close is very difficult”. Hannah
explained that she had also held her feelings back from her boyfriend, out of a wish for a ‘perfect relationship’: “I guess I just wanted it to be perfect, I just wanted nothing to go wrong so I always told him I was OK”. Given her experience of relationships being destroyed, it appears that Hannah attempted to preserve her remaining relationships by shielding them from potentially destructive emotions.

*Hidden emotions*

It seems that following her father’s disappearance, Hannah struggled to express her emotions in arenas other than her romantic relationships. She stated: “I’d say up to about seventeen, no emotion whatsoever”. She went on to explain: “I’d been hurt probably the worst that anyone could hurt me so, you know, a friend saying she didn’t like what I was wearing was actually OK”. Hannah seems to imply that everything seemed trivial in comparison with the pain suffered at the loss of her father, as if the loss of the relationship with her father had provided a comparative frame for her feelings about other things. However, it may also be that revealing one’s emotions involves exposing an intimate part of oneself, something that Hannah described finding difficult and may have avoided for fear of further hurt.

Hannah’s ability to ‘carry on regardless’ seems to have been positively appraised by others (“my friends say I’ve had such a level head throughout all of this”) and she seemed to take pride in her achievements despite the adverse circumstances, saying: “some people could go different ways, they could just drop everything, um, whereas I think I’ve just gone straight through this... and I’ve done it”. It seems that more recently, Hannah
has been learning about emotional expression through close relationships at university. For example she says of a friend: “she’s a very emotional person... and I’ve maybe learnt from her, it’s ok to be emotional and not be ashamed by it”.

**Absent father kept a secret**

During her childhood and early teens, it seems that Hannah kept the circumstances of her father’s absence a secret, even from her best friends. This may have been because she felt her circumstances made her unusual. She explained: “I grew up in a world where no parents were divorced, no parents were separated... I lived in [a town in south east England], you know, it was a very white middle class sort of school”. This perceived difference may have been difficult to tolerate at an age where neither social skills nor identity are securely developed. Hannah felt embarrassed by her family’s living arrangements (as noted earlier), and seemed concerned about judgement or blame: “I didn’t want to tell anyone cos I thought they would judge me, or my mum or my sister, like we had done it cos we were the ones left here, or that we had done something to my father”.

Although she did not elaborate this point, one might speculate on the effects of keeping such a secret. Hannah described finally telling one particular friend, and said: “my barrier just went down”. Perhaps this suggests that secrecy held Hannah back from truly intimate friendships.
Hannah was seven years old when her parents separated and she seems to perceive her relative youth as having impacted on her experience of father absence. In particular she said: “I wasn’t told anything about [the circumstances of my parents’ separation] because I was too young”. This lack of information impeded Hannah’s ability to construct an account of events (see below) but her young age seems also to have affected her ability to cope with and understand the situation. For example, she recalled struggling to cope with her sister’s distress: “as a younger sister you don’t know, and I was quite young anyway, you don’t know what to do”. Hannah also described wondering about her own role in her parents’ separation: “it did cross my mind straight away thinking, ‘Oh dear, is it me?’”, “I did ask my mum this, is it because you had a second child, was it because of me?”. It is recognised that a child’s age at the time of their parents’ separation is likely to affect the way they respond to the separation and in particular, younger children are more likely to blame themselves for family change (Dunn, 2005). Despite rationalising her concerns about being to blame (e.g. “I knew that it couldn’t have been my fault cos he didn’t know me”), they appear to have lingered into Hannah’s teens. For example when she learnt of her teacher’s jail sentence (see above), Hannah reported thinking: “I’m good at this, getting rid of people”.

One might also hypothesise that Hannah’s age and position in the family has had advantages. She described being the youngest in her extended family, saying: “I was the baby of everyone, I was always looked after which was lovely”. This situation appears to have repeated itself at university: “all my friends are older than me here, they look after
me, oh, I’m so protected, it’s lovely”. One might suggest that this ‘baby of the family’ role provided Hannah with a feeling of security which she may have lacked after her father’s disappearance. Furthermore, Hannah seems to have fallen back on this familiar role to provide her with a sense of security during a potentially unsettling period of transition – moving away from home.

**Constructing an account of her experiences**

As mentioned before, Hannah was not told the circumstances of her parents’ separation at the time it occurred. However, it appears that from a young age Hannah made attempts to construct an account of events, for example, finding some home videos: “I watched them to give me some idea of what was going on”. She described having very few memories of her childhood, stating: “I suppose I blocked a lot of it out of my mind”. These memories may have been blocked out because, as discussed above, at seven years old Hannah was unable to reconcile these memories of “doing the normal family thing” with her immediate experience of loss. However, some vivid memories do remain. For example Hannah recalled taking her father to the airport and sensing this would be the last time she would see him. Vivid memories such as this one are thought to form landmarks in an individual’s account of their personal past (Harvey et al, 1990).

Hannah reported that aged sixteen, “I started to think, hang on, how come I don’t know about this?”. She stated that her lack of knowledge about her father and her parents’ separation was highlighted when she started college and met new people who asked, for example: “what does your dad do?”. It may also be that by her mid-teens, Hannah’s level
of cognitive development better equipped her to contemplate and understand her experiences and, indeed, that doing so had come to the fore as she grappled with stage-salient issues such as identity formation.

At interview, Hannah conveyed a sense of disbelief about her father’s disappearance (“I just can’t believe he’s ever done this to us”) and constructing an account of her experiences seemed to be an ongoing process. In the interview she reflected on milestones in her understanding (“I can see there are points in my life where things have changed”), and appeared to come to new insights as we spoke, saying, for example: “maybe that contributed as well to me wanting to know more about my parents. I never thought of that”. Hannah also described the value she perceived in telling her account to others: “I think, also coming to university and telling people that don’t know your family that’s a really, that made a difference, someone completely new who just said well, and maybe just said the right things”. Similarly, when asked how she felt about participating in the research interview, Hannah said: “it’s also good to talk to people about these things, it helps to clear your mind”. Hannah’s statements seem to echo the thinking that acute personal stress is best dealt with when an individual is able to work through its meaning for themselves and confide that meaning to a close, empathic other (Harvey et al, 1990). Equally, Hannah’s statements may point to the usefulness of counselling in circumstances such as hers.

Overall, Hannah’s experience appears to be one of protecting herself from further pain, whether by keeping her emotions hidden or keeping her distance in relationships, in
particular with men – perceived to be the source of pain. Hannah seemed to perceive her age at the time of her father’s departure to be a ‘moderating variable’, marking her experience out from her older sister’s, for example. Equally, the ongoing process of constructing an account of her experiences appeared to have moderated her perceived experience.

Case study two: Lauren

Lauren is twenty years old and has just completed a degree in broadcasting at a university in south east England. Her parents divorced when she was five years old, after which her father moved abroad. Lauren’s mother remarried eight years ago after a series of relationships and gained two step-children. Lauren’s father returned to the UK during her teenage years and has lived with his girlfriend and her son for seven years. During Lauren’s teens, she saw her father fortnightly but now only visits him a few times a year. Lauren’s childhood was primarily spent in the Midlands, and her teenage years in south east England.

Hidden emotions

It seems that Lauren’s parents had an acrimonious divorce. Lauren recalled her mother making her feelings about her father clear and reflected on the impact of this: “they had not a very friendly break-up and I think it was quite hard for me to talk to my mum about it because my mum was always very angry with him and saying how horrible and rubbish he was”. Like Hannah, Lauren spoke of keeping her feelings private and finding it hard to
be emotionally open. She said: "I was amazingly shut off for so many years, like I wouldn’t talk to anyone about what I’d been through or how I felt or anything". Perhaps, like Hannah, this served to protect herself from further pain. However, she may also have found it difficult to express herself if she perceived her feelings to be at odds with those around her, perhaps imagining that she would not be well received.

*Adopting a ‘carer’ role*

Lauren explained that her mother experiences recurrent bouts of depression and that she had been particularly depressed after the divorce. Consequently, Lauren described having had to “grow up quite quickly”, taking on a caring role for her brother (three years her junior) and becoming her mother’s “confidant”. She recounted her frustration and exhaustion at not being able to improve things for her mother: “it got to the point where it didn’t matter what I said any more, I’d say the same things over and over again and it wouldn’t make any difference”. Reflecting on this experience, Lauren implied that it had felt like having her childhood taken away from her and that her step-father’s arrival had enabled her to regain this to some extent. However, she also recalled struggling to adapt to his presence, saying: “all of a sudden I’m not that best friend person who [my mum] turns to, which felt a bit weird I think cos I’m suddenly like ‘Well, why are you talking to him when you used to talk to me?’” It seems that Lauren felt both a sense of relief at giving up her role as carer but also a sense of loss, perhaps feeling she was being replaced by her step-father. It is recognised that where pathology (e.g. parental depression) is introduced to a family environment, rigid roles may be adopted by family members in order to maintain the equilibrium of the family system (Nardi, 1991). Identity exploration
is curtailed by rigidly adhering to any role and the arrival of Lauren’s step-father may therefore have been particularly timely – freeing her from her carer role as she entered adolescence, a critical time for identity exploration.

**Perception of self in relation to father**

During the interview, Lauren reflected on her relationship with and perception of her father and noted how this had changed over the years. As in Hannah’s case, she spoke of having little memory of her early childhood but of gradually constructing an account, using photos and snippets of information. Lauren stated she had been close to her father prior to the divorce and presented an enduring image of herself as “daddy’s little girl”. Lauren expressed relief that her father’s girlfriend had a son rather than a daughter: “I will always be daddy’s little girl, that hasn’t been taken away from me”. It may be that, given her experience of father absence, Lauren’s identity as “daddy’s little girl”, although precious, was one about which she did not feel fully confident. The presence of another ‘daughter’ may have been perceived as a threat to this identity.

*A fragile relationship with father*

A sense of insecurity in Lauren’s relationship with her father was woven throughout the interview. She spoke of her father being “the fun parent” who took her and her brother out for weekend trips and described never having argued with him, giving the impression of a tenuous, ‘fair weather’ relationship that might not withstand a row. Lauren also
stated: “when I say goodbye to my dad, there’s always this horrible feeling... this definite
gut wrenching thing when I leave my dad still where, yeah, I don’t know, it’s still I don’t
really want to leave him”. The “gut wrenching” feeling Lauren describes seems
reminiscent of the panicky reaction of an insecurely attached infant at the departure of a
key attachment figure (Ainsworth et al., 1978), and may well stem from residual
uncertainty about the reliability of her father’s presence in her life.

**Instability**

Lauren reported that following her parents’ divorce, her mother had had a series of
relationships. She described finding it hard to open up and trust each boyfriend and
stated: “I think it got a bit harder every time with the next one... I think it was just
because they’d leave like Dad did”. Furthermore, she said: “when they come and then
they’re gone again... when the next one comes you’re kind of like, ‘How long ‘til you go
again?’”. It seems that Lauren’s experiences with her mother’s boyfriends compounded
her experience with her own father, perhaps strengthening an impression of men as
unreliable.

This impression of instability contrasts directly with Lauren’s portrayal of the core family
unit. For example she said: “it didn’t matter who came in and who came out, it was me,
mum and [my brother] together, and umm, I think I secretly quite liked that”. This image
of permanence and stability amongst remaining family members was echoed by Hannah,
who suggested that relationships had drawn closer through shared experience. Lauren
said: “I mean all of this had made me and [my brother], like we’re so close”.

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Insecurity

Lauren’s interview was scattered with references to feeling left out. For example, she said of her father and his girlfriend: “they talk about the things they’ve done... and me and [my brother] aren’t part of that, it’s really weird cos it’s kind of you do feel left out”. Similarly she said of relationships with friends: “I’ve always felt that I don’t know what they’re thinking, I don’t know if they like me, I don’t know if they want me here”. Lauren stated that her experiences had left her with “huge insecurities”. She explained: “my dad left me and then everyone prior to that for the next what, five, seven years left me every time err I got close to them... I had huge issues with, and it wasn’t trusting people, I trusted them, I think it was just that they weren’t going to be there”. The experiences Lauren describes with both her father and her mother’s boyfriends may be interpreted as abandonment or rejection and attachment theory suggests that children raised in such environments learn to expect rejection and tend to develop avoidant attachments. These in turn directly influence subsequent intimate relationships (Belt & Abidin, 1996). This appears to capture something of Lauren’s experience: “it didn’t matter how much someone told me err they loved me or they wanted to be with me... it felt like I was pushing them away and it didn’t matter what they did”. Lauren explained that she had been in therapy for a year when she was eighteen, which had helped her come to terms with her experiences.

Lauren’s account seemed to describe the negative impact of an ongoing insecure attachment with her father and the compounding effect of her experiences with her
mother's partners. She also highlighted the impact of her relationships with her parents on her sense of identity – “daddy's little girl” and her previous carer role.

**Case study three: Juliet**

Juliet is a twenty-one year old sociology student, in her first year of study at a university in south east England. She is an only child and her parents separated when she was eleven years old. She describes the separation as “a relief”, explaining that her father was “quite violent” and used to hit her. Juliet had no contact with her father during her teenage years, and now sees her father approximately twice a year.

**Experience of father absence**

Juliet reported that her father was abusive. She stated: “he just used to lash out and hit me all the time so I used to be like really nervous and scared”. Consequently, Juliet described her parents’ separation as “a relief”. She explained: “he wasn’t living with me any more and life, my life was so much better because he wasn’t there”. She referred to her improved school performance as a marker of her enhanced quality of life.

Despite an initially positive reaction to life without her father, it seems that Juliet found his ongoing absence painful. She stated: “I didn’t see him for like five years, he just couldn’t be bothered with me at all”. She went onto explain the impact his absence had on her: “about two years ago I was a bit like fucked up, I just got really depressed over stuff cos he just couldn’t be bothered”. Perhaps Juliet’s lifelong experiences of father absence had affected her sense of self, for example, making her feel as though she were...
not worth bothering with. Juliet reported she had had counselling at university, which seemed to have helped her come to terms with her experiences.

Seeking a paternal relationship

Despite her father’s behaviour, it seems that as a child, Juliet always hoped they might enjoy some time together: “I wanted it to be fun... you hoped that it would sort of be alright, but then he used to just get so angry all the time”. She spoke of having little adult support during her early teenage years, but described forming friendships with some of her tutors during her time at sixth-form college, who seemed readily available, supportive and understanding. The tutors Juliet named were both men and of one she said: “he was just sort of being a dad to me”. One might suggest that Juliet’s account echoes Hannah’s statement, that in being without a father she looked for something like that in the men around her, for example teachers or her mother’s partners.

Mother’s impact on experiences

Throughout the interview, Juliet commented on how her mother had mediated her experiences of her father and his absence, for example saying she handled her marriage badly because she was so young: “she wishes she’d divorced him sooner, but because she was only like eighteen, nineteen when I was born she didn’t really know what to do”. Similarly, Juliet stated that post-divorce her mother had spent all her time with her new partner, enabling Juliet to mix with “the wrong crowd”. Finally she left Juliet (aged seventeen) to start a new life abroad, which seemed to compound Juliet’s feelings of abandonment: “I was just like, was always on my own sort of thing, in physical and like
mentally as well... and then when she went [abroad] I was left on my own again... she just didn’t give a shit at all”.

Juliet also reflected on her mother’s relationships and reported that for a while, she had replicated her mother’s relationship pattern: “you know I said my mum kept going out with complete arseholes cos her dad was like that, I started going out with the same types of people cos my dad was an arsehole, I just thought that was ok”. One might question whether Juliet’s relationship experiences were simply a consequence of her experiences with her father or whether they were, in some way, mediated by her experience of her mother’s relationships.

**Impact of experiences on identity**

Throughout the interview, Juliet gave the impression that her experiences had made her feel ‘different’. Like all the other participants, she implied that her circumstances were unusual amongst her school friends and described finding it hard to fit in at university, where she felt so different to the other first year students – more mature and with no parental backing, either emotional or financial. When asked what had drawn her to participate in this research, Juliet stated: “I thought it was unusual the criteria you were looking for, I didn’t think there would be many people, and I was like, ‘that’s me, that’s exactly me’”. It seems that Juliet’s perception of being different to her peers may have impacted on the way she construes her own image, perhaps unsurprisingly given that her experiences occurred throughout adolescence when identity formation is a key developmental task.
Juliet reflected on how her experiences had been mediated by both her mother’s behaviour and her relationship with her father pre- and post-divorce. Like Hannah, she reported seeking a paternal relationship, despite her experiences of violence with her own father. Similarly, her experiences of father absence appeared to have impacted her subsequent relationships and her sense of identity.

Overview

Although there were differences in the specific details of the individual participants’ accounts, there appeared to be several core themes that characterised their collective experiences of father absence. The first of these was the young women’s apparent desire for a paternal relationship. With the exception of Lauren (who had most contact with her father post-divorce), each of the participants described seeking a paternal relationship in their father’s absence, with other available males, such as teachers. This may suggest that there is a fundamental need for a paternal-type relationship, or provide evidence of young women attempting to fill the many roles left unfulfilled by their father’s absence (Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda, 2004).

Secondly, each of the young women reflected on how their experiences of father absence had affected their identity formation, a key developmental task of adolescence and early adulthood (Erikson, 1963). In two of the cases, it appeared that father absence temporarily hindered identity development, through the participant’s adoption of
inappropriate roles (e.g. carer) and through the participant’s difficulties in separating from mother, another key developmental task. Equally, each of the young women reported feeling that their circumstances marked them out as different from their peers, and this feeling seemed to have been incorporated into some of the participants’ identities.

Difficulty in close relationships seemed to be another core theme woven throughout the accounts. On the whole this appeared to stem from a desire for self-protection, as participants spoke of hiding their emotions, keeping their distance or pushing people away in order to avoid being hurt through further loss or abandonment. Similar patterns were seen in the women’s accounts of their romantic relationships, in particular a mistrust of men and fear of further abandonment or hurt.

This study has also highlighted causes of individual variation in these particular young women’s experiences of father absence. In particular, participants’ experiences appeared to be moderated by their mother’s behaviour post-divorce, which served to either compound or ameliorate the participants’ experiences. The quality of relationships with fathers both pre- and post-divorce also appeared to moderate the participants’ experiences, as Dunn (2005) predicted. Similarly, the individual’s age at the time of their father’s departure appeared to moderate their subsequent experience, perhaps due to the individual’s ability to construct an account of events at that age.
Value and limitations of the study

It would appear that this study’s findings support the conclusions of previous studies into the effects of father absence. Due to the use of a case study approach its generalisability remains limited. However its added value lies in its illustration of how the patterns and processes identified in the wider father-absence literature look in phenomenological terms.

The quality and value of the study may also be assessed using recognised evaluative criteria for qualitative research (e.g. Yardley, 2000). The study meets the ‘transparency and coherence’ criteria since themes and interpretations are grounded in examples from the data. Similarly, the study fulfils the ‘impact and importance’ criteria by attending to what its findings add to the existing research on effects of divorce and father absence.

Very few young women volunteered to participate in this study and one might question whether this self-selected sample present highly motivated accounts which may not fully overlap with the actualities to which they refer. Furthermore the participants’ accounts were necessarily retrospective which may further diminish the accuracy of their accounts. However, research evidence exists which suggests that retrospective reports and autobiographical memory are not necessarily and inevitably inaccurate and unstable (e.g., Blane, 1996; Neisser, 1994). The accuracy of the participants’ accounts is further validated by their reflection in the wider father-absence literature.
One might also question the homogeneity of the sample given that the details of participants' specific experiences varied widely and half the participants had had counselling. However, as outlined above, several core themes emerged which characterised their collective experiences, and those who had had counselling were only marked out by their level of cognitive organisation, evident in their presentation of material. Furthermore the sample may be seen as homogenous since all participants were white and currently live in an area of south east England.

**Implications for Counselling Psychology practice**

The accounts of father absence presented in this study may prove informative for counselling psychologists working with clients who have grown up without fathers, as many of the themes drawn from the participants' accounts may present themselves in the therapy room. For example difficulties forming intimate relationships or completing the separation-individuation process. However, whilst this study has identified common themes, it has also acknowledged the degree of individual variation in young women's experiences of father absence and this must also be anticipated in therapeutic encounters with father-absent clients.

Finally, all of the participants commented that they found it helpful to talk about their experiences to friends and indeed to the researcher at interview, and those who had had counselling spoke of how it had helped them come to terms with their experiences. It is thought that constructing an account of one's experiences enables one to create meaning out of acute personal stress and furthermore, that confiding that meaning to an empathic
other facilitates 'working through' such an experience (Harvey et al, 1990). It seems that the participants' statements confirm such a hypothesis and indeed point to the potential value of counselling for young women who have experienced father absence.
FOOTNOTES

1 NB. Hannah’s relationship with her teacher was not sexual and his imprisonment was not related to their relationship in any way.

2 Any conclusions drawn about the nature of Lauren’s attachment to her father are necessarily very tentative since they are based solely on evidence present in the transcript.
REFERENCES


09 February 2005

Ms Natalie Chambers
Department of Psychology
School of Human Sciences

Dear Ms Chambers

**Young women/s experiences of father absence (EC/2004/125/Psych)**

On behalf of the Ethics Committee, I am pleased to confirm a favourable ethical opinion for the above research on the basis described in the submitted protocol and supporting documentation.

Date of confirmation of ethical opinion: **09 February 2005**

The list of documents reviewed and approved by the Committee is as follows:-

Document Type: Application
Version: 1
Dated: 12/12/04
Received: 15/12/04

Document Type: Research Protocol
Version: 1
Received: 15/12/04

Document Type: Sample Information Sheet
Version: 1
Received: 15/12/04

Document Type: Sample Consent Form
Version: 1
Received: 15/12/04

Document Type: Sample Interview Schedule
Version: 1
Received: 15/12/04

Document Type: Your Response to the Committee's Comments
Dated: 24/01/05
Received: 27/01/05
This opinion is given on the understanding that you will comply with the University's Ethical Guidelines for Teaching and Research.

The Committee should be notified of any amendments to the protocol, any adverse reactions suffered by research participants, and if the study is terminated earlier than expected, with reasons.

You are asked to note that a further submission to the Ethics Committee will be required in the event that the study is not completed within five years of the above date.

Please inform me when the research has been completed.

Yours sincerely

Catherine Ashbee (Mrs)
Secretary, University Ethics Committee
Registry

cc: Professor T Desombre, Chairman, Ethics Committee
Dr R Draghi-Lorenz, Supervisor, Dept of Psychology
INFORMATION SHEET

This research project aims to explore young women’s experiences of growing up without their fathers and the perceived impact of this, whether positive or negative, on their current lives. This project comprises a component of my Doctorate in Counselling Psychology, and aims to inform counselling psychology practice. The study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Surrey Ethics Committee.

Participants for this project have been chosen because they meet the demographic criteria I am studying, that is young women whose fathers have been absent since their early teenage years. Participation in this project involves being interviewed by myself for approximately one hour about your experience of father absence. There will be no right or wrong answers in the interview as I hope to hear your personal account. I am aware that for some people this may be an upsetting subject to talk about, and you may withdraw from the project at any time.

Interviews will take place in a private room within the Department of Psychology to ensure your confidentiality. Interviews will be audio taped, however tapes will only be heard by myself, will not be labelled with your name, and will be destroyed once the project is complete. Similarly, your anonymity will be assured by use of pseudonyms in the final report. All data will be handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. As participants are undergraduates from the University of Surrey, they may encounter me, the researcher, again on campus. Should this occur it will be expected that a professional attitude will be take to the meeting, that is neither party will make reference to the research and neither party will have any expectation of further interviews or therapy.

If you participate in this research, feedback or a copy of the final report will be available to you in September 2005 on completion of the project, and I will provide details of how this may be obtained.

If you have further questions or require further information regarding participation in this project, please contact myself or my supervisor:-

Natalie Chambers  
email: psm2nc@surrey.ac.uk  
Adrian Coyle  
email: a.coyle@surrey.ac.uk
CONSENT FORM

❖ I agree to take part in the research project about young women’s experiences of father absence. I have been informed that I will be interviewed about my own experiences of father absence.

❖ I understand that the interview will be audio taped. I have been assured that all personal data is held in the strictest confidence, that my anonymity will be preserved and that the tape recording of my interview will be destroyed once the research project is complete.

❖ I have read and understood the Information Sheet provided and have had all my questions regarding this research project satisfactorily answered.

❖ I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without needing to justify my decision and without prejudice.

❖ I confirm that I have read and understood the above and freely consent to participating in this study.

Name of volunteer ........................................
(BLOCK CAPITALS)
Signed ........................................
Date .................

Name of witness ........................................
(BLOCK CAPITALS)
Signed ........................................
Date .................
DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

The following information is collected so that people who read the final report can know more about the people who took part in the study. However, none of the information will be used to identify you as this research is completely confidential.

1. How old are you? ___________

2. How would you describe your ethnicity?
(Please indicate the ethnic group to which you feel you belong)

**White**
British
Irish
Any other White background (please specify below)

**Black or Black British**
Caribbean
African
Any other Black background (please specify below)

**Asian or Asian British**
Indian
Pakistani
Bangladeshi
Any other Asian background (please specify below)

**Mixed**
White and Black Caribbean
White and Black African
White and Asian
Any other mixed background (please specify below)

**Chinese or other ethnic group**
Chinese
Any other ethnic group (please specify below)
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Prior to interview starting:
- ensure participant has read information sheet
- ask if they have any questions about it
- sign consent form
- give demographic information sheet for completion
- TURN ON TAPE RECORDER

My name’s Natalie Chambers and I’m a trainee Counselling Psychologist. As you know, this interview is part of my research project, which aims to explore young women’s experiences of growing up without their fathers. And today it would be really great if you could share something of your experience with me.

To start with it would be helpful if you could give me an idea of your family structure. [I thought we could try and draw a genogram… shall we start with your parents?]¹

- Mother?
- Dad? When did he leave? How often have you seen him since then?
- Brothers and sisters?
- Has your Mum remarried?
- Step/half-siblings?
- What about your Dad?
- Grandparents? How much do you see them? Involved throughout childhood/adolescence?

Ok, you’ve told me that your Dad left……………….. Can you say a little about what it was like growing up… without him around/only seeing him at weekends…?

Circumstances of divorce/separation
- Conflict/amicable?
- Court involvement? Visitation orders?
- Dad/Mum leaving for another man/woman?
- Participants beliefs/deductions about their role in marriage breakdown?

Relationship with Dad
- Before he left?
- After he left?

¹ Removed after pilot interview – see Method Section.
- Conflict/loyalties between parents/new parents?
- Comparisons between siblings?

*Recall memories/examples to illustrate?*

What happened around key ‘events’?
- Christmas
- Birthdays
- Parents evening/school events

Experience of other divorced/separated families?
- At school?
- Within the family?
- Comparisons? Judgements?

Relationship with Mum
- Before absence?
- After absence?
- What was she like around the time of the divorce/separation? E.g. depressed, fine, angry, more relaxed/strict parenting?
- Current relationship with ex-husband/partner? How does she talk about him?
- New relationships?
- Changed name? Impact on participant?

Impact of other friends/relations
- Other adults e.g. teachers/grandparents/aunts/uncles/family friends
- Peers

We’ve talked quite a lot about your experience of.... growing up without your father around/only seeing your Dad occasionally... and I was wondering what sort of impact you thought that these experiences have had on the way you are today?

Experience of university
- First time away from home?
- Leaving Mum? Concerns/responsibilities?
- Finances?

Romantic/sexual relationships
- History
- Attitude towards — e.g. avoidance, determination to get ‘right’...
- Attitude towards men/women?
- Partner’s family circumstances — seek similar? Envy of nuclear family?...

*What makes you say that? Uncover logic/thinking.*
We’ve talked about...................... And we’re coming towards the end of the interview. Is there anything else that comes to mind that you’d like to add?

I’m wondering how it’s been for you today, talking to me about your experiences? Something you’ve thought about/talked about much before? Why volunteered?

*In case of participant becoming/having become distressed have de-brief here and discuss options for future counselling/support.*

Thank you for participating in my project.

Example prompts:
Could you say some more about that?
Could you give me an example?
SAMPLE TRANSCRIPT

I: Ok, so as you know this interview’s part of my research project which aims to explore young women’s experiences of growing up without fathers around or in the household. Um, yeah, so it would be really great if you could share something of your experience with me.

P: Sure

I: Um, I thought what we’d start off with just to get ourselves going is um looking at your family structure, and I thought we could draw like a genogram so that it’s like all clear and I can see um what’s what.

P: Ok

I: Um so yeah, have you done, seen or done genograms before?

P: No I haven’t, no.

I: Alright. Well essentially it’s like a family tree type thing

P: Ok.

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1 I: Interviewer; P: Participant.
I: So if we start with your parents…² So, um, Mum and Dad, obviously… [starting to draw on paper] women are circles and men are squares, um, so if I do it like that… that’s your mum and dad. And are they separated or divorced or…?

P: Separated, um because my father disappeared so my mum can’t get a divorce, so they’re separated at the moment.

I: Ok. So we’ll indicate that by just doing like a line across that line. Um, so mum and dad… and then do you have siblings?

P: Yeah, I’ve got one older sister

I: One older sister. Ok, so we’ll draw that down there… that’s your sister and that’s you. So this is you and you’re twenty, right? And your sister’s…?

P: 24

I: Ok. Um now so if your dad’s disappeared presumably you don’t know very much…

P: Um, I was about seven, eight so I do know… I did have quite a lot of my young childhood with him, but then… but then he disappeared so…

I: Right, ok. So presumably in terms of him having got another partner or anything…

² (...) represent pauses in speech.
P: We haven’t got a clue! He might do... (laughs)

I: Nothing... you don’t know... that’s alright.

P: But my Mum, she’s never...

I: She’s not remarried...

P: No... me and my sister, we’re her sort of family and she’s not wanted to remarry, so...

I: Fair enough... And, what about grandparents?

P: Um, well, my nan and granddad... I don’t have any grandparents left but um cos we’re an older family, but my mum’s, they were all married, but my grandfather on my mum’s side lived abroad for most of my mum’s childhood as well until he retired so...

I: So you obviously did have grandparents but you’re saying they’re no longer with us?

P: No longer with us, no.

I: Ok, but they were together?
P: Yeah, they were married

I: They were married but he lived abroad for a while, yeah?

P: Yeah.

I: Ok. Um, so when somebody’s died we put a cross through... um so I’ll do it like that. Um, so what about on your dad’s side?

P: Yeah, they were married as well, but passed away. I never met my granddad on that side cos he was a lot older, um he died before I was born.

I: Alright. So did your mum have siblings that were around or...?

P: Yeah, I’ve got an aunt and uncle

I: Ok. So we should draw that off there...

P: Um and she’s married... but they don’t have any children though. And my father was an only child.

I: Right ok.

P: We’re a very small family! (laughs)
I: Well, I don’t know what you think, but I just thought that would just lay things out and then we can see... well it makes it clear for me anyway how things are. Ok, so you’ve said that your dad disappeared... so does that mean that you haven’t seen him at all? No contact?

P: Absolutely nothing, no. I got one birthday card on my eighth birthday and then nothing since.

I: Right ok

P: And neither’s my sister... or any of my family actually on my mum’s side. We’ve tried to contact him obviously, but there’s just been nothing.

I: Right

P: So it’s been a bit strange in that respect! (laughs)

I: I don’t know if you remember the time very well when it happened...?

P: Um, well he worked [abroad]³ since I was about two, so I don’t... from that age you don’t remember anything anyway... and we went over there a couple of times to visit him and he came back for holidays, yeah... It was just after my sister’s birthday in August, it was... we went on holiday to [Europe] and um we had the worst time,

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³ All names and identifying information have been changed to preserve the participant’s confidentiality.
my sister had to look after me and my mum and dad were just arguing like anything. Obviously I wasn’t told anything about it, because I was too young. And then we came back and yeah, we never saw him again, so obviously something… I’ve only just recently found out all that happened, and that’s a good few years after…

I: Yeah, sure

P: But it was… um, he did leave the family, well it was the three of us, I call the three of us my mum, my sister and myself, we are very close… um we lost our house we were in when I was younger, the house was repossessed… we had to go and live with my Nan when she was alive, my granddad had passed away by then, um but she had Alzheimer’s so she didn’t want us there, cos I don’t know if you’ve ever seen someone with Alzheimer’s but they don’t know what is going on at all, um so we had to go into council housing… um so we were put in a two bedroom flat for the three of us which was err…

I: Cosy!

P: Yeah, which was awful, so through all this my mum was er you know, didn’t want to bring up everything for my sister and myself cos we had to deal with it all at the time. I think that was why I never knew what was actually going on, um and I just wanted to be there for my mum, you know, support her um… so yeah, that’s basically it, um… and I think it was just money, basically he ran us into so much debt my mum couldn’t cope with it, so that was yeah, my grandmother who passed away quite recently, we ended up not talking to his side of the family as you can imagine, um, she
tried to contact us a couple of times but blamed my mum for everything that happened saying that she got into the debt, when we of course knew perfectly well that it wasn’t my mum, um so we just cut them off and so it’s just been um one side of the family… It’s quite complicated! (laughs)

I: Yeah, I’m just trying to take it in, get my head around it.

P: So from about seven I grew up just with my mum basically, it was a very female house!

I: Yeah! So I’m just thinking as you’re talking about the experience in [Europe] and the years after that, it sounds as if, you know, you were protected from the actual facts of it, but maybe that you feel that you would have liked to know…?

P: Um, I would have at the time… I always asked my sister, cos we were very close as you can imagine. If something like that has happened, siblings I think do become very close. And she wouldn’t tell me, she was like you will be told one day, always this, so I would ask questions, but I ask questions about everything! Um, so I um, I sort of forgot about it when I reached secondary school, you know I started my secondary school, I started afresh, didn’t let it get to me really til about sixteen when I started to think hang on, how come I don’t know about this. I talked to my mum and a couple of things came up when I was about sixteen, and then when I moved to college um and I thought, people were, you meet new people and they’d sort of say what does your dad do or things like that and I was like I’ve no idea and it starts to bring questions up in mind about why it all happened, so about a year and a half ago my
mum just told me everything... I would like to have known, but they were protecting me, so if I had known I may have grown up a bit differently, whereas my friends say I’ve had such a level head throughout all of this and I’ve come to university... you know some people could go different ways, they could just drop everything, um whereas I think I’ve just gone straight through this with me and my mum and I’ve done it... so if I’d known about it I may never have got to university... so maybe I do appreciate it! (laughs) In a way...

I: I guess there’s pros and cons and you never really know what might have been or whatever...

P: No. I think the one thing that annoyed me was that my sister knew.

I: Mmm, yeah I was going to ask you about that

P: Mmm, but she was four years older, she was that little bit older that she was... yeah, I think four years is quite a lot, it’s four and a half actually, so she had just started secondary school, I think my mum saw that she was very grown up for her age anyway so she thought she would be able to cope with it...

I: And I guess, perhaps she might also have been more aware at the time of what was sort of going on, a bit more clued up about that sort of thing...

P: Yes, definitely. But my sister was much closer to my father than I ever was, cos I never grew up, for her first few years, five years or maybe four years before I was
born, um, he was always at home so she did grow up with him more whereas I didn’t have any direct living, you know I didn’t live with him full time for you know a large amount of time to make a difference in my life

I: Yeah, yeah I see what you mean. So um then the living [abroad], so that was from when you were about two?

P: Um we went there for long visits, so it was like the whole summer, um cos I had my schooling in England and so did my sister, my mum didn’t want us to be over there. Um that was quite young, I, the only reason that I remember those trips is that we have videos...

I: Oh, ok

P: ... and I found them when we moved, when the house was repossessed, and I did something really cheeky and I shouldn’t have done it but at that age you don’t really know, I did hide the videos and I watched them to give me some idea of what was going on... and then I managed to do it, I never told my mum any of this actually, I managed to put them back as well. I suppose she kept them as sort of evidence of some sort, and there was a film of us all together [abroad] doing the normal family thing, um but I suppose I blocked a lot of it out of my mind anyway... but we went over maybe three or four times from maybe the first time was when I was about three and then consecutive years or maybe one year in between, so leading up to when I was about seven.
I: So, he was living [abroad] and working there, and you were over here and going out for visits...

P: Yeah

I: Um and did he then come back or was the holiday in [Europe]...?

P: That was just quite random. We’d never been anywhere except for [where he was living] cos obviously he was working full time and we had school and then suddenly we were going to [Europe]! (laughs) Yeah, we got a house over there in the South of [Europe], and we drove down and it was... I don’t know whether it was planned, I’ve never found that out, why we went over there... and yeah, it was a week and yeah, my sister just had to look after me the whole time... um, you know there were the tears and my mum was crying the whole time... It was a really big house I remember, everyone had a separate room, probably a good thing! And that was when I think everything, yeah, it was when it all blew up so... um, yeah, I do remember when we got back from Europe he went back [abroad] and we did take him to the airport, so... it must have been to a point where they were, they were still talking, but it wasn’t... my mum was like get rid of him! (laughs) And I do remember, I don’t know if you remember at Heathrow when you used to actually be able to watch the planes, yeah we went up there and I remember knowing that was the last time I’d see my father, cos there’s that feeling inside you that you know... So um, that’s quite a vivid memory I think. Um yeah, that’s um... (laughs)
I: So you had some sort of sense that this was going to be the last time, but I guess, perhaps you didn’t...

P: Didn’t want to believe it...

I: No sure, and didn’t know exactly how it would pan out, I mean I suppose there’s not seeing somebody again and then there’s absolutely no contact, which I mean apart from the card...

P: Yeah, just the one birthday card after that, cos we went to [Europe] in the summer and then we went back and I had school, and then my birthday’s in February, and we hadn’t heard anything and then I got this card... um, yeah... and that is it. It is... having no contact with your father is a strange concept sometimes to try and explain to people, you know, he’s flesh and bones! That’s what I, if he’s, I just can’t believe he’s ever done this to us I mean especially to my mum, she means the world to me and she didn’t deserve it, but, yeah... I’ve got quite a few friends who’ve actually had their parents recently actually. I grew up in a world where no parents were divorced, no parents were separated... I don’t know whether that’s, I lived in [south east England], you know it was a very white middle class sort of school and um yeah, just as I moved to college I started, my friends their parents just started to split up and it was good that I... maybe that contributed as well to me wanting to know more about my parents... I never thought of that! (laughs) Um, yeah, I’ve forgotten where I was going with that...
I: Um, you were saying that, yeah, you grew up in a world where nobody was divorced...

P: Yeah, I couldn’t talk about it with friends and I remember, I had one best friend at school, we grew up, we did everything together and I never told her until I was about sixteen about what happened. She just accepted that I lived with my mum, her parents obviously knew, as I found out later, my mum had spoken to her parents. Um but I never spoke to her about it until I was old enough to tell her and um, yeah, it was, that was a realisation as well and err she did for a few weeks she was a bit off with me, she couldn’t accept it, but she didn’t mean it to be me personally, but it was that someone could actually do that and she couldn’t get her head round it.

I: And you’re saying somebody could do that and meaning your dad disappearing or...?

P: Yeah, no, my dad disappearing... how could someone do that to, sort of, me cos I was her best friend, my sister who she knows and my mum who, she know all of us very well. Um but no, we’re still very good friends.

I: That’s great. Um I was curious to know what the experience was like for you, I mean I hesitate to use the words ‘keeping a secret’ cos I don’t want to make that sound in a pejorative sense but, you know, holding something back from someone you were obviously really close to.
P: Yeah, I was embarrassed I think, because of where I was living. Um I didn’t want to tell anyone cos I thought they would judge me, or my mum or my sister, like we had done it cos we were the ones left here, or that we had done something to my father um... I was, a lot of the time I just tried to forget about it, um... maybe that was, I do that, I still do that though (laughs). You know, if something’s really bothering me, I forget about it for a while until I’m ready to think about it. I think maybe I just left it quite a few years... which is easy for someone to do. I had my school, schooling to concentrate on, um, I did lots of activities, I was, you know, I’m a big swimmer, I did that... still never told anyone... there was a guy I went out with at college, a year and a half I went out with him, I only told him after about just over a year, I told him what happened. And it is a serious trust issue as well, I must admit the trust in men has completely disappeared! (laughs)

I: Yeah, that’s a question in my mind really, what...

P: Mmm, I went to a girls’ school, which was probably a good thing at the time, um I think it was, I appreciated it. There’s a girls’ school, a boys’ school and a mixed school where I am and my mum sent me to the girls’ school, I think, knowing that this would be a good thing for me. And then I went to college and that was my next, that was my first interaction, you know, of being friends with guys, and I could not accept that friends could be guys, no, that guys could be friends without them hurting me. I found it really hard for about a year, and then I thought, they’re just people! (laughs)

I: But for that first year, what was it like? Did you just not want to associate or were wary or...?
P: I was friends with them, but you when there's that barrier of someone coming, knowing all about you, I wouldn’t let any guy near me. I met quite a few girls at college who I just let in to know me and I’ve still got them, we’re a really close group of friends. And then it happened to be um my friend, who comes here as well, we’ve come to uni together, um, his mum got a job with my mum, my mum got a job at the school she was working at, my old secondary school, and my mum spoke to her about it, and she told her son and he asked me about it. And that was when I was like, oh, ok, perhaps I should… and he couldn’t believe I’d been hiding something for ages. He knew my dad wasn’t there but he just thought they were divorced. Normal people sort of do get divorced. So I um, I told him and to be honest that did me the world of good, yeah. Couldn’t stop crying for hours, the poor guy! It just let, my barrier just went down, and ever since then I’ve been a lot more emotionally, emotional about things. Maybe, I was maybe in the second year of college, so about seventeen, yeah, and I’d say up to about seventeen, no emotion whatsoever. If somebody hurt me, oh well! (laughs) I’d been hurt so, I’d been hurt probably the worst that anyone could hurt me so, you know, a friend saying I don’t, saying that she didn’t like what I was wearing actually was ok. And then after I told this guy, um, I felt more comfortable. It was after that that I started going out with this other guy I knew. Yeah, found it difficult, because they’re the type of people that will get so close to you, they know everything about you, um and yeah, and I eventually told him and at the point, um, I think the only reason I told him is because his parents split up, yeah, and he didn’t know what to do with himself, but I said, I can kind of understand you and we spoke about it… It all just leads, it does, yeah, lead into, I can see where there are points in my life where things have changed.
I: I was just thinking that, there seems to have been a gradual process of coming to terms with it and, as you say, kind of accepting it a little bit more as and when you’re ready.

P: I think now, before if I’d, maybe sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, I would have been crying my eyes out if I was talking to you right now. But I think, also coming to university and telling people that don’t know your family that’s a really, that made a difference, someone completely new who just said well, and maybe just said the right things, I’ve got some really close friends here. Just because, you know, you live with them, you see them twenty-four hours, um, and I think, and that has made me a lot more emotionally stable, but still emotional. You know, if somebody does say they don’t like the top I’m wearing now I’m like oh! But I’d always say, I don’t go who cares, I’d always say why?! Tell me! And talk about things, yeah. My housemate at the moment, she’s unbelievably, we are unbelievably close, um, she’s like my sister here. She’s the same age as my sister, so I, I think that’s why we got on straight away, and she, she’s a very emotional person, always, you know, she’s one of those romantic people whose emotions are everywhere, which is great! And I’ve maybe learnt from her, it’s ok to be emotional and not be ashamed by it. So um yeah… but I think being away from home, um, and it’s so, it’s been a long time now so I can talk about it and it doesn’t bother me really at all… well, until I think about it! (laughs) But we have just been, when my nan passed away on my mum’s side, she had a gorgeous house actually, um, we sold that cos it was, we were going to move in but it was too much for mum to move into a place with so many memories. We thought, you know, we got some money and we’ve moved out of the council flat and into a
they're no relation to me but I do call them aunt and uncle. Um, and he was a, a real role model. He was, he’s got, their children are fantastic, it’s a boy and a girl. They’re, they are quite a bit older, they’re sort of twenty-six and twenty-four, so I’ve always been the youngest as well. He was wonderful. They used to come and visit and he always used to look after me and I must admit, he did exactly what, he’s working in a really big company but he, he always had such a stressful job but he always had time for us, always remembered our birthdays, he was, yeah, I really do love him a lot.

I: Yeah, I can see just as you’re talking that you’ve got a real soft spot for him!

P: Yeah. For some reason my sister doesn’t get on so well with him. Not, I mean they get on fine but we always talk and spent hours talking which is lovely. So I think he’s been a bigger role model than my real uncle. Um, but there are no other men really! There were, my old next door neighbours in the house that was repossessed, um, it was an older couple and their son. Their son was fifty so they were quite a lot older. Um, their son was at work the whole time so I never really saw him, but Ted he’s was, err, sort of a grandfather almost, um, role model, um, but he was, he was great. He passed away very recently actually, which has been very difficult for my mum, cos they got on very well. But he was, he was great! He was always saying, come on, let’s go and do this. Even if it was just me that he took for a walk to the shops or something, it meant that he got out, I got out. Yes, but they moved away from where I lived, um, maybe a year after we, after our house was repossessed cos they didn’t want to live there without us! So they moved away, but now that he’s passed away his wife and his son are coming back to our home town to be nearer my mum and our family, so that was nice...
house now, which was in December, last December, and it's made such a difference! We're away from the point where we're in a council flat cos this is what our father's done, we've started afresh. My mum has just, oh, she's just bloomed, she really has, forgotten her past. Not that she, she will never sort of remarry, she has no trust in men! (laughs)

I: I can absolutely imagine, that must be very difficult.

P: She's, my uncle has been very good to us. He's not, I must admit my aunt has got special needs, she's very, very bad. But you know, that doesn't, we don't see that anymore, my uncle's quite like that. You know, even though he can't pick up on you know, some things that are blindingly obvious, he'll always be there, always do anything for my mum, he's the only man around her that she actually trusts.

I: From that point of view then, I mean from the point of view of men, or adult men in your life when you were growing up, was he sort of around at that point?

P: He was always around, I must admit I was really scared of him! I don't know why. I think it was because it was a man, um, I was, um my aunt, I get on very well with my aunt, um, and I always went to her if, if they were around. I was always really scared of my uncle... until recently. Like now, I'm absolutely fine, you know, I can joke around with him, it's a very, very distant relationship, but I know he's there. But then, this is another connection, my mum's cousin, um, she's very close to one of her cousins and her husband, and they were around quite a lot. They do live in [south west England] but I was very close to um my cousin, my mum's cousin's husband, so,
I: It sounds as though they were very close to your family

P: Yeah, it was amazing. You know, even though I was a lot younger, you know I was the baby of everyone, I was always looked after which was lovely. Um, they do mean a lot to me so, yeah, I've been quite fortunate.

I: Yeah, it sounds as though there were strong people around you throughout the time

P: Yeah. There was, um, at school, um, I was always very wary of male teachers, I do remember that as well, err, but the majority were female anyway, um but there were a few men. And I think what was a really big impact on me, was that I had an absolute favourite teacher, he was a graphics teacher, cos I loved graphics, he was wonderful, in my eyes he couldn't do anything wrong and I was his star pupil, it was great. And in my year eleven, err, a very bad situation happened where, um, his wife had an affair and he was just, went quite mad and err she was killed in the accident and she was also a teacher at our school. He obviously was put in jail, um, and she had gone, and the guy she'd had an affair with was my maths teacher. This was unbelievable, like, the two male teachers that I had suddenly gone out of my life, the one I trusted as well, which was, this was a horrible time and err, this didn't just affect me it was the whole school, a horrible situation. But again, it was my favourite teacher and I was like, I'm good at this, getting rid of the people who I think, you know that was again... but that was when I was about sixteen so I was a bit older and you know it's a bit easier to cope with, um and I think that was another contribution to why I wanted
to know what went on with... when someone goes out of your life one way maybe, then you know...

I: Yeah, well I guess it did have, maybe kind of rang bells for you with your previous...

P: As a role model, he was a role model, he was yeah, everything that I wanted to be, in the way that he did everything, yeah and suddenly that went and I suppose because I didn’t have a father, looking for something like that in a teacher is maybe what you naturally do.

I: Yeah, yeah, cos I guess you’re seeing them very regularly, you know all those things, aren’t you...

P: Yeah, definitely.

I: Um, but I just heard you say that yeah, you kind of thought to yourself, oh I’m good at this, getting rid of like, sort of people that are close to me and I wondered whether it did feel a bit like that or whether you did at any point kind of think what was my part in this, you know, was it something I did or you know...?

P: Um, I suppose I did at one point think because he was around in my sister’s younger years, suddenly I came along and (laughs) I did ask my mum this, is it because you had a second child, was it because of me? And it was, she said it wasn’t but it did cross my mind, definitely. Suddenly, just because you’ve come into the
world, yeah, he disappears and I know it was because of his job and things went wrong, um, yeah... it was, I know that because we didn’t, I wasn’t close to him really at all I must admit, um, I was, I was a mummy’s girl, I completely still am! But um, I suppose it is, I know this probably isn’t, I don’t know whether this is a natural thing but [Laura], sorry, my sister went to my father, was a daddy’s girl and I was a mummy’s girl, so of course we never really sort of swapped roles so I never really knew him. And I suppose at that point I knew that it couldn’t have been my fault cos he didn’t know me! (laughs)

I: Sure. So you’re able to rationalise it but still...

P: Yeah, it did cross my mind straight away, thinking oh dear (laughs) is it me? But I did, I can, my mum did assure me that it wasn’t me. And I think that she was quite glad that maybe I did come along cos my sister was so close to my father, not that she had a daughter that was hers, but it made a difference because she was very distant from my sister. There is still quite, a little bit, not as much because they’ve had to go through all this together but I’m still the one closer to my mum. Which is, it’s not a competition or anything, but it is obvious actually and my sister always says so and yeah, it’s um, it’s just a bizarre situation...

I: So I’m wondering whether it’s been a kind of different experience for your sister, you know if she had a different relationship with your dad to start with?

P: She found it very hard... I, I, err, probably she was, cos yeah, she was at secondary school, and then as we were growing up the house was repossessed and she was just
doing her GCSEs, which was a horrible time for anything to happen. And I always remember having to sort of be... I don’t know, as a younger sister you don’t know, and I was quite young anyway, you don’t know what to do, but I just remember having to sort of hug her. She was always crying and I think it was a mixture of exam stress, having her house lost and our father being never, we knew that he was never coming back so... I think she had a very different experience to me. It was a lot harder. But then she went to college, um, and then to university and being that much older, I was the one at home more. I was, because I was still at secondary school, I was sort of an only child for quite a long time um... and... I suppose that’s where my home comforts and being so close to my mum has really exploded on, it’s you know, I, she doesn’t see our home at the moment as home, but she does she’s more, well she’s a teacher now, you know sort of first job, first car, first house sort of thing. But she doesn’t, you know, home isn’t home to her anyway, but she’s never really called it home, even when she was at university, so it was always like, oh I’ll come back to [Notown], and um, yeah she was, found it quite.... I know she’s tried to contact my father and that came out when I was... oh, she went to South America in her gap year, it wasn’t that long ago, just before I came to university, um, yeah... and she, when she was over there, somewhere different, she thought she’d try. She’d got a few contacts [where he lived] through... (inaudible)... and she did try to contact him. She managed to get his email address but he never replied, um, and but she tried. And then we did actually get one email from him, my mum got an email. We still don’t understand how this ever happened! My mum has an email address for, um, she can’t use the email anyway, but we gave it to her cos it’s things like if we want to send her an email or pictures or you know, it’s good for her to have it. We got an, when my nan passed away, um, about six months after that we got an email from my father going um sorry
to hear about your mother, sorry this was to my mum, sorry to hear about your mother um and then it was something about how the house, obviously we were going to sell it and it was worth quite a bit... all he wanted was his share of the money. And it was, he just brought that up saying are you going to sell [Hollytree Close], that was the house, and um, my mum was just absolutely (inaudible), but she emailed him back saying we’ve already sold it! Not that we had, but that was the only way she had to get him off, um and then she said um can we sort out this divorce settlement cos she thought if I get out now there’d be no way he could get the money. Um, and he never got back to us! No such luck, even the email address is not, he doesn’t use it anymore or he just ignores us... So that was one bit of contact we had.

I: And that was relatively recently, in the last few years

P: Yeah, the last few years. And we don’t even know how he got my mum’s email address. We thought he might be able to get my sister or my, you know, our email addresses, cos we’re sort of, we’ve sort of got quite obvious ones. But my mum’s is really unusual it’s quite odd. And we don’t know why he did it, anything, then nothing since that, um, so... And doesn’t obviously want to get divorced because he won’t get a divorce settlement. And um, it’s things like, my mum is trying to protect the house we’ve got at the moment cos he could just turn up any day and just go well some of this is mine because we’re still married. Like she’s got in her will that it’s passed on to my sister and myself, and then to my, to her cousin’s children... we’ve covered ourselves in every aspect but there is that thought that he could turn up any day and go I want the money. Which is quite scary, and I think that’s why my mum actually bought the house straight away, to get rid of any money in the bank. Because
people can find out anything these days as well, yeah... I suppose... That’s another thing actually that I was going to bring up, that, for a long time I was positive I always used to see him walking up and down the street. I, yeah, I could be walking down the road, and I’d be like is that my father and it’s not and I’d be like why am I doing this, he’s [abroad]. And until recently I’d always think he’s going to turn up on our doorstep, he’s going to, and I used to get scared, I used to have nightmares that he was going to come back and kidnap me and, oh, it was stupid! I used to wake up in absolute panics, and my mum was always like, he’s never going to come back, don’t worry. And yeah, I was positive he was going to take me away [abroad]. I don’t know, it’s odd what goes through your mind in these situations...

I: But I guess there was, and still is, the element of uncertainty of not knowing, yeah, when he’s going to pop up or you know, crop up in an email or... I guess there’s just no way of knowing.

P: I suppose, my mum said to me that when I reached eighteen she said it’s your choice whether you want to contact him or not or at least try. And I thought that was really nice of her, she said you’re an adult now. And I decided not to, and at that time my grandmother was around, she said you can contact your grandmother if you want, and I said no. Um, and obviously she’d done the same thing with my sister when she turned eighteen, so um... And I think that’s awfully strong of my mum to say that, of someone who’s hurt us really badly, to give her daughters a choice to contact them, that person. Um, but yeah, I decided not to.

I: And was that because you don’t want to or because of loyalty to your mum or...?
P: Um... scared of the consequences? That if I contact him, yeah we could, the life that we’ve built up now could just come crashing down again, and I think my mum is getting a bit older, she is an older mum, and um yeah I want her, she’s going to be sort of retiring so I just want her to be in a happy retirement, you know quite just settled in her house, but if he comes back I don’t know what he would do. And until I was eighteen we had our, it was somewhere in London, you know the office that tracks people coming in and out of the country, we had him on that list because of what he had done to me and my sister, because he’d left children, um, of course he never came into the country until after I was eighteen. And we did have, we were told once that he’d come back but they couldn’t tell us because I was over eighteen that he’s come back in the country, um and that was a scary thought, that was quite scary in fact. But it’s quite clever how he waited! (laughs) But obviously he knew he couldn’t come back over here, cos they said that if he was caught coming back into this country he would have to pay his way, he would have to get our house back or at least give my mum some money and pay his way.

I: So I guess then you were sure for all those years that he actually wasn’t going to come back, that he was away, but even so...

P: Yeah, he could have got through the system, disguised himself or, especially cos we don’t know if he’s got a [foreign] passport, cos they were looking for a British passport... there were things like that. It was never a hope he’d come back, I can assure you that. It was a I don’t want him back but he could be...
I: Ok, so an element of fear then or kind of...

P: Fear, yeah, that's a good word. Fear of maybe being hurt again or being kidnapped, I don’t know! (laughs) It’s, it is odd.

I: Um, I’m keen to ask you a bit more about, um, you and your mum’s relationship, because it sounds like, certainly now, that you’re quite protective of her...?

P: Oh, yeah! (laughs) We, we are very close. We, um, I think she’s a friend. I mean I don’t tell her everything, that kind of isn’t right, but I tell her most things, and definitely she knows all about what I’m doing here, you know, boyfriends and friends, and it’s great. Um, so I kind of see her as a friend almost, which is lovely and I am very protective of her. Um she, she’s not too well at the moment, she’ll have to have an operation, like a major operation probably this summer, and I’ve been to every hospital appointment, even when it’s meant missing stuff here I’ve gone back and I’m like I’ve got to be with her. Cos yeah, I don’t, I suppose it’s cos she was so strong for me but now I’ve grown up I can be strong for her. And she relies on me, I rely on her. Um, a lot of my friends at college sort of did find it a bit weird, you know, how can you be so close to your mum?! But um, yeah I’ve stayed with it, and even at uni, it’s not that far actually, about forty minutes away but I don’t go home that often. I phone her most nights, and there’s a girl, actually doing psychology in the second year, she’s very close to her mum as well, and it’s so good meeting someone who sees their mum as a friend, and we talk about this and say, it’s not weird at all, it’s great! And yeah, I’m very lucky. Like she’s a bit older, she’s like don’t do that, or she’ll laugh at me or whatever and goes oh you’ve learnt from that, but um, yeah, just unbelievably close.
Like if I go home I’m always, I suppose not role reversal, but I’m always the one who does the cooking and looking after her, but she’ll do things like do the washing and stuff cos I don’t like doing that! You know, I think maybe we’re just equal. And um, when my sister comes home, that’s err, just recently, more recently we’ve got on each others nerves I think cos she doesn’t respect my mum in the same way, she’s always like I’m going home I’m going to be pampered (laughs), and I’m like do stuff, come on get off the sofa and actually do the cooking or something, and she’s never... no, she’s the opposite... but again it’s because she wasn’t as close...

I: So, I wonder what it was like moving away to university then, having been at home and you know, really kind of close with your mum. Was that difficult or...?

P: It was. I didn’t actually mean to come so close. I had looked at quite a few universities and then suddenly I came to [this university] and I was like, I want to be here! It was great. So I came here and it was hard, but I actually came with seven friends from college (laughs). I have my sort of home people here, and yeah, obviously stayed in contact with her. The first year I probably went home once a month, you know once every four weeks which was nice, obviously went home for the holidays, and this year, certainly this semester, once every three weeks, just because being in a house I was used to, well you’ve probably experienced this, it’s much smaller than a halls of residence so it’s like, I’ve got to get out of here, and my escape is home, going home. Um, and yeah it is hard but I’ve had such a fantastic time here. And um, err, I’ve just been, again one of the youngest here, all my friends are older than me here, they look after me, oh, I’m so protected it’s lovely! But it’s, my mum knows that I’m looked after, so yeah, it’s um... Yeah, she’s just glad I’ve
got here. She’s just so proud of us it’s unbelievable. My sister’s just done the same, she’s, she did a masters at err [X university] then went to [Y university] and now is a teacher... So proud of both of us, that’s the main thing, to make her proud makes me feel really good so...

I: Yeah, um, I’ve got my eye on the time and we’ve got a few more minutes and I just wanted to um ask a bit more about um your own relationships, I mean we spoke a bit about it, with men I’m talking about, boyfriends and that, at college um there being somebody and that being a bit of a rocky road...

P: Um, yeah... cos I met him at college and um, yeah, we were just really close friends for until actually my first week at university when he decided to sort of he came up here and he asked me out. It was absolutely, it was very romantic! Um, and we had, we’d just got so close and it was fantastic... we went out for a year, we broke up last Easter so quite recently. Um, it was, it took me a very long time to trust him, um and also he was the first serious boyfriend, I mean I’d had a couple of boyfriends you know, they didn’t really mean that much, but he was the person that I was like whoa, ok! I must admit, I don’t know whether I fell in love with him or not cos you, I don’t know, the first relationship you’re a bit, well you know... if I did, it took me a long time, and I do love him to bits, I really do, I still do, we’re still very close. But he always moaned at me cos I didn’t talk to him about how I was feeling. I was like, yeah I’m fine, are you ok? (laughs) You know, he got so annoyed with me, and I know I did it but I guess I just wanted it to be perfect... I just wanted nothing to go wrong so I always told him I was ok. And then um that was the easiest thing to do, it was the easy option again. Yeah, I trusted him, yeah I think I trusted him definitely,
but I think it was because I knew him as a friend though as well which did help. I did trust him but it was the opening up, letting people come close is very difficult. Um but when we broke up at Easter it was the first time in a year and a half, yeah no, the first time I’d cried in front of him, and I will, I’m somebody who actually cries quite a lot. I cried last night when my friend said something really nice! I’m just like that, but I never cried in front of him, because I wanted everything to be perfect and I didn’t want to be hurt. I think it was compensating for maybe that, because I hadn’t no, nothing to do with men really for a long time of my life, that I went into a relationship going, right I’m going to have the fairytale relationship!

I: You really wanted to make it work

P: Yeah, you know you see on all the American films! (laughs) It’s really bad but, yeah, I learnt a lot out of it, I learnt an awful lot. Actually that you should follow your heart, not your mind, whereas I was following my mind, I’ve got to have this, I’ve got to have that. So I wasn’t following my heart but I think you have to once in a while… Yeah, I’m still not over him so there’s nothing since I must admit, he, yeah, he means a lot to me.

I: Yeah, it sounds like it was a big and important relationship…

P: Yeah, and it was to him as well which was really nice, and yeah, we just grew apart…
I: I’m aware of keeping an eye on the time for you and I think you’ve pretty much answered all my questions... is there anything else you’d like to add?

P: Um, well I wanted to say my trust in women is a lot stronger, like I find it loads easier to trust women quickly. And like for example if this interview had been with a male I think I would have found it harder to speak openly about things. But I should say, I’ve done quite a few interviews and things for people in psychology, sociology... I like to help, but it’s also good to talk to people about these things, it helps clear your mind and then I don’t have to think about if for a few weeks. I’ve got exams coming up so I should really be concentrating on those!

I: Ok, well if you have any further thoughts you have my email address, so please do contact me if there’s anything else. I also wanted to ask if you’d like a copy of the final report when it’s finished...?

P: Yes please, that’s be great. I’d be really interested to hear about others experiences.
REFLECTION ON THE USE OF SELF IN THE RESEARCH

The topic of father absence has loomed large in my life for some time now, having formed the basis of my first and second year research projects. However as I approached this piece of interpretative work, it felt important to reflect on all the things that had influenced my thinking about fathers and daughters in order to be more fully aware of the lens through which I would be interpreting.

My interest in the effects of father absence and the significance of father-daughter relationships initially stemmed from observation of and concern for my wider family. My curiosity was roused by my impression that father absence precipitated a range of both positive and negative consequences, and that these consequences varied widely, even between siblings. Evidently the effects of father absence were complex and multi-faceted.

Having chosen to focus on this topic, I became aware of the numerous references to father absence, lone-parenting and demographic changes in family structure, seemingly across all forms of media, whether newspaper or magazine articles or themes in films or song lyrics. In particular, the plight of fathers following divorce has been brought to the nation’s attention by the 'Fathers for Justice' movement. Similarly, there have been several 'reality TV' programmes over the last year
involving psychologists, which highlight the importance of early parental relationships (e.g. The House of Tiny Tearaways).

During the past year I have been practising psychodynamically in placement. The psychodynamic approach, stresses the importance of early relationships and the way in which parental figures are internalised to become part of an individual’s inner world. Much of my time in placement, both with clients and in supervision, has been spent trying to understand the legacy of such relationships. Two clients in particular spring to mind when thinking about the impact of father-daughter relationships. One client struggled with her lack of relationship with her father, despite his physical presence, whilst the other found herself drawn to bullying men, repeating destructive relationship patterns initially experienced with her bullying father.

Having spent two years thinking about father-daughter relationships, I have of course considered my relationship with my own father. My parents remain happily married and at the outset I perceived father absence to be outside my own experience, the closest encounters being the absences in my wider family (mentioned above) and friends whose parents are divorced. However, more recently I have realised that I did experience periods of father absence throughout my childhood as my father worked abroad for extended periods. Furthermore, both my parents were regularly absent during my teenage years as I attended boarding school for six years. Subsequently I have been reflecting on the variables that moderated these experiences, making them relatively positive ones.
Most recently I have found I have become increasingly aware of the importance of fathers at different life-stages. Having reached my mid-twenties it feels as if I am in a period of transition - several of my peers are getting married and others having their first children, whilst myself and many others in my age group have recently lost grandparents. This sense of generational shift has caused me to reflect on my family relationships and roles of individual family members and speculate how these may continue to change over time, for example wondering what my father will be like as a grandfather if I am lucky enough to have children.

Throughout this research project I have struggled to comfortably adopt the role of researcher, which has felt at times both similar and very different to my role as therapist. The material participants shared with me at interview felt familiar to that I have encountered in the therapy room, and as previously described, interviews were undertaken using a basic counselling-style format. However, I had to constantly remind myself of my specific agenda and hold back from interpretations or avenues of enquiry I might have pursued had I met the participants as clients. A similar struggle characterised the period of analysis. I came to realise how tentatively I make interpretations as a therapist, regularly ‘checking out’ my interventions with clients for their accuracy or ‘fit’. It felt most uncomfortable to make interpretations about the research data without the participants’ validation, and I felt a great responsibility to represent them fairly and get my interpretations ‘right’. Indeed, to start with I unwittingly avoided interpretation by producing highly descriptive accounts of the participants’ experiences. However, consultation with my research supervisor reminded me that there were no definitive ‘right’ interpretations, and that I would
inevitably produce my own unique account through my own unique interpretative lens.

Despite these struggles, I have enjoyed this research project. I remember discovering as an undergraduate that, much to my surprise, I enjoyed research work, having previously assumed it wasn’t me. I have come to realise that the process of research appeals to the methodical, fastidious part of me, and the method of analysis employed in this study appeals to the frustrated English literature student in me, who enjoys engaging with written material. I feel that I am now at a stage in my training where I am beginning to look to the future and ‘life after the course’, and I have begun to wonder how I will integrate research into my practice once qualified. Perhaps this will begin with the incorporation of my new researcher identity into my emerging identity as a Counselling Psychologist.
Manuscript Submission Guidelines:

Manuscript Review Policy: Each submitted manuscript will be read and judged by at least two reviewers. Authors must submit three copies of their manuscripts, with no authorial identification other than a cover sheet noting title, authors, and institutional affiliation. Manuscripts should be typewritten, double-spaced, with footnotes, references, tables, and figures on separate pages. All manuscripts should follow the guidelines of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 5th edition. An abstract of no more than 150 words, as well as a brief biographical paragraph describing each author’s current affiliation, research interests, and recent publications, should accompany the manuscript. When possible, manuscripts should be no longer than 35 pages. Youth & Society is not able to return manuscripts submitted. U.S. authors are requested to enclose a business-size, self-addressed, postpaid envelope for shipment of reviewers’ comments and editorial decisions. Address all manuscript correspondence to Kathryn G. Herr, Editor, Youth & Society, Montclair State University College of Education and Human Services, Finley Hall 111, 1 Normal Avenue, Montclair, NJ 07043, herrk@mail.montclair.edu.
It has been noted that fathers have been neglected in the literature regarding divorce and its outcomes. This exploratory study presents an in-depth analysis of seven fathers’ accounts of living apart from their children following separation or divorce. The study aimed to explore men’s reported experiences with particular reference to the impact non-custodial fathers believe that their experiences have had on their identities as fathers and their psychological well-being and how these experiences are said to be mediated by their relationships with their ex-partners. An interpretative phenomenological approach was adopted in order to capture the essence of their individual experiences. Several core themes were found to characterise their collective experiences. These included the perceived impact of ‘maternal gate keeping’ and the role of appraisals, both of their actions and of themselves as fathers. Implications for counselling psychology practice are also discussed.

Keywords: divorce; fathering; counselling psychology; coping; maternal gate keeping; appraisal
MEN'S EXPERIENCES OF LIVING APART FROM THEIR CHILDREN FOLLOWING SEPARATION OR DIVORCE: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Introduction

It is commonly recognised that within the last fifty years there have been significant changes in the shape of contemporary families in the Western world. Across Europe there has been a decline in the proportion of 'nuclear families' (Eurostat, 2000), and in particular a decline in the number of fathers living with their biological children. Amato and Sobolweski (2004) report that in the US only 35% of men were living with their biological children in 1995, compared to 53% in 1965. A vast body of research has focussed on the effects of such paternal absence on the psychological development and well-being of children, whilst the majority of research focussing on fathers has examined the factors which encourage compliance with child maintenance payments and visitation arrangements (e.g. Bartfeld, 2000). More recently however, the impact of divorce on fathers has been brought to our attention, in particular through the high profile activities of action groups such as Fathers 4 Justice. The media has begun to portray these men as “desperate” (Appleton, 2005) and “inwardly suffering” (Stuart, 2005).

Reviewing the growing body of research which examines noncustodial fathers’ responses to divorce reveals “striking effects... in the area of mental health” (Lehr & MacMillan, 2001). Separation from their children is posited as a “major life crisis” for fathers and
associated with significant health risks (Grill et al, 2001). Specifically, men describe feelings of grief, depression and loss (Dudley, 1996). Nielsen (1999) asserts that fathers suffer as much as or more emotionally than mothers after divorce, and are in fact more likely than women to become depressed, commit suicide or develop a stress-related illness after divorce. However, she suggests that the extent of men’s suffering is often overlooked, in part due to fathers’ reluctance to let people know how miserable they are or to ask for help. Moreover, Baker and McMurray (1998) suggest that fathers’ grief is disenfranchised because social norms do not permit public acknowledgement of their mourning.

Studies have shown that noncustodial fathers’ grief stems primarily from the loss of their children rather than from the loss of their marital identity (Hawthorne, 2000), meaning that noncustodial fathers experience divorce in a different way to other divorcees. The loss of their home, fathering role, sense of family and day to day involvement with their children all contribute to a father’s sense of hurt and alienation (Baker & McMurray, 1998).

Evidence suggests that the involvement of the noncustodial father has psychological benefits for the father as well as the child (Devlin, 1992). However it is reported that “a large portion” of non-custodial fathers have infrequent or no contact with their children (Dudley, 1991) and of those fathers that do see their children the majority are dissatisfied with contact and child support arrangements (Dudley, 1996). A father’s contact with his child following divorce or separation is thought to be mediated by numerous factors,
including geographical distance, socioeconomic status and legal arrangements (Amato & Sobolweski, 2004). Notably, men’s predivorce involvement with their children has been found to be a poor predictor of their postdivorce involvement (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Much of the research in this area concludes that the most significant factor influencing a father’s contact with his child after divorce is the mother’s attitude towards him and whether her behaviour facilitates or obstructs an ongoing paternal relationship (e.g. Amato & Sobolewski, 2004; Nielsen, 1999; Baker & McMurray, 1998).

Increasingly, researchers are recognising the struggles men face in maintaining their roles as fathers after separation or divorce. Cabrera et al. (2000) suggest that in general fathers are afforded more discretion in defining their parental roles than mothers and indeed that there is no singular set of developmental tasks or endpoints that define competent fathering. This seems particularly true outside the traditional family model leaving men to develop a new role for themselves for which there is “no script or dress rehearsal” (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) and at a time of great emotional upheaval (Hawthorne, 2000). Moreover, post-divorce visitation arrangements often give nonresident parents insufficient time to sustain close and psychologically meaningful relationships with their children (Amato & Sobolweski, 2004). Consequently noncustodial fathers commonly describe feelings of inadequacy and incompetence (Hetherington & Cox, 1985), and report feeling disenfranchised (Nielsen, 1999) and expendable from the family system (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).
Previous studies of father’s experiences of divorce describe men’s anger and frustration with the judicial system (Lehr & MacMillan, 2001), their perception of the legal system being biased towards mothers and insensitive to fathers needs and rights (e.g. Arditti & Allen, 1993; Dudley, 1991). Arditti and Allen (1993) assert that perceptions of inequity are central to understanding noncustodial father’s dissatisfaction and that such perceptions affect subsequent father-child relationships. Similarly it has been reported that repeated adversarial proceedings exacerbate conflict and decrease paternal contact (Dudley, 1991). Nielsen (1999) suggests that the legal system reflects societal beliefs which idealise motherhood and take an ambivalent stance towards the contribution of noncustodial fathers, although the increasing number of men receiving custody of their children may reflect a gradual acceptance of the suitability of paternal custody (Cabrera et al., 2000).

Relevance to Counselling Psychology

The existing literature seems to conclude that the noncustodial fathers’ experience of divorce is a complex one, encompassing experiences of loss as well as the challenges of negotiating a new role for themselves in their children’s lives. With so many fathers living apart from their children following divorce, it seems probable that there is a large population of men in emotional distress, some of whom we are likely to encounter in our practice as counselling psychologists. It is therefore important to have a sound base of evidence on which to draw when working with such clients, and to date it seems there is a “dearth of research” on this particular population (Lehr & MacMillan, 2001). Furthermore, psychologists have a role to play in informing policy makers and with shifts
in family law ongoing, a clear understanding of the challenges faced by noncustodial fathers is essential.

In brief the present study aims to explore men’s reported experiences of living apart from their children after separation or divorce, with the aim of informing counselling psychology practice. In particular it is hoped to construct an understanding of the impact non-custodial fathers believe that their experiences have had on their identities as fathers and their psychological well-being and how these experiences are said to be mediated by their relationships with their ex-partners. However, it is important to note that this was an exploratory study and plenty of space was allowed for participants to nominate areas of particular salience to them.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through social networks. Information about the study was disseminated via email, posters and word of mouth. In order to preserve participants’ confidentiality and minimise the likelihood of the researcher meeting participants again in the future, the researcher ensured that all participants were several steps removed from herself (i.e. contacts of contacts of contacts). The use of this recruitment strategy was also anticipated to reduce the potential risk associated with the study. It was hypothesised that since participants were traceable and linked, albeit remotely to the researcher, they would be less likely to engage in problematic behaviours during the research interview.
Participants were seven men aged between 31 and 55, all of whom were living apart from their children following separation or divorce. Five participants described their ethnicity as white British and two as British Caribbean. Six participants reported their highest educational qualification to be GCSE or equivalent and one participant reported having A levels or equivalent. Since this is an exploratory study, broad inclusion criteria were established but, in order to focus on one group of men, participants were those men who wished to maintain contact with their children.

The researcher originally proposed to recruit a sample of ten men for this study, that being the maximum sample size recommended by Smith et al. (1999) for a study using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) due to the difficulty of holding more than ten cases in mind when conducting the analysis. However, it became apparent as the research proceeded that each participant had provided such a wealth of data that the analysis of ten similarly rich interviews would have limited the possibility of discerning participants’ meaning-making in detail during the analysis. Hence, recruitment ceased after seven interviews had been conducted. This sample is comparable to samples used in other IPA studies (for example Macran, Stiles and Smith, 1999).

The seven participants are described in more detail below (See Analysis).

Interview Schedule

Data were collected through individual interviews, using a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix 6). The schedule was developed by the researcher with the
research aims and the literature pertaining to non-custodial fathers’ experiences in mind. A key informant was also consulted as part of the interview schedule development process. The key informant was an independent researcher who had personal experience of living apart from his children following divorce. He provided an ‘insider’s’ opinion on the appropriateness and sensitivity of the interview schedule. Questions were designed to be open-ended and non-directive in order to elicit participants’ unique experiences and were carefully constructed to avoid implying that a particular construction of non-custodial fathers’ experiences was held by the researcher.

The interview schedule adopted an autobiographical perspective, inviting participants to reflect on their experiences in the past and present as well as their hopes for the future. Amongst other topics, participants were asked about the circumstances of their separation or divorce, the quality of relationships they shared with their children and how these had changed over time and the factors that had facilitated or hindered their contact with their children. The first interview was conducted as a pilot but, as this did not result in any changes being made to the interview schedule or interviewing procedure, the data from this first interview have been included in the analysis.

Procedure

After ethical approval had been obtained (see Appendix 2), participants were interviewed at a place of their choice. Five participants were interviewed in their homes, one in his work place and one in a hotel lounge. Two participants were interviewed in the presence of their new partners. Interviews lasted for between 50 and 240 minutes. Prior to the day
of interview, participants were provided with an information sheet (see Appendix 3) and at interview, were given an opportunity to ask any questions they might have. Participants then signed a consent form (see Appendix 4) and completed a demographic information questionnaire. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Given the sensitive nature of the research topic and the potential for participants becoming distressed, interviews were conducted using a basic counselling-style format as recommended by Coyle (1998). At the end of the interview, participants were invited to comment on their experience of being interviewed and the researcher was prepared to advise participants who appeared in any way distressed by the material discussed on accessing further support and to provide details of appropriate counselling services. In the event this was not needed by any of the participants. The researcher also made a follow-up telephone call to participants the day after the interview had taken place to ensure their well-being and to allow any further reflections on the process of being interviewed to be communicated.

Analytic Strategy

Data were analysed using an idiographic version of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 1996; Smith et al., 1999; Smith and Osborn, 2003), whereby transcripts were analysed individually and data were integrated only after intensive engagement with each participant’s account. IPA aims to explore the participant’s experience from his or her perspective, capturing some of the quality and texture of that individual’s experience in order to develop an ‘insider’s perspective’ (Conrad, 1987). It is assumed that, through intensive engagement with the data and the participant’s
perspective, meaningful interpretations can be made about the participant’s experience and thinking (Smith et al, 1997). However, it is acknowledged that participants’ accounts may not be isomorphic with the experiences of which they speak due to memory distortion, recall biases and the impact of the interview context for example. IPA seemed an appropriate method of analysis given the study’s focus on men’s ‘experience’ of living apart from their children. Some other methods of qualitative analysis which could have been used are grounded theory and thematic analysis. However the former aims at theory building which was not the prime concern of this study and the latter was not deemed sufficiently systematic to meet the study’s aims. Moreover this study formed part of a larger body of research and it was therefore important to match the analytic strategy used in previous work (Chambers, 2005) to allow for comparability.

Data analysis involved repeated readings of each transcript, with notes being made of interesting points or associations related to the research questions. Transcripts were read again and emerging themes (recurrent topics or subjects within the participant’s account) were tentatively named, with names chosen that seemed to characterise key points within the participant’s account. These relatively fine-grained themes were then examined and amalgamated into super-ordinate themes where this seemed meaningful. Finally the themes extracted from individual transcripts were drawn together and examined for similarities, differences or connections and a consolidated list of themes was produced (See Appendix 1). At this stage the themes were grouped into four domains which seemed to make sense of participants’ experiences. Throughout this process, transcripts
were referred to for evidence in support of these themes, in order that emerging themes remained grounded in the participant’s account.

IPA recognises the dynamic interaction between participants’ accounts and the researcher’s interpretative framework (Smith et al, 1999) and the effect this has on the final research product. It is therefore necessary to reflect on the researcher’s interpretative framework in relation to the research topic and the way in which this framework may have affected the analysis. The interpretations of the researcher will have been shaped by her role as Counselling Psychologist in training, currently practising cognitive-behaviourally. Coming to the research topic as a young woman, with no children of my own and at a different life-stage to the participants, I hoped my interpretations came from a stance of openness and curiosity. Although I felt as if I had few preconceived ideas, I am aware that I am part of a culture in which non-custodial fathers are frequently portrayed by the media under the umbrella of action groups such as the Real Fathers for Justice. See Appendix eight for further exploration of the researcher’s interpretative framework.

By way of validation, all interpretations were checked by an independent researcher and unwarranted or idiosyncratic interpretations removed. Similarly, all major interpretations are accompanied by quotations from participants’ transcripts, enabling readers to judge their persuasiveness for themselves. Other criteria that have been identified for evaluating qualitative research, such as commitment and rigour, can also be applied to this study (Yardley, 2000).
In the quotations presented in the analysis, ellipsis points (...) are used to indicate omitted material and information within square brackets has been added for clarification. All names and identifying information have been changed to protect the participants’ confidentiality.

Analysis

The seven participants are described below listed in the order in which they were interviewed. Participants’ names and identifying details have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Nick is a 46-year old landscape gardener. He has been living with his mother for the past 18 months after separating from his partner of ten years. She continues to live with their two daughters, aged six and three, and Nick regularly makes the 200 mile round trip to collect his daughters as they spend every other weekend with him and their grandmother. The girls spend longer period with Nick during school holidays.

Sam is a 31-year old sales assistant who separated from his ex-girlfriend eight years ago. Their daughter was nine months old at the time. Sam used to have weekly contact with his daughter but, since moving to another part of the country, he and his new wife, Rachel, visit his nine year old daughter approximately every six weeks. Like Nick, Sam sees his daughter for longer periods during school holidays.
Peter is a 55-year old sports instructor. He and his wife divorced after 24 years of marriage when their son was 17 years old. Initially Peter moved out of the family home, but after a couple of years bought his ex-wife out of the property and returned to live with his son. Peter’s son is now 24 and is living and working in the Far East.

Mark is 38-years old and works as a development manager. Six years ago he and his wife divorced after eight years of marriage. Their daughter was three years old at the time. Mark now lives five miles away from his ex-wife and daughter but currently works abroad a great deal. He has agreed with his employers that he will be out of the country for no longer than three weeks at time so that he can regularly spend long weekends with his daughter.

Dan is 36 and works as a personal trainer. He has a ten year old son who lives nearby with his ex-partner from whom he has been separated for three years. Dan spoke of having a flexible arrangement with his ex-partner about contact with his son and spoke of seeing him at least at weekends and once in the week.

Phil is a 49-year old sound engineer. He and his ex-wife divorced 13 years ago after approximately ten years of marriage. Their three children were six and a half years, four years and 18 months old at the time. Phil’s ex-wife allowed him to make visits to the children in the family home or take them for afternoons out during the first ten years after their divorce. However, two years ago he received a letter from his children saying they
did not want to see him any more and since this time he has seen his children only once at their grandmother’s funeral. Phil lives with his new wife.

Steve is a 46-year-old builder who lives with his new partner, Jo. Steve was married to his ex-wife for 16 years and they divorced six years ago when their three children were 13, 11 and two years old. Steve has had erratic contact with his children since the divorce and describes a conflict-filled relationship with his ex-wife who has repeatedly taken Steve to court over financial matters. At present Steve’s oldest son lives with him and Jo, along with her two children. Steve’s youngest son seems to live between his mother’s and Steve’s homes and he sees his daughter every other weekend.

Sixteen key themes emerged from the analysis and were evident in all seven participants’ accounts. This was striking given the participants’ breadth of experiences and the variety and richness of their individual accounts. Amongst the participants there were both positive and very negative accounts of experience and consequently several themes contain a dichotomy - ‘what works’ versus ‘what doesn’t work’. This dichotomy of experience was also represented within one participant’s account where he spoke of experiencing change over time. The 16 key themes fell into four domains which seemed to make sense of participants’ experiences (See Table 1). However it is not suggested that these represent discrete, independent entities since there is a degree of overlap and connection between themes (See Table 2).
### Table 1. Overview of themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moderators of experience</strong></td>
<td>Ex-partner's 'gate keeping' behaviour</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Money</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Communication</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Change over time</td>
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<td>Frame of reference</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Circumstances of split</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Appraisals</strong></td>
<td>Appraisal of actions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>External locus of control</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Perceived impact on child</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Appraisal of self as father</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Perceptions of others'</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Appraisal of situation</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Coping</strong></td>
<td>Support</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reflection</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Outcomes</strong></td>
<td>Emotional impact</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship with child(ren)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. Themes and illustrative quotations

(See Appendix 1)
In examining the men’s accounts, it seemed that their overall experiences (‘Outcomes of experience’) were measured by their emotional impact and their impact on the fathers’ relationship with their children. Participants spoke of feelings of loss, anger and hopelessness, all of which have been previously identified in the literature as emotions commonly experienced by non-custodial fathers (for example, Lehr and MacMillan, 2001). A variety of relationship experiences was described by participants, ranging from experiences like those of Mark who felt he now shared a better relationship with his child than before the divorce to experiences like those of Phil whose relationship with his children had significantly deteriorated. These ‘outcomes’ were shaped by numerous factors and these are represented as ‘moderators of experience’, ‘appraisals’ and ‘coping’.

The domain of ‘moderators of experience’ contains what participants presented as the facts of their stories. This encompassed statements about the circumstances of their separation and accounts of their ex-partner’s behaviour, for example. One of the most contentious moderators mentioned by all participants was money. Mark said, “Money is the root of all evil between divorced parents. No matter how good the relationship is, money will always come into it” Although somewhat concrete, these ‘moderators’ seemed to have considerable impact on participants’ overall experiences and linked with other domains in significant ways, some of which I will elaborate below.

The domain of ‘appraisals’ is concerned with the ways men seemed to evaluate their circumstances and their part within these – for example, the way they understood their actions in the separation and how they perceived events to have affected their children.
This domain also included men’s reports of comparing their circumstances with those of other non-custodial fathers. For example Dan said, “Of all the guys I know who’ve been through a separation with children involved, property, I’ve come off the best”. The idea of appraisals resonates with a cognitive perspective which asserts that it is not an event in and of itself that determines what people feel but the way they perceive or construe that event (for example, Beck, 1995).

The third domain, ‘coping’, encompasses the ways in which participants reported having dealt with their experiences. This included receiving support from family and friends and reflecting on their experiences either privately or in therapy. Men also spoke of employing action-oriented coping strategies such as focussing on work or, as Steve said, “I hadn’t seen my kids for about a month and I didn’t know when I was ever going to see them again, and I said ‘I’ve got to do something – I can’t sit down, I don’t know what to do’, so I just started building that shed.”

As aforementioned, these domains are not discrete entities and indeed the nature of the connections between domains is of importance. All participants spoke of experiencing change over time, hence a dynamic model has been created to represent this (See Figure 1).

Due to word limitations it is not possible to elaborate each theme in detail. I therefore intend to focus on those themes that provide answers to my research questions and those
that seemed of greatest salience to participants. This was assessed as those themes that participants mentioned most frequently and those that seemed most emotive.

Figure 1: Model to represent participants' experiences

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5 Bi-directional links have been used to demonstrate the presence of feedback between domains. For example, if a man's relationship with his child deteriorates (Outcome), he may also experience deterioration in his perception of himself as a father (Appraisal). Uni-directional links have been made between 'Moderators' and other domains since these more concrete items did not seem to be affected by other domains. Participants did however report change in 'Moderators' over time, for example reporting changes in their ex-partner's behaviour.
Ex-partner's 'gate keeping' behaviour

One of the themes that seemed to resonate with all participants was the impact of their ex-partner's behaviour. The phenomenon of the custodial parent, most commonly the mother, acting as a 'gate keeper', facilitating or obstructing the non-custodial parent's access to their child, has already been noted in the literature (for example, Hawthorne, 2000). There was evidence of 'gate-keeping' in six of the participants' accounts, the exception being Peter whose son was 18 shortly after his parents' divorce and therefore able to make his own choices about seeing his father. Amongst the other six participants a spectrum of experiences was reported, ranging, for example, from Dan's reported experience of being "encouraged" to see his son and to Steve's experience of continuing impeded contact with his children. 'Gate keeping' may also be a covert process and indeed may not be consciously enacted by the custodial parent. Phil spoke of his children's loyalty to their mother and how this interfered with their desire to see him - "They might want to get in touch with me but they don't really feel they can let mum down". As Baker and McMurray (1998) highlighted, acknowledging the custodial parent's 'gate keeping' role is significant as it refutes the assumption held by some that non-custodial parents have total control over contact with their children post-divorce. Although frequently identified in previous studies, the full of impact of 'gate keeping' on fathers does not appear to have been fully elaborated.

Amongst the six participants with younger children, there was a strong sense that, when it came to access to their children, women have the power. As Nick said, "She has the girls in her house. She has the whip hand." Men's accounts of ex-partners' gate-keeping
ranged from being subjected to explicit threats (Sam reported the following exchange with his ex-partner: "If I ever said... ‘If you could give me a ring a bit beforehand so I can arrange my life around [visits]’, ‘Right, that’s it – you’d better see your lawyer because you’re not going to see your daughter again’") to those with amicable agreements with their ex-partners but who still perceived a constant threat. In relation to the latter situation, Mark said:

"The biggest issue is always the threat that rightly or wrongly the law supports the mother and that [my ex] even now for the next ten years has the power to up sticks and move away. And so you always feel as though you’re treading a fine line between standing up for yourself as an ex-partner, as a divorced, as a father but wanting an easy life just to keep the peace...Whilst I know she, I think she never would, she still has the power to just take her away from me...I’m not suggesting she would but the threat’s there. It’s always there, whether it’s been said or not"

Mark’s statement also highlights the participants’ shared sense that this power imbalance is reflected in the legal system. Steve spoke of encountering this at first hand – “I go into court knowing I’m going to be seen as the bad guy...I just feel if I sit there and do nothing they walk all over me but as soon as I open my mouth I’m being aggressive. I can’t win.”
These experiences amount to men perceiving their circumstances to be largely out of their control, in particular regarding access to their children. Participants’ accounts of this appraisal have therefore been collected under the theme ‘External locus of control’. The men’s frequent references to luck and good fortune substantiate this sense of things being out of their control. For example Nick said, “So far fingers crossed it works well... I’m very lucky.” The emotional impact (‘outcome’) of this appraisal appears to be greatest for those men who reported having least control over their circumstances, namely Steve and Phil. Their accounts were full of references to feeling hopeless or helpless and indeed both described experiencing symptoms of depression (for example, tearfulness and sleeplessness) or having been on antidepressants:

“Well there you go, something like marriages...to see your children enjoy the happiest day of their lives so far will be a terrible day for me because I’ll do one of two things. I’ll either go and it’ll be terrible or I won’t go and it’ll be terrible.” (Steve)

“I’ve cried out so much with it all and sometimes I will, you know, when something on TV gets to me or um it reminds me of the whole situation. But the way I feel about it now is that I’ve done really everything in my power that I could to attract them, whatever, and have them in my life and that’s clearly not going to happen at the moment.” (Phil)
The apparent connection between men’s appraisal of their circumstances being externally controlled and the resultant emotions of hopelessness resonates with the traditional model of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). Interestingly, in speaking of the coping strategies they had employed, participants described taking charge of what they could, thereby attempting to internalise their locus of control. For example, Nick said, “I just think about things I can do to improve my life...I’m quite happy doing my own thing now and I’m trying to get the business built up.”

**Appraisal of actions**

Previous studies have identified emotions commonly experienced by non-custodial fathers – for example guilt (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). However they do not seem to have explored why these emotions arise or their impact. For participants in this study, the role of ‘appraisals’ seemed pivotal and in particular the way the men appraised their actions. In telling the story of their separation, it seemed that participants evaluated their behaviour – for example, speaking of acting in their child’s best interests. The theme of evaluation also ran through participants’ accounts of their children post-divorce, as they told of the impact they perceived their actions to have had on their children:

“The environment he was existing in when I was here wasn’t good either so...towards the latter stages he’d be in his room trying to do his work and he could probably hear me and his mum arguing and stuff like that. But now, she’s happy, I’m happy and he’s happy, so I think it’s probably for the best – well I think it’s definitely for the best all round.” (Peter)
The way an individual makes an appraisal is shaped by his or her ‘frame of reference’, the lens through which they view the world based on previous experiences, such as those within the family. This process was evident amongst participants. For example, Dan said:

“My mother was a single mother – do you know what I mean? – and I didn’t turn out to be stealing cars. It’s like single mother, single parent, so what? I never really bought into that stigma of your kid’s going to be a tearaway or it makes the mother best or the father...so what, they’ve split up, big deal you know.”

Participants’ emotional responses seemed directly linked to their appraisals, so that those who were not able to appraise their actions positively reported a range of negative emotions. This was striking in Peter’s account, since his rational appraisal of his actions (see above) seemed at odds with his frame of reference and he spoke of struggling with a sense of failure and guilt:

“That feeling of guilt when a relationship breaks down, as though you’re abandoning – even your ex-wife, it feels as though you’ve abandoned her, you’ve betrayed them, that horrible feeling, it’s left me with that horrible feeling that I failed...My background says that you have to be in a, you have to have a family. It’s a very strong West Indian thing.” (Peter)
Participants' appraisals were not only linked to their emotional responses but also influenced the relationships they had with their children post-divorce. For example, it seemed that fathers' feelings of guilt hampered them in maintaining relationships with their children. Phil said, "I was dreadfully guilty, felt dreadfully guilty for leaving...and so I think that's why certain conditions never really got sorted out like I had the children on holiday or they'd see my new partner or, you know. I felt very guilty and so my upset wife took control." By the same token, it seemed that fathers who appraised their actions positively were not hampered in their subsequent relationships with their children.

Appraisal of self as father

One of the key themes running through participants' accounts was the importance of being known as their child's father. For some men, particularly those whose children were very young at the time of separation, this was about their child knowing who they were. For example, Sam said, "I always wondered and always worried that she wouldn't know who I were and maybe just refer to me as dad but not really understand in her head who I actually were." For others, this was a concern about their role being filled by another man. Dan said, "My biggest fear and my biggest issue was um, um moving out and then her getting a new partner and losing my son to this new partner". Overall participants seemed to prize their identities as fathers.

Men's accounts also contained descriptions of their identities changing as a result of their experiences. Once again there was a range of both positive and negative outcomes. Mark presented a positive account:
"The archetypal role was as the husband and father and now no longer being a husband I can concentrate on being a dad and I use the two words very separately...Before it was almost a detached relationship as a parent and I can think to myself I actually think I'm a proper dad now, I actually have some value, purpose. I'm not just the breadwinner who comes home from work, sits down and has his tea and his child's already in bed."

By contrast, Phil and Sam's accounts contained a sense of loss:

"I had to find who I were again because I was no longer family member. Two point four kids and all that thing – that was what I weren't." (Sam)

"We’re both missing something in our lives that we started out with a good plan to do, you know to carry out. I mean I was there at their birth...In those early years I did all of it and so the bond formed very strongly very quickly and yeah, suddenly going, well I’m here now and no children live in this house, it’s very strange...You feel bereft because all the ground work was sort of done to start with. That sounds like a business plan – it’s not meant to be but suddenly it’s all change.” (Phil)

For Sam, this experience of loss was short-lived as in time he was able to negotiate a new way of being a father to his daughter. Looking across the seven participants’ accounts,
the importance of negotiating a new way of being a father is striking. Those men who had not succeeded in doing so to their satisfaction were those who reported the worst overall outcomes. This struggle to redefine their fatherhood is recognised in the literature which cites the ambiguity in society about the role of the non-resident father as one such challenge (Kissman, 1997). Similarly the difficulty of redefining oneself in a sometimes hostile environment is acknowledged (Arditti, 1992), which seems to have been the difficulty faced by both Steve and Phil. Phil said:

"Sometimes I'd stay in the house. In the early years because they were quite young I'd just stay and play with them in the house but I didn't feel relaxed. It wasn't relaxed at all - I was always on edge because the thing she would always do is, 'OK, you've seen the kids. Now we need to talk' and it would always be that confrontation in the other room about stuff unnecessarily. I mean you make your plan, you've got your boundaries, you go and visit and that's it but there'd always be an interrogation afterwards - 'What were you doing?' What was I doing? You know, it would all spill in to the wrong rooms. It was just horrible and nasty and not the time to do that. I would go round at night and have a chat with her but I don't think it was particularly fair on me to have that sort of talk in my visiting time."

Once again the importance of the men's ex-partner's behaviour is evident and the ability of the couple to negotiate with one another, resonating with the view that mothering and fathering are relational (Tiedje & Darling-Fisher, 1996).
In appraising themselves as fathers, participants seemed to be exploring their sense of competence in the role. Moreover, their appraisals of themselves also seemed to take into account the perceptions of others. For example, Sam recalled his friend defending him saying, “He only sees her once a week but in that time, you know what I mean, he couldn’t be a better father to her”. This supports Erera et al.’s (1999) suggestion that the most salient aspect of fathers’ identity is their sense of being competent as a father.

**Reflection**

The theme ‘reflection’ encompassed participants’ reports of thinking about their experiences or talking them through with friends, family, in therapy or indeed during the research interview. Phil highlighted the value of talking when he said:

“I had quite a few friends and I think I must have bored them stupid for the first two years because that’s all you can talk about, you know [laughs] but you get it out, you get it out and talk about it and yeah... I think that’s what I needed, to talk it out.”

This theme seems closely linked with ‘appraisals’ since both are concerned with participants’ making sense of or creating an account of their experiences. It is thought that constructing an account of one’s experiences enables one to create meaning out of acute personal stress and furthermore, that confiding that meaning to an empathic other
facilitates ‘working through’ such an experience (Harvey et al, 1990). Mark’s report of attending Relate counselling seems to support this view:

“I mean the Relate thing was pure agony, for any bloke to sit in a room and try and speak about his feelings is a nightmare, trust me, it’s not what men do. But for me it was the real, err opportunity to, yeah, some of it felt like just going through the motions but the end result was not about vindication but I’m just trying to think of the right word... reassurance? That I did feel the way I thought I felt and I wasn’t being swayed for whatever reason by some aspiration of a better life, the grass is always greener sort of thing... um, if we hadn’t gone for that counselling, the Relate counselling...I really think that without that you don’t formalise or segment what it is you think you’ve been through, whereas having been through it, if you do it just becomes part of your life”

Mark implies that there was value in talking to someone outside his situation, although he also touches on the struggle for some men in accessing counselling, whether because it is “not what men do” or because it isn’t routinely offered to them. He went on to say, “I think there could be a better way of promoting it to blokes than the way it is”, suggesting that women may have relationships with their GPs or other health professionals following child birth and are therefore more likely to be offered support following divorce than men who do not routinely come into contact with these services. Men’s low uptake of health
and counselling services is readily acknowledged (for example O’Brien et al., 2005) but perhaps this is a specific field at which promotional campaigns might be targeted.

This is not to say that all men would welcome the opportunity to have counselling following divorce or separation. Reflecting on the experience of being interviewed, Steve said, “Although it’s nice to get it off your chest we’ve done it a thousand times before on all the subjects that we’ve mentioned, but it doesn’t do you any good though”. Steve’s sense was that talking about it wouldn’t change his circumstances and whilst there may be some truth in this, it may also reflect his feelings of hopelessness. Phil offered a different perspective, reflecting on his time in therapy saying, “I found that all quite useful. It didn’t really solve anything but it made me feel better, feel stronger. But maybe it made me feel a bit clearer as to what was happening, that helped me a bit.”

Overview

Value and limitations of the study

Whist this study has produced some valuable results, many of which are in line with the existing literature on father’s reported experiences of divorce or separation, there are several limitations which ought to be considered. The first of these relates to the method of analysis employed. The results of any IPA study can only be transferred beyond the study’s participants with caution, not least because of the limited sample size, and transferability will depend upon the extent to which other men’s contexts are similar to those of the participants in this study. The seven participants were not necessarily representative of noncustodial fathers in general as the majority maintained regular
contact with their children and were not dissatisfied with these arrangements for example. However, the commonality of themes within this diverse group of men and the parallels with the themes in the existing literature on men’s experience of divorce may suggest that the study has uncovered more general experiences and processes. Moreover this particular sample of noncustodial fathers usefully demonstrated a spectrum of ‘what works’ versus ‘what doesn’t work’. Further value of the interpretative phenomenological approach lies in its illustration of how the patterns and processes identified in the wider literature on men and divorce look in phenomenological terms.

A further source of possible bias lies in the fact that the sample of participants was self-selected and therefore one might question whether they presented highly motivated accounts which may not fully overlap with the actualities to which they refer. Furthermore the participants’ accounts were necessarily retrospective which might further diminish the accuracy of their accounts. However, research evidence exists which suggests that retrospective reports and autobiographical memory are not necessarily and inevitably inaccurate and unstable (e.g., Blane, 1996; Neisser, 1994). Previous qualitative studies into noncustodial father’s experiences (e.g. Dudley, 1991) have also noted that divorced fathers and mothers differ in their reporting on many topics and have therefore suggested that the views of former spouses ought to be elicited in order to get a more rounded picture. Whilst this point is acknowledged, the aim of this study was to explore divorced men’s experiences, which surely could only be described by the men themselves.
Despite its limitations, the results of this study are valuable and hold up against identified criteria for evaluating qualitative research (Yardley, 2000). The grounding of all major interpretations in examples from the data means the study meets the criteria of ‘transparency and coherence’. Furthermore, the fact that the results both replicate and extend previous research in this field would suggest that it meets the ‘impact and importance’ criteria. Similar themes emerged from the data as have been described in previous research, for example the significance of ‘maternal gate keeping’, however the added value of this study lies in the elaboration of the apparent processes at work which seem to have been overlooked in previous studies. For example the men’s perceived external locus of control in response to both their ex-partners and the legal system and the ensuing sense of helplessness they described. The resultant model of participants’ experiences that was developed (See Diagram 1) seems to resonate with both cognitive models and models of coping prevalent in health psychology (for example Leventhal et al., 1980; Moos & Schaefer, 1984). Both these models stress the pivotal role of appraisals for both an individual’s subsequent behaviour and their emotional response, and also present a dynamic approach with change in one component bringing about change in another. Perhaps the resonance with a coping model is unsurprising given that divorce is undeniably a life crisis much in the same way as a major illness.

Although this study stands alone, it also forms part of a larger body of research along with an interpretative phenomenological case study analysis of young women’s experiences of father absence (Chambers, 2005). Notable similarities are evident across both studies, the most fundamental being the moderating role of the mother or ex-partner.
Chambers (2005) concluded that mothers compounded or ameliorated young women’s experiences of father absence, and the results of the current study suggest a similar role for mothers in moderating men’s experiences of living apart from their children. Furthermore the quality of relationship the young women reported sharing with their fathers after their departure from the family home seemed to significantly shape their overall experiences. This may parallel what the fathers in this study described as the importance of negotiating a new way of being with their children post-divorce. These analogous findings alone suggest a role for family-oriented professionals in aiding families in the wake of a divorce, perhaps by helping fathers negotiate new relationships with their children or educating mothers (or mediating with them) about their powerful role. Perhaps in this way we might see better outcomes for both fathers and children following divorce or separation.

Implications for Counselling Psychology

The men’s accounts presented in this study may prove informative for counselling psychologists working with fathers who are living apart from their children following separation or divorce as many of the themes drawn from participants’ accounts may present themselves in the therapy room, for example feelings of grief, loss and depression. Whilst this study has identified common themes, it is also acknowledged that there is a great deal of individual variation in experiences and this must also be anticipated in therapeutic encounters with clients. However, the overarching model represented (See Diagram 1) may reveal more general processes that may have wider
relevance. Family therapists may also find the results of value, since a clear understanding of each family member's perspective is important.

Several participants commented on the value of therapy in coming to terms with their experiences. The need for services to be made more readily accessible to men and perhaps more widely promoted was also highlighted. Previous studies have proposed support groups and psycho-educational programmes for fathers (e.g. Devlin, 1992) and this may warrant further exploration since participants also mentioned the value of support from those in similar situations to themselves.
REFERENCES


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**Table 2. Themes and illustrative quotations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Illustrative Quotation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moderators of experience</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ex-partner’s ‘gate keeping’</td>
<td>“she makes a habit of telling me about school, ok he’s got a school play, he’s got this coming up at school... so she keeps me in touch with what’s going on” (Dan)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“there was a clear sort of boundary made that they would not enter my new life with me, that they would not be part of my new life and my new relationship, who was someone different then at the time. And err that was very much a decision taken by the mother err which wasn’t flexible, it just didn’t give me any leeway to have them in my life and progress with that” (Phil)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Money</td>
<td>“I’ve been very fortunate financially... I gave her an awful lot of money in the pay-off, is that the word? The settlement which kept it harmonious” (Mark)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication (open vs. conflict)</td>
<td>“we talk so that’s made a difference, that’s made a real difference” (Dan)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I don’t deal with her anymore, I don’t talk to her anymore which I find, well I never thought it would get to that but I just find that it’s easier to bypass her really because I think she’s sort of obstructive”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change over time</td>
<td>“Time I think, corny as it sounds time I think is one of the biggest things... You start to feel more comfortable with yourself, more comfortable with the arrangement with your child” (Dan)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frame of reference</td>
<td>“My background says that you have to be in a, you have to have a family. It’s a very strong West Indian thing” (Peter)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Circumstances of relationship breakdown</td>
<td>e.g. <em>mutual falling out of love, being cheated on, leaving for another woman</em>...</td>
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### Appraisals

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<tr>
<th>Appraisal of actions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Acting in child’s best interests</td>
<td>“I love him, she loves him and we hate each other <em>(laughs)</em> and he can pick that up you know... So we decided it was for the best really” (Dan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prioritising child/relationship</td>
<td>“I try to plan everything around my life with [my daughter]” (Mark)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aiming for positive change</td>
<td>“I’ve just tried not to be the stereotypical, I’ve tried to make it more beneficial and make it work, you know. I try to be as involved if not more so than when I was there” (Dan)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative appraisal</td>
<td>“I was leaving for purely selfish reasons” (Steve)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Culpable</td>
<td>“didn’t feel particularly happy... or, or proud of</td>
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what I’d done cos obviously I was to blame as well, I can’t say it’s all her” (Nick)

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<tr>
<th>External locus of control</th>
<th>“it’s not worth arguing about cos at the end of the day she has the girls in her house. She has the whip hand. So I have to be a little bit careful what I say cos she could make it a lot harder than it is... It’s not worth rocking the boat, it really isn’t” (Nick)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Threats/uncertainty</td>
<td>“Am I going to have my daughter or is she going to dangle her in front of me on the doorstep and say right that’s it, that’s the last time you’re going to see her” (Sam)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good fortune/luck</td>
<td>“I can’t stress enough the fact of how fortunate I am in this situation” (Dan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injustice/Negative view of law</td>
<td>“it’s again like the court. If you say nothing you feel guilty and if you do say something you’re the bad guy anyway. So either way you lose.” (Steve)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Perceived impact on child</th>
<th>“[my daughter] doesn’t seem to mind. She never complains that she doesn’t see me, because I know for a fact that [my ex] would tell me if [my daughter] was saying “I miss my dad’”” (Sam)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>“clearly it shook her quite a lot that it happened, that I left” (Phil)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accounts of child’s response</td>
<td>“[my daughter] says I have two houses, I have two...”</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Appraisal of self as father</strong></th>
<th>bedrooms, as opposed to I live with my mummy, my daddy lives somewhere else” (Mark)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative appraisals</strong></td>
<td>“I think I’ve failed as a father” (Steve)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive appraisals</strong></td>
<td>“We all aspire to certain things and you know, I like to think I’m the best dad in the world to my daughter, I’m the only one she’s got so it’s a fairly easy competition to win but it’s how I feel” (Mark)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Active involvement</strong></td>
<td>“I am as involved as I can be in [my daughter’s] education and if she stays with me however long it’s not all fun time, she has to do her homework and all the rest of it and I’m still totally involved” (Mark)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Provider</strong></td>
<td>“It’s a very male thing isn’t it. And I suppose at the end of the day I’ve lost a lot but I can always hold my head up and say well I’ve always supported them the best I can under the circumstances” (Phil)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Something to offer</strong></td>
<td>“if the plan is to hurt me they’re only cutting off their noses to spite their faces because there is so much to be gained by what we could have together” (Phil)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Close relationship</strong></td>
<td>“but it just meant from a very early age we do things together rather than… I don’t know. We are very close as father daughter but also as friends” (Mark)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Providing a ‘secure base’</strong></td>
<td>“my son… knew that anything he wanted, I’d give it to him. If he needed help or if he needed to contact...”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commitment to parenting</td>
<td>“I’m not the kind of person that goes round procreating willy nilly. I think it’s the kind of thing if you do you do it seriously” (Sam)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shifts in identity</td>
<td>“I had to find who I were again because I was no longer family member, two point four kids and all that thing, that was what I weren’t” (Sam)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being known as father</td>
<td>“my biggest thing was wanting him to know that I’m his father and I’m going to go on being his father” (Dan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Fear of) Being usurped</td>
<td>“A big thing to deal with particularly in the first few months was that I was no longer bringing my daughter up. That was now in the hands of a decrepit smackhead” (Sam)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secure in identity</td>
<td>“she knows she’s a [surname], she knows it’s on her birth certificate and if she ever chooses to use the name it’s entirely up to her. If she never uses the name it doesn’t bother me... yeah, she’s just [my daughter] to me!” (Sam)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of others’</td>
<td>“it’s quite nice to know, maybe I’m being smug, that the school secretary said, “oh that’s pretty good. You’re a good dad to ‘em”. And I like to hear that” (Nick)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive (i.e. good father)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Stigma</td>
<td>“the downside of being a father is that it doesn’t...”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appraisal of own situation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comparison with other men</td>
<td>“I suppose in the paper if there’s an article about this sort of situation I tend to read it with a view to other people’s sort of situation can be comforting to me, you know. I then put a gauge up and go they’re worse off than me or they’re better off than I’ve been. And it’s trying to get your own personal gauge on where you are with it cos you’re out there on your own most of the time” (Phil)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

| Negative appraisal of experiences | “I don’t think it’s been that bad sometimes but then when you remember… I can only remember selected bits, but when you put it all down in front of you it has been bad” (Steve) |

| Positive appraisal of experiences | “When you put it all together, and say it was like that, and you look at the whole experience and actually it’s not bad” (Dan) |

| Hope for future | “looking forward to when they’re older is a real plus in my mind” (Nick) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rational thinking</td>
<td>“I was thirty years old and I knew what were going to be the consequences of our actions and I just had to live with it and get on with it. I mean some people call that cold and callous but that’s just reality” (Mark)</td>
</tr>
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<p>| Mental processes | “the way I am about my children and well, |</p>
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Action-oriented coping</th>
<th>seeing an end point</th>
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<tr>
<td>everything to do with my children, I think there's something that I'm not in control of in my mind that's put up a defence mechanism so I don't get too hurt&quot; (Steve)</td>
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<tr>
<td>it helped that I ran away and came down south and did fruit picking for months and months and months until I got my head back together again&quot; (Sam)</td>
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<tr>
<td>[my ex] and I have got ten years to go and then after ten years we will be out of each other's hair forever&quot; (Mark)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Support</th>
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<tr>
<td>Rejection</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;All the friends that we had as a couple sided with [my ex-wife], err, particularly the women. The men as a result would say one thing to me in person but they acted differently because obviously they had to protect their own marriages&quot; (Mark)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not feeling understood</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;I had to sort of look at who I knew who'd gone through this because people who hadn't gone through it didn't know how to deal with it&quot; (Phil)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support from those 'in same boat'</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;it was supportive at the time just to know that someone else had gone through it, and you suddenly don't feel so lonely&quot; (Phil)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends and family</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;I had a lot of good friends around me who took me in, because I had nowhere to live&quot; (Sam)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Valued balanced advice</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;this guy was very sober and he'd sit down with me</td>
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and um... he'd talk very sensibly cos it's his field. And he gave me some very good advice... “it's going to be like this, this is what I've seen, this is what I've experienced”” (Dan)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Reflection</th>
<th>“I found that all quite useful. It didn’t really solve, it made me feel better, feel stronger. But maybe it made me feel a bit clearer as to what was happening, that helped me a bit” (Phil)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doesn't change circumstances</td>
<td>“Although it’s nice to get it off your chest we’ve done it a thousand time’s before on all the subjects that we’ve mentioned, but it doesn’t do you any good though” (Steve)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Counselling</td>
<td>“if I hadn’t had the counselling, I really think that without that you don’t formalise or segment what it is you think you’ve been through, whereas having been through it, if you do it just becomes part of your life” (Mark)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Outcomes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional impact</td>
<td>“There were anger, hatred, umm, despair, mixed with the feelings of I’ve been deceived, I’ve been had over. I did feel like I’d purely been a sperm donor and yeah, an empty feeling really” (Sam)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Risk of loss</td>
<td>“I think my worst nightmare was losing them, absolutely, I used to worry about that an awful lot” (Phil)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>“I was, apprehensive is wrong, fear is probably the</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ongoing struggles</td>
<td>“I don’t sleep very well, the last few years I haven’t slept well, but when the girls are here I sleep... well I can go to bed at half past ten or something like that and I know I’ll sleep well. I think it’s psychological. I’m relaxed cos I’m with my children.” (Nick)</td>
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<td>Loss</td>
<td>“when I say the thought of suicide had crossed my mind, it hadn’t been to the point where I’d sat there with a razor blade, but I’d thought I haven’t got anything to live for, everything I had to live for has been taken away from me” (Sam)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Helplessness</td>
<td>“you feel helpless in many ways, helpless, absolutely helpless and err that hurts very much” (Phil)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Powerlessness</td>
<td>“I can’t get angry over it cos there’s no point cos it’s impossible to change the situation.” (Nick)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hopelessness</td>
<td>“It was constant threats like that that really wear you down because you do expect a letter through the door saying if you want to see your daughter you’re going to have to fight” (Sam)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with child(ren) Positive change</td>
<td>“in hindsight when I look back it’s the best thing that could have happened in terms of the relationship with [my daughter]” (Mark)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative change</td>
<td>“we wouldn’t talk about anything deep, we wouldn’t talk about anything too deep because it’s like rocking the boat so… that did kind of close down the emotional contact between us” (Peter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced contact</td>
<td>“I’ve gone from full contact to virtually nil, so there’s, there’ll be a phone call maybe once or twice a week and then maybe we’ll meet up during that week if he had the time to do it, you know, um… so I think in that way your relationship is affected because the contact is so vastly reduced that it’s um, it can’t help but change” (Peter)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secure relationship</td>
<td>“I think how it’s changed over the last year, definitely the last year cos I’m a lot more chilled out with them… I think I’ve just realised I don’t need to be so intense and trying to please them cos they’re happy to be here” (Nick)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiating a new relationship</td>
<td>“we kind of became friends again because the relationship had kind of changed from one of father son to kind of looking at him as though he was little boy, and it was still father son but it had changed to a more mutual respect position of two men in a house together” (Peter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unable to develop relationship in new ways</td>
<td>“They didn’t see the best of me they just saw me in a very sort of almost rushed state. You see I’m very patient but to achieve things in a short space of time, like if they wanted to do this it was like, no we haven’t got time for that, come this way, and always rush, rush, rush and no quality, no quality time at all.”</td>
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| Nature/quality of arrangement | And so that felt bad as well. You know if you’d gone away for a fortnight camping or something we could have really formed our relationship, we could have improved upon it” (Phil)  
“... my ex needs to go on holiday then obviously we have to plan with my diary that I’m in the country or I try and commute to London for a couple of days. So it works well” (Mark)  
“Arranging on a Sunday night to drop the kids off at eight o’clock knowing full well that they’ve got school and not being in until ten o’clock at night. I mean I’m sitting there until ten with the kids in the car”  
“I do feel that my only real contact with the boys is through money... that’s when I spend most of my time actually with them if they’re working with me. And again, they’re not there because they want to spend time with their dad, they’re there because they want the money” (Steve) |
| Significance of money |
24 July 2006

Ms Natalie Chambers
Department of Psychology
School of Human Sciences

Dear Ms Chambers

Divorced men's experience of living apart from their children: An interpretive phenomenological analysis
(EC/2006/16/Psych)

On behalf of the Ethics Committee, I am pleased to confirm a favourable ethical opinion for the above research on the basis described in the submitted protocol and supporting documentation.

Date of confirmation of ethical opinion: 29 March 2006

The final list of documents reviewed by the Committee is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Application</td>
<td>14/02/06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Proposal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information Sheet</td>
<td>14/02/06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consent Form</td>
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<tr>
<td>Draft Interview Schedule</td>
<td>14/02/06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demographic Information</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recruitment Poster</td>
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<tr>
<td>Insurance Proforma</td>
<td>14/02/06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Your Response to the Committee's Comments</td>
<td>13/03/06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amended Protocol</td>
<td>13/03/06</td>
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</tbody>
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This opinion is given on the understanding that you will comply with the University's Ethical Guidelines for Teaching and Research, and with the condition set out below.

- That you clarify the statement 'participants will be recruited through social networks' (page 4, paragraph 3 of the amended protocol). If information about the study will be disseminated via email and posters please submit samples of these for the Committee's records.
The Committee should be notified of any amendments to the protocol, any adverse reactions suffered by research participants, and if the study is terminated earlier than expected with reasons.

I would be grateful if you would confirm, in writing, your acceptance of the condition above, enclosing the requested documents.

You are asked to note that a further submission to the Ethics Committee will be required in the event that the study is not completed within five years of the above date.

Please inform me when the research has been completed.

Yours sincerely

Catherine Ashbee (Mrs)
Secretary, University Ethics Committee
Registry

cc: Professor T Desombre, Chairman, Ethics Committee
    Dr A Coyle, Supervisor, Dept of Psychology
This research project aims to explore fathers’ experiences of living apart from their children and the perceived impact of this, whether positive or negative, on their current lives. Although there has been a lot of research studying the impact of divorce, in particular on children, very little attention has been paid to men’s experiences. It seems important that this gap in the research is addressed and fathers given an opportunity to have their voices heard. This project comprises a component of my Doctorate in Counselling Psychology, and aims to inform counselling psychology practice. The study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Surrey Ethics Committee.

Participants for this project have been chosen because they meet the demographic criteria I am studying, that is men who are living apart from their children following separation or divorce. If you decide to take part in this research, you will be interviewed by myself for approximately one hour about your experience of living apart from your children. There will be no right or wrong answers in the interview. I’m simply interested in hearing you talk about your own experiences in your own words.

Interviews will take place at your home or workplace or in a private room at the University of Surrey – whichever is most convenient for you. I am aware that, for some people, it may be distressing to talk about their experiences of living apart from their children. During the interview, if you find things too difficult, it will be perfectly OK to ask for a break, arrange to continue another day or withdraw from the project altogether.

Interviews will be audio taped but the tapes will only be heard by myself, will not be labelled with your name and will be erased once the project is completed in September this year. Similarly, your confidentiality will be assured because, in my research report, I will not use the real names of any people, places or organisations that you mention. All data will be handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

If you participate in this research, a summary of the final report will be available to you in September on completion of the project, and I will provide details of how this may be obtained.

If you have further questions or require further information regarding participation in this project, please contact myself or my supervisor:

Natalie Chambers
email: psm2nc@surrey.ac.uk

Dr Adrian Coyle
email: a.coyle@surrey.ac.uk
CONSENT FORM

❖ I agree to take part in the research project about father’s experiences of living apart from their children. I have been informed that I will be interviewed about my own experiences.

❖ I understand that the interview will be audio taped. I have been assured that all personal data is held in the strictest confidence, that my confidentiality will be preserved and that the tape recording of my interview will be destroyed once the research project is complete.

❖ I have read and understood the Information Sheet provided and have had all my questions regarding this research project satisfactorily answered.

❖ I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without needing to justify my decision and without prejudice.

❖ I confirm that I have read and understood the above and freely consent to participating in this study.

Name of volunteer ..................................................
(BLOCK CAPITALS)
Signed ..................................................
Date .................................

Name of witness ..................................................
(BLOCK CAPITALS)
Signed ..................................................
Date .................................
DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

The following information is collected so that people who read the final report can know more about the people who took part in the study. However, none of the information will be used to identify you as this research is completely confidential.

1. How old are you? __________

2. How would you describe your ethnicity?  
(Please indicate the ethnic group to which you feel you belong)

White  
British  
Irish  
Any other White background (please specify below)

Black or Black British  
Caribbean  
African  
Any other Black background (please specify below)

Asian or Asian British  
Indian  
Pakistani  
Bangladeshi  
Any other Asian background (please specify below)

Mixed  
White and Black Caribbean  
White and Black African  
White and Asian  
Any other mixed background (please specify below)
Chinese or other ethnic group
Chinese
Any other ethnic group (please specify below)

3. What is your current job (or, if you are not working, what was your last job?)

4. What is your highest educational qualification?
   GCSE /O level or equivalent
   A level or equivalent
   Degree
   Any other qualification (please specify below)

5. What is your current marital status?
   Single
   Married
   Divorced
   Separated
   Living with a partner

6. How many children do you have? _________
INTerview SCHEDULE

Prior to interview starting:
- ensure participant has read information sheet
- ask if any questions arising and address these
- sign consent form
- give demographic questionnaire for completion
- TURN ON TAPE RECORDER

My name is Natalie Chambers and I’m a Counselling Psychologist in training. As you know, this interview is part of my research project which aims to explore men’s experiences of living apart from their children. And today it would be really great if you could share something of your experience with me.

To start with it would be helpful if you could tell me about your current home circumstances.
- Living alone?
- New partner?
- Remarried?
- Children from new partnership?
- Step-children?

And how long has it been since you separated from your ex-partner?

Could you tell me a little about the circumstances of the divorce/separation?
- Conflict/amicable?
- Length of relationship?
- Court involvement?
- Custody?
- Financial implications?
- Other men/women involved in the break up?

Ok, you’ve told me …… (e.g. about your divorce). Could you say a little about what it was like moving away from your children?
- Emotional impact?
- Quality of relationships before/after?
- Have your experiences been the same with each of your children? Or differences between children?
- Impact of new partners/step-families?
- What happened at family/child milestones (e.g. birthdays, school events, Christmas?)

How often are you currently seeing your children?

Could you describe what your time together is usually like?
- What context/activities?
- What makes contact hard/easy?
- How does your ex-partner facilitate/hinder this contact?
- Able to be 'Dad' in the same way as before separation?

We’ve talked quite a lot about................ I was wondering whether you received any support from anyone during this time?
- Friends?
- Family members?
- Others in a similar position?
- Any experience of stigma/negative responses?

How do you see things unfolding in the future with regard to your relationship(s) with your son/daughter/children?
How do you feel about that?  
Ideally, how would you like things to unfold in the future?

[If relevant] I wonder if you’re thinking about having more children in the future?  
What makes you say that?  
[Explore motivation and how he thinks this might affect his feelings about his present situation]

We’re coming towards the end of the interview and I wondered whether there was anything else that comes to mind that you’d like to add?

Before we finish I’d be interested to know how it’s been for you talking about your experiences today?
- Something you’ve thought/talked about much before?

In the case of participant having been distressed during the interview allow time to de-brief here and discuss options for future counselling/support.
If it’s ok with you I’d like to call you tomorrow as a follow-up, to see how you are and if anything more has occurred to you since we spoke.

Thank you for participating in my project.

Example prompts:
Could you say some more about that?
Could you give me an example?
What makes you say that?
Can you recall a memory to illustrate that?
I: And perhaps we could start off by you telling me a bit about your current circumstances?

P: Um, basically I was err, err my ex-partner for ten years and we have a err ten year old together. And I split up, we split up three years ago. Uh, basically so err I’ve separated from his mother but he lives very close to me, so he’s not far from me and I get to see him quite a lot.

I: Ok, and are you living alone or are you re-married?

P: I’m living alone

I: So it’s been about three years you say since you were separated and I’m wondering whether you’d mind telling me a bit about the circumstances of that divorce and separation?

P: Um, it was just um, we were just going on different paths really and it was sort of obvious very early on that err, to cut a very long story short, it was obvious very early on in our relationship that we weren’t really that compatible. And it got to a stage where
really the relationship was probably over about five years ago, six years ago but then there was this thing of I want to stay together for the child. And then there’s a part, there’s a point when you get past that you know and you’re staying together just for him, you know I love him, she loves him and we hate each other (*laughs*) and he can pick that up you know and we’re not tactile, we don’t hug, we don’t kiss, we’re all over him but there’s this big wall between us. We’re civil. There’s no screaming matches or throwing china but, no, it’s just not on really. So we decided it was for the best really.

I: Mmm. And so when it came to the separation, was it fairly amicable or was there conflict at that point?

P: Umm. It, it, it’s difficult in a way. It had the potential to be quite, you know, go quite pear-shaped but I, I, me personally I’m the sort of person that umm, all I’m saying is that it’s nice to be nice and I’ve known other guys in that situation who’ve, where it’s not been amicable and it’s been a dog fight and to cut a long story short, they’ve been taken to the cleaners. Um, yeah, I owned half the house and I know I could have lost everything, I know guys who have. So to me it was just important to try and make it as smooth as possible really. Err, there was a bit of bitterness in the beginning but you know, um it wasn’t nasty, you know

I: Mmm. And it sounds like you’d really watched what had happened to other people and

P: Very much so because I, I’ve known two or three guys who’ve been through it and I must say, of all the guys I know who’ve been through a separation with children involved, property, I’ve come off the best. Some of those guys have come off really bad. Um, but it’s partly their fault, partly through no fault of their own, sometimes their ex has
just been vindictive, sometimes they’ve been nasty and they’ve come off really, really bad. They’ve got restrictions on when they can see their children and what have you and it’s one thing I’m really happy about, I’ve got none of that at all. I think she knows that it’d be very bad for him saying I couldn’t see him or I could only visit him x amount. You know if she went to court I’m sure she could arrange it.

I: So when it came to setting up an arrangement or coming to an agreement about how much access you’d have to your son, how did that go?

P: Umm. I think umm, like I said at the end of the day, you know, credit to her, she’s rational. I mean when I look at other people’s situations and these guys standing on top of parliament and what have you, these superman guys, when I hear the stipulations that their ex-partners have put on them like you can’t see your daughter... who’s that punishing? Do you know what I mean? And she can see through that, she knows that whilst we don’t really bitterly hate each other but say we were to see less of each other, she knows it would be very important for me to see my son, incredibly so for me to see my son. So in that respect it’s actually been really good, and as I say I think my situation, well you’ll see in your study, is unique in that I see him whenever I want, if anything she’ll call me and say “I thought you were having him on Wednesday!” So she encourages me more as well, which is part of it is her making sure, well there’s no way I’m losing touch with my son, that’s a given, but part of it will be that and part of it will be because she needs a break as well. So I can take him on weekends or weekdays, so umm yeah, in that respect it works well
I: So partly you’re saying then that she can see that it’s good for everybody that you have access, but also that it works out quite well for her in giving her free time

P: Exactly, exactly

I: So how often are you seeing your son at the moment?

P: Literally he lives five minutes away and I mean that was by design. When I first left I said ok right, I mean I was looking within a three mile radius of the house. Which was quite a sacrifice cos you sort of come to the end of a relationship and you want to get away and I had some fantastic job offers but quite far away and I said no, I’m going to stay near to him so, um yeah. It’s literally about five minutes away. Err, it depends. I can see him (sigh) it ends up being weekends and even though I hate the term ‘weekend dad’, but as I said, the way I work if I’ve got no clients I’ll go and pick him up from school or he’ll stay with me. The only thing is it’s hard for him to stay over during the week cos in the weekdays I start work at seven in winter, so um I’d have to take him home at some ridiculous hour of the morning, so he can’t sleep over. But at weekends he’ll stay over, sometimes he’ll come up Friday then go back Sunday night. Yep, so on average, definitely weekends, say Friday, Saturday or Saturday, Sunday and a couple of times in the week, or at least definitely once in the week. And when the weather’s like this, he’s very active, I’ll grab the bikes and we’ll take the bikes out for a couple of hours. So it might be a long thing or an hour or two, but a lot of contact.

I: It sounds really kind of relaxed and informal.
P: Like I said, fortunately so. Fortunately so. I can literally call up and say, “Hi! How you doing? I’m coming to get [my son]” “Cool!” Like I said, it works both ways as well cos sometimes you know you think that, you might think ok, we were together we had a child and then we split up, and I think well who got the worst deal. Ok so I had to move out my home but I’m free! You know? But she’s living with [my son] like all day, so umm, yes sometimes it is giving her a break. Do you see what I mean? So yeah, in that respect it’s ok.

I: It almost sounds like swings and roundabouts in all respects

P: Yeah

I: I mean just going back to the time of you first moving out. Obviously you’ve spoken about how you were keen to live as close as you could, but I wonder what that was like for you? Whether you knew it was going to work out well or whether you had uncertainties?

P: (sigh) um... at the time when it came to moving out it was just a situation where it was, if you sit down and reason it you think anything has to be better than this really. Like I say, we weren’t horrible to each other we were just... a regular pattern would be I’d come home from work and I might be upstairs with [my son], we’d have dinner then she’d go upstairs and watch soaps, then go up to bed when she was asleep. And this went on for years! So we lived together but we weren’t actually seeing each other, sort of skirting around each other and umm, yeah it got to a situation where it was yeah, you know basically anything’s got to be better than this. And then I had lots of thoughts that it
might be bad, I might not get to see [my son]. And when I really sat down and thought about it, umm... sometimes you know, when you really sit down and think about it you might see you know, guys live with their children but how much do they actually see them? You know, there's one job I start at seven and then um I come here um and... so basically I leave in the morning before he's awake and I get home, I get home some evenings when he's just about to go to bed, some evenings he's asleep, you know. And you get into this false sense of happy families, yeah I'm with my son but when you actually calculate it I'd see him for three waking hours in the whole week. And again I sat down and was thinking if I move out, you know, he can come to me for the weekends and that will be time dedicated to him. And I did all that sort of calculation and I thought this isn't too bad actually because when he's with me, he's with me as opposed to, he's in the house, I know he's in the house somewhere but... do you know what I mean? Instead of seeing him when he's about to go to sleep or I'm about to go to work, you know?

I: So it moved from thinking would you see him to kind of rationalising it and working it out that

P: That I'd see him more

I: So thinking about the relationship you have with [your son] then and I'm wondering if you notice a difference between how it was when you were living together to how it is now?
P: My biggest fear... my biggest fear, and it's just a personal thing, I'm not saying it's right or wrong, but my biggest fear and my biggest issue was um, um moving out and then her getting a new partner and losing my son to this new partner. When I came to my senses I knew it sounded irrational but then again I'm in one of those situations where it happens you know and guys when they move out and she gets another partner and all of a sudden the child's got five new uncles! That, that was just my biggest issue and fortunately it didn't work out that way, you know. Cos yeah, my biggest thing was wanting him to know that I'm his father and I'm going to go on being his father. Ok so we don't live together but it's not like, you know, I just send his mum a cheque on his birthday or something. I'm his dad. And I've always been... I've always had that sort of thought, cos to cut a long story short, my parents separated when I was thirteen and err, my mother didn’t remarry 'til I was like eighteen and fully grown and my father remarried when I was sixteen. But just to me personally I've always had this, and it's just my definition that um my mother's remarried and that's her husband, my father's remarried and that's his wife. She's not my step-mum, he's not my step-dad. You're my mum, you're my dad and there's never any step with me, that's my mum’s husband, that's my dad's wife, end of story. And it's like that with my relationship, she can have fifty boyfriends or one husband whatever, but I'm [his] dad. No step-dad, that's it. If I was unavailable or in jail or something or a million miles away then someone might have to step into the role (inaudible). So that was the biggest issue for me and um so far so good. And err, his mum's had a partner and it was cool. I was really nervous about it but it was fine, it was fine. But err, yeah
I: I can understand that would be a concern, you know, someone stepping into your shoes, your dad shoes

P: Exactly, exactly. You know some guys just take it in their stride but I, no, I’d have a problem with it really but it’s been fine.

I: So thinking about the way you were able to be a dad before the separation and the way you’re a dad now... is there any difference or has it kind of rolled on just the same?

P: It’s a big change, a big change. Number one, err, it’s sort of good and bad. You know what it’s like, it’s like I said before, you’re in your house with your child, he might be upstairs playing and you might be downstairs watching TV or resting, you’re might be living a home but not spending anytime with them even though you’re in the same house. Now when I see him it’s me and him, it’s me and him time, um be it one hour, two days, the school holidays, whenever I see him it’s about me and him. Which is good. Um, the downside is, slightly is that err, it’s err, how can I put it? It’s slightly strained, you know, a bit like false. So ok, when I was living at home we did something, we’d play and then we wouldn’t. But now when I see him it’s like, “right ok dad, entertain me! What are we doing now, what are we doing now, what are we doing now?!” The whole time. And it can be a bit... sometimes I just want to come home and chill out. I’m happy just happy to have him with me. But he’s like “what are we doing?! What are we doing?! What are we doing?!?” The whole thing’s like, entertain me. And sometimes that can be stressful cos you know, sometimes I’ve had a really hard week and I want to see him but I really can’t
I'm just like come round and read or something, you know, and he still doesn't get that I'm just happy
for him to be here. He's just like, "what are we doing dad? What are we doing?"

I: It sounds like he wants to get the absolute most out of his time with you

P: Absolutely, absolutely. Which I mean, there's nothing wrong with that, but umm
compared to sort of normal families it's sort of artificial in that way. Cos you don't
normally entertain each other twenty-four hours of the day, or every waking hour if you
like. So it's a bit strained, but it's not bad it's just when you compare it to normal...

I: And so does that mean you're doing different things together than you would have
done or just kind of doing it more?

P: We're doing all the stuff we used to do but it's more condensed. We used to play
Playstation and we used to take the bikes out, we used to skateboard, we used to go out
and about, we've got a big thing about fun fairs, we love fun fairs, the rides, we always
go to fun fairs. And um it's just more of it because we might be doing four of those things
in a day, and so it's you know, more intense. And I seem to always have to have a
different agenda, criteria when he comes, like an itinerary, we're doing this and then
we're doing this and then we're doing this. Um, yeah. So it's stuff we were always doing
but now it's more intense.
I: Well I can see how that would be tiring at the end of your week... I’ve got a question down here about milestones, and I’m thinking about birthdays, school events, Christmas, that sort of stuff and what happens around those times?

P: Again, um, well birthday’s are birthdays, I’d never miss his birthday. Christmas, yeah, I never miss Christmas. She um, my ex, she um makes a habit, this is where I’m fortunate, she makes a habit of telling me school, ok he’s got a school play, he’s got this coming up at school, they want to go on a camping trip so he has to come round and discuss it, so she keeps me in touch with what’s going on. And obviously birthdays and Christmas I’m there. But it gets a little complicated there, cos there I can actually play, and this will sound strange, but I can play a smaller role. Because my son’s an only child, and you know on my side there’s me, my brother and sister, there’s my mum and dad, um, and on her side there’s her, her father... her mother and father separated funnily enough, so there’s her father and her father’s wife, her mother and her mother’s husband, my parents... so birthdays and Christmas for [my son] get silly. One Christmas in particular he had to take a break from opening presents. I find it, not sickening, but just a bit, well it’s just hideous, he had... And oh, another thing that makes a difference... err, I do alright, I make a good living, but my ex-partner, she, she’s well off basically to cut a long story short, so money’s never an issue, money’s never an issue. So yeah, things like birthdays can get a bit silly and I tend to stand back a bit, you know, because he’s swamped in a load of stuff. I still see him but I don’t tend to buy him loads of presents cos I know, you know it’s not like if I don’t get him a load the poor mite’s not going to have anything!
I: Hmm. Just kind of side tracking a bit, just cos you mentioned the money side of things, and I’m just wondering if you think that made a difference?

P: It made a huge difference. Like I say, I can’t stress enough the fact of how fortunate I am in this situation, you know, talking to guys who are having to pay out every cent they’ve got and they’ve got the CSA, you know. And because, two things, I don’t have any issues about paying... (inaudible), and number two she’s quite rational, I’ve got to respect that and she’s from a well-off background. So as far as the separation, as far as the separation, from her point it was like “you know what, you can see [my son], blah, blah, blah, we need to split! Get the hell out of here! I’m not going to worry about money!” cos finances was not an issue. So yeah, like I said, again I give her money monthly and school trips and stuff I pay for them, but I’m kind of forcing my way in, not forcing but I have to impose my finances otherwise she wouldn’t take anything, cos she’s just like that, you know, she’ll just do it. So um, yeah, she was like how much are you paying, and I decided on how much a month and she was like that’s cool. I mean there’s certain things like I get him kitted out for school every September, and certain things like bikes, um, I bought him his bike... there’s certain things I deal with but the rest of it she does.

I: And does it feel important to you that you’re making a financial contribution?
P: Very much so, yes, very much so. Again it’s just, I don’t want to be, you know, the thing is he’d be absolutely fine without it, he wouldn’t want for a single thing if I did that, but that’s just how I want my relationship with him to work, I’ve always had a financial input, you know so...

I: So um, I’ve got a question here which is about the support you’ve received along the way, I suppose I’m particularly thinking about when your break up first occurred and whether you had friends or family around who made it easier for you?

P: Um, let me think... not really. I suppose the only support I had um... this is what I had really, I had friends who had been through it and consequently been taken to the cleaners and it had all gone really bad, there was a new bloke in the house and the kids were calling someone else dad and they’d had the CSA on to them and it was um, I’d heard nightmare stories! And they couldn’t see their children or whatever. So I’d heard nightmare stories and I was like, “ok, I don’t want it to go like that”. And I had some other friends who were into social work and one of them is actually a child social worker, um, he was quite refreshing cos I’d talk to the other guys and they were like “she’ll take you to the cleaners!”, but this guy was very sober and he’d sit down with me and um... he’d talk very sensibly cos it’s his field. And he gave me some very good advice, which was good cos I sort of had a bit of a balance. From really angry fathers saying “just kill her!” and then this guy who was like, “it’s going to be like this, this is what I’ve seen, this is what I’ve experienced”, yeah, it was good.
I: So I guess he knew what you were going through and could understand. And I'm wondering if on the flip side you've had any negative experiences? If you've noticed any stigma or social kind of stuff around being separated or being an absent dad...

P: Well you get thrown in that basket of 'weekend dad' and you think well the time I'm most likely to see him is the weekend so 'weekend dad', there's not a lot you can really do about that. Other than that I've just tried to, I've just tried not to be the stereotypical, I've tried to make it more beneficial and make it work, you know. Like I say (inaudible), I try to be as involved if not more so than when I was there. So um apart from that, like I say, it doesn't really bother me you know, you know my mother was a single mother, do you know what I mean, and I didn't turn out to be stealing cars. It's like single mother, single parent, so what? I never really bought into that stigma of your kid's going to be a tearaway, or it makes the mother best or the father... so what, they've split up, big deal you know.

I: Sure. And really then drawing on your own experience...

P: Yeah, yeah, exactly. So overall, no, I haven't found any stigmas.

I: So I'm thinking that we've spoken about the past and about how things are now, but I'm wondering if you've thought towards the future and how you'd like to things unfolding between the two of you or working out in the future?
P: I, I think the future to me is, is always going to be better. We’re separated now but what’s important to me is that I was there at the beginning, at his formative years. I was there when he was walking, talking, I was there at his birth, I taught him how to ride a bike, how to play chess. These things to me are milestones which I was there for. As he gets older, as we all do, your parents become less of an issue. So round about sixteen, I expect around sixteen, seventeen and as he gets older, I expect to be seeing less of him but him to still very much know who I am and um, yeah, there’ll come a time when he goes away to uni or whatever, he’ll be his own person... so the future holds more promise for me. I think, yeah, it will be easier when he’s older, um, and another thing which sounds strange about the future which I think will work out better is the fact that he’s got his whole teenage years to go through. And I think it’s going to be easier cos when you’re living with your parents you rebel against your parents, it’s going to happen, I know it’s going to happen cos I did it! It’s going to happen, I wouldn’t be that lucky! I know he’s going to do the whole teenage freakin’ out thing and err I think, when you’re with your parents it’ll be against your parents whereas now it’s like he has a different perspective. I see it happening now, if he has issues with his mum he comes to me and says, “Can you believe she made me do this? Can you believe she made me do that?” and I’m like “ok, this is what we’re going to do”, and I can talk him into doing the same thing but he’s had different, rather than both of us just nagging at him, he’s able to come away and talk to his dad. So unfortunately I think for her it might be that she gets the teenage stuff and I’ll be this other guy who can say “ok, what’ happening? Let’s talk about this”. It might be he’s a cool kid, but I’m just anticipating that teenagers freak out and I’m anticipating that when it happens he’s still got like two sides and because I’m not
there every day I can be a bit more like what’s going on. So I’m trying to get him into that now where he talks to me. Cos if it’s your parents you can’t really tell them things, whereas he can talk to me about his mother (a bit inaudible). And I think that’s going to come more into play in the future.

I: Mmm, so it sounds like kind of you know creating a distinct role for yourself, cos I’m thinking if you were all still under the same roof you’d still be encouraging him to talk to you, but as you say it’s very different when you’re all together. So it’s like you’re defining that role of a different pair of ears and you’ll understand...

P: Exactly, exactly. And you wouldn’t really get that in the same house. Cos kids rarely rebel against one parent, you know, when they’re in the same house

I: Mmm, it’s like they come under one heading of ‘parents’

P: Exactly, whereas he has options, you know, so err, yeah. It might work the other way, he might rebel against me and go to his mother, but I think because he’s a boy, you know, we might have that sort of bond, where it’s the issues that his mum might not pick up or... so that’s my thinking.

I: Um, I’m wondering whether you’ve thought about new relationships or about having more children in the future?
P: The main thing for me was, ok, I've just come out of a relationship of ten years, I have female friends but I just keep it friendly, I don't want to rush into anything at all I must admit, you know. The thing is with me is I'm perfectly happy being single, I don't mind (inaudible). But the main thing for me is to take a break, it's been three years and I still think I'm taking a break, I'm like ok, you did that it didn't work out, it went pear-shaped, you don't want to go down that route again... (inaudible) I've been burnt and when somebody's been burnt it's just like, go easy. So relationship-wise that's where I am at the moment

I: Ok, well I've pretty much asked all of the questions I've got down here, but I'm wondering if there's been anything that's cropped up for you while we've been talking, anything that you wanted to say?

P: Overall I wanted to say, and this is why I'd be very interested to read your study, I, compared to people I talk to I realise I've been quite fortunate, well like I say, I think my situation's unique in that basically I'm able to see my child and we're able to, we're able to um talk without solicitors and barristers which is err, which is, in the beginning stages we did cos like there were certain things I had to get sorted cos I didn't know how it was going to go so you have to make sure you do have access and I needed to know what was going to happen. As it turned out she said yes, yes, yes, of course you can, but I had to go through the legal process to make sure and whether I was going to be restricted, how's that going to work. But quite early on it turned out that it wasn't going to be like that, we talk so that's made a difference, that's made a real difference.
I: Ok. Just before we finish I'd be quite interested to hear what it's been like for you talking about all this stuff today

P: It's been, it's been easy. I'll tell you why. Ever since [my friend] mentioned it I've been thinking about it. But it's probably the first time I've sat down and started thinking about it, "what am I going to say, what has it been like?", but then I started thinking, "actually it's been like that" and I started to talk it through in my head. That process was quite refreshing really, sitting down and working out the pros and cons, it's been like that or it's been like that

I: So kind of taking stock of what's happened really?

P: Exactly. Because I don't think before I'd really done it. You just plod along, but then when you, like I said because I knew I was going to talk to you I was formulating things in my head, and yeah, taking stock and it was quite refreshing really. When you put it all together, and say it was like that, and you look at the whole experience and actually it's not bad. You know, of course it's easy saying that three years later and of course in the beginning it was a bit heavy, but yeah, it's not bad. Time I think, corny as it sounds time I think is one of the biggest things (inaudible)... in the first couple of years it was like I'll come round to collect [my son] and then I'll go, but now it's like sometimes I'll go to the school play with her, last year we went to Thorpe Park all together. It was very strange, and we couldn't have done that two years ago. A reunion isn't on the cards but the fact
that we can do that it like two years ago we couldn’t do that and now we can, so that’s cool, time has made it a lot easier, a lot easier to deal with.

I: So maybe if I’d interviewed you two years ago it would have been a different interview?

P: Um, yeah. Cos two years ago I didn’t know how it was going to work out, I didn’t know how much I was going to see him, whether she’d let me, how much physical time I was going to see him, I didn’t know what the whole new partner thing would involve you know. So I was, apprehensive is wrong, fear is probably the right word. There were so many ways it could have went, it made me feel a bit sick really... but now I see how it’s gone it’s not too bad.

I: Mmm, I guess that’s one of the interesting things from my part is that I’m interviewing people at different stages if you like, eighteen months in, eight years in, and that’s really coming out that, even though as you say it’s a cliché, time really does help

P: It does! It really does help. You know, um, especially like I say if you remain civil it really does, you know, if you’re in a relationship or a separation where you’re going to be horrible to each other then time’s not going to make that any better, but if you remain civil it really does, it really does help. You start to feel more comfortable with yourself, more comfortable with the arrangement with your child... it’s not too bad...
I: Ok, so unless there’s anything else?

P: No, that’s it.
REFLECTION ON THE USE OF SELF IN THE RESEARCH

Having spent two years exploring young women’s experiences of father absence it has felt refreshing to spend a year looking at ‘the flip side of the coin’. I can recall a sense of intrigue as I embarked on this project having done very little work focussing on men in the past and therefore feeling unsure what I would discover. Before embarking on my previous research endeavour I felt as though I had some idea of what the young women’s perspectives might have held, both from discussion with father absent friends and as a young woman myself. It couldn’t have been more different this time round being neither a man nor having close relationships with any divorced or separated men. Spurred on by the fresh challenge I gave little thought to how I might experience it personally, and certainly did not anticipate it being as challenging as I have found it.

One of the main challenges I faced was undertaking this project at this particular time in my life. As a twenty-seven year old unmarried, childless student I felt that I was at a different life-stage than my participants and indeed noted at interview that they seemed to position me as such with comments like, “we’re a generation apart”. Within the last year I have seen my first three school friends get married, others get engaged and indeed I am to be bridesmaid to one of my closest friends later in the summer. These experiences are full of joy, hope and promise for the future. Within the same period I have been reading the literature and engaging with seven personal accounts of relationship breakdown –
dreams lost, relationships turned sour. This juxtaposition has not been a comfortable one. Furthermore, during the course of this research I decided to end my own four-year long relationship. Of course I would not claim that the research per se was responsible for this decision, but the many hours spent pouring over participants’ accounts seemed to act as a warning for the future – ‘the ghost of Christmas yet to come’. Consequently I felt compelled to confront the problems I had been trying to ignore, believing it better to do so now than after ten years of marriage and with children in tow for example. Although a rational choice, this has not been easy.

Other challenges I faced were tied to my status both as a woman and as a daughter. Participants did not seem to hold back in their accounts of their ex-partners because they were talking to a female researcher and I found it disheartening to hear that women or indeed people can behave so cruelly towards one another, seemingly in some cases with no regard for the bigger picture (i.e. their children’s well being). As a daughter who particularly cherishes her relationship with her own father I found it difficult to conceive that some children would not want to have a relationship with their dads. Perhaps if the men had been abusive or neglectful, but this was not the sort of fathers the participants appeared to be. However I was all too aware that the participants’ accounts were but one side of the story and that each of the other characters (i.e. mother, children) would hold a different perspective. In one case I found myself doubting elements of the participant’s account, thinking there must be more to it for his ex-partner to have responded in this way. On reflection, I suspect I just didn’t want to believe that someone could be so cruel.
Of course one might question why I found these experiences so personally challenging given my clinical experience where stories of loss, hurt and conflicting relationships are the norm. I think the difference lay in my status as a researcher rather than therapist. It seems to me that as a therapist the experience of hearing another's pain is to some degree offset by the prospect of working together to bring about some change in that person’s life. By contrast as a researcher I felt as though I was prodding the participants to elicit their stories then simply walking away. Of course this is not exactly what happened, and I tried to use my counselling skills for some benefit within the remit of the research interview, but this is how I felt. Furthermore some participants spoke about their experiences at great length, up to four times what I am used to within the therapeutic hour, and I felt unable to 'call time' as I would at the end of a therapy session. Having prodded participants for their stories, I felt it was only fair to allow them the space to express what they needed to. Looking back, my struggles seem to be concerned with a loss of the agency I hold as a therapist. Needless to say, it took me some time to recover after each interview, time to process participants’ accounts and to make some sense of them in my own mind. I don’t mind admitting that I was greatly relieved when it was decided I would stop after seven interviews since the process was taking its toll.

So what has kept me going through this research project? First and foremost it has been how deeply moved I have been the participants’ accounts. I was stirred by their shared sense of injustice, in particular the way they perceived the law to favour women and leave men vulnerable to the whims of their ex-partners. Similarly the terrible plight of men like Phil and Steve whose fatherhood seems to have been ruined by their ex-wives.
Having heard these men’s accounts I felt bound to advocate on their behalves and indeed my great frustration is that I have been so limited for words in this particular research report and unable to elaborate on each of the points participants raised. However this has confirmed my growing sense that I would like to pursue research post-qualification. In part it was a sense of moral compunction that brought me to counselling psychology and it now seems that pursuing research is another way to assuage this.
Call for Papers and Instructions to Authors

_Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research, and Practice about Men as Fathers_ invites submissions of scholarly articles and essays dealing with all aspects of fathering. _Fathering_ is a multi-disciplinary, peer-reviewed journal devoted to the promotion of knowledge about fathers and families as well as knowledge of practice with fathers. The journal publishes original articles that are theoretical, empirical, practice-oriented, or based on comprehensive reviews of the literature.

**Submission Guidelines**

- Submission implies that the article has not been published elsewhere, nor is under consideration for publication by another journal.

- Manuscripts will be reviewed anonymously. In order to insure anonymity, each copy of the manuscript should include a separate title page with the author(s)' name(s) and affiliation(s), and these should not appear anywhere else on the manuscript. Footnotes that identify the author(s) should be typed on a separate page. Author(s) should make every effort to see that the manuscript itself contains no clues to the author(s)' identity.

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- In lieu of four paper copies, authors are encouraged to submit an electronic version in MS Word for PC attached as a file to an email addressed to the editor. Electronic submission can greatly speed the review process. Send the copy to JayFagan@mensstudies.com.

Manuscript preparation:


- All copy must be typed, double-spaced (including indented material, tables, footnotes, and references) on 8 1/2 by 11 inch white opaque paper. Allow margins of about one and one-half inches all around.

- All manuscripts must include an abstract containing a maximum of approximately 100-150 words typed on a separate sheet of paper. List up to six keywords on the same page immediately below the abstract.