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# Through fog: An autoethnography of childhood emotional neglect.

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## **Abstract**

Childhood emotional neglect is increasingly recognised as significant and widespread, potentially linked to adult depression and anxiety, yet it remains hidden, poorly understood, ill-defined, foggy. Less widely researched than other forms of child maltreatment, emotional neglect has largely been neglected. The literature tends towards measures of prevalence, or predicted outcomes; at the other extreme are purely subjective personal misery stories.

My autoethnography blends autobiography, my own story, with ethnography, the story of a group of 12 participants. Unstructured interviews capture nuanced stories of emotional neglect, and I use my subjective experience to examine the stories in their social, cultural and historical context. Blurring boundaries between research and creative writing, I aim to elicit a visceral response: don't just hear this story, really feel it.

Thematic analysis of the data reveals common themes: feeling unloved, unwanted; unseen, unheard, invisible; feeling disconnected, aloneness; a lack of joy. Taught in childhood that our feelings don't matter, it's hard in adulthood to recognise and attend to them. Blamed for childhood upsets, "What's wrong with you?" becomes, "It must be me." Taught not to have needs, not to make a fuss, not to inconvenience anyone, it's hard to ask for help, or recognise we need it. We're left confused, alone; if our own parents don't want us, don't love us, can't enjoy us, won't listen to our story, who will?

Participants tell the sociocultural context of their childhoods: hospital practices and child-rearing fashions that damaged infant attachment; emotionally distant parenting handed down the generations; pressures of work and home life, or our parents' own unmet childhood needs, that left them unable to love and enjoy us.

Childhood emotional neglect is widespread, causes far-reaching harm, yet lacks clear definition, and remains under-researched. It's time to tell this story; it's time to come out of the fog.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	v
Table of figures .....	vi
Acknowledgements .....	vii
Prologue: The fog.....	1
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	3
Chapter 2: Methodology .....	18
Introduction .....	18
Dramatic interlude.....	33
Dramatic interlude.....	52
Reflexivity and Bracketing .....	62
Ethical considerations .....	69
Analysis.....	77
Dramatic interlude.....	86
Chapter 3: Literature review .....	99
The fog .....	99
Dramatic interlude.....	139
Chapter 4: "All my bruises were inside" .....	157
Chapter 5: Discussion .....	158
Introduction .....	158
Section 1: Unloved.....	162
Dramatic interlude.....	167
Dramatic interlude.....	202
Section 2: Lasting impact.....	222
Dramatic interlude.....	267
Section 3: Sociocultural aspects.....	274
The fog .....	286
Section 4: Perspectives.....	333
The fog .....	354
Chapter 6: Concluding thoughts .....	369
The fog .....	369
Dramatic interlude: Finale.....	385
Epilogue: The fog.....	390
References .....	391
Appendices .....	413
Appendix A: "All my bruises were inside" .....	414

Appendix B: Models of themes and sub-themes .....	434
Appendix C: Models and figures from NVivo analysis phase .....	439
Appendix D: Ethical approval paperwork .....	440
Appendix E: Analysis of first bracketing interview .....	450

## Table of figures

Figure 1: Through fog.....	1
Figure 2: The crack in my world.....	16
Figure 3: An axe to grind .....	50
Figure 4: A table of themes.....	79
Figure 5: Slice & Dice .....	82
Figure 6: Model of major themes.....	91
Figure 7: The maze .....	96
Figure 8: Search terms .....	101
Figure 9: Table of search results .....	102
Figure 10: Arrangement of major themes and themes in discussion chapter .....	159
Figure 11: No emotions allowed.....	166
Figure 12: A hole in the heart .....	174
Figure 13: House of bombs.....	250
Figure 14: Mind map (15/10/14).....	275
Figure 15: Russian doll .....	283
Figure 16: Angela in pram .....	299
Figure 17: Birth order of participants .....	325
Figure 18: Model of themes from Round 2 .....	439
Figure 19: Word cloud of 1,000 most frequently used words in "Intergenerational" nodes, Round 2.....	439

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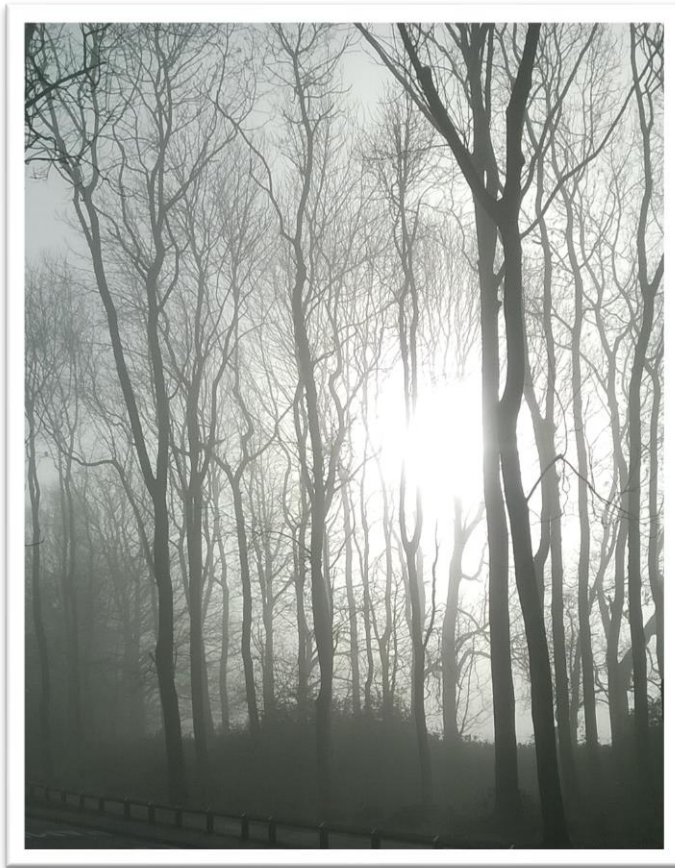




## **Prologue: The fog**

The fog has crept up on me almost without me noticing. Now, all around me is damp, white, impenetrable. I don't know where I am, and I can't see where I'm going. The ground underfoot is marshy, and the way ahead uncertain.

Figure 1: Through fog



I'm lost and afraid, but I know I can't stay still; I have to move forward. If I stand still, I will sink. I inch ahead, testing each step, searching for solid ground. I have a torch with me, but the light doesn't help. I just have to find my way by touch, step by step. The fog blocks out the sunlight. I'm cold, and I feel very alone. Sound is muffled by the fog, too. I can't see the moisture in the air, but I know it's there, because my clothes are damp. The fog has seeped in.

I'm tired of trying to find my way alone in the fog. I call out: "Hello? Is anyone there?"

I think I hear a voice, coming faintly through the fog.

"Hello?" I call again. "Is there anyone out there?"

I see a little flicker of light, and another figure begins to take shape in the fog. It's no more than a shadow at first, but once she is nearer I can see her more clearly—another woman, just like me, with a torch, trying to find her way across this marshy ground in the fog. We recognise each other, and embrace, and edge forwards together.

So we go on, and every now and then I call out again, in case there's anyone else nearby. Soon, another woman joins us, and another. Maybe only women get lost in the fog? I don't know. I call out again, a little louder and more confidently now, sure that there must be others like us; and this time it's a young man who answers, and joins the group. Soon, more women join us, and more men. There are 13 of us in total. We walk on together, and as we walk, the others tell their stories. They've been trying to find their way, too, but it's so hard when you're alone in the fog, and the ground feels so treacherous underfoot. Our progress is slow, but at least now we know we're not alone.

\* \* \*

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

In this introductory chapter, I explain why I set out on this journey, setting the research in context both in academic terms and in terms of my life story. I explain briefly what informed my choice of methodology, although a fuller justification of the research methods comes in Chapter 2. I introduce the creative elements of my thesis, *The Fog*, and the *Dramatic Interludes*, explain why I chose to write in the first person, and introduce my approach to reflexivity. I outline the challenges of defining childhood emotional neglect, and address the question of blame, which I return to in the discussion chapter. Finally, I set out the structure of the thesis, and introduce the characters who play a part in it.

### *Why I set out on this journey*

This research grew out of my dissertation for an MSc in Counselling Psychology, which began as a heuristic self-search inquiry into the experience of receiving feedback, but became an exploration of my experience of childhood emotional neglect. The themes that I identified in my data led me to literature that described this phenomenon, and I knew instantly that it matched my experience. There had always been the possibility that my dissertation might become autoethnographic, as I had questions about my experience: Was it typical for my generation? Was it something my parents had experienced themselves, and unintentionally passed on? Was it to do with birth order, being a girl, or the Second World War? However, in that piece of research I kept the focus on the heuristic pursuit of the essence of the phenomenon; the fleeting sense of something that was on the edge of my awareness, and the endeavour to bring it fully into awareness. The logical subject for my PhD research project, then, was the experience of childhood emotional neglect, and the questions that I had left

unanswered in the MSc dissertation. I wanted to know what happened (or didn't happen), and why; I'm trying to understand (and I realise that may not be possible).

The main question that I set out to answer is:

What is the experience of childhood emotional neglect?

Childhood emotional neglect is increasingly thought to be the most common form of child maltreatment, and yet remains the least visible, least understood and least researched (Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van Ijzendoorn, 2013; Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Alink, and van Ijzendoorn, 2015). What research there is tends to be quantitative, rather than qualitative, examining the prevalence, or the potential relationship between childhood emotional neglect and adult outcomes, and rarely gives voice to the participant. As I explain further in the literature review, such research is sometimes methodologically flawed, for example, making generalisations from insufficient data, or not making clear distinctions between emotional neglect and emotional abuse, or other forms of child maltreatment.

An amendment to the Serious Crime Act in March 2015, the so-called *Cinderella Law* (BBC, 2014), updated the legal definition of child cruelty to include emotional abuse and neglect for the first time, but the law itself does not give a definition; the wording of the original act was extended to cover ill-treatment "whether physical or otherwise". Without a clear understanding of emotional neglect, and what the long-term consequences are for child development, it's hard to see how this law can be effective. This thesis does not have all the answers; but in painting a detailed picture of emotional

neglect, using the participants' words to evoke the lived experience, I may add some more pieces in the puzzle.

### *Why autoethnography?*

Autoethnography seemed an appropriate method to examine a phenomenon from different angles, and to answer the questions I had to leave unanswered in my MSc dissertation. I was attracted by the boundary-blurring, paradigm-challenging nature of autoethnography, the opportunities for story-telling, social critique, creative research methods, and the element of performance (Holman Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013, p. 37). Autoethnography would help me to answer my research question, and seemed a good fit for someone who had always felt something of an outsider in her own culture.

### *Creativity: The fog and the dramatic interludes*

I wanted to incorporate creative writing in my thesis as a way of engaging the emotions as well as the intellect of the reader/audience. The first creative element that I developed was *The Fog*, prompted partly by a reflection on the elusive nature of childhood emotional neglect, and partly by my sense of confusion when I started the substantive literature search. This creative element conveys some of the *felt sense* (Gendlin, 1978/2003, p. 32) of childhood emotional neglect; fog serves as a metaphor at times for the feelings of isolation, confusion, and disconnection from others; it also represents the challenges around definition, in that childhood emotional neglect is recognised as a phenomenon, yet the closer we look at it, the harder it may be to see it clearly. *The Fog* runs through the thesis as a narrative thread; I invite the

reader/audience to use it as an opportunity to reflect, and to focus on the felt sense of childhood emotional neglect.

The second creative element is a series of what I have called *dramatic interludes*. I always wrote these at times of heightened emotion; each one represents a moment in time during the research process, and although they are a series of snapshots, rather than scenes in a play with a clearly defined plot, there is nevertheless, just as in a series of family photographs, an element of progression, culminating in a finale at the end of the thesis. To some extent, I write my reflexivity into the dramatic interludes, sharing my inner dialogue during the research process.

Although I have called these “interludes”, they are not a break from the main argument of the thesis, but an integral part of it. They tell some of my own story, perhaps the parts that I can only tell obliquely, through creative writing, possibly out of a sense of shame. They have also been a way of accessing knowledge that I could not access any other way (Bolton, 2008). For example, it has always been hard for me to claim knowledge or power; yet I can do this through the voice of SOPHIA, my ideal researcher self. In one dramatic interlude, SOPHIA stops BABA YAGA and THE GRINDYLOW in their tracks before they can say anything else destructive or critical; this may reflect my growing ability to catch hold of my inner demons and silence them before they can say too much. Through the research process, however, I am growing in confidence as a researcher; in another dramatic interlude, ANGELA is able to silence BABA YAGA and THE GRINDYLOW herself.

Another function of the dramatic interludes is to allow the reader/audience to come up for air. The dramatic interludes allow for some playfulness, for example, when THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET gets bored and makes up nonsense words about research; this enables me to reassure the reader/audience that although I have been deeply wounded by my own experience, I am OK. I introduce the characters under “Dramatis Personae”, below.

### *Voice*

Autoethnography rejects the positivist convention of the objective researcher-author who is absent, without any personal influence on the research. Instead, the researcher-author is self-consciously present throughout the research; I have therefore chosen to write in the first person. When I am writing from personal experience, to do otherwise would feel inauthentic. In addition, at times I have chosen to write in the present tense so that the action unfolds before the reader/audience’s eyes (Tillmann-Healey, 1996, p. 104), conveying a “you-are-there” feel (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 105). This may help me to achieve the autoethnographic aim of creating an evocative work which arouses a visceral response (Bochner & Ellis, 2002).

As a child, I often felt that my voice was silenced, or simply not heard. It has therefore been important for me to find my own voice; the creative elements have to some extent enabled me to achieve this. As an aspect of the autoethnographic nature of this research, it has also been important to allow the similarly silenced voices of the participants to be heard. I have done this partly by using extracts from the interviews to illustrate the themes in the discussion chapter, and also through the short film, “*All my*



*bruises were inside*”, which forms part of this thesis but will continue to speak beyond the walls of academia on social media.

### *Reflexivity*

I explore reflexivity and reflective practice in the methodology chapter, but reflexivity is also a thread running through the thesis. Reflective practice is not a departure from the norm, but my default setting. This has probably originated from my training as a breastfeeding counsellor; whilst I was not engaged in therapeutic counselling, the counselling skills that I learnt were modelled on Rogers’ person-centred approach to counselling, and there was a strong emphasis on reflective practice. In terms of this thesis, by telling you, the reader/audience, something of myself and my own story, I am encouraging you to evaluate the research for yourself, using your own subjective knowledge to decide for yourself what feels “true” to you, and what feels “false” or questionable.

### *Definitions: of childhood, of emotional neglect*

Initially, one of my aims for this study was to help to resolve the problem of accurately defining childhood emotional neglect, although as the study progressed and I listened to more stories, I felt that I moved further away from this goal, rather than nearer to it (see page 158). Childhood emotional neglect continues to elude a single, universal definition. This is widely recognised in the literature (Iwaniec, 2006), and I discuss the challenges around definitions in the literature review; for now, I offer some general considerations, both of “childhood”, and of “emotional neglect”.

“Childhood” may be defined according to biological parameters; for example, the onset of puberty could be defined as the end of childhood, although that would not fit with our current legal understanding of childhood as ending much later (UNCRC, Article 1, 1989). Around the world, leaving childhood is often marked by formal rituals or initiation ceremonies. In the UK, we leave childhood and enter adulthood via a series of confusingly contradictory milestones; for example, an individual is considered old enough to smoke, drink alcohol, have consensual sexual relationships, drive a car, leave school, enter paid employment, marry, open a bank account, and vote—all of which are considered quite adult actions—at a range of different ages, starting from as young as 13. Elsewhere, and at different times in our own culture, “adulthood” may have begun much earlier; or not have been conceptualized as a different state at all (Hays, 1996). For the purpose of this study, I follow The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which defines children as everyone under 18, unless "majority is attained earlier" under local law (UNCRC, Article 1, 1989).

But what is “childhood”? Is it a time of innocence, protected from the harsh realities of life—a waiting room for adulthood—or is it an apprenticeship for adult life, where we learn how to be ourselves, and how to be with others? How childhood is conceptualised varies from culture to culture. A UNICEF report found that in Sweden, the emphasis was on preparing for “a responsible adulthood”, and in Spain, childhood was seen as a “cherished special time, mainly for children to learn”; whereas in the UK, children were “often left to their own devices”, with family roles and expectations less clearly defined than in the other two countries (Ritchie, 2014).

Humans are unique among mammals in that our infants' brains are not fully mature at birth; they have the hardware in place, to use a computer metaphor, but they need to be programmed by interactions with those around us, so that we can function in our specific social environments (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 55; Lieberman, 2015, p. 41).

Childhood is when we learn, not only through formal education, about the world—about maths and science, the humanities, and how to ride a bike, or keep ourselves clean; but from the moment we're born, we're also learning about the social world and our place in it. Who can I trust, and whom should I fear? Am I allowed to have needs and desires, and if I express them, will they be met? Is it safe to love? Will I be loved in return?

“Emotional neglect” is even harder to define, and continues to elude a single, universally applicable definition, because like childhood, it is culturally and historically situated (Iwaniec, 2006, p. 23). There are multiple, confused and overlapping definitions of emotional neglect which causes problems for researchers. I explore this in detail in the literature review; but I outline here some of the dimensions along which childhood emotional neglect is conceptualised in the literature, followed by my own working definition. For the purposes of data collection, the participants have offered their definitions through the stories they tell, and I accept their definitions as equally valid; you may have your own definition, too.

Some writers make a distinction between abuse and neglect (Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Alink, & van Ijzendoorn, 2012, p. 15). Abuse may simplistically be seen as equating to “action”, and neglect to “inaction” (Klein, Elifson, & Sterk, 2007); this maps onto the distinction between “commission” and “omission” (Music, 2009; Glaser,

2002), and possibly the distinction between “psychological abuse (cruel and sadistic acts)” and “parental antipathy (rejection)” (Bifulco et al., 1994, cited by Howe, 2005, p. 94). Briere and Jordan distinguish between “events”, which they would apply to instances of abuse (all forms) and “processes” or “relationships”, which they would apply to emotional neglect (2009, p. 383).

Throughout the literature, various terms, including psychological maltreatment (Howe, 2005), psychological abuse (Felitti et al., 1998, p. 248), and emotional abuse (Stoltenborgh et al., 2012), are used as near synonyms or overlapping terms. Friedman and Billick (2015) question whether abuse and neglect are interchangeable terms or conceptually different (p. 254); Trickett and McBride-Chang suggest that abuse and neglect overlap (1995). Perhaps the distinction between abuse and neglect is unhelpful; Glaser (2002), for example, proposes a definition which combines “emotional abuse and neglect” (p. 703).

Both Glaser (2002) and Music (2009) refer to degrees of harm; parent-child relationships are recognised as existing on a continuum from “good” to a “sufficiently damaging relationship to merit being termed abusive” (Glaser, 2002, p. 700), and childhood emotional neglect as ranging from mild to severe (Music, 2009, p. 142).

Some debate whether the emphasis should be on the parents’ “ill treatment” of a child, or on “impairment of the child’s health and development” (Glaser, 2002, p. 701).

Howe (2005) advocates for a “reverse definition”; that is, defining what a child needs for normal healthy psychological development, and assuming psychological maltreatment (entailing emotional abuse and neglect) in its absence (p. 96).

This may be a helpful stance, as it reduces the emphasis on criticizing parents, and instead helps to focus everyone’s attention, including that of the parents, on the child’s needs. Such a definition, however, requires a clear understanding of a child’s needs from a “competent, caring parent” (Howe, 2005, p. 96). Brazelton and Greenspan (2000) propose a list of the “irreducible” needs of children; however, this highlights the difficulty of separating emotional neglect from physical neglect. For example, a child’s need for protection, safety and regulation may include both physical and emotional elements.

Whilst some of the participants in this study describe incidents or experiences which may fall under the category of abuse, for me, the essence of childhood emotional neglect is not so much the presence of harmful interactions, as the absence of the positive ones which a child needs for development; the lack of a consistently available and attuned primary caregiver; the lack of joy and playfulness; the absence of anyone in our lives who promoted us, encouraged us, allowed us to know that we were special, prized, enjoyed.

### *It’s not about blame*

Mothers (or parents; but it’s usually mothers) are frequently “blamed” for negative outcomes (Hays, 1996, p. 48; White & Wastell, 2017, p. 2267). But parents—our parents, their parents, ourselves as parents—cannot shoulder all the blame for childhood emotional neglect. I may be being too generous, but I believe that our parents were, probably, doing the best they could with the knowledge they had at the time and with the resources, both material and psychological, available to them. Some

writers refer to “victims of victims” (Liedloff, 1975/1989, p. 12; Hay, 1984/2005, p. 3). Although I dislike the term “victims”, which implies helplessness, I am conscious of the intergenerational aspects of childhood emotional neglect. I don’t make any claim in this thesis that we can look forward and predict that individuals who are emotionally neglected in childhood will inevitably go on to emotionally neglect their own children. What both the data and the literature seem to suggest, however, is that if we look back with compassion at our parents, we may see a pattern of emotionally cold or psychologically absent parenting, passed on from generation to generation, without any intent to cause harm (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 23).

I have tried to make it clear throughout that this is not about blaming our parents. Several of the participants are equally clear that they don’t blame their parents, and can see that they were only ever doing the best they could; but whilst we are clear that no harm was intended, harm was still caused.

### *About the thesis*

I was not brave enough to completely abandon the conventional thesis structure; however, Chapter 2 is the methodology chapter, which includes an exploration of reflexivity, ethical considerations, research methods, and analysis, and the literature review forms Chapter 3. This is so that the reader/audience becomes familiar with the autoethnographic nature of the thesis early on, but also reflects the fact that I carried out the literature search and review during, not before, data collection. In Chapter 4, I present what would be, in a conventional thesis, the “findings”, in the form of a short film, “*All my bruises were inside*”, which tells the story of the participants through two composite characters and a narrator. The discussion follows in Chapter 5; and in the

concluding chapter, Chapter 6, I address the limitations of this study, and implications for practice.

### *Dramatis personae*

This thesis is not structured as a play, but it feels important at the outset to introduce some characters who are going to play an important part in telling the story of my research journey through the dramatic interludes. These are what might be called *configurations of self*, to borrow a term from person-centred counselling (Mearns & Thorne, 2013, p. 29). This fits with my understanding of myself not as a fixed, unitary self, but as having multiple “selves” (Reed-Danahay, 1997).

ANGELA: Myself, as you see me standing before you: Mother, daughter, sister, wife, friend, counsellor, PhD candidate, researcher and researched, the narrator *and* the subject of the narrative at times.

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET: My inner child, whose internal life/history informs the research. Sometimes a very little girl, and sometimes a surly adolescent, THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET stomps, and sobs, and giggles her way through the thesis, expressing all the messy emotions that were forbidden in an emotionally neglected childhood.

SOPHIA: My ideal researcher self; usually to be found with a book in her hand. Calm, logical and wise, SOPHIA reminds me to look at the evidence, the data, and the literature, and to remember what my research question is.

BABA YAGA: One of my saboteurs; BABA YAGA is an ambiguous figure from Russian folklore, portrayed variously as an old woman (sometimes cruel, sometimes maternal); a beautiful woman (sometimes helpful, sometimes hindering); or one of

three sisters of the same name. I have chosen this ambiguous figure to personify the critical voice which is not literally my mother's voice, but rather my own inner critic; and perhaps at times my perception of my mother's voice.

THE GRINDYLOW: My other saboteur; THE GRINDYLOW is a marsh-dwelling creature from English folklore. Reputed to grasp at children's ankles and pull them into the marsh if they stray too close to the water, THE GRINDYLOW may have been a bogeyman invented to keep children safe.

CHORUS OF ACADEMICS: An imaginary panel of academics, who comment, question and critique, a bit like a Greek chorus. The CHORUS OF ACADEMICS voice the anxiety, frustration, and sometimes resentment in my relationship with the academic establishment.

### *The Little Girl with Big Feet*

In the Welsh folk tale, *The Little Man with Big Feet*, (Berg, 1966), the "little man" invites the old farmer to stand on his enormous feet, so that the farmer can see the harm he has been causing by throwing away his dirty dishwater over the wall outside his house every night. The little man is desperate; every night his little house under the ground is covered in the washing-up water, and all the tea-leaves and potato peelings and other kitchen waste, and this has been happening for 30 years. The old farmer is upset, and goes home and tells his wife, who is also upset; now that they know about this problem, they are prompted to take action, despite the trouble and expense.

This story, in Leila Berg's collection of Folk tales for reading and telling (1966), is a tale-within-a-tale, a sub-plot in a larger Welsh folk tale. I don't remember if it was read to me when I was a child, but I remember reading it to my own children, put-on



Welsh accent and all. When I first encountered autoethnography as a research methodology, I thought of this story. It has all the characteristics of autoethnography: challenging a prevailing discourse (the old farmer always throws his washing-up water over the wall); a hidden, marginalised or minority story being told (the little man lives underground); using judicious self-exposure to arouse empathy (looking through the

Figure 2: The crack in my world



crack in the ground, and the invitation from the little man to “stand on my feet, then you’ll see,” is very like an invitation to “stand in my shoes”); eliciting a visceral response (the old farmer and his wife are upset); provoking social action (the old farmer and his wife change their habits). I have modelled THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET on the “little man” in this story; I invite the reader to “stand on my feet” and look through the crack in my world, and see the distress caused by childhood emotional neglect.

What's more, the image of the underground house with the kitchen waste thrown over it is a powerful metaphor for the experience of childhood emotional neglect. The experience of our feelings being dismissed as unimportant, our passions and enthusiasms ridiculed or ignored, is very like the description in the story of the dirty dishwater going down the chimney and putting the fire out. Like the little man in the story, those of us who have experienced childhood emotional neglect have put up with, and put up with, and put up with it, for more than 30 years in some cases. Now, we're telling our story.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

### Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the research question, explaining what I want to find out, and who I want to tell, as well as describing the actual questions I asked participants. I explore the strengths and limitations of autoethnography, and justify it as an appropriate methodology for the research question, including the philosophical basis. I acknowledge tensions between autoethnography and the requirements of a higher research degree, and how I attempted to resolve them. I introduce the participants and describe the process of data collection and analysis, and how I chose to present the outcomes of the study, considering the strengths and limitations of what I did, and why I feel my choices were justified. Finally, I describe reflexivity within my research, including the bracketing process, and the ethical considerations that are relevant to such sensitive research.

### *What am I trying to find out?*

The central research question is this:

What is the experience of childhood emotional neglect?

Initially, I hoped to refine the definition of childhood emotional neglect. Now, I find that the more closely I look, the less clarity I can bring to the definition. As I acknowledge in the introduction to this thesis, childhood emotional neglect is a nebulous phenomenon, hovering as it does somewhere on the continuum between culturally appropriate, healthy, respectful parenting, and psychological abuse (Iwaniec, 2006).

Whatever I find will only be a partial and incomplete answer, and may only be valid for the here and now (Etherington, 2004a, p. 82). Childhood emotional neglect is a human experience, socially or culturally constructed (Iwaniec, 2006). Autoethnography rejects the notion of a human world that is fixed and fully knowable (McLeod, 2001), even the notion of a single self that is fixed and fully knowable (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Denzin, 2014, p. 79). Likewise, culture is not something that can be fully known, but rather “ambivalent”, in process rather than fixed (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 119); and our understanding of a given culture is inevitably altered by “more reading, writing, research, conversation, or simply living” (ibid, p. 123). Furthermore, as our cultural goals develop over time, and as the concept of emotional neglect is subject to further research, anything that I write here may become more valid, or less; I can only add to the conversation, not give the last word. All I can hope to add to the existing body of knowledge is a small amount of new information about the experience of childhood emotional neglect; insights garnered from 12 participant interviews and my own story.

With this in mind, I asked the participants, and myself in the bracketing interviews, a single question:

What was your experience of childhood emotional neglect?

I followed this with an invitation to tell “your story, in your own words”, deliberately keeping the question open in order to elicit the detailed descriptions that were significant to the participants, rather than structuring the interview around a set of topics or themes.

I was also interested to know the following:

What impact has it had on you through your adult life?

This supplementary question rests on my assumption, partly confirmed by both the data and the literature (for example, Stoltenborgh et al., 2012, p. 871), that childhood emotional neglect has a recognisable impact on adult life; participants usually volunteered their answers before I asked the question.

*What is my audience?*

I want my research to reach specialist audiences; those who may come into contact with individuals affected by childhood emotional neglect in the course of their professional lives, including counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists, teachers, social workers, and professionals in the criminal justice system. However, I also want my research to reach a more general audience; people who had similar experiences themselves; parents, and those about to become parents; and individuals who recognise that a friend, romantic partner, or work colleague, experienced childhood emotional neglect.

This aspiration to reach a wider audience, both within and outside the academic world, partly influenced my choice of methodology. Stories, because they “condense, exemplify, and evoke a world,” may be as valid and legitimate a way of organising research as any other, and have the advantage that they are accessible to a general audience (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 119). Autoethnography in particular rejects the

“inaccessible and jargon-laden” nature of some traditional academic writing, read only by other academics (Holman Jones et al., 2013, p. 36).

### *What is the chosen methodology?*

Autoethnography developed partly out of an increasing distrust of the “objective observer/outsider” stance of the traditional anthropologist, which led to anthropological studies or ethnographies by “insiders” (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 3). There continues to be a debate around whether the “insider” or “outsider” can carry out the best anthropological or ethnographic study; in part, this reflects the feminist, post-positivist rejection of binaries and dichotomies, recognising that we all have multiple, simultaneous or overlapping roles in our lives (Meerwald, 2013) and that boundaries and identities are not fixed but fluid (Taylor, 2011). Autoethnography in particular is associated with blurring boundaries and challenges traditional notions of “real research, real data” (ibid, p. 44).

Autoethnography may be seen as a form of ethnography where, in contrast to conventional ethnography, the researcher rejects the “objective outsider” stance (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 6). Terms such as “native ethnography,” which Reed-Danahay defines as “a study of one’s own group”, or “home” ethnography (ibid, p. 8), attempt to capture the autoethnographer’s insider status. However, one of the challenges of this approach is that if we are part of a culture, we may not be able to critique it adequately. The task for the autoethnographer is to make the familiar *unfamiliar*; “tacking back and forth between an insider’s passionate perspective and an outsider’s dispassionate one” (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 77). To borrow a metaphor from photography, autoethnographers “zoom backward and forward, inward and outward” (Ellis, 1999, p.

11). Ellis suggests that the autoethnographer studies the scene “first through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self” (ibid).

However, my reflexive note reads:

“Zooming in and zooming out” both imply some distance from the subject, as the photographer remains behind the lens. It feels to me more like “stepping in and stepping out”; I’m really standing inside the experience, and then standing outside, looking at it objectively, like someone from outer space. (Reflective journal, 12/04/18).

Membership of the group that gives the researcher “native” status may not be restricted to a racial or geographical group, but rather some other aspect of “self-identification” (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 5). This might be membership of a group of people who have a shared experience such as being a refugee, or having survived breast cancer (Ellis, 1999); or being one of a group of people who identify themselves as having experienced childhood emotional neglect.

Muncey places emphasis on “connecting the personal to the cultural” (2010, p. 29), and incorporating “the researcher’s vulnerable self, emotions, body and spirit” (ibid, p. 30). Reed-Danahay suggests that autoethnographic research may be carried out by “an autobiographer who places the story of his or her life within a story of the social context within which it occurs” (1997, p. 9); however, autoethnography sets itself apart from autobiography or memoir by its “commitment to rigorous cultural interrogation and analysis,” (Grant, Short, & Turner, 2013, p. 3).

A key aspect of autoethnography is a blending social science and literature; as in heuristic research, the “results” or findings of autoethnographic research may be presented as a “creative synthesis”, rather than a “conventional research report format” (McLeod, 2011, p. 212), extending or blurring “the boundaries of academic writing”, (ibid, p. 213). McLeod suggests that such use of poetry, drama and other forms of creative writing, and even artwork, may enable the autoethnographic researcher to represent “what was unsaid and possibly unsayable” (ibid, p. 214); I explore the role of creativity further below (page 24). However, extending the boundaries of academic writing may lead to tensions when the research project is a PhD thesis, subject to the requirements of academic protocol (see page 37).

Within the natural sciences, there is a convention of research being objective, rational and logical. Atrocities committed by Nazi doctors during WWII, and the abuse of science by Stalinist and other inhumane regimes which used knowledge to support political ideology, strengthened the tendency towards the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge’s sake, or “value-neutral” research (McLeod, 2011, p. 40). However, McLeod argues that within the human sciences, this may be difficult to achieve: “when the researcher is the instrument of inquiry . . . it is hard to argue that any kind of pure objectivity has been attained” (McLeod, 2011, p. 40). Instead, McLeod argues the case for research as “value-informed practice” which makes “a commitment to social justice,” (ibid, p. 40). Critical theorists and feminist writers go further, not only denying the possibility of value-free inquiry, claiming that all researchers are influenced to some extent by their values and belief systems, but holding that



“academic knowledge that merely serves to support existing inequalities within society is indefensible,” (ibid, p. 41).

Autoethnography, in particular, is concerned with challenging or critiquing existing inequalities; or communicating the meaning of an experience, the quality of someone or some group’s life more fully, with the explicit aim of bringing about a desired change (Lockford, 2002, p. 76). This fits with the general ethos of qualitative research, especially within counselling and psychotherapy, which “actively embraces the use of qualitative research or human science as a means of furthering social justice and progressive social action,” (McLeod, 2011, p. 40). Indeed, Van Maanen (2011) suggests that this is inherent in all research: researchers “traffic in communications, and communication implies that we intend to alter the views of our readers,” (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 147).

### *Creative methods*

Autoethnographies may be written in the form of novels or poetry, or incorporate visual arts (Etherington, 2004a; Muncey, 2010; Turner, 2013). However, in a seminar on performative social science, Jones (2010) cautions against “taking interview transcriptions, leaving out a line or two here and there, rearranging it on the page in stanza format mimicking poetry, and then passing it off as poetic inquiry.”

Yet

even just

arranging the

words differently

on the page  
makes us pay  
*attention*  
in a different way

The arrangement of text “in stanza format mimicking poetry” does, I would argue, slow down our reading, pricking our attention. A rhyme can emphasize or echo a word or phrase, creating connections that might otherwise be overlooked. In my brief example above, putting “even” and “just” side by side on a separate line may temporarily distract the reader by drawing attention to the fact that these are potential synonyms; separating “makes us pay” from “attention” by a line break could momentarily alter the meaning of both lines. Law (2004) makes the case for writing academic works differently, “as if they were poems, as if every word counted” (p. 12).

As outlined in the introduction, I developed two forms of creative writing in this autoethnography, which serve different but overlapping purposes. In *The Fog*, the short story which intercepts the academic thesis, I aim to convey some of the feelings around emotional neglect in narrative form. In the dramatic interludes, I play out some of the struggles of the PhD process, simultaneously telling some of my story. Both of these creative elements use metaphors to engage the reader/audience’s emotions, and to communicate some of the abstract concepts under discussion in an accessible way; the occasional photographs and line-drawings, too, may evoke emotions that words alone cannot (McLeod, 2011, p. 214).

However, creative methods are not merely a way of representing the outcomes of our research so that they are more accessible to a wider audience; they are also an important way of accessing subconscious or intuitive knowledge. According to Bolton, “People know, understand, intuit, remember, feel and think far more than they realize. Creative artistic processes can enable expressive exploration of areas to which logical or analytic thinking has limited access” (2008, p. 135); writing creatively within my thesis enabled me to access previously inaccessible inner wisdom.

Reflecting on the use of metaphors both to elicit and disseminate knowledge led me to a striking insight. Lakoff and Johnson describe “ARGUMENT IS WAR” as one of the key concepts that we live by, at least in the Western, industrialized world (1980/2003, p. 4). For someone who has always avoided conflict, it makes sense that I would choose a methodology that refuses to get drawn into the fight. I am not setting out to test a hypothesis, or to prove a case in an adversarial sense; instead, I will “put it out there” so that you, the reader/audience, can “make of it what you will” (Turner, 2013, p. 227).

### *Emancipatory?*

Harper and Thompson (2012) suggest that all qualitative research has the potential to be empowering, because it listens to the stories of participants, and strives to communicate the participants’ actual words in some form or other; emancipatory research consciously chooses methods that will “treat people with respect and listen to their stories rather than treating them as objects” (p. 45).

I was drawn to autoethnography because I associated it with “emancipatory research” (Wall, 2006, p. 3), concerned not only with social justice and social action in the wider world, but also bringing about positive change for those directly involved in the research process, including myself (Holman Jones et al., 2013, p. 32). Participants may benefit from the opportunity to “reflect on and re-evaluate experiences as part of the process of research” (Letherby, 2000, p. 101; also Bourne & Robson, 2013). Personal growth is not the primary motivator, but I deliberately chose a methodology which celebrates and values my willingness to use my own story in my research process (Grant et al., 2013).

I kept in touch with participants for as long as they indicated that they were willing, sharing my writing with them, inviting their comments, and negotiating the final representation of their stories (Stacey, 1988). This process of offering participants the opportunity to “talk back to how they have been represented in the text” is a feature of emancipatory research, but also an important aspect of relational ethics (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011); honouring the commitment to sharing power, valuing the participants as co-creators of knowledge, is central to feminist theory and research. However, Stacey (1988) cautions that the researcher cannot completely avoid taking responsibility for interpreting and evaluating the data, and that sometimes, despite our best efforts, we may find that in choosing one course of action over another, we inevitably “betray a feminist principle” (p. 24).

Although participants described it as a challenging process, it seems it has also been emancipatory. Mickey, for example, wrote:

I would like to say that confessing to someone about my childhood experience was very helpful for me. Even though it was difficult to tell the story and read the transcript, it helped me digest better the information. (Mickey, by e-mail, 06/05/16).

Muhammed, reflecting on the interview process, wrote:

I also felt myself as normal when you said as a 50 years old [sic] woman you still carry childhood emotional neglect's signs or consequences in your life, as it was a reassurance for me that it is such a major issue to deal with in rest of our lives. I felt normal because it was not only me struggling with it. (Muhammed, by e-mail, 19/10/16).

These comments seem to confirm that, although the purpose is not to provide therapy, unstructured interviews where participants can “unload suppressed feelings, innermost thoughts, and private experiences” can feel therapeutic (Trussell, 2010, p. 389, citing Ortiz, 2001).

Rachel's comments, in response to reading her interview transcript, suggest that the process has helped to change her feelings towards her father:

When reading the parts where I spoke of my understanding of how dad's upbringing had impacted his own ways of being/parenting and how much closer we now are—I felt full of love for my dad when reading the transcript, almost

as if I know he really has been the best dad he could be. (Rachel, by e-mail, 31/05/15).

The opportunity to re-evaluate and reframe her relationship with her father in a more positive light seems truly emancipatory.

*How does autoethnography help me to answer the research question?*

Epistemology (our beliefs about knowledge), methodology (our understanding of how research creates knowledge) and research methods (the practical step-by-step of conducting our research) are inextricably linked (Carter & Little, 2007). If we believe that the social world is co-constructed, this will influence our ideas about how knowledge can be gained, including the research design and procedures (McLeod, 2011).

Within the broad spectrum of qualitative methods, autoethnography, with its postmodern, constructionist, subjective, and relativist philosophical underpinnings, and a belief in multiple truths, or a truth that can only be partially known (McLeod, 2011), seemed the approach most suited to the question that I wanted to answer, the kind of participant I expected to engage in the research, and the kind of researcher I wanted to be.

Van Maanen points to the origins of autoethnography in “polyphonic” or “jointly told” ethnographic tales; although he cautions that there is still an imbalance in the final work in that “informants speak, ethnographers write,” (2011, p. 137). The

autoethnographer regards knowledge as co-constructed and data as co-created (Ellis, 2004, p. 61), and research participants therefore not as subjects to be objectively studied, but co-researchers with an active role in the creation of the finished work (Ellis, et al., 2011), reflecting the “move from ‘studying them’ to ‘studying us’” (Ellis, 2007, p. 13, citing Tillman-Healy) which is especially associated with autoethnography. However, for convenience, I have referred to all the individuals who took part in this study as “participants”.

Etherington suggests that autoethnography involves the “judicious use of ourselves” (2004a, p. 37), but that this should be purposeful, and not exposure for exposure’s sake. Despite the personal risk, I wanted to disclose some of my own experience in the hope that it would enable the reader/audience to engage more fully, more personally, with the research, and equally, empower others to be open to their own similar (or different) experiences (Chang, 2008, p. 145).

As outlined above (page 23), autoethnography rejects the idea of value-free research, and aligns itself with feminist research, placing equal value on the ethical purpose and the product of the study (Price, 1999). This fits with my intention to provoke change, even if that change is only a participant’s reframing of her/his own story. Another aspect of this is challenging the prevailing discourse (Price, 1999); in this autoethnography, I challenge the familial discourse that my own childhood was happy and “normal”, and the societal discourse that typical Western industrialized parenting is healthy and appropriate.

Autoethnography embraces subjectivity, rather than fearing or denying it (Ellis, 2004), enabling me to use my personal experience and bias to inform and enhance the research, “honestly acknowledging its existence” rather than concealing it (Price, 1999, p. 19). This feels especially important to me as a person-centred counsellor; embracing my subjectivity in my research feels similar to the quality of congruence in person-centred counselling (that is, having as much as possible of one’s experience in the moment in awareness, and available for communication; Rogers, 1980, p. 15). Similarly, autoethnography feels a comfortable fit with person-centred counselling in privileging the individual (Muncey, 2010, p. 2) rather than generalizing; and in demanding a high level of researcher reflexivity (Grant et al., 2013), autoethnography values, rather than denies, personal reflectiveness (see page 62 for a fuller exploration). In many ways, autoethnography corresponds to the way I work as a counsellor: “intimately, intuitively, and with a frequent sense of puzzlement . . . [where meaning] is embedded in multiple contexts of an individual’s history and culture” (Price, 1999, p. 3).

Whilst it feels important to write in an accessible, evocative way that elicits a visceral response in the reader/audience, I also want to ensure that I have conducted my research in a rigorous, systematic way that I can defend before an academic audience, real or imagined. Autoethnography, combining elements of creative writing and literary devices with rigour, aims to produce work which is valid *and* accessible (Muncey, 2010). However, as I write this, I am aware of nagging self-doubt. Narrative methods, especially autoethnography, have become “symbolic”, says Bruner: “the instrument of the oppressed for battling the hegemony of the ruling elite and their experts, the way to tell one’s story as a woman, as ethnic, as dispossessed,” (2002, p.



112). I'm a woman, but can I claim to be oppressed, dispossessed? Is my battle to tell my story and be heard by others a legitimate struggle? Dare I claim this methodology? Yet when I read about the way in which childhood emotional neglect as a phenomenon has itself been neglected (Music, 2009), when I read that signatories to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) continue to fail to uphold the rights of children (Children's Rights Alliance for England, 2016), and when I listen to the stories of my counselling clients, as well as my research participants, then I think: Yes, if not for myself, at least for others who are emotionally neglected, this is a legitimate struggle.

Among other methods that I might have chosen, heuristic self-search inquiry shares some features with autoethnography, such as the use of the researcher's personal experience; a view of the world and knowledge as socially constructed; and an acceptance of multiple truths (Sela-Smith, 2002; Moustakas, 1990). However, despite considerable areas of convergence, I perceive a difference between heuristic self-search inquiry and autoethnography. I chose the former for my MSc dissertation, when I had a hazy sense of something on the edge of awareness that I wanted to focus on and bring fully into awareness in order to explore the essence of it (Moustakas, 1990). This piece of research feels different; I know intimately what the phenomenon is, and I want to tell the story so that others can hear it, and use it; and I want to provoke change.

My approach may have some overlap with grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), in that I am not setting out to prove or disprove a hypothesis generated by a theory about the world or human behaviour; rather I am examining data to see what I can learn from it, taking an inductive approach. However, grounded theory assumes the

possibility of “universality of meaning and generalizing”, and focuses on “conceptualization rather than on description” (Price, 1999, p. 4), so would not be an appropriate methodology for this research, where description is key.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) seems a good fit with my desire to achieve “in-depth explorations of people’s lived experiences”, and their sense-making processes (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, cited in Georgiadou, 2014). However, IPA appears to stop short at the in-depth exploration, whereas autoethnography has a more active purpose; to promote social justice and bring about change (Price, 1999, p. 19).

\* \* \*

## **Dramatic interlude**

*Dramatis personae*

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET

ANGELA

SOPHIA

BABA YAGA

THE GRINDYLOW

CHORUS OF ACADEMICS

*Scene: The research office. ANGELA sits at the laptop, gazing at the screen, her expression troubled; THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET sits at her side, swinging her legs; SOPHIA is sitting in the corner, reading a book.*

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET: (*In a sing-song voice*) It's raining, it's pouring,  
research is boring!

ANGELA: (*Distractedly*) It's not boring at all; it just has to be done really carefully  
and methodically.

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET: (*Rudely*) How come you *look* bored, then?

ANGELA: (*Wearily*) I'm just struggling a bit with justifying my methodology. I'm  
finding it hard to be clear about autoethnography and how it's different to, and more  
appropriate for my subject matter than, for example, heuristic inquiry, interpretive  
phenomenological analysis, or even a straight thematic analysis.

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET: (*In a sing-song voice again*)

Analysis, analysis,

Brain freeze, paralysis!

Gabble, gabble,

Psychobabble,

Justification, mustification,

Mystification, twistification!

Methodology, bletherology,

Autoethnography, *stupidography*!

These long words make me go cross-eyed—

I WANT TO GO AND PLAY OUTSIDE! (*Kicks the desk*)

ANGELA: Yes, I want to go and play, too, but I have to write this up. I don't know if I can do it—it's so difficult! (*Her eyes fill with tears*).

BABA YAGA: (*Gliding in from the doorway, where she was standing unseen*) It does sound very difficult. But if you were Pamela I expect you'd be able to do it without any problem! (*She gives a little trilling laugh*).

THE GRINDYLOW: (*Slithering out from under the desk*) Yes, it's probably much too difficult for you. After all, what do you know about anything? Thought you could do a PhD, did you? You? *A doctor of philosophy?* What were you thinking of!

ANGELA: I don't know! (*She puts her head in her hands and weeps silently*).

SOPHIA: (*Puts down her books and comes over to where ANGELA is sitting*). So what is the problem, exactly, Angela? Can you put it into words?

ANGELA: It's just—I think I've grasped what autoethnography is, and what it does, and how, and why, and then I listen to someone talking about another research method, say heuristic inquiry, or IPA, and I think—oh, that sounds like what I'm doing! Maybe I'm not doing autoethnography, after all? Maybe I've got it all wrong?

SOPHIA: Or is it just that there *is* a lot of overlap, and sometimes researchers use different names for the same thing, depending on their disciplinary background, their area of research, or their theoretical frameworks?

ANGELA: *(Still tearful)* Maybe; and that's one of the things that worries me, that I don't have the right disciplinary background to be doing this research, and I don't have firm theoretical frameworks in place!

SOPHIA: And is that necessarily a bad thing? Rather than framing this in negative terms, as a "lack of" something that you think you ought to have, could you see it instead in positive terms as a "freedom"; a freedom to be open to different perspectives, perhaps, rather than being trapped by one dominant one? A freedom to be creative, rather than being constrained by conventions? A freedom to define what autoethnography is for *you*, rather than slavishly following someone else's step-by-step process?

ANGELA: Maybe; but who would listen to me?

BABA YAGA: *(Opens her mouth to speak, but SOPHIA firmly puts her hand over BABA YAGA's mouth)*

THE GRINDYLOW: *(Reaches up to grasp ANGELA's ankle, but SOPHIA steps on his hand).*

SOPHIA: *(Smiling gently)* How many times have you presented at postgraduate research forums, symposiums, seminars and even conferences now, and had positive feedback? Haven't people told you that they came to the postgraduate research forum at Keele because they saw that it was *you* presenting? Didn't you have an article

accepted for *Under Construction*, the Keele postgraduate journal? What was the response to your *Engaged Researcher* blog? Haven't you just had an article accepted in the *Qualitative Methods in Psychology Bulletin*? And didn't I hear that you've been invited to consider getting your research published beyond the university?

ANGELA: (*Grinning sheepishly*) Um...

CHORUS OF ACADEMICS:

Be clear in your writing, *do* make it inviting,

But make sure that your arguments hold;

Acknowledge your sources, informants, resources;

But be original, creative and bold!

You're the master, not servant,

So *do* be observant,

And make sure that your arguments hold;

But define your own path, write your own ethnograph,

Be original, creative and bold!

\* \* \*

### *Tensions*

I am aware, however, of tensions within my autoethnography. Some researchers may feel that they are free to reject the conventions of traditional research, to write autoethnographies “even without explicit academic references” (Short, Turner, &

Grant, 2013, p. 234), but as a PhD candidate I must demonstrate “satisfactory evidence of experience of methods of research” (Faculty of Natural Sciences Postgraduate Researcher Student Handbook, 2016-2017, p. 23). This requires me to follow at least some of the conventions of traditional research practices; as Ellis concurs with her potential supervisee, “your committee will demand an analytic chapter” (1999, p. 680). A constant concern, however, has been that I may find that in meeting the perceived requirements of an academic degree, I may have “undermined the purposes of writing an autoethnography” (Wall, 2008); I explore this tension in a short review (Blanchard, 2016).

Writing the dramatic interlude above gave me the confidence to develop my own approach to autoethnography; a creative, subjective methodological approach that nevertheless incorporates systematic and rigorous analysis, influenced by Chang (2008), and Anderson’s “analytic autoethnography” (2006). However, Wall (2016) cautions that Anderson’s approach is criticised by autoethnographers such as Ellis and Bochner, who maintain that autoethnographies should be “unruly”, rule-breaking (p. 2). The unruly, rule-breaking nature of autoethnography may appeal to my inner child, THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET; but it doesn’t entirely suit ANGELA, who is frightened of getting things “wrong”; and it doesn’t comfortably fit a PhD.

However, as a postmodern, feminist research method, with the explicit aim of empowering the participants and making a positive difference to their lives (Price, 1999, p. 6), autoethnography seems entirely appropriate for the subject matter and the participants; individuals who feel that their voices have not been heard, and who may find it empowering to tell their story and finally be heard.

One of the strengths of autoethnography's story-telling approach is that, unlike objective, quantitative methods, it may enable the reader/audience to develop an empathic understanding of another's life. The human brain is hard-wired to respond to narrative (Newman, 2003); information delivered in story form is therefore both accessible and memorable (Kottler, 2015). The "author/teller" and the reader/audience jointly create the meaning of a narrative through "emotional arousal that leads people to reflect on the content in a personally relevant way" (ibid, p. 22). Furthermore, stories may be "the impetus for dramatic life changes...because of our capacity to identify and empathize with others, not to mention the imagination that allows us to vicariously enter other worlds" (ibid, p. 27).

Music (2009) questions whether there are "sufficient diagnostic categories or theoretical ideas" for childhood emotional neglect (p. 142), and Brown, Fite, Stone and Bortolato (2016) call for more detailed, nuanced research into the relationship between childhood maltreatment and internalizing problems. An autoethnographic approach may achieve a depth of understanding of a phenomenon or experience which a large scale, quantitative study cannot attempt to capture. Kottler (2015) describes the need in counselling to elicit "deep and thick descriptions of personal experience" (p. 7); whilst clinical, empirical observations and measurements provide a certain kind of proof, they are "no substitute for the client's story of what happened" (ibid). Kottler is writing about psychotherapy, but this could equally apply to qualitative research. Luke and Banerjee (2013) call for a greater focus on children's perceptions of maltreatment, rather than external observations; and others (McLeod, Wood, & Weisz, 2007) call for more detailed research to aid understanding of the phenomenon. Autoethnography



offers the potential for capturing these perceptions and interpretations, and the richly descriptive details that might otherwise be overlooked.

Autoethnographies often take the form of “self-study”, with the “group”, the “ethno-” element of ethnography, inferred rather than actual participants. Others, like mine, involve participants, but usually a small number, to enable greater depth over breadth. I was not aiming, then, for a large enough sample to be statistically significant or generalizable; however, I was curious about whether my experience was uniquely British, typically female, or restricted to a particular generation. I welcomed, therefore, the opportunity to incorporate male participants, participants of different ages, and participants from different cultural backgrounds to my own. I still make no claim of statistical significance or generalizability; at the same time, in broadening my range of participants, I may have weakened my representation of a self in a particular cultural context (Ellis, et al., 2011).

### *Methodological limitations*

A potential limitation of all autoethnographies is that they inevitably remain incomplete; I can only hope to present “one version, one way of achieving coherence” (Bruner, 2002, p. 74). Even while writing this thesis, my understanding of my own story has shifted, and participants have shared some of their changing thoughts and feelings. Repeated telling of the same story can uncover new layers of meaning, not least because story-telling is a collaboration between the story-teller and the reader/audience; “we are never free of doubt and ambiguity . . . there is risk here, but there is also truth” (Van Maanen, p. 120). However, I am conscious of writing to an

externally imposed deadline, and have to accept that the analysis is “not finished, only over” (ibid, 2011, p. 120).

One potential limitation of this study is that it may be deemed unreliable, depending as it does on the participants’ (and my own) memories of childhood events. Sparkes (2013) cautions that “memories are tricksters and shape-shifters” (p. 203), and there has been considerable focus in recent years on the issue of false memories (Muncey, 2010, p. 102). Muncey suggests that our memories are neither accurate nor permanent (ibid, p. 104), but constantly revised or reconstructed according to our constantly changing life story, owing more to beliefs than biology (ibid, p. 105). Depressed individuals may tend to recall negative memories more readily than positive; this is sometimes used to explain the relationship between childhood trauma and adult psychological distress (Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006, p. 842; MacLeod et al., 2006). However, others find that negative mood reduces the likelihood of false memory, at least in experimental conditions (Storbeck & Clore, 2005). Perhaps memories can be unreliable, *and* reliable; perhaps they can be confused, conflated, *and* contain elements of truth (Rothschild, 2000, p. 151). I have first-hand experience of unreliable and conflated memories, and I am aware of family events which my sisters and I remember similarly, but interpret differently; however, I have also witnessed very young children recall early childhood events with astonishing accuracy. Ultimately, it is not my aim to evaluate or prove the accuracy or inaccuracy of one memory or another. Just as I work with the client’s subjective reality in counselling, so in autoethnography, the individual’s perception of an experience is validated (Elliott, Fischer, and Rennie, 1999, p. 216).

Another potential limitation is that autoethnography is not “methodical”, linear or “neat” and depends more on “discovery and happenstance” than careful planning (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 153). In conducting unstructured interviews, leaving participants to tell the stories that are important to them, I pass up on the opportunity to compare like with like, or the possibility of making definitive statements about what actually constitutes childhood emotional neglect. In return, however, I argue that I avoid falling into the trap of only seeing what I was looking for, and missing the unexpected along the way (Kahneman, 2011, p. 85). In following where the research led me, I remained open to the potential of “generating new insights” into an old problem, and producing a “nuanced account” that honours the contribution of the participants (McLeod, 2001, p. 1); in place of a large and representative sample, I may have gained a deeper, more detailed description of the experience of childhood emotional neglect.

### *Alternative criteria for judging validity*

Positivist, quantitative research relies on widely accepted standards of validity and reliability, although the scientific community’s confidence in these standards is questioned (Hammersley, 1990). Bruner, however, argues that the “believability” of narrative approaches depends on the interaction between story-teller and reader/audience, and on the context (2002, p. 24). Can I convince the reader that I am a credible author? Can I achieve a balance between emotive language that engages the reader/audience and evokes the lived experience, and sufficient self-questioning and challenge to meet the requirements of a PhD? Perhaps only the reader/audience can decide.

The positivist, modernist criteria of validity, generalisability and reproducibility are not relevant for autoethnographic research (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 133); the different aims of autoethnographic research require different criteria. Carter and Little (2007) emphasise the importance of “internal consistency” between the epistemology, methodology and research method as one way of evaluating qualitative research, in place of rigid criteria. However, there are some consistent themes among the criteria proposed for evaluating qualitative research, most of which apply to autoethnography. Yardley (2017) suggests that there is broad agreement on four key areas; sensitivity to context; commitment and rigour; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance (p. 295).

### *Sensitivity to context*

Autoethnography in particular is concerned with “awareness of the participants’ perspectives and setting” and the social and cultural context of the research, and through reflexivity, acknowledges how these may influence both data collection and the process of analysis and interpretation (Yardley, 2017, p. 295). Sensitivity to context may also extend to avoiding “imposing pre-conceived categories on the data”, and placing greater emphasis on the participants’ unique and individual meanings of their stories and experiences (ibid).

### *Commitment and rigour*

In contrast to the “God’s eye view” implied by the objective, positivist stance (Denzin, 2014, p. 70), Van Maanen suggests that ethnographers should ideally “question aloud

(or in print) whether they got it right”, or whether there might be alternative interpretations and potential representations of their data (ibid, 2011, p. 51). Elliott et al. (1999) refer to “triangulation”, using evidence from other data sources to support findings, as an appropriate tool for evaluating qualitative research (p. 219); however, this may be less relevant for autoethnography, which is concerned less with establishing absolute truths, and more with the participants’ perceptions. A more appropriate criterion for autoethnographic validity might be the practice of “member checking” (ibid, p. 218) or “reliability checks” (Ellis, 1999, p. 614), whereby the researcher asks participants whether they agree with the analysis, interpretation, or conclusions; Ellis suggests that the researcher invite the participants to offer their own interpretations (ibid).

Elliot et al. (1999) suggest that evidence of “good practice”, in terms of following established research processes, may ensure validity (p. 218); however, Law (2004) cautions against believing that “eating our methodological greens” provides any kind of certainty (p. 9). According to McLeod it is the “uncertainty, ambiguity, unknowability” experienced in qualitative enquiry, and the researcher/participant’s “willingness to risk” that proves its worth (2001, p. 10). Similarly, Van Maanen views uncertainty as strength, noting that the concept of culture itself may be “contested, emergent and ambiguous”. The people we study may find their culture as difficult to know and inhabit as we do, so ethnographic writing should reflect the “obscurity and shifting nature of the cultural materials themselves” (2011, p. 127).

### *Transparency and coherence*

Speedy (2008) suggests that “transparency”, “trustworthiness”, and “accountability” (p. 56), are valuable criteria for judging autoethnography; these may be met by reflexivity within my research. I explore the issue of reflexivity further below (see page 62); however, in brief, it is a process of checking whether my analysis and interpretation of the data is justifiable, challenging myself to remain open to other possible meanings, and asking myself reflexive questions. McLeod suggests that this kind of “in-built” reflexivity is one key to good qualitative research (2001, p. 181); however, there are limitations to the power of reflexivity and bracketing, in that “unmasking one perspective” may still leave other biases concealed (Bruner, 2002, p. 23).

Elliot et al. suggest that the findings and conclusions should have “internal consistency”, in other words, that they should make sense to the reader (1999, p. 218). Similarly, Van Maanen suggests that autoethnography may be judged by the standards of “fidelity, coherence, generosity, wisdom, imagination, honesty, respect and verisimilitude” (2011, p. 33). One way of achieving this might be through transparency in the process, so that the reader/audience can see how I reached my conclusions; showing my “workings out”, as in a maths problem.

Autoethnography aims to appeal to a wider audience than a specific academic discipline. A general audience, in place of specialist knowledge of the subject, can use criteria such as “plausibility or believability”, rather than “accuracy or representativeness” (ibid, p. 105). Van Maanen suggests that we ask whether the work is “of interest (does it attract?), coherence (does it hang together?), and fidelity (does it seem true?)” (ibid, p. 105). This approach to evaluating research feels a comfortable fit

with person-centred philosophy, being a less hierarchical, less “expert” approach to evaluation, as opposed to a hierarchical approach, whereby “some are better judges than others” (ibid, p. 122).

### *Impact and importance*

Elliott et al. (1999) are concerned with whether the “interpretive account has shown utility” (p. 219); in other words, is the completed research useful? Speedy (2008) lists “substantive and enduring contributions” and “impact and transformation”, and Richardson (2000, cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 406) suggests that autoethnographic work can be judged by whether it makes a substantive contribution. These criteria might be seen as fitting with the requirement for a PhD thesis to represent “a contribution to the knowledge of the subject and afford evidence of originality” (FNS postgraduate research student handbook, 2016-2017). In aiming to fill a perceived gap between quantitative or objective expert-practitioner accounts of childhood emotional neglect, and the purely subjective first-person accounts referred to as the “misery lit” genre (Muncey, 2010), by adding the participant’s voice to a rigorous study (Faulkner, 2012), I hope to meet this criterion.

Utility may also be judged by the value to the participants. Autoethnography’s validation of the individual’s subjective reality may be central to the transformative power of autoethnography and other narrative methods (see page 41); those who work with trauma survivors note the value of bearing witness to the traumatic story (Herman, 1998). Rothschild particularly emphasises acknowledging the realities of both the “experiencing self” *and* the “observing self”, psychological entities also described as the “internal and external sensory stimuli”; “self and observing ego”; “core self and

witness”; “Child and Adult”, or “internal and external reality” (2000, p. 130).

Autoethnography may create a space where the experiencing self can tell its traumatic stories to an accepting audience (both the researcher and the wider audience of the research), *and* play the role of observing self (through the process of reading through the interview transcript for accuracy, and commenting on the analysis and other aspects of the research as it progresses). Participants noted the value, as well as the challenge, of reading their own words. For example, Mickey wrote:

Reading through the transcript and reviewing everything motivated me further to accept what happened, understand when I have feelings related to my past and move on with life and be open to what it has to offer. I have to say that this process was very tough but I think that it has helped me to understand better what I feel and the reasons why some things happened, so I can move on. Thank you again. (Mickey, by e-mail, 05/02/16).

Richardson (2000, cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) also suggests that autoethnography can be judged on aesthetic merit, and on whether it makes sufficient impact, or its capacity to invoke a “lived experience”; though this phrase is not always clearly defined (Banister et al., 2011). My aim is to arouse the reader/audience’s emotions; to elicit a visceral response (Ellis, 2002) by showing, not telling (Etherington, 2004a, p. 37). Whether I succeed or not, then, depends to some extent on the reader/audience’s capacity for empathy and emotional arousal.

Ultimately, different criteria are appropriate for judging different kinds of research, just as we have different ways of judging visual images. For example, different criteria



would be used to judge an architect's or an engineer's drawing, a photograph, and an impressionist painting of the same building; or the crime scene photographs in a forensic pathologist's report, and an oil painting of Ophelia. Whereas specialist, technical knowledge might be necessary to evaluate the former, non-specialists can appreciate the latter, be moved by it, and take some meaning from it.

### *Who took part in this research?*

In this section I introduce my participants, and explain their involvement in the research. I could have included pen-portraits of the participants, but it was hard to write sufficient detail for them to be meaningful, without them being too revealing and potentially exposing. The lives of several participants have distinguishing features which might make them identifiable in the small university community; however, leaving out those features might render the pen-portraits bland and meaningless. I chose not to write pen-portraits, therefore, providing instead some general descriptions, and letting the reader/audience come to know the participants more closely through their stories.

I adopted a low key approach to recruitment for a number of reasons. One reason was that I only wanted a small number of participants. Whereas a quantitative study would have required a sample of sufficient size and representativeness to enable me to generalize the findings to the wider population, I aimed instead to develop a detailed description of the phenomenon or experience, including "the cultural categories and assumptions according to which one culture construes the world" (McCracken, 1988, p. 17). Therefore, I only needed to include enough participants to collect sufficient data

to enable me to describe childhood emotional neglect, and explore it within these cultural categories and assumptions.

A second reason was that I did not want to prompt a flood of inquiries, some of which I might then have to reject. Knowing that a feeling of not being wanted is a part of the experience of childhood emotional neglect, I did not want to cause further hurt by saying “no” to anyone.

I started by advertising my research to Counselling Psychology MSc students at Keele University. There were pragmatic advantages to this: they were at Keele, I had easy to access them, and it was easy to meet them for interviews; this might help to avoid some of the widely recognised difficulties of “getting into the field,” (Price, 1999, p. 10). There were also ethical considerations; Counselling Psychology MSc students would be familiar with the research process and in a good position to give informed consent (Finlay & Molano-Fisher, 2008, p. 257). There were also disadvantages; this restricted me to a limited population, and possibly a fairly homogenous group. I aspired to a wider and more diverse sample, including other cultural backgrounds, to avoid limiting my study to a Western perspective (Thomas, 2014, p. 170). As time went on, and I continued to talk about my research at conferences, seminars and the regular Keele postgraduate researcher forum, as well as more generally with friends and family, the pool of participants gradually widened.

One potential limitation of a self-selected group of participants is that they (and I) might have an axe to grind (Bruner, 2002). The dual processes of reflexivity and bracketing (see page 62), where I explore my bias and assumptions, may help to

mitigate this, or at least bring it into awareness so that the reader/audience can take it into account (Grant et al., 2013; Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Figure 3: An axe to grind



When I invited volunteers to contact me during conference presentations, I did this with care for future anonymity and exposure by saying that I had left invitations by the door, “so if you know anyone who you think might be interested in taking part, please take an invitation and leave it for them to contact me.” This made it possible for an individual to take an invitation “for a friend,” if they wished, in the way that people will sometimes introduce their own shaming and hidden problems by seeking advice “for a friend.”

I could have chosen to limit my participants to “people like me”; white, British, middle class, middle-aged, and female. However, I was concerned that if I wrote only about my own experience, and the experience of others like me, the phenomenon would be too easily dismissed as a peculiarly British problem; the experience of “being British” (Fox, 2004; Gerhardt, 2015, p. 85), or “middle-class neglect” (Pearson, 2011), which

actually happened during a postgraduate research workshop. I was sure that childhood emotional neglect was a wider problem, not limited to a particular time or place, or social class, so when I was approached by potential participants of different ages and stages of life, from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, I readily accepted them.

I considered recruiting outside the university. I was aware of the potential, as I encountered clients in my counselling practice whose stories seemed to include an element of childhood emotional neglect. These individuals would have broadened the sample beyond university graduates; however, I did not attempt to include any clients. The main reason was an ethical concern about whether I could invite them to take part without risk of coercion (Bond, 2004, p. 7), and the problems that might be caused either to the research or to the therapeutic process by the resulting dual relationships (Bond, 2004, p. 9). For all I might strive towards equality and avoid presenting myself as “expert” or more powerful in the counselling relationship, I have had my own experiences of feeling less than powerful as client, and I could not be sure that a client could give fully informed consent, or exercise free will in agreeing to take part. Another potential disadvantage was the danger of imposing a diagnosis or label on a client’s story, which would not be compatible with person-centred counselling and could potentially be harmful. I chose in the end not to attempt to recruit any counselling clients as participants, mainly for ethical reasons, but also because of the practical and logistical challenges of arranging interviews. Furthermore, the question of whether or not I had a representative sample of participants seemed irrelevant, given my methodology (see page 48). As I am not claiming generalisability from the findings

of this study, the fact that all the participants are university graduates, and most (though not all) are connected with Keele University, is not a significant limitation.

\* \* \*

## **Dramatic interlude**

*Dramatis personae*

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET

ANGELA

SOPHIA

BABA YAGA

THE GRINDYLOW

CHORUS OF ACADEMICS

*Scene: The research office. The LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET is standing by the desk, crying loudly. BABA YAGA is standing to one side with her arms folded, smiling slightly, tapping her foot and tutting. ANGELA, also crying, is at the desk, papers strewn across it. THE GRINDYLOW has hold of her legs and has almost pulled her off the chair; ANGELA is holding onto the desk to keep herself from falling. SOPHIA, who has come back from the library with an armload of books, enters the office.*

SOPHIA: *(Puts the books down on the desk)* What's going on here?

GRINDYLOW: *(Gleefully)* Angela's made a mistake! Angela's made a mistake!

ANGELA: (*Sobbing*) I've got it all wrong! I've made a terrible mistake!

BABA YAGA: (*Soothingly*) Well, I'm sure it was an easy mistake to make. What you're trying to do is probably much too difficult for someone like you. But it doesn't matter; as my father used to say to me, "Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever!"

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET: (*Cries more loudly*).

SOPHIA: (*Taking hold of THE LITTLE GIRL's hand, kicking THE GRINDYLOW away and helping ANGELA back onto the chair*) Angela, what's happened?

ANGELA: (*Tearfully*) It's these reviewers' comments, Sophia, for the article I was trying to write about ethical tensions. I realise I've got it all wrong. I've completely misunderstood what autoethnography is. I'm so stupid! Idiot! Idiot! Idiot! (*She starts to slap herself*).

SOPHIA: (*Catching ANGELA's hand and holding it firmly with one hand, while still keeping hold of THE LITTLE GIRL's hand with her other*) How have you got it all wrong? What have you misunderstood?

ANGELA: (*Holding out a sheet of paper*) Look—they say, "We're having trouble placing this as autoethnography, because there are participants..." How could I be so stupid? I am *so* stupid!

BABA YAGA: (*Opens her mouth to speak but SOPHIA silences her with a stern look*)

THE GRINDYLOW: (*Reaches out towards ANGELA'S ankles again but SOPHIA kicks him back under the desk*).

SOPHIA: (*Sits THE LITTLE GIRL up on the desk and dries her eyes with a tissue, while speaking calmly to ANGELA*) But Angela, you know that autoethnographies can involve participants. Some of the very first examples you read about involved participants, like the group of women survivors of breast cancer that Carolyn Ellis talks about in *Heartful Autoethnography*, remember?

ANGELA: (*Faintly*) Yes...

SOPHIA: So perhaps you haven't made a mistake, perhaps you haven't got it all wrong? Perhaps the reviewers aren't as familiar with autoethnography as you are, and you just need to explain a bit more in your introduction to the article?

ANGELA: Oh! (*Puts her hand to her mouth*)

SOPHIA: "Oh," what?

ANGELA: (*Wiping her own eyes*) Well, when I think about it, the article on ethical tensions is to go alongside a book review which will explain a bit more about autoethnography, and the reviewers won't have read that. And a lot of

autoethnographies *are* written by one person, without participants, and the “group” is inferred—sort of, “people like me”—so you’re right, I probably just need to explain a bit more.

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET: So is everything going to be alright now?

SOPHIA: (*Smiling*) Well, I don’t know about “everything” being “alright” now, Little Girl, there’s still a long way to go and an awful lot of work for Angela to do! But certainly everything isn’t as “all *wrong*” as it seemed.

BABA YAGA: There, you see? I *knew* there was no need to make such a fuss!

ANGELA: (*Hanging her head*) I’m sorry, yes, it was silly of me to get so worked up about it.

SOPHIA: (*Firmly*) I don’t think it’s silly at all, I think it’s very human. This is an important piece of work and you care very deeply about getting it right, both for yourself and for your participants. It’s only natural to get anxious and upset when you think you might have gone wrong. And, let’s face it, Angela, you haven’t picked the most clear-cut, straightforward methodological approach, have you? (*Smiling*) Is it any wonder there’s some confusion about what exactly autoethnography is, when it can take so many forms, and be used in so many different disciplines to achieve so many different ends? Do you remember what I said before, about defining what autoethnography is for you?



ANGELA: Yes, I do. You're right, Sophia, thank you. Where would I be without you?

*(Stands and embraces SOPHIA warmly).* Right, everyone, back to work. We have an article to revise!

CHORUS OF ACADEMICS:

Read, write, review, and revise,

Till words are swimming in front of your eyes!

Read, read, write, review,

Don't just regurgitate, craft something new!

Review, revise, read, read and write,

You might find you're writing well into the night!

Review, revise, read, read,

Articles, books, papers, all you can read,

And write, write, review, revise,

Till the references swim in front of your eyes!

\* \* \*

Thirteen participants in total took part in this study, comprising eight women (myself, Miranda, Heather, Cathy, Rachel, Alice, Kate, and Harriet) and five men (David, Mickey, Alan, Muhammed, and Finlay), ranging in age from mid-twenties to early sixties at time of interview. The first six participants were all students or graduates of the MSc in Counselling Psychology at Keele University (myself, Miranda, Heather, Cathy, Rachel and Alice). Of the remaining seven participants, five were engaged in postgraduate research activities at Keele University (David, Mickey, Alan, Muhammed, and Kate); and two were from my wider friendship circle (Finlay and Harriet). Eight

participants (including myself) describe themselves as white British; of the remaining participants, one has dual British/other nationality (Harriet), one is Eastern European (Mickey), one is Middle Eastern (Muhammed); and two are from families of Indian and Pakistani origin, now resident in the UK (Alice and David respectively).

In order to protect the identity of participants it is common practice to give pseudonyms, or create composite characters (Ellis, 1999). For each participant, I either offered a choice of one or two names which I had selected, or invited them to choose a name for themselves. I offered a choice of name partly because I wanted the participants to feel comfortable with their pseudonym, but in particular, because I was wary of imposing inappropriate names on participants who did not share my white British background. I also consciously avoided a regular pattern in naming participants, such as choosing a name with the same first initial as the participant's real name, to reduce the risk of revealing their identities; as Ellis found, within small communities, such systems can soon be cracked like a code, exposing participants (2007, p. 11).

### *How did I gather the data?*

Sometimes, qualitative researchers, especially autoethnographers, are vague about specific research methods (Huberman & Miles, 2002). In the following sections, I attempt to bring some clarity to my own methods, describing in detail how I gathered and analysed the data, including the rationale for my methods, and potential strengths and limitations.

The first step was to record some of my own story through a bracketing interview with a colleague (Rolls & Relf, 2006, p. 293), a process which I describe in more detail below (see page 62). I repeated the process of bracketing before each round of data collection, and examined each interview for further data, although the emphasis in subsequent interviews was more on reflexivity than data collection; similarly, I used my reflexive journal to collect data as well as to record thoughts and feelings about the research process.

With all 12 participants I used unstructured individual interviews, which often merged into “research conversations”, with self-disclosure encouraging participant disclosure (Ellis, 2004, p. 65). Whilst this level of researcher involvement in the interview might be considered to weaken the validity of the research from a positivist perspective, in constructivist methodologies such as autoethnography it is accepted that interviewer and interviewee jointly construct the narrative (ibid, p. 61), and that such dialogue facilitates deeper access to the subject matter (Etherington, 2004a, p. 25).

I chose not to read measures frequently used in child maltreatment studies, such as the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ; Bernstein et al., 2003) or the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) questionnaire (Felitti et al., 1998), before interviewing participants, as I didn’t want them to over-influence data collection; I wanted to consciously avoid the interviews taking the form of question-and-answer sessions. Taking such an approach could have potentially closed off the possibility of new knowledge, new understanding. What I wanted to achieve was an “in-depth and intimate understanding” of the phenomenon (Ellis et al., 2011), better reached by a more open approach. McCracken (1988), in his exploration of the long interview

process, makes the distinction between a quantitative study, which “surveys” the data, suggesting a superficial overview of a large area, and a qualitative study, which “mines” the data, suggesting digging deep down (p. 17): I wanted to dig deep down.

I also held a focus group, to which I invited the first four participants (although only three were able to attend on the day), to provide a space where the participants could interact with each other and generate further illumination of the phenomenon through spontaneous dialogue. Coolican (2009) suggests that the contributions of some participants may prompt others to share more; however, it can be difficult to facilitate, with some dominating and others holding back. In addition, the sensitive nature of the topic may limit what participants feel able to share in a group setting (*ibid*); although participants are frequently more willing to share distressing material than researchers believe them to be, provided they can see the benefit of the study (Harper & Thompson, 2012). I made audio-recordings of all interviews, including the bracketing interviews and the focus group, and transcribed them verbatim.

As an additional layer of data collection, I invited participants to share any further reflections with me, whether additional childhood memories, new perspectives on their childhood, or their experience of the interview process; this was by e-mail or by face-to-face conversations. I also noticed what participants said, and did, around the interviews and focus group, as well as what they said during the interviews (Powdermaker, 1950). For example, several participants apologised for taking up my time, either immediately after recording the interview, or in e-mail correspondence afterwards, or questioned whether their story had been good enough; with the

participants' permission, I coded these comments for "Apologising" and "Not good enough" (see page 259).

One of the strengths of unstructured interviews is the possibility for gathering richly detailed data (Van Maanen, 1988), capturing details that might be missed by more structured approaches; the "missing stories trapped in the 'empty space' . . . deemed too subjective or too self-indulgent to report" (Muncey, 2010, p. 3). This creates the opportunity for the researcher to be open to unexpected, unanticipated, new data (McLeod, 2011). Working with individuals who experienced childhood emotional neglect, it seemed particularly important to choose a data collection method which gave "greater control to the respondents" to tell their stories in their own way, at their own pace (Huberman & Miles, 2002, p. 247).

One of the perceived limitations of the unstructured interview approach is the potential for "messy, unorganized data" (McCracken, 1988, p. 19); participants do not tell their stories in a "linear" fashion (Huberman & Miles, 2002, p. 247), so it may not be possible to compare like with like; and there may be inconsistency or significant gaps in the data (Coolican, 2009). However, Price suggests that in return for "generalizability and comparability", the qualitative researcher gains "internal validity and contextual understanding" (1999, p. 9).

Another potential limitation from the positivist perspective is the possibility of researcher bias influencing the participants' data. This can be mitigated to some extent by being transparent about the context in which the data has been created (Etherington, 2004b), an aspect of researcher reflexivity; and in return, we gain deeper knowledge

when participants can modify and develop their story in conversation with the researcher, rather than presenting a “one-shot deal . . . the first and . . . most superficial story” (Ellis, 2004, p. 65).

*How does the data gathering enable me to answer the research question?*

Whilst there is some description of the phenomenon in the literature, much of what is published tends to be quantitative, so that the complexity of the experience and the details of individual stories are typically reduced down to generalized phrases or concepts. Unstructured interviews, in which the participant and I worked together to construct a detailed and nuanced depiction of childhood emotional neglect, have the potential to access the kind of “emotional, intimate” knowledge that will enable others to understand more deeply what this experience feels like (Ellis, 2004, p. 66).

A potential limitation of this approach is the difficulty of accurately representing the experiences of others. Hammersley, for example, suggests that “descriptions are always selective . . . there are always multiple, non-contradictory, true accounts possible of any phenomenon” (1990, p. 22); personal narratives cannot be assumed to be “a window onto reality” (Etherington, 2004a, p. 81). Furthermore, the volume of data generated may create challenges around analysis and representation (ibid, p. 80). Reflexivity throughout the research process, a commitment to rigorous self-questioning and transparency about my purpose, and how this has influenced the outcome of my research (Hammersley, 1990, p. 64), may go some way towards mitigating these limitations. Inviting the participants to comment on and be involved in the research process at different stages, not just in the initial data-collection phase, enabled me to

feel more confident about my representation of their stories, as well as honouring the ethical commitment to informed consent as an on-going process (Bond, 2004).

## **Reflexivity and Bracketing**

### *Reflexivity*

Autoethnography requires that I use my subjective experience of the phenomenon under scrutiny to make sense of it and explore its implications, making subjectivity a strength rather than a limitation (Price, 1999). However, researcher subjectivity can lead to the accusation of “self-indulgence” in personal experience research (Sparkes, 2001); researcher reflexivity, in the form of honesty and transparency about the entire research process, may help to mitigate this. In this section, I explore the concept of reflexivity; the function of reflexivity in my research; and the part that bracketing has played in my reflexive process.

Etherington refers to “multiple levels” of researcher reflexivity: “being aware in the moment of what is influencing our internal and external responses, while also being aware of what influences our relationship to our topic and our participants” (2004b, p. 46). Reflexivity, then, “requires self-awareness, but is more than self-awareness” (ibid, p. 47); a continual process of examining what I’ve done, how I’ve done it, and why I’ve chosen to do it in this way (Grant et al., 2013). Reflexive research recognises that both researcher and researched have agency; it “challenges us to be more fully conscious of our own ideology, culture and politics, and that of our participants and our audience”, “creates transparency”, and may help to address concerns about “power relations between researcher and researched” (Etherington, 2004b, p. 47). Reflexivity may support rigour by helping the reader/audience to understand the circumstances of data

collection; and it may blur “the distinction between content and process” (ibid). This felt especially relevant for an inquiry into childhood emotional neglect conducted by a researcher who is still on a journey of recovery from her own experience of childhood emotional neglect. I cannot attempt to be unbiased and without assumptions; I can only write my bias and assumptions into the research. The self-questioning nature of reflexive research sits well with my habit of reflective practice in my counselling work; reflexivity may provide a “bridge between research and practice” (Etherington, 2004a, p. 31). Reflexive research is “fully aligned with the core principles of therapeutic practice” (Bondi & Fewell, 2016, p. 15); and like reflective practice, reflexivity requires a willingness to look in the dark corners of our selves (ibid).

One of my key tools has been a reflexive journal where I have recorded thoughts, feelings and doubts about the research process; I have also made use of the reflective space available in both my academic and my clinical supervision. Although I have kept firm boundaries between my counselling and my research *practice*, an ethical challenge which I have explored in a short review (Blanchard, 2016), my *thoughts* and *feelings* about client work and research often overlap.

Another reflexive element has been creative writing in my thesis; the creative fiction, *The Fog*, which weaves in and out through the thesis, and the dramatic interludes, where characters play out some of the struggles in my research/life (Blanchard, 2018). I have sometimes been surprised by what has flowed from the end of my own pen, from the hidden recesses of my own mind, demonstrating the way in which creative methods may enable us to access embedded or intuitive knowledge which we are unable to



access through a conventional, logical approach (Bolton, 2008, p. 135). The final layer of reflexivity took the form of the bracketing interviews, which I explore below.

### *The bracketing process*

Bracketing has its philosophical and epistemological origins in Husserl's phenomenological methods, which endeavoured to find the essence of an event without interpretation. According to this approach, the researcher would set aside any preconceptions that might "taint" the research (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 80). This concept of bracketing belongs to a modernist, positivist philosophy, with its concept of a single, fully knowable truth (McLeod, 2001, p. 6). However, complete objectivity may be an illusion (Etherington, 2004b); knowing is an interpretive process, and it may not be possible for humans to be completely free from preconceptions (Tufford & Newman, 2010). The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) and British Psychological Society (BPS) codes of practice for researchers acknowledge that bias is inevitable; we can only see the world through our own filters and in the light of our own cultural, historical and personal values (Bond, 2004, p. 8; BPS, 2018, p. 2). However, the bracketing process provided an opportunity to explore and make transparent my values and my experiences and how they have affected the way that I have conducted the research (Bond, 2004, p. 8); to examine my assumptions and biases, so that I can incorporate them into my research, rather than deny them.

Viewed in this light, the process is not so much a bracketing off of my assumptions, as a positioning statement: "This is where I stand on this," or even, "This is where I'm at right now". I am declaring my assumptions; I am making my bias transparent, visible in the research, and owning it, so that the reader/audience can take it into account

(Grant et al., 2013; Tufford & Newman, 2010). Furthermore, my preconceptions may be a valuable source of knowledge and insight, as much as a potential hazard (Grant et al., 2013), which the bracketing interviews provided an opportunity for me to record (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

The actual process of bracketing shares some features with clinical supervision for counselling (Rolls & Relf, 2006, p. 286), although the purpose is different. In clinical supervision, I describe my way of working with a particular client, enabling me to reach new insights; similarly, as I described my experience of the research process in the bracketing interviews, I was able to reach new insights. The bracketing interviews which punctuated each round of data collection provided an opportunity for me to “enter and withdraw from the data” (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 89), to gain some perspective; in describing the research project so far to an interested other, I was able to uncover more of what I have learnt, just as the client reaches new understanding in talking to the counsellor, and the counsellor reaches new understanding in talking to the clinical supervisor.

There is no clear, single definition or description of the bracketing process (Rolls & Relf, 2006); this may be an advantage, rather than a limitation, in that it creates freedom for researchers to define the process in their own terms (Tufford & Newman, 2010). For my deeply personal research, bracketing included, but was not necessarily restricted to, an opportunity to explore my biases, preconceptions and assumptions about childhood emotional neglect (Tufford & Newman, 2010); an opportunity to record my “beliefs and values . . . thoughts and hypotheses” (ibid, p. 84); and a space to record and process some of the emotions triggered by the research process (ibid).

Tufford and Newman describe bracketing as a “multilayered process that is meant to access various levels of consciousness” (ibid); a dynamic and ongoing process as opposed to a single act of “setting preconceptions” (ibid). For some, this contributes to the researcher’s ability to achieve the “analytic goal of attending to the participants’ account with an open mind” (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, cited in Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 83); however, for me, the value has been rather in encouraging me to be “honest and vigilant about [my] own perspective” (ibid), and making explicit my “beliefs and biases early in the research process to allow readers to understand [my] position” (Cresswell & Miller, 2000, cited in Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 83).

Bracketing has been a process, then, of setting my work in context; revealing to the *reader/audience* who I am, so that they can take my bias into account (Grant et al., 2013; Tufford & Newman, 2010); but also revealing to *myself* who I am, so that I can use this constructively in the study, not be hindered by it. In this way, bracketing can be seen as an aspect of reflexivity which adds rigour to the study (Tufford & Newman, 2010). It also provided me with an opportunity to create a data set in addition to the participants’ stories, by effectively interviewing myself (Glaser, 1998).

Another function of bracketing is as an aspect of researcher self-care, in addition to sensitive and supportive academic supervision (Bond, 2004, p. 6). These additional interviews, conducted with a trusted colleague, provided an opportunity to explore the emotions aroused in me by such personally sensitive and potentially distressing research (Rolls & Relf, 2006); having an attuned and supportive colleague bear witness to the challenges of the research process brought some relief. This satisfied to some extent the requirement of the BACP code to engage in “actively seeking conditions for

undertaking the research that are compatible with self-respect” (Bond, 2004, p. 11), and helped to manage any potential “ethical and professional consequences” of the emotional impact on me (Rolls & Relf, 2006, p. 288).

The potential limitation was that in the absence of a clear definition, menu or formula, I could not be sure that what I was doing was effective bracketing; furthermore, there are no guarantees that, even if I bracketed “correctly” or effectively, it has had the desired effect. No amount of “bringing into awareness” necessarily prevents my bias adversely affecting my work; though from a feminist perspective, I could argue that this is neither possible nor detrimental (Grant et al., 2013).

Another factor is that bracketing is a time-consuming process; after a delay in gaining ethical approval, the time taken to record, transcribe and analyse the bracketing interview meant that I was almost six months into my PhD before I was ready to interview participants. Bracketing also required an extensive and long-term commitment from my bracketing interviewer; a time-commitment that he was willing to give, but a consideration for researchers nevertheless.

As well as a lack of clear definition of what bracketing is, there is no agreement on when it should happen (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 85); at the beginning of the research project, or at the start of the analysis phase (ibid). Rolls and Relf (2006) suggest that bracketing should be carried out at start of the research project and continue throughout, the “cascading nature of qualitative research” making it unhelpful to limit bracketing to the start, or to any particular phase (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 85). Informed by this, I completed a bracketing interview before the first participant

interview, and then again at the end of each round of data collection, resulting in four bracketing interviews, each approximately one and a half hours.

The process of bracketing (that is, recording, acknowledging, examining, exploring my expectations, assumptions, thoughts and beliefs, and emotional responses to the research process), was not restricted to the bracketing interviews. I wrote memos throughout, and used my reflexive journal to make theoretical, methodological and observational notes (Tufford & Newman, 2010). As well as being a valuable aspect of reflexivity in my research, this process has been part of the zooming in and out associated with autoethnography (Ellis, 1999, p. 11); focusing on the details of a feeling or an experience, then standing back to see the wider picture, making connections between my experience and those of participants, and our cultural contexts.

Rolls and Relf (2006) describe how “the presence of a skilled ‘bracketer’ contributed to the production of knowledge by increasing objectivity and amplifying the researcher’s own reflexive capacity.” In response to this, I noted:

- (a) I can do reflexive, I would be fine without a bracketing interview.
- (b) It will be very good for me—both for my research, and for my personal journey—to let someone help me with this. (Reflexive journal, 11/06/14).

I chose a fellow PhD student as my bracketer, someone who I was confident would offer the right mix of safety and challenge. A potential drawback was that a fellow PhD student might be too sympathetic, might share the same biases, or might not

always be sufficiently challenging; I was not aware of these problems arising during the process.

After initial informal conversations in which I outlined my ideas and ascertained that the bracketer was willing to work in this way with me, we met formally to negotiate the bracketing contract, discussing among other things, the issue of payment, to acknowledge the considerable time-commitment and effort required, as well as acknowledging the bracketer's other commitments (Rolls & Relf, 2006, p. 293); my bracketer declined payment. We also discussed the length, timing and number of interviews, including the possibility of continuing electronically over time if necessary; confidentiality, limits to confidentiality, and boundaries (ibid). Through this process, I was able to develop a "negotiated, supportive relationship" (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 86).

In summary, reflexivity and bracketing have provided a way of bringing my research, my counselling practice and my personal development together. This has been perhaps the only honest way for me to conduct this particular study; I cannot separate myself from my research. Process and content frequently merge; my life, my counselling practice and my research are not connected by bridges, not separate strands woven together, but "felted" (Grant et al., p. 2).

### **Ethical considerations**

I have been guided by the codes of practice of two bodies; BACP and BPS, both of which are based on ethical principles. The cornerstones of the BACP code are respecting autonomy, beneficence (working for the good of others), non-maleficence

(avoiding causing harm), and justice (a fair distribution of services or opportunity to contribute); the BPS code is based on the principles of respect, competence, responsibility and integrity (BPS, 2018, p. 4).

Both organisations require researchers to take responsibility for making informed judgements about what constitutes appropriate behaviour, rather than relying on a set of rigid rules. Inevitably, sometimes there are areas of conflict between competing principles (Thompson & Chambers, 2012), and the BPS makes it clear that the existence of a code does not in any way substitute for researchers using their “professional and ethical judgement” (BPS, 2009, p. 4). The BACP emphasises the importance of “trustworthiness” and “openness and accountability” in research, not only towards the participants but also towards others who may be affected by the research (Bond, 2004, p. 5). This is especially relevant for autoethnography, where others are implicated, but their consent has not been sought (see page 71). Both organisations also expect their respective codes of practice for research to be used in conjunction with the ethical frameworks for practitioners in therapeutic practice or clinical work (Bond, 2004, p. 4; BPS, 2014, p. 4); the BACP acknowledges that this can be challenging.

In part because of the long shadow cast by the actions of Nazi doctors, and in part because of highly publicised failures of some recent drug trials to prevent severe adverse outcomes to participants (BBC News, 2016; Bradford, 2016; Matharu, 2016), avoidance of harm to participants has arguably become the chief focus of ethical review panels (Thompson & Chambers, 2012). The World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki of 2000 clearly puts the wellbeing of the participant above potential gains

from research in terms of increased knowledge or benefits to society (Bond, 2004), and whilst my proposed study is not medical research, it is clear that the wellbeing of the human participant is paramount in any research context.

However, there is potential for harm in all research (Thompson & Chambers, 2012); rather than focusing on informed consent and avoidance of harm, it may be more helpful to “focus on relationships and emotions” (Thompson & Chambers, 2012, p. 24). An important ethical consideration in this particular type of research is the inclusion of “intimate others” by implication (Ellis, 2007, p. 3). In talking about their childhood experiences, participants (including myself) are inevitably also talking about family members. Ellis refers to this as the “relational ethics” of ethnography and autoethnography (ibid, p. 4), which focuses on the values of integrity, dignity, and mutual respect, and acknowledges the interconnectedness of the researcher, the participants, and their communities. Ellis makes the distinction between doing research “on” people, and doing research “with” people (ibid, p. 13); I feel that in openly declaring my own experience of childhood emotional neglect, it was clear to the participants that I was doing this research *with* them, rather than *on* them.

Nevertheless, there were two specific potential areas of harm or distress to participants in my study. Firstly, talking about the past could raise distressing or disturbing memories for the participants; secondly, revisiting childhood issues might have a negative effect on the participant’s relationships with their parents or siblings. The BACP code recognises that research may involve “areas of vulnerability in people’s lives” or “socially sensitive issues”; furthermore, we cannot always know in advance what will trigger feelings of vulnerability in research participants (Bond, 2004, p. 8). I



followed good practice guidelines in terms of excluding participants whose circumstances or age might make them particularly vulnerable, only including adults who were not mentally impaired or undergoing any psychological treatment at the time of the study (Bond, 2004, p. 8); although Thompson and Chambers suggest that we are all vulnerable, researcher and researched alike (2012, p. 27).

Having acknowledged that in such sensitive research there was a potential for harm, I was aware of my responsibility to reduce the risk (Bond, 2004, p. 8). This included, on the recommendation of the University's Ethical Review Panel (ERP), ensuring that participants were fully informed about the potential risk by providing them with a topic schedule beforehand (see Appendix D, page 447), detailing likely areas of discussion. However, I felt this gave rise to a tension with the research method, which might be undermined by the participants coming to the research interview with preconceived ideas about the subject (McLeod, 2011). This could be construed as an example of an ethics committee "shaping research" (Gladwell, 2015); I explore this ethical tension in a short article (Blanchard, 2017).

Even though some participants became distressed during their interviews, they seemed nevertheless willing to contribute because they could see the benefit of the research (Thompson & Chambers 2012). It seems that "experiencing distress is not necessarily experienced as harmful" (ibid, p. 30); Gladwell, writing in *Therapy Today*, found that "participants were keen to be involved and described the experience as positive . . . It put them in charge of their story," (2015, p. 38). I saw my role in the research interview as being to help participants to manage their distress, not necessarily to avoid it completely.

I endeavoured to minimise harm by having face-to-face or telephone conversations with participants before their interviews, offering them an opportunity to raise concerns or ask questions that had not been answered by participant information sheets. In the participant information sheet (see Appendix D, page 443), I explained that talking about the past might raise distressing or disturbing memories for the participant, and made it clear that if this happened during the interview, I would stop recording if the participant wanted me to do so; I reminded each participant of this when we spoke before the interview, and again immediately before I started recording. I also checked with the participants that they were comfortable with the level of distress that they were experiencing throughout the interviews, offering to end the conversation or turn off the recording equipment if they wished (Harper & Thompson, 2012), and offering the opportunity to reflect on the process of the interview afterwards (ibid).

Working as a counsellor means that I have experience of facilitating an environment where clients feel sufficiently safe to share sensitive material, to learn to tolerate the level of distress that this entails, and to feel sufficiently empowered to ask if we can bring the process to a halt if they find the level of distress is becoming *intolerable*; this may have been useful in the research setting.

One practical precaution was booking the interview room for 2 hours, even though I did not intend to record for more than 1.5 hours, allowing for time to settle into the room at the start, and time at the end to debrief. I also invited participants to share with me their experience of being involved in the research process when I sent them their interview transcripts to check for accuracy, when I had completed the analysis of their

interviews, and when I had completed discussion sections. This offered them opportunities for further reflections, as well as being part of the ongoing consent process.

Whilst participants may contribute data to the project freely, once they see their words in writing, or see how they have been represented within any creative work produced as part of the research, they may experience discomfort or distress, or concern about the potential impact on self or others (Bond, 2004, p. 10); treating consent as an ongoing process may to some extent alleviate this (McLeod, 2001). This became even more relevant once I made the decision to produce a short film as part of the thesis, with the intention of sharing it on social media. I planned to use actors to play the roles of composite characters, but was aware that participants might be more afraid of exposure through this more widely accessible medium than through publication of academic papers or conference presentations, which have a much lower readership/audience. For this reason, I sought additional consent from the participants and let them see the film script in advance of filming so that they could veto any anecdotes or phrases that they felt might betray their identity; all gave their consent, though one participant requested two minor changes.

However, treating consent as an ongoing process meant asking participants to remain available for further contact over a long period, during which they may have wanted to leave this issue behind; it was also a potential weakness of my study that I left myself vulnerable to participants withdrawing consent when the study was well advanced (Bond, 2004). Early on in the research process I made the decision that I would continue to keep in contact with participants as long as they were willing to be

contacted, and continue to ask their consent at each stage, and face the risk of them withdrawing some or all of their contribution; this felt like the best fit both with my personal commitment to ethical research and to my practice as a person-centred counsellor.

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) make the distinction between “procedural ethics”, the process of gaining ethical approval for research; and “ethics in practice” (p. 263), the requirement to act responsibly and make ethically appropriate judgements in the day-to-day conduct of research. These are not necessarily two completely distinct aspects, however. Procedural ethics might include a commitment to respect both confidentiality and privacy of participants, as a minimum adhering to the requirements of current data protection legislation, anonymising data, safe storage of personal and identifying information, and a commitment to use the data only for the purpose agreed (Bond, 2004, p. 7); yet responding to unexpected challenges arising in relation to confidentiality and privacy could be construed as ethics in practice. For example, I initially planned to include anonymised interview transcripts in my thesis, but ultimately chose not to; the university could be seen as constituting a “small community”, with a heightened risk of individual participants being identifiable from their stories, even with personal names and all identifying details removed (Bond, 2004).

I ensured that participants knew how to access psychological support afterwards if they felt they needed it, as suggested by the BACP *Ethical Guidelines for Researching Counselling and Psychotherapy* (Bond, 2004, p. 5). Recognising that sensitive research carries risk for the researcher as well as participants (Etherington, 2004a, p. 206), I

started seeing a counsellor so that I had somewhere to take any personal issues raised by the research if I felt unable to explore them with my academic supervisor. I was fortunate, however, that my lead supervisor was herself an experienced counsellor and was sensitive to the heavy emotional load of the research; clinical supervision for my counselling work provided an additional element of “personal and professional support” as suggested by the BACP code (Bond, 2004, p. 6). As described above, the ongoing process of bracketing provided an additional supportive relationship within which I could explore the emotional impact of this deeply personal research (Rolls & Relf, 2006).

However, conducting ethical research is not only about avoiding harm to individuals. I have been aware throughout the process of the requirement to work ethically in all respects, including research integrity. This has included, but not been restricted to, engaging in any necessary learning or training to develop an appropriate level of competence to complete this research project, and striving to ensure that my research contributes something of value to the body of knowledge (Bond, 2004). Another aspect of ethical research has been my commitment to dissemination, at the very least as a mark of respect for the participants who have contributed their stories. I have endeavoured to report fairly and honestly on the research process and its outcomes, including presenting at research forums and conferences from the start of the study; and will continue to do so beyond submission, in the hope of achieving some change, if only for the individuals in my audience (Bond, 2004, p. 10).

## **Analysis**

In the following section, I describe the three phases of analysis, which corresponded to the three rounds of data collection; the different physical processes of analysis that I used; and different layers of analysis that I applied to the data. Throughout, I evaluate my methods in terms of their usefulness in answering the research question.

### *Three phases of analysis*

Between August 2014, when I conducted my first bracketing interview, and March 2017, when I completed the final participant interview, I recorded a total of 16 interviews (including the bracketing interviews, and the focus group), divided into three rounds of data collection; August 2014 to May 2015, August 2015 to January 2016, and August 2016 to March 2017. After each round, I carried out a preliminary analysis and wrote a draft discussion.

During the first round of data collection, starting with the first bracketing interview in August 2014 and ending with the focus group in May 2015, I conducted a thematic analysis of each individual interview in turn. Corbin and Strauss suggest that “analysis should begin after the first data have been collected” (2008, p. 58), which provides the opportunity for each step of the data collection, analysis and interpretation to “inform each other in a cyclical process” (Chang, 2008, p. 122). It helped me to see analysis as a process which “builds over time and with the acquisition of data” (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p. 57), and whilst I was not engaged in the process of developing a grounded theory, I was conscious of noticing potential themes from the very first pieces of data. It also helped me, as a novice researcher, to build my confidence by presenting each interview-analysis-interpretation cycle to my supervisors during the first round of

data collection. Inevitably, this analysis was driven by my own interpretation, my “understanding of the events as related by participants,” (ibid, 2008, p. 48). Conscious of this while actually engaged in the process of analysis, I wrote reflexive notes or memos throughout. For example, after completing the analysis of the first participant interview, I commented in a reflexive memo:

One difference I found was that when analysing my own material from the bracketing interview, it was relatively easy to gather the individual themes that emerged into major themes. It was my material—I knew what it meant, what it signified to me, what each phrase or theme related to. Or at least, I believed I did; perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I felt I had the authority to arrange the individual themes into major themes (and I can hear that internal, critical voice: “Who gave you the right to... ?”)

When analysing my participant’s material, I felt much less certain about gathering individual themes into major themes. How could I be sure if I had accurately ascribed meaning to her phrases, interpreted the themes correctly? For quite a while I sat with the individual themes spread out before me on separate bits of paper, wondering how on earth to bring them together in less than 20-30 major themes.

One way that I managed my uncertainty about the accuracy of my interpretation is by the process of member checking or reliability checks (see page 44), although even this process cannot guarantee accuracy (McLeod, 2001, p. 187).

Once I had completed the first round of data collection I returned to the data and reviewed the themes, regrouping them as seemed appropriate. The physical process of this looked messy (see Figure 4), but was systematic and thorough. For each individual data set I had created small slips of paper for the individual themes, which helped me to arrange them into major themes in the first phase of thematic analysis.

Figure 4: A table of themes



When reviewing the analysis, I spread out the slips of paper from all the interviews and moved them around, regrouping them and developing new categories and major themes until they seemed to fit with each other. I tried to keep an open mind throughout; having the individual themes written on separate pieces of paper made it easier to move themes from a “lower-level concept” to a “higher-level” one, or to reinterpret themes or events “to group them and subsequently bring them to a higher level of abstraction” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 52).



A second bracketing interview, in August 2015, marked the end of the first round of data collection and the start of the second, completed in January 2016. I had recently completed the training programme for the NVivo qualitative analysis software, and influenced by this alongside a close reading of Braun and Clarke's step-by-step guide to thematic analysis (2006), I carried out the analysis of the four individual interviews in this group as a single data set using NVivo (see page 81 for further description of using NVivo qualitative data analysis software).

However, when it came to revisiting the Round 2 data analysis for the draft discussion chapter, I found it somehow less accessible on the computer than on paper. This might have been in part because I had analysed the four interviews as a single data set; I also sensed that the hum of the computer, when I was using NVivo, created some pressure (at least in my mind) to always be "doing" something, whereas working with pen and paper, I felt more comfortable "being" with the data in a reflective way (Etherington, 2016). So when I completed the third round of data collection, starting with a third bracketing interview in August 2016 and ending with the final individual interview in March 2017, I returned to my earlier practice of carrying out the thematic analysis of each individual interview in turn, followed by an analysis of the group of interviews.

### *Three different processes*

I used three different processes to carry out the analysis. The first was what I refer to as the "Pen & Paper" method; that is, starting with a printed copy of the interview transcript, underlining significant phrases, referred to as "coding" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82; Chang, 2008, p. 119), and jotting down themes as they occurred to me on a separate sheet. This is a time-consuming and laborious process, but it enabled me to

become very familiar with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). It was also immediately accessible and user-friendly, without the need for lengthy training, and I could do it anywhere; at my desk at the university, at the kitchen table, in the car waiting to pick up one of my children.

I had reservations about using qualitative analysis software, concerned that I might feel disconnected from the data; however, it seemed valuable for my development as a researcher to try out the NVivo qualitative data analysis software, so when an opportunity for training arose, I took it. If it proved effective, that would be positive for my existing research and possibly enhance future projects or employment opportunities; if I found it did not suit my research, then I could explain why. Either way, I would be able to compare and contrast the way that I had carried out analysis by manual and technological methods. Effectively, the NVivo qualitative data analysis software programme simply helps the researcher to manage the process; I followed the same procedures as for my Pen & Paper approach, reading the interview transcripts, but on the screen instead of on paper, creating “nodes” for significant phrases in the interview transcripts, equating to either “codes” or “themes”, depending what level of abstraction I was working at. Although the analysis process is the same when using the NVivo software, in that the researcher still makes the decisions about what items to code, and which codes to develop into themes, the software makes some processes quicker or easier, such as making models or maps of the themes, and makes others possible which would not otherwise be, such as creating word clouds (see Appendix C).

Influenced by a fellow researcher’s presentation at the BACP research conference in May 2017, I developed a third process, “Slice & Dice”, which entailed printing all the

interview transcripts single-sided and cutting each page into themes, sentence by sentence, using a metal ruler and a scalpel (Figure 5). This had the disadvantage that a physical piece of paper could only be put on one pile or another, whereas using the Pen & Paper approach or the NVivo software, I could code an item for more than one theme simultaneously.

Figure 5: Slice & Dice



If I had used the Slice & Dice method exclusively, this could have been a limitation; however, as a third and final phase of thematic analysis applied to the entire data set, it provided a useful check. The process was time-consuming, but was an opportunity to revisit all the themes, checking that none of them had become so abstract that they no longer represented the data; and checking for consistency across all the data-code-theme connections, from the first bracketing interview to the final participant interview.

### *Three layers of analysis*

Chang suggests that “Initial data analysis begins with coding and sorting . . . used to fracture each data set into smaller bits on the basis of topical commonality and to regroup the data bits into topical categories” (2008, p. 119). The first layer of coding and sorting that I carried out was a thematic analysis of the content of interview transcripts, following the approach detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Although this involves a degree of interpretation, I considered this a “hard” analytical approach (Etherington, 2016), in that I was following a specific step-by-step process. Chang suggests that one of the pitfalls of autoethnography is an overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation (2008, p. 54); I felt that the systematic approach of thematic analysis would help me to avoid this, enabling me to develop themes methodically rather than claiming that themes “emerged from the data” or “were embedded in the data,” without restricting or limiting what I did with the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis had several advantages for my research. It proved a flexible analytical tool, which enabled me to modify and adapt the size and type of unit of data or code, according to what best suited my purpose (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). This was especially valuable at the start, as the open-ended nature of my enquiry meant that I didn’t know at first what would prove most significant (Chang, 2008, p. 119).

Thematic analysis can be applied to different data items (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which enabled me to analyse individual interviews, the focus group, and other communications (such as e-mails) using the same tool. Similarly, it can be used equally to identify personal themes (such as feeling unloved), and sociocultural or historical themes (such as hospital practices, or different gender roles); this enabled me

to zoom in and out from the personal to the social, cultural, and historical, without having to change analytical tool. Thematic analysis does not impose strict rules, for example, on the number of times an item must occur in order to be counted as a code or theme (Braun & Clarke, p. 82); this meant that I could give equal value to what seemed intuitively to be a significant theme, even if it only occurred once in a participant's story. In this way, thematic analysis may be used to create a "rich description of the data set" or "detailed account of one aspect" (ibid, p. 83), which has enabled me to develop overarching themes at one point, and at another, to focus on specific aspects or sub-themes, helping me to meet my goal of a "commitment to rigorous cultural interrogation and analysis," (Grant et al., 2013, p. 3).

I am frustrated by the absence of methodological details in some autoethnographic research; so I offer here my detailed description of analysing the first bracketing interview. First I created an "orthographic" transcript of the interview verbatim, including hesitations, tearfulness, laughter, false starts and corrections (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). I read through the transcript, underlining sections where the content seemed significant to me (coding) and also noting where my tone of voice or pace changed; where I wept, laughed, hesitated. Then I read through again, noting each significant word, phrase or sentence as it occurred and creating a theme or descriptive title for it, listing each new theme on a separate page. So, for example, at line 19 of the interview, I described my feeling that I have "taken into myself" the experience of childhood emotional neglect, and "carried on doing to myself . . . all my adult life" the very things that I perceived were done to me in childhood. My initial margin note, "internalised", became the second theme for this interview: "Childhood emotional neglect internalised." In lines 126 and 127, I describe my memory that "my parents

weren't demonstrative", and my belief that this is true for "a lot of people of that generation". My margin notes here, "not showing emotion" and "societal/generational" became the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> themes: "No emotion", and "Generational/societal" (see Appendix E: Analysis of first bracketing interview). I noticed that the themes ranged from the deeply personal, through observations or potential explanations, such as the societal aspects, to factual notes; for example, the fact that I moved house (and therefore schools) when I was six years old.

Continuing with this form of thematic analysis, I wrote each individual theme on a small piece of paper and spread these out on my desk, then arranged them into what seemed logical groups to create major themes. This was the Pen & Paper process that I repeated for each of the interviews in the first round of data collection, and for those in the third round.

I remained conscious that I was interpreting even as I selected and named themes, and that another researcher might categorise and name the themes quite differently. The participants (including myself), in telling our stories, have also been "consciously or unconsciously selective" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 54) in what details we choose to share, how we interpret events, what we remember. Themes do not "emerge" from the data, neither do I "identify" them, as if they were sitting there waiting to be noticed (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80). Participants tell their stories, and I consciously create themes, based on my interpretation of their stories, including their words, their phrases, their facial expressions, what they choose to tell and how they choose to tell it, and my responses to all of this. This feels like it carries huge risk for me. I have to make a decision and justify it, and stand by it; I risk being wrong. My constant need to show

my “working out” may be an illustration of the lasting impact of childhood emotional neglect: I don’t trust myself, and I don’t believe that I will be trusted.

\* \* \*

## **Dramatic interlude**

*Dramatis personae*

ANGELA

SOPHIA

THE GRINDYLOW

BABA YAGA

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET

*Scene: A bedroom, in darkness. SOPHIA and ANGELA are lying in bed; there is no one else to be seen.*

ANGELA: Sophia?

SOPHIA: *(Sleepily)* Mmhmm?

ANGELA: Sophia, I’m frightened.

SOPHIA: *(Yawns)* Frightened? What of?

ANGELA: What if I'm wrong?

SOPHIA: (*Less sleepily*) What do you mean, "wrong"? Wrong about what?

ANGELA: I mean—what if I'm wrong? What if I wasn't emotionally neglected at all? Supposing what I experienced was just a normal childhood? All the things I think are wrong with me that I say were caused by emotional neglect—what if I am really just a spoiled youngest child? What if I'm just a horrible person? Immature, naïve, self-centred, thoughtless, lacking empathy, ungrateful, shallow, mean, spiteful, lazy, selfish, sly, greedy, a terrible daughter, a terrible mother—

SOPHIA: (*Sits up sharply and switches on the bedside light. THE GRINDYLOW has hold of ANGELA's ankles and is pulling her from the bed; meanwhile, BABA YAGA is crouching on the pillow, literally chewing ANGELA's ear off.*) STOP! Everyone, stop! (*Sternly*) Back into bed, all of you. We'll talk about this in the morning.

*THE GRINDYLOW slinks back under the bed, BABA YAGA retreats to the corner of the room, and ANGELA lies back down, pulling the covers up to her chin. SOPHIA lies back down and turns off the light.*

*Nothing can be heard in the darkened room except quiet breathing, and if you listen very carefully, the sound of muffled sobs. THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET, unseen, unheard, not noticed by anyone, is sitting crying in the dark.*

\* \* \*



The second layer of analysis comprised reflections and *focusing* (Gendlin, 1978/2003, p. 10), trying to grasp the felt sense of the experience. This could be considered a “soft” analysis (Etherington, 2016), depending heavily on my subjective interpretation and understanding. This process included trying to see what was familiar to me in an unfamiliar light; “tacking back and forth” between perspectives (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 77).

One reflection during the process of writing was noticing “Mum wanted to be everybody’s best friend/belong” as a clue that Harriet’s mother may have experienced childhood emotional neglect herself; so I moved this from a sub-theme that I had called “Mum manipulative/Always Mum’s agenda/utterly selfish/emotional blackmail” under the major theme of “Not loved or cared for”, to the major theme, “Intergenerational aspects”.

Much of this reflective analysis occurred during the process of writing the discussion chapter or talking to others about my research (Van Maanen, 2011, notes, p. 123).

Each time I wrote a paper presentation, I focused on a small part, and looked at it in great detail; thinking about how to explain this small part to others forced me to be clear in my thinking.

A third layer of analysis was the autoethnographic zooming in and out (Ellis, 1999, p.11); focusing on the details of participants’ experiences, then widening the lens to take in the circumstances of their families, their communities, their societies, the national and international historical circumstances of their childhoods, including

societal norms about gender and family roles; consideration of whether gendered roles are biologically determined or culturally constructed; and the impact of war and famine, illness, and intergenerational aspects. For example, in an earlier stage of analysis I had placed the sub-theme “Mum ill (etc)” below “Anger & arguments/conflict”, and placed both of these themes under the major theme of “Not loved or cared for”. When I came to write up the analysis, however, I reversed the sub-themes so that “Mum ill” sat above “Anger & arguments/conflict”. This may reflect a change in my own thinking; or it may be influenced by the current discourse on mental health, and an understanding of someone who is “angry” as suffering the consequence of a loss or a lack, or a psychological wound, rather than as just bad-tempered by nature.

If I needed to defend this subjective interpretation and theme-creating process, I might explain that I revisited and reviewed the themes at each stage, checking that I still agreed with my own earlier and later interpretations, bringing to the process all that I have learnt from further reading, listening, reflecting, living. I might explain that I have engaged with the process of member checking (see page 44), and that participants have generally concurred with my interpretations.

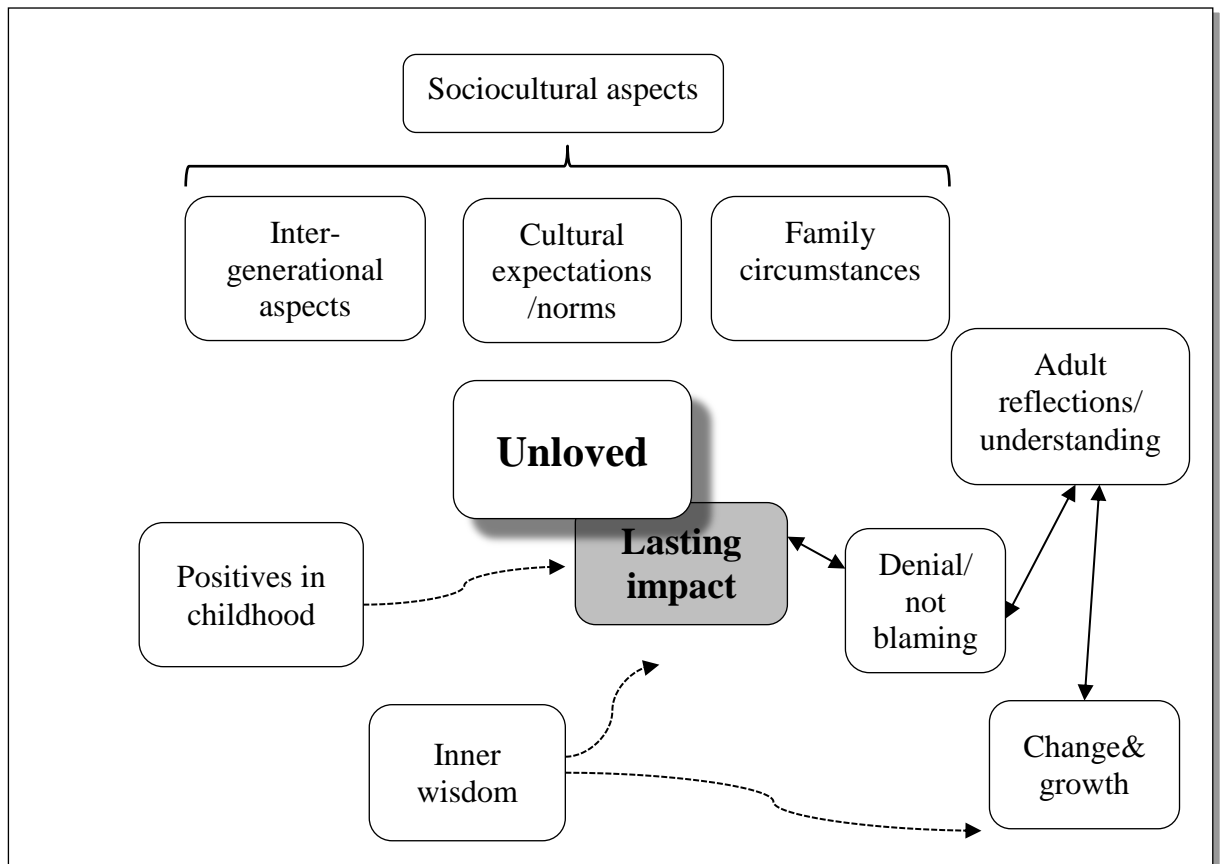
However, I choose to justify my subjective interpretations as a strength and an integral part of my autoethnographic research process. I have experienced being (I believe) an emotionally neglected child *and* being a parent; I am wearing both shoes at the same time, insider and outsider (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 17), as well as having embodied knowledge of parenting and early childhood, built up over years of learning about and working with mothers and newborns or young children. I saw the theory in practice

before my eyes, and reflected on it, as well as developing person-centred counselling attributes, skills and theory, long before I trained to be a therapeutic counsellor or started this research project. I'm not saying that I know everything; but I do know something. As in person-centred counselling, the participants have their own inner wisdom; and I have mine.

Throughout the research process, I have been conscious of the challenge of balancing the rigour required for an academic degree, and honouring the rebellious and story-telling nature of autoethnography (Wall, 2016, p. 2). Although using thematic analysis as a tool enabled me to satisfy some of my concerns around demonstrating rigour, I have become increasingly concerned that using "snippets" from the participants' stories has potentially detracted from "the evocative nature of the whole stories" (Ellis, 1999, p. 680). Another challenge was balancing thoroughness and pedantry; between "superficial analysis of major themes, and over-detailed analysis of minutiae which becomes boring," (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 51).

These successive phases, processes and layers of analysis culminated in a map (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87) or model of the major themes (Figure 6; see Appendix B, page 434 for detailed models of all themes and sub-themes).

Figure 6: Model of major themes



In arranging this model, I noted that at the heart of the inquiry, my question is:

What is the experience of childhood emotional neglect like?

I therefore placed “Unloved” in the centre of the model in larger type. “Lasting impact” incorporates what I see as one of the most damaging aspects; the long shadow that childhood emotional neglect casts over our adult lives, a theme which recurred in all the participant interviews. In the model, therefore, I have positioned “Lasting impact” in the shadow of “Unloved”.

I gathered together the themes “Intergenerational aspects”, “Cultural expectations/norms” and “Family circumstances” under the umbrella term “Sociocultural aspects”. This may be contentious, but I believe that these are factors which may in part lead to conditions where childhood emotional neglect can arise. That’s not to say that childhood emotional neglect will inevitably follow when these conditions are in place; my aim is not to generalize and predict behaviour, but rather to look back and try to understand.

Potentially one of the most harmful consequences of childhood emotional neglect is our inability as adults to recognise that any harm was done; this tendency towards denial is captured in “Denial/not blaming”, which I see as being linked to both “Lasting impact” and “Adult reflection and understanding”.

The major theme that I describe as “Inner wisdom” incorporates all those instances where, even in childhood, individuals recognised that something was wrong; or where, guided by their actualising tendency (Rogers, 1951), they sought out individuals or experiences that enabled them to get their developmental needs met, even when the individuals or experiences were less than ideal. Dotted arrows indicate that “Inner wisdom” may have mitigated the lasting impact to some extent, and may have had a positive influence on the potential for change and growth.

The major theme “Change and Growth” captures the ways in which participants describe themselves as having grown or changed as adults, or describe relationships changing or improving. Some of the positive change and growth seems connected to

developing adult perspectives and understanding, so I have indicated this link with a solid arrow.

Finally, “Positives in childhood” describes the positive aspects of our childhoods.

None of the participants described a childhood of abject misery, devoid of any happiness, comfort, or hope; all describe at least one person with whom they had a positive relationship, or one positive aspect of childhood, so a dotted arrow indicates that this may have mitigated the lasting impact. Grandparents often provided a positive relationship; sometimes neighbours took that role. The complexity of the experience is illustrated by the fact that for some (Miranda, Heather, Kate), their fathers played a positive role, whereas for others (myself, Rachel, Finlay, Harriet), fathers were distant, disconnected, almost irrelevant; or a figure of fear (Cathy, Muhammed). Similarly, whilst grandparents may have played a positive role in their grandchildren’s lives, the participants sometimes recognise that their beloved grandparents were nevertheless harsh or critical towards their own children, the participants’ parents (see page 290).

Describing the themes in this way implies distinct and clearly differentiated boundaries, which is far from the truth; the boundaries are blurred. I had to make decisions about where to place themes and sub-themes, and some of those decisions have been challenging; I may have made wrong decisions. For example, I placed the large cluster of themes around “Mum was ill, etc” under the major theme “Cultural expectations/norms”; but it may belong in “Family circumstances”. I decided that this cluster related to the conflict between the required “Good mother” performance and the pressure that this places on a woman (Hays, 1996). It could, however, equally belong under the major theme “Intergenerational aspects”, if the mother has become depressed

as a consequence of her own experience of childhood emotional neglect. For some participants (Harriet, Kate, Rachel, Heather), their mothers' depression or suicidal behaviour could be seen as an aspect of having to take the parent role, conditional approval or emotional blackmail, which I have placed with the "Unloved" themes. The themes can thus be seen not as in a linear, but in a cyclical and overlapping relationship to one another.

During the analysis phase, I was conscious of creating individual codes or sub-themes that might overlap sufficiently that they could merge. However, in the early stages I wanted to ensure that I kept all the nuances in; this, to me, was one of the strengths of such qualitative analysis. For example, "Feeling helpless" might seem very similar to "No autonomy in childhood," and "Powerless"; however, I believed that the individual stories revealed subtle differences.

For example, Alice describes not wanting to go to India to visit her extended family, especially after being bullied by her uncle on a previous visit, but not feeling she had any choice in the matter, because she was only 14, and "you had to just do what you were told, you weren't allowed to have an opinion or—we weren't allowed to think for ourselves". I coded this for "No autonomy as a child". Elsewhere, however, Alice describes a more global feeling of helplessness when she was growing up; "I felt helpless for many years . . . and it's just that helpless feeling of not being able to do anything about the situation, I was never able to do anything about my situation"; I coded this for "Feeling helpless". Alan also describes a feeling of helplessness as a 14-year-old, but in the initial analysis I coded this for "Controlled", as Alan referred

specifically to his memory of “being controlled by” his parents, which left him feeling powerless, helpless, without autonomy.

Even now, after hours spent arranging the themes, developing the map of the themes, and considering the relationships between them, I continue to revise the themes as I write. I am acutely aware that this process of thematic analysis is not finished or completed, only over for now (Van Maanen, 2011).

I tried to be analytical, but consciously avoided analysing in the sense of psychoanalysis. Similarly, in the representation of the participants’ stories, I accept their subjective realities just as in person-centred counselling; but I also need to demonstrate that I can be evaluative, interrogate my own interpretations, and offer alternative viewpoints. You, the reader/audience, must judge whether I have achieved this.

### *Representation*

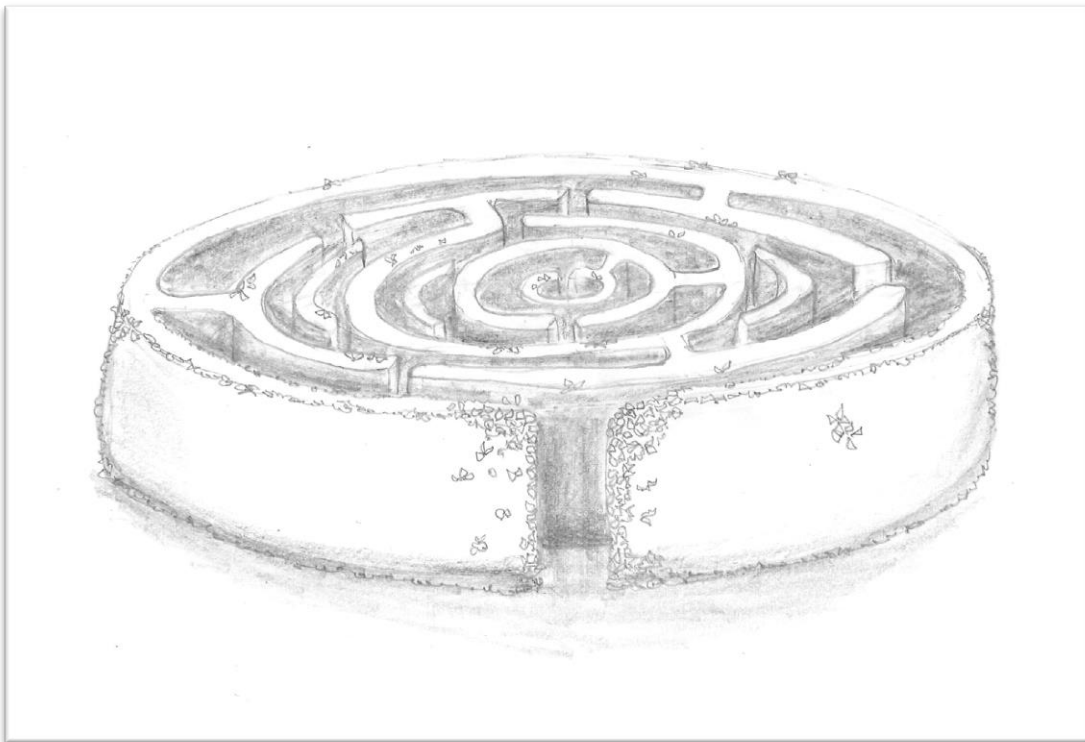
Having completed data collection and analysis, I faced decisions about how to represent the findings; although Etherington (2004a) suggests that “if there is no such thing as objective truth to be found, then there can be no findings” (p. 83). However, I needed to present the outcomes of the study; and I needed to find a way which incorporated my own story, my own voice, without completely subsuming the individual stories and voices of the participants (ibid). One of the issues was that, due to the generosity of my participants and their willingness to tell their stories, and my own insecurity about ever having done enough, I may have collected too much data for this kind of study (Ellis, 1999, p. 679); doing justice to all of the participants became a



significant challenge. In constructing the discussion chapter around the themes that I had developed during the thematic analysis, I feared that I had gone down the wrong path; but it was too late to turn back.

Feeling like I'm wandering around in a maze, and I've taken a wrong turn—gone a long way down the wrong path, and need to find my way back to the right path. (Reflective journal, 16/11/17).

Figure 7: The maze



In privileging the themes, influenced by Chang's systematic approach to autoethnography (2008), I might imply a generalisability that I never intended to claim for this research. Boyle and Parry (2007) make the case for the narrative approach in autoethnography, where individual isolated events are not apparently significant, but the cumulative effect of a "sequential bearing of witness" (p. 187) to the whole story

has a powerful impact. Ellis, too, makes the distinction between illustrating the research outcomes with data extracts, and the power of the whole narrative (1999, p. 680); however, I could not see how to do justice to all of the participant stories, and remain within the word limit of a PhD.

Another tension within this PhD was finding the balance between honouring the creative, story-telling approach of autoethnography, and demonstrating the ability to think critically about my research; this applied to representing the outcomes just as much to the data collection and analysis (Ellis, 1999). Etherington (2004a) advises the autoethnographer to “show—don’t tell” (p. 37); however, showing alone would not suffice for a PhD. The best resolution to these tensions seemed a compromise; combining showing *and* telling, finding a way to present the stories, including my own, *and* to satisfy the requirement for academic rigour required for a PhD.

Concerned that the brief interview extracts incorporated in the thesis would not sufficiently convey the cumulative effect of the experience of childhood emotional neglect (Boyle & Parry, 2007, p. 187), I conceived the idea of incorporating a film in the thesis, with actors playing the roles of composite characters, adapting techniques from poetic inquiry (McCullis, 2013), or ethnodrama and performative art (Grbich, 2013). Like a sculptor working from a block of stone, I started with a single text document made up of all the participant interview transcripts, including my bracketing interviews, e-mail exchanges, and excerpts from my reflective journal, and chipped and carved away until I had a script in which every major theme and every participant’s voice was represented to create a “polyphonic narrative collage” (Grbich, 2013, p. 145). With a view to using the film for dissemination of my research in the future, I

interspersed the participant stories with “clarifying comments” (ibid) in the form of excerpts from the literature. “*All my bruises were inside*” is the result (see Chapter 4). First, though, I consider the context of the research in the literature review (Chapter 3).

## **Chapter 3: Literature review**

### **The fog**

As we make our way slowly across the marsh in the fog, some of the children tell me that they've looked for maps to guide them across the treacherous ground; but they found nothing that helped. "There's just nothing out there that describes this experience," they say. This was my feeling, too, although I didn't do a thorough search before starting out. It felt important that I find my own way; I was wary of false trails and will-o'-the-wisps that might lead me far from my own path.

\* \* \*

### ***Introduction***

The section of *The Fog*, above, sets the scene, and reminds the reader that my thesis is a creative, interpretive work. Below, I justify my decision to complete the literature search and review during, rather than before, data collection and analysis, and describe the search strategies that I used, and the results that these produced. I then explore problems of definition and methodological challenges that affect research into childhood emotional neglect. In reviewing the literature, I keep in mind my main research aim of offering a detailed description of the experience of childhood emotional neglect, and examining the phenomenon in its sociocultural context; my secondary question about the lasting impact of childhood emotional neglect; and what my research adds to the body of knowledge.

### ***Positioning the literature search***

In quantitative research, and some qualitative research methods, a thorough literature search is usually carried out in the preparatory phase of the research project (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This enables the researcher to clarify what is already known about the subject, identify gaps in the existing knowledge, and inform and guide the research

project. Gough, Oliver, and Thomas (2012) suggest that it is unethical to embark on primary research without carrying out a review of the literature, as this may result in a waste of limited resources through duplication of work, or ill-informed and therefore poorly conducted research (p. 3). Other methodologies, however, privilege the data, placing the literature search and review after data collection, so that the researcher is not over-influenced by the prevailing views of the scientific community (Noblit & Hare 1988, p. 31).

Autoethnography falls somewhere between; privileging the data, but acknowledging that researchers are usually investigating a phenomenon already intimately known to them. As I explain in the methodology chapter, I cannot avoid preconceptions, though this is not necessarily a limitation (see page 89). In such “personal experience” methods (McLeod, 2011, p. 217), whether to complete the literature search before collecting data or afterwards is considered not so much a weakness as an irrelevance, in that knowledge of the subject is already embodied in the researcher as part of her or his lived experience (Etherington, 2004a, p. 217).

However, a review of the literature is necessary to place the research in context. Corbin and Strauss (2008) suggest that some knowledge of the relevant literature before data collection can be useful to make comparisons with the data and enhance the researcher’s sensitivity to what is significant in the data during collection, and that it can prompt questions for initial observations or interviews and suggest areas for theoretical sampling. However, these last two points seemed less relevant for my study as I did not use a schedule of questions in participant interviews, and my emphasis was on individual narratives rather than theoretical sampling.

There was a tension, then, between the need to review some of the relevant literature, to ensure that my research would make an original contribution to the existing body of knowledge and to inform my data collection; and on the other hand, the need to keep an open mind during data collection (McLeod, 2001). I managed this tension by leaving the substantive literature search and review until after I had completed the first two rounds of data collection and analysis, and before I began the third. I kept in mind the suggestion that concepts or themes that recur frequently in both the literature and the data are clearly significant, and continually questioned whether themes truly arose from the data, or whether I was “imposing these concepts on the data” because they had become familiar to me from the literature (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 37).

***Search strategies and results***

My starting point was an electronic search of databases such as EBSCOHost, PsychInfo, Web of Science and ProQuest, although there are limitations to electronic searching, such as a large number of results which contain the target words, but do not share the focus of the proposed research (Gough et al., 2012, p. 13); see Figure 8 and Figure 9 below for the search terms and results.

Figure 8: Search terms

CHILDHOOD	EMOTIONAL NEGLECT
child* OR "early life"	neglect* OR maltreat* OR stress* OR "emotion* neglect*" OR "parenting style" OR "emotional life" OR "child rearing" OR cold OR distan* OR "maternal absen*"

Figure 9: Table of search results

Search engine	Total number of results	Peer reviewed/ references available	Words in abstract	Dates
EBSCOHost	2,344	584	314	1959–present
PsychInfo	2,944	711	288	1906–2016
Web of Science	1,142			1950–present
ProQuest	54,900		70	1964–2016

From these results, I selected peer reviewed papers to read in full, on the basis of promising abstracts, from multiple disciplines, including psychology, psychiatry, social work, neuroscience, neurobiology, education, looking for frequently cited authors to establish major writers. The search did not find qualitative papers; this may reflect a limitation of electronic search engines, or publication bias. Some studies were correlational; for example, Brown et al. (2016) examined the associations between child maltreatment and internalizing problems; O’Mahen, Karl, Moberly, and Fedock (2015) explored the association between childhood maltreatment and emotion regulation as contributors to depression. Most had a narrow focus: for example, Carpenter et al. (2009) tested cortisol reactivity in healthy adults who self-reported childhood emotional abuse; Buckholdt, Parra, and Jobe-Shields (2014) tested a specific model of family emotion-related processes. Some studies were systematic reviews and meta-analyses of empirical studies (for example, Glaser, 2002; Norman, Byambaa, Butchart, Scott, & Vos, 2012; Stoltenborgh et al., 2013). These were useful in that they established that childhood emotional neglect is a widespread phenomenon, and described some typical outcomes; but none had the nuanced accounts which capture the

finer details overlooked by questionnaire surveys, and the participant's voice was absent. I found these papers objective, detached; I had no visceral response to them.

I excluded studies which included only clinical populations, as my participants are functioning, don't have a diagnosis of a mental illness, and though some have had talking therapy, are not receiving medical treatment. I also excluded papers which examined emotional neglect as an aspect of specific circumstances, for example, children with a specific physical disability or condition, or children in foster care, as I am researching the experience of individuals who have not been diagnosed with a physical disability or condition, or identified as needing input from the statutory services. Such papers may have some relevance to my research, but I wanted to focus on emotional neglect as a stand-alone issue in an otherwise normal, healthy population. The emotional neglect of a child with a condition that might affect physical or cognitive development, or a life-limiting illness, may be considered a different phenomenon to the hidden emotional neglect of an apparently normal, healthy child. For example, a child whose physical condition makes him or her generally less responsive, or who cannot physically initiate or request physical contact, may be less able than a physically healthy and developmentally normal child to elicit sensitive and attuned responses in a parent (Bowlby, 1969/1997, p. 341).

Initially, I intended to exclude papers in which there was not a clear enough distinction between emotional abuse and other forms of abuse or neglect. However, as overlapping and inadequately delineated definitions affected most of the papers in this search, I included papers that referred to emotional abuse and emotional neglect, as well as those which use alternative terms such as "psychological neglect" or the more



general term “psychological maltreatment”, but note this lack of differentiation in my review.

I also included in the review a number of papers which I found by less systematic means; references found through seminars and conferences, and references that were passed on to me by others whom I told about my research. One of the limitations of this review may be that I have included only papers published in the English language; and there continues to be bias in the kind of research funded, undertaken and published, for example, towards positive results and novel findings (Leyser, Kingsley & Grange, 2017).

The majority of papers written about child maltreatment come from the Western industrialized world. However, a meta-analysis of 13 papers on the subject of childhood physical neglect (59,406 participants in total) and 16 papers on the subject of childhood emotional neglect (59,655 participants in total) from across six continents by Stoltenborgh et al. (2013), and another meta-analysis by Stoltenborgh et al. (2015) of 29 papers on the subject of childhood emotional abuse (7,082,279 participants in total, again drawing on data from six continents), suggests that the phenomenon of child maltreatment is a universal and global problem. The total number of studies reviewed, the rigorous inclusion process, the large total number of participants involved, the geographic distribution of the studies (though the largest number come from the US), and the details included of the systematic review process suggest that this is a robust and reliable study; the finding that emotional abuse and neglect were the least studied forms of maltreatment in this review may provide some justification for my research.

The electronic search did not find examples of good quality, peer reviewed research which offered detailed descriptions of childhood emotional neglect, as opposed to measuring the quantity of it or examining a cause and effect relationship between childhood experiences and adult outcomes. This prompted me to review some works which may be considered less robust scientifically, (for example, they are not peer reviewed, or do not give details of research methods, or sample size and characteristics), yet contribute to the body of knowledge of this phenomenon. These include self-help books (such as Cori, 2010; Webb, 2013), written by therapists in response to issues that they see frequently in clinical practice; and expert practitioner books (such as Gerhardt, 2015; Howe, 2005), written to communicate the practitioner's knowledge, accumulated both from reading of professional literature and clinical practice, to a wider audience.

Gough et al. caution that clinicians may be subject to unconscious bias (2012, p. 3). This may, of course, be true of any form of research; it may only be a significant problem if the expert practitioner is either unaware of this potential for bias, or attempts to make claims about generalisability based on this potentially biased view. I am using such literature here to examine the qualities of childhood emotional neglect as they are perceived by others who have spent time listening to the detailed stories of their clients, to see whether the themes that they have identified correspond to those that I have created in my thematic analysis of the data; this seems to me to be a valid use of such literature. Whereas the electronic search may be seen as a survey of the landscape, offering a broad overview of the extent of the territory, my use of the self-help and expert-practitioner literature can be seen as an attempt to dig down into the depth of the

literature, looking for the rich details of the experience that I found to be lacking in the studies reviewed below.

### ***The challenge of defining emotional neglect***

As I outline in the introduction to this thesis, defining childhood emotional neglect is problematic (differentiating between emotional abuse and emotional neglect, and other forms of abuse; drawing the line between overly harsh, but not emotionally neglectful parenting, and finding culturally sensitive definitions); this presents challenges both for the researcher and the reviewer.

For example, in a meta-analysis of the worldwide prevalence of childhood emotional abuse, Stoltenborgh et al. (2012) include this definition of emotional abuse:

The failure to provide a developmentally appropriate, supportive environment, including the availability of a primary attachment figure, so that the child can develop a stable and full range of emotional and social competencies commensurate with her or his personal potentials and in the context of the society in which the child dwells. There may also be acts towards the child that cause or have a high probability of causing harm to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. . . . Acts include restriction of movement, patterns of belittling, denigrating, scapegoating, threatening, scaring, discriminating, ridiculing or other non-physical forms of hostile or rejecting treatment. (World Health Organization, 1999; cited in Stoltenborgh et al., 2012, p. 15).

The authors acknowledge that whilst the first part of this definition could more accurately be said to describe emotional neglect, the second part includes behaviours which may be considered emotional abuse. A second definition, (from Sedlak, 2001), included as an appendix to Stoltenborgh et al. (2012), combines both emotional abuse and emotional neglect under the heading of “Acts/Omissions Included.” This illustrates the lack of clarity and consensus around definitions of emotional abuse and neglect.

In a review of meta-analyses of the prevalence of child maltreatment, Stoltenborgh et al. (2015) highlight the importance of research being culturally relevant and appropriate, but acknowledge the challenge of developing clear, universally accepted definitions of child maltreatment. For example, childhood sexual abuse may be one form of maltreatment easily recognised as wrong across different cultures, whereas in the case of physical and emotional abuse and neglect, what one society deems harmful, another may see as normal parenting. The number of individual studies included in this review (244 publications), the global distribution (Africa, Australia and Asia as well as Europe and North and South America), and the detailed description of methods used to search for and analyse the studies, suggest reliability; although one of the findings is that estimates of prevalence vary considerably across the studies. However, although the possible forms of maltreatment, including emotional neglect, and the potential consequences, are outlined, there is none of the detailed description that would engage the reader’s emotions or convey a sense of the lived experience.

In Young and Widom (2004), the definition offered for neglect is “a judgment that the parents’ deficiencies in childcare were beyond those found acceptable by community

and professional standards at the time and represented extreme failure to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter and medical attention to children” (p. 1372). Most of this definition seems to refer to physical neglect, although elsewhere, inadequate medical attention is included in the definition of emotional neglect. Furthermore, the definition depends heavily on societal norms; whilst this allows for cultural sensitivity, it may not be a reliable guide.

Similarly, Klein et al. (2007), in an examination of the role of childhood neglect in adult women’s “HIV-related risky behaviours” in a largely African American sample, define neglect as being “treated in manner that was unacceptable by community and professional standards at the time” (p. 40). If neglect is widespread in America, and if some common child-rearing practices are potentially harmful, then whether or not parental behaviour is acceptable to the community or even professionals may not be a sufficiently robust guide to emotional neglect.

Klein et al. (2007) differentiate between being abused (entailing action) and being neglected (entailing inaction), which may be a useful distinction; but in reality, abuse and neglect may overlap or merge (Trickett & McBride-Chang, 1995). Briere and Jordan (2009), on the other hand, in a comprehensive overview of the long-term effects of various different forms of child maltreatment and contextual variables, make a distinction between events, such as “instances of sexual or physical abuse” or being a witness to domestic violence; and processes or relational trauma, for example, the “ongoing experience of emotional neglect or relatively unremitting terror” (p. 383). Again, whilst it may seem helpful in theory to differentiate between events and relational trauma, in reality, traumatic events often occur alongside relational trauma,

making it difficult to separate both occurrence and impact; and whilst “relatively unremitting terror” may describe the experience of some emotionally neglected children, it may also be a consequence of repeated instances of abuse. Briere and Jordan consider social context, the potential for abused children to experience further abuse in later life, the likelihood of self-blame, and denial; the interaction of various factors in this overview illustrate the complexity of emotional neglect, and the challenge of identifying cause and effect (ibid).

Friedman and Billick highlight the difficulty in understanding and researching childhood neglect, partly because of a lack of “a consistent, universally accepted definition” (2015, p. 253). This paper usefully reviews a number of associations and risk factors for child neglect and maltreatment, but does not always provide sufficient context. For example, one finding is that children living with relatives other than their parents were twice as likely to be neglected as those living with their biological parents; but the context was not explored (for example, at what age, and for what reasons, children went to live with relatives; and whether the circumstances around their removal contributed to the neglect). The authors helpfully review different approaches to defining neglect, including definitions that use abuse and neglect as interchangeable terms, and those that see a “conceptual difference” between abuse and neglect (p. 254), yet appear to conceptualise child neglect in this paper mainly as physical neglect (evidenced by observations such as “Caregiver not providing adequate supervision” or “Child not secure in their stroller”, p. 258). The authors acknowledge the challenges posed by cultural differences and changing societal norms when attempting to define child neglect; and that parents who appear neglectful may be doing what they believe is best for their child. One example of this is Hispanic parents

choosing not to use car seats, believing their children “will feel abandoned” if not held in their parents’ arms (ibid), which is helpful in illustrating the complexity of the challenge.

O’Mahen et al. (2015) distinguish between emotional abuse and emotional neglect, and between these and other forms of abuse or maltreatment; however, the definitions are imprecise and inconsistent. For example, the authors describe “low positive reinforcement and high levels of negative reinforcement and punishment” as “characteristics endemic to abusive, and in particular, neglectful environments” (p. 288). However, it is not clear whether this refers to emotional abuse or other forms of abuse, to emotional neglect or physical neglect. At one point, emotional abuse is defined as a “pervasive, psychologically harmful relationship between the carer and child” (p. 292), which is too imprecise to be useful; this could equally be a definition of emotional neglect. Later, emotional neglect is defined as “a pattern of child-caregiver interactions characterised by emotional unavailability, unresponsiveness and neglect” (ibid); this latter definition is more helpful than the former, as it adds the detail of “emotional unavailability” and “unresponsiveness”, though “neglect” remains unspecified and may include physical as well as emotional neglect.

### ***Methodological challenges in childhood emotional neglect research***

Methodological issues (finding appropriate measures, appropriate research design, a tendency towards descriptive, cross-sectional studies rather than prospective or longitudinal studies, ethical dilemmas) present another set of challenges (Carpenter et al., 2009; McLeod et al., 2007; O’Mahen et al., 2015; Stoltenborgh et al., 2012; Stoltenborgh et al., 2013; Stoltenborgh et al., 2015). A frequent criticism levelled at the existing research is that it takes cross-sectional, descriptive, self-reported data and

infers a causal link from a correlation; McLeod et al. (2007) therefore call for more experimental (for example, intervention-based), prospective or longitudinal studies which might establish specific causal links between emotional neglect and child outcomes. Stoltenborgh et al. (2013) highlight the problem of small sample sizes, sampling procedures and the influence of sample characteristics in many studies; the difference between observation and self-report measures; whether data has been collected by interview or questionnaire, and the number and type of questions used in questionnaires, leading to inconclusive or unreliable results. Furthermore, emotional neglect may be harder to rate (than, for example, physical abuse), as it is more open to personal interpretation, and specific effects may prove hard to isolate, as it is frequently reported in combination with other forms of child maltreatment (Wright, Crawford & Del Castillo, 2009).

However, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van Ijzendoorn and Juffer (2003) question the use of experimental designs in the context of childhood maltreatment. There are obstacles to achieving the perceived ideal of a “rigorous double-blind procedure”; for example, there may simply be too many variables to control for in family life (Serbin & Karp, 2004). Furthermore, there is potential for researcher bias, especially if a main researcher delivers the intervention. There are ethical considerations, too; it would not be ethical to withhold a positive intervention from an “at-risk” family because they had been allocated to the control group.

Another argument against some studies is that in focusing on the numbers required for a large scale study, the rich details of individual lives are reduced to codes and cyphers, and valuable information may be lost between the columns. For example, a commonly



used assessment of childhood adversity, the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire, measures sexual and physical abuse by assessing frequency, rather than severity; this may not capture the meaning of the experience for an individual.

Whilst calling for longitudinal studies to establish the mechanisms behind the intergenerational transfer of risk of adverse outcomes, Serbin and Karp (2004) acknowledge that even in such studies there will inevitably be random events, some of which may affect the whole community, and a range of “happy and tragic” individual experiences (p. 354) which cannot be controlled for, as well as loss of participants over time, all of which may affect results and lead to incomplete or false conclusions. For example, the authors caution against over-generalising, referring to the differing impacts of WWII and the Vietnam War on the American generations that experienced them. However, they suggest that studying “multiple ‘unique’ cases” can lead to more general understanding (ibid); this potentially supports the use of narrative methods with fewer participants, such as autoethnography. In particular, the authors caution against the simplistic approach of singling out one risk factor for child development, such as poverty, and implementing an intervention that only addresses that factor, such as “sending young single mothers to work” to help the family out of poverty (ibid, p. 357), whilst not addressing any of the other risk factors.

Luke and Banerjee (2013) also note that the context of maltreatment is frequently not reported. The sensitive nature of the research, and the vulnerable status of the participants, may pose difficulties in attaining large enough sample sizes; and it may be difficult to decide which aspects of the maltreatment context to examine in a given study.

In O'Mahen et al. (2015), study assessments were concurrent, but reports of childhood maltreatment were retrospective; this may have exaggerated the strength of relationships between childhood events and later psychological problems, and may have been influenced by the current emotional state of respondents (Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006). Conversely Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, and Herbison (1996), whilst acknowledging the potential for biased recall or false memories, found that participants in their study tended to underestimate, rather than overestimate, the impact of childhood events on their adult psychological wellbeing, a finding shared by others (Briere & Jordan, 2009; Mert, Kelleci, Yildiz, Mizrak, & Kugu, 2016). Mullen et al. (1996) report that only a fraction of even serious child maltreatment is reported at the time of occurrence, so such research will continue to rely on adult recall, with its inherent limitations.

### ***How is childhood emotional neglect conceptualised in the literature?***

Apart from the two self-help books, Cori (2010), and Webb (2013), and the two expert practitioner texts, Gerhardt (2015), and Howe (2005), detailed descriptions of the experience of emotional neglect are largely absent from the literature that I review here. However, I noted common themes, some of which correspond to themes in the data collected for this study; I use these themes as headings below.

#### ***Child's needs overlooked***

A key area of agreement in the literature and in my data is that the emotionally neglected child's needs are overlooked; this may include a lack of the positive interactions that appear to be necessary for normal psychological and social development, such as physical affection, and may also include a form of role-reversal,

where the child becomes responsible for the parent's emotional well-being. Although this is potentially harmful to the developing child, there may be no intention to cause harm.

Glaser (2002) draws on empirical research, clinical experience and child development theory to form a conceptual framework of psychological maltreatment, combining emotional abuse and neglect. Glaser stresses that the figures are usually underestimates, but notes that in England, the number of children placed on child protection registers under the category of "Emotional Abuse Alone" has risen (p. 699). This may reflect a growing awareness of childhood emotional abuse and neglect as potentially having harmful consequences, and therefore wider reporting, or it may also reflect an actual rise; it's not clear from this paper which is the case.

Glaser proposes five categories under the definition of "emotional abuse and neglect" (p. 703), one of which is "emotional unavailability, unresponsiveness, and neglect" (ibid). Glaser suggests this may occur when parents are physically or mentally ill, abusing drugs or alcohol, or overworked, and do not provide alternative care for their child; however, this seems a somewhat simplified list of causes, as there may be other reasons why parents are unable, or unwilling, to be emotionally available and responsive to their children. Glaser also lists "developmentally inappropriate or inconsistent interactions with the child", which may entail both over-protection, limiting opportunities; and under-protection, exposing a child to "confusing or traumatic events and interactions", including "domestic violence and parental (para)suicide" (ibid), which may describe the experiences of some participants in my study (for example, Heather, Rachel, Kate, Harriet). The fact that both over-protection

and under-protection are recognised as potentially harmful indicates the complexity of the issue and the difficulty of creating a straightforward definition, or guidelines for parenting.

Drawing on attachment theory, Howe (2005) presents a social work perspective on child abuse and neglect, incorporating all forms of child maltreatment, including sexual and physical abuse and physical neglect; these are not the main subject of my research, although they arise in some of the participant stories. Howe uses the term “psychological maltreatment” to cover what others differentiate as emotional neglect and emotional abuse, and categorises this as a form of abuse rather than neglect, making a distinction between emotional neglect and physical neglect, which other writers describe as overlapping phenomena (for example, Trickett & McBride-Chang, 1995). I concur with Glaser in finding the terms “maltreatment” and “abuse” to have unnecessarily negative connotations (2002, p. 700), implying conscious harmful acts or interactions, rather than the unintentional omission of the positive interactions that children need.

Like Glaser (2002), Howe (2005) focuses on the ways in which children’s needs are not met, and emphasises the fear that children may experience when they feel that their parents are not willing or able to provide them with the protection, comfort and attention that they need (p. 90); although because he combines emotional abuse and emotional neglect under the term psychological maltreatment, some of the damaging consequences which he describes may not be applicable to less extreme forms of childhood emotional neglect. Writing from a social work perspective, and therefore conscious of the child as situated in a family context, Howe refers to the home

environment of the psychologically maltreated child as “cold”, lacking in “warmth and spontaneous expressions of love and delight”, but with potentially violent anger “lurking beneath the taut surface” of family life (p. 91); this is a good match for some of my participants’ stories (my own, Cathy’s, and Kate’s, for example).

Howe (2005) also describes psychologically maltreated children who learn early on to take care of themselves not only emotionally, but also in terms of practical task such as making meals and getting to school (p. 98), which fits with Rachel, Kate and Harriet’s stories; although others might categorise the latter as physical neglect.

Glaser (2002) includes in her categories of emotional abuse and neglect the parent’s “failure to recognize or acknowledge the child’s individuality and psychological boundary”, including “using a child to meet their own unmet needs, or failing to recognise that the child has his or her own unique needs and desires which are different to the parents” (p. 703); this seemed a significant feature in some participants’ stories (for example, Miranda, Mickey, Harriet).

A detailed categorisation may be helpful in tailoring professional interventions to the precise situation, rather than offering a general intervention which may not be effective (Glaser, 2002). Such a categorisation may not be acceptable in all cultural settings; however, Glaser points out that cultural practices or beliefs that are considered to be normal or desirable may nevertheless be detrimental to child development.

Whereas Glaser (2002) combines emotional neglect and emotional abuse, I aim to tease out a distinction between abuse and neglect. From the data collected in my study, and

other literature, I see a conceptual difference between emotional neglect as an absence of the positive interactions that children need for emotional development, and emotional abuse as the presence of harmful actions or interactions; although these frequently occur alongside each other and overlap, so it can become hard to separate them.

Howe lists four ways in which parents may fail to respond adequately to a child:

1. “Failures of perception” (not registering a child’s need for attention);
2. “Misinterpretation of attachment-related information” (not considering the child’s need “legitimate”, or expecting the child to be more capable of self-soothing);
3. “Failure to select a response” (not making a decision to act appropriately);
4. “Failure to implement a response” (realising that the child is expressing a need, and having some idea how to respond, but not responding). (2005, p. 114).

These overlap somewhat with Glaser’s five categories of emotional abuse and neglect (2002), but Howe focuses particularly on the absence of what children need, which is a better fit with my understanding of emotional neglect. Howe suggests that the main feature is that the parent is unresponsive to the child, potentially leaving the child feeling generally “ineffective” (2005, p. 116); this seems a significant feature of several participants’ stories, and may have long-term consequences, including the development of chronic shame (DeYoung, 2015, p. 25).

Sometimes children are allowed, or encouraged, to take the role of parent, looking after themselves, and possibly siblings; even, as Webb (2013), describes, having to “parent her own parent” (p. 62). Several participants described this experience, especially Miranda, Cathy, Mickey, and Finlay. Webb suggests that this leads to such individuals becoming “overly responsible” in adulthood, as well as feeling “empty, disconnected” (p. 63), or “counter-dependent” (p. 204); all of these outcomes were described by participants in my study (see “Lasting impact”, page 222).

In *Why Love Matters*, Gerhardt (2015) combines attachment theory with findings from neuroscience, clinical experience as a psychotherapist, and personal experience to argue that love and affection are not just pleasant optional extras for the developing child, but that on the contrary, they are essential for normal, healthy development. This argument resonates with me and seems to fit with the participants’ stories. However, Gerhardt is heavily influenced by a psychoanalytic or psychodynamic approach, which I sometimes find lacking in tentativeness; and although she illustrates key points with details from client work in a helpful way, this is usually from the expert practitioner viewpoint, and the clients’ own voices are rarely heard.

Gerhardt (2015) reviews the neuroscience of being loved, such as the chemical changes in the infant’s brain in response to being lovingly held (p. 58) and loving looks (p. 59), and in response to the stress of being ignored (p. 65), or not being held or comforted when distressed (p. 84). This seems highly relevant for the experience of childhood emotional neglect; for the infant, the stress of not having these early attachment needs met has “the quality of trauma” (p. 88). Whilst sympathetic towards parents (p. 25), and sensitive to the sociocultural context of parenthood (p. 37), Gerhardt emphasises

the importance of the parent-child relationship, especially in the first three years, when the infant is so dependent, and the parent(s) therefore so powerful (p. 11).

Critics of the current preoccupation with neuroscience and the significance of the first three years argue that increased interest in infant brain development in the early years has diverted attention from more family-oriented support (Wastell & White, 2012), and led to a focus on reproduction and maternal behaviours, with insufficient attention paid to poverty and social deprivation (White & Wastell, 2017). The problem, however, may not be so much with neuroscience as with the conclusions drawn from it, and the way policy makers use it (White & Wastell, 2017; Wastell & White, 2012).

Wastell and White argue against a critical period during the early years, pointing to the evidence from neuroscience of a “highly plastic and adaptable brain” (2012, p. 403). However, in offering evidence that the attachment styles of children age one to four years old have been observed to change when the family circumstances change, for example, when there is a reduction in domestic violence, or a rise in income (ibid), Wastell and White appear in fact to support the argument that attachment styles are affected by the immediate family environment, which includes parental interactions with the child.

Fonagy, Gergely, and Target (2007) explore the “parent-infant dyad” and its role in the development of the “subjective self” (p. 288) in a paper which draws on a large body of empirical data but also explores whether the theory makes sense in evolutionary terms; in other words, what would be the evolutionary advantage of this set of behaviours? The authors use evidence from neuroscience to propose that attachment theory is



relevant not only for physical survival, but also for survival in the social world. The social world is both collaborative and competitive, but within the early parent-child relationship, it is assumed that parents will not be in competition with their children, which is thought to facilitate an infant's ability to grow and develop in this context. This seems particularly relevant to my study, as the experiences of a number of participants suggest that within their families, competitive pressures did in fact exist, which may have hampered their development.

Fonagy et al. (2007) argue that the human infant's brain is "experience-expectant" (p. 291); that is, rather than a blank slate, it is pre-programmed to respond to certain experiences, but needs those experiences to be activated, and develops in response to them. The absence of positive experiences may therefore be significant for social development. One interesting finding is that one-year-olds are able to distinguish between an adult being unwilling, or unable, to perform an action; this may be a factor in the development of chronic shame (DeYoung, 2015).

Fonagy et al. (2007) note that insecurely attached infants appear to be fixed on external cues, whereas securely attached infants feel confident in the caregiver's authenticity and are therefore more ready to learn. The authors conclude that insecure attachment may result in poor mentalisation, that is, the ability to think about thinking and feeling, and understand the thoughts and feelings of self and others; this may contribute to the feeling of not belonging, a common experience among my participants (see page 177).

Looking at the phenomenon from a conceptual point of view, Cori (2010) suggests a number of "Good Mother" messages (p. 12) which children need to hear for normal

psychological or emotional development, and which may be absent in emotionally neglecting families. Cori focuses on the absence of positive messages, rather than presence of harmful or hostile interactions (p. 96); this fits with my understanding of emotional neglect. Furthermore, I find it interesting that Cori's first and tenth "Good mother" messages, "I'm glad that you're here", and "I enjoy you. You brighten my heart", emphasise the presence of positive affect that children need in order to develop a strong sense of self; this is less apparent in much of the psychological literature, which focuses on the absence or presence of harm (Music, 2009).

The abusive and neglectful parent may be portrayed in the media as cruel and overtly aggressive, easily recognisable as a "bad" parent (Ritchie, 2014). However, this is not necessarily the experience of emotionally neglected children, whose parents may be doing their best in challenging circumstances (Glaser, 2002). Instead of focusing on deficits in parenting, or harmful parent-child interactions, Glaser suggests that a more helpful starting point is the child as an independent, social being with unique attributes and experiences, in need of protection and support to become socialised into the community; and the "violation of or failure to respect" any of these factors as constituting emotional abuse or neglect (ibid, p. 703). This may be a typically Western perspective, however, as cultures more influenced by Eastern philosophy and customs may not conceptualise a child as an independent social being.

Webb's self-help book, *Running on Empty* (2013) has the advantage of distinguishing between emotional neglect and other forms of neglect or abuse, emphasising throughout that emotionally neglected children may be physically well cared for; it draws on recognised authors such as Ainsworth, Bowlby and Winnicott as well as

being informed by the author's experience as a therapist; it addresses themes thoroughly and in detail, illustrating theoretical points with vignettes based on client work; and emphasises that parents are not usually "bad" or deliberately cruel, but doing their best, nevertheless often "passing on accidental, invisible, potentially damaging patterns" to their child (p. 12). Like Cori (2010), Webb (2013) emphasises that emotional neglect results from the absence of something beneficial to a child's development, rather than the presence of something harmful (p. 64), which broadly matches my understanding of the phenomenon, although I acknowledge that the landscape remains foggy (see page 117).

Webb's stated aim is "showing the inner experience of the person who is emotionally neglected as a child, and the psychological impact as it appears in the adult later in life" (2013, p. 201), yet the book is written predominantly from the stance of therapist or objective observer, with few opportunities for the voice of clients or participants to be heard directly. The first section offers a theoretical exploration of what children need—good-enough parenting—and how emotional neglect may occur, using composite characters to illustrate points, sometimes in a rather formulaic and repetitive style; the second part describes the impact of childhood emotional neglect in our adult lives. The author assumes a direct cause-and-effect relationship between childhood emotional neglect and adult outcomes, without offering detailed empirical evidence of this; and the focus is largely on parenting, with little attention paid to other environmental influences, or alternative explanations.

### *Parenting style*

A lack of emotional communication in the family, or alexithymia, leaving a child unable to display distress or stress, or having to hide or minimize needs, was noted in the literature. Parenting styles or parental behaviour and attachment styles were also mentioned, including authoritarian or controlling, or conversely, overly permissive parenting; “ineffective” mothers and physically or psychologically absent fathers, and workaholic parents; “workaholic” implying, to me, without any blame, parents (ab)using work to manage or avoid emotional distress, analogous with the way an alcoholic may use alcohol, as opposed to needing to work long hours on low pay to meet essential bills.

Buckholdt et al. (2014) explored how emotion dysregulation might be passed on through “parental invalidation of emotions” (p. 324), a common experience among my participants. A key finding was that “invalidating parent reactions . . . can teach [adolescents] that emotions are unacceptable and cannot be tolerated by their parents” (ibid). This study had a diverse sample in terms of ethnicity, family composition and socioeconomic status (SES), although the authors acknowledge that the sample size was small, and that their approach was cross-sectional, whereas a longitudinal study design could confirm the direction of the relationship.

Cori (2010) notes the contrast between “functional” communication, and meaningful or emotion-related communication (p. 102); Webb (2013) also describes families where emotions are not allowed (p. 93), referred to as alexithymia (p. 98). In particular, Webb describes families where complaining, unhappiness or conflict is forbidden (p. 108). The long-term impact may be that individuals become disconnected from their

own feelings, potentially leading to depression and suicide or suicidal feelings (p. 110), which may have been the case for some participants in my study (for example, Alice and Alan).

The meta-analysis of 47 papers by McLeod et al. (2007) found that “more negative parenting was associated with more child anxiety” (p. 162), although the effect size was small. The authors found that both controlling and rejecting parenting styles increased childhood anxiety, which fits with the experiences of participants in my study.

However, the authors note that a controlling parenting style (“over-involvement” as opposed to “autonomy-granting”, p. 164) seemed more significant than a rejecting parenting style (“parental withdrawal” or “aversiveness”, p. 165), and that the small effect size suggests there are other factors.

Bögels and Brechman-Toussaint (2006) also found that the quality of the parents’ relationship may be a factor in the development of child anxiety; and that the parent’s perception or beliefs about their own ability to control a situation may lead to them becoming over-controlling, which is generally agreed to cause anxiety in the child. The authors express caution about “mood dependant memory bias” in self-report studies, and the tendency to “explain current problems from past experiences” (p. 842), but accept that two previous reviews of the literature (Rapee, 1997; Wood et al., 2003) have established that parental over-control leads to child anxiety, although the link between parental lack of warmth and child anxiety is less clearly established.

Webb (2013) also describes “rule-bound, restrictive and punitive” authoritarian parents, who live by principles such as “Children are meant to be seen and not heard,” and

“Spare the rod, spoil the child” (p. 19), who fail to respond to a child as an individual; and the opposite, the over-permissive parent, who fails to set sufficient boundaries and avoids conflict (p. 26). Participants in my study describe the experience of both authoritarian parents (myself, Cathy, David, Alice, Mickey, Alan) and permissive parents (Rachel and Kate, at least in terms of lack of boundaries); these may be what Howe (2005) describes as mothers who “feel ineffective and incompetent” and fathers who “simply opt out and fade away” (p. 114), which may fit the experience of some of the participants, although not all. I am conscious of a strong desire not to replicate my parents’ authoritarian approach with my own children, alongside a constant fear that I have gone too far to the other extreme, and been too permissive.

A meta-analysis of 70 studies of sensitivity and attachment interventions in early childhood by Bakermans-Kranenburg et al. (2003) appears to support a causal role between parental sensitivity and children’s development, specifically developing a secure attachment. Again, however, the authors challenge the assumption that parental insensitivity leads to insecure attachment, hypothesising that the reverse may be true. Born in hospital at a time when babies were routinely separated from mothers except for feeding, I wonder whether, in terms of attachment theory, this led to me being “closed off” from my mother by the time we came home after the customary ten days’ hospital stay, making it harder for her to develop a close relationship with me. Maternal separation, especially in the early days or weeks, has been found to increase the corticotropin-releasing factor (CRF), which Gerhardt (2015) describes as the “biochemical of fear” (p. 91), in the amygdala; this may have affected other participants in my study born during that era.

In her self-help book, Cori (2010) uses her experience as a therapist alongside research, neurobiology, physiological and psychological theory, to describe the child's experience of an "emotionally absent mother". Themes are clearly defined and illustrated; and Cori draws on recognised authors (for example, Schore, Siegel, Bowlby, Winnicott). Although the focus is mainly on the wounded child, Cori (2010) also invites readers to consider their own mothers' stories (p. 83). Among the reasons why mothers may be emotionally absent, Cori includes factors beyond a mother's control, such as separation because of her own or her infant's physical illness, war, trauma, and bereavement, alongside factors like drug or alcohol abuse, domestic violence, mental illness or preoccupation with her own needs (ibid), which adds some balance and seems relevant in terms of my participants' stories.

Acknowledging the ambivalence of some individuals' experience, in that their mothers were not obviously "bad", Cori (2010) uses the term *undermothered* (p. 12) to convey a childhood in which there was not a complete lack of mothering, but significant gaps. However, Cori focuses almost entirely on the role of the (idealised) mother, and despite acknowledging other factors, including genetics, birth order and stressors in the family or local community, assumes that the role of mother is the most important (p. 3); fathers are mentioned only briefly, although Cori acknowledges that fathers who are engaged and effective may partially make up for a lack of mothering (p. 95). There is an inherent assumption that childhood events/experiences cause present day difficulties; little attention is paid to the social and cultural environment, or alternative explanations for adult outcomes. Cori refers to her research, but the participants have almost no voice; they are referred to, and described, but there are few direct quotes, even in the chapter entitled "Voices of the undermothered"; and there is no information

about the sample in terms of size, recruitment, sex or demographic diversity; nor any details of how data was collected and analysed.

Of particular relevance to childhood emotional neglect is emotion regulation in infancy. Drawing on attachment theory and the author's clinical experience, Gerhardt (2015) argues that our earliest interactions with our primary caregiver are non-verbal as well as verbal; approval or disapproval, joy or distress, confidence or anxiety, interest or disinterest, can all be communicated through facial expression, body language, tone of voice, and touch, and children may learn that they "shouldn't really have feelings" (p. 39) if their parents pay no attention to them or respond with disapproval. Such early assumptions about the world and our place in it, especially in terms of how other people will respond to us, become our "internal working models" (p. 40, citing Bowlby, 1969/1997), and may continue to affect us through life; I feel this explains my own experience and seems to fit with the participants' stories (see, for example, "Not noticing self", page 234).

### *Hidden nature of childhood emotional neglect*

Several authors noted the hidden nature of emotional neglect, both the fact that emotionally neglected children may appear outwardly calm yet have physiological markers of stress, and the confusion resulting from a contrast between public image and private experience; this may include the defensive strategies of self-blame, and denial of childhood emotional neglect. Webb (2013), for example, notes that childhood emotional neglect remains a hidden problem, acknowledging the difficulty of researching a phenomenon entailing "missing pieces" (p. 199), which is therefore so difficult to observe and measure.



Music (2009) gives a psychotherapist's view when he reflects on his experience of a group of clients whom he found particularly challenging to work with. Whilst he cautions against "confusing symptomatology and aetiology" (p. 143), and acknowledges that it may be hard for a parent to respond warmly to an unresponsive child, Music outlines common features of clients which may indicate a common cause.

Music (2009) acknowledges a range of experiences that could be construed as neglect, and the lack of adequate "diagnostic categories or theoretical ideas" (p. 142) to describe neglected children. Even within this paper Music frequently omits to clarify whether he is describing physical neglect, or emotional neglect, or a combination of both. Nevertheless, I found it a valuable paper as it describes in accessible language a number of features that seem to match both my own and my participants' stories; it also incorporates some of the family context without judging or blaming the parents.

Cori (2010) refers to the confusion that may arise for children when there is an "illusion of a happy family", when children may think that they must be loved, because their mothers (or parents) perform aspects of the role of mother (or parent) well, yet still don't feel loved (p. 101); this is very apparent for some participants (for example, Miranda, Heather).

Gerhardt (2015) also refers to the discrepancy between the low level of stress or distress that children may exhibit externally, and the high level of stress that may be detected internally, for example, through measuring cortisol levels (p. 91); Music (2009) similarly describes children who are doubly or triply neglected (by practitioners,

but also by themselves) because they do not appear stressed. This is the double-bind of childhood emotional neglect; having learnt early that we must not exhibit distress, or parental approval will be withdrawn, we have no way of signalling to the outside world that we need help; and we may need to hide our distress from ourselves in order to perform “not being needy” adequately. This seems to match the experience of the participants (for example, myself, Miranda, Cathy, Mickey). Partly for this reason, Music hypothesises that neglect is potentially more harmful than abuse (2009, p. 153), although it is not clear at this point whether he is referring to physical neglect, emotional neglect, or both.

In a longitudinal study of 1,694 secondary school aged children in mainstream education in the West of Scotland, Young, Lennie and Minnis (2011), note that “paradoxically, lack of service contact could be interpreted as further validation of neglect” (Young et al., 2011, p. 895). The authors conclude that children’s perceptions of emotionally neglectful and controlling parenting should be recognised as an important risk factor for psychopathology in later adolescence and adult life (Young et al., 2011). However, the authors also comment that the actual mechanisms by which emotional neglect leads to later problems are still not fully understood, and acknowledge the potential for a genetic factor.

### *Intergenerational aspects of childhood emotional neglect*

Whilst it may not be true that individuals who are maltreated in childhood will inevitably become parents who maltreat their own children, an intergenerational pattern of child maltreatment is widely reported; and more recently, the possibility of directly

inherited traumatic memory. The complex interaction of our genes with our environment is also noted in the literature.

In one of the few longitudinal studies reviewed here, Assel et al. (2002) found an effect of even low levels of maternal emotional stress on children's behaviour and development, and explored the way in which maternal childrearing history may indirectly affect this, although the sample was restricted to low-income families or those with a pre-term child, both of which may have caused additional stresses to families. For some participants in my autoethnography, their mother's depression is part of their story, so the way in which a mother's depression may affect her parenting skills seems of relevance. Assel et al. support the theory of intergenerational or "cross-generational transmission of poor parenting" (ibid, p. 366), although the authors acknowledge that other factors, not included in their study, may also be relevant.

Howe (2005) notes an intergenerational pattern, suggesting that those who mistreat their children in this way have also often had "emotionally harsh childhoods" themselves (p. 91), or may have "unresolved childhood losses and traumas" (p. 97). Howe notes that mothers in particular who have been rejected by their mothers are more likely to reject their own children (p. 95); however, as the participants' stories illustrate, this is not inevitably the case (see page 351).

Cori (2010), too, refers to the intergenerational nature of the phenomenon, suggesting that many emotionally absent mothers may be "untreated trauma survivors, or the children of trauma survivors" (p. 94), emphasising that it is not the extent of the trauma which is significant, but the degree to which the mother has processed and recovered

from the trauma (ibid). This seems relevant for those of us whose parents or grandparents survived wars, famine, or other disasters, as well as traumatic losses, including childhood emotional neglect.

Early separation of babies from their mothers is also recognised as leading to lower levels of oxytocin (known as “the bonding hormone”), leaving individuals prone to depression in adulthood, and in turn potentially affecting a woman’s ability to mother her own baby (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 25); this may explain how emotional neglect can be passed from one generation to the next. Gerhardt (2015) also mentions recent findings from epigenetics which suggest that, alongside the potential for being indirectly affected by trauma in our parents’ lives through the way in which it affects their behaviour towards us, we may directly inherit a memory of our parents’ traumatic experiences, potentially leading to traumatic responses, vulnerability to PTSD, or depression (p. 162). Although the mechanisms are not yet fully understood, epigenetic studies of mice and the inherited memory of fear in response to exposure to cherry blossom seem to provide some evidence for this phenomenon, which has long been suspected (Dias, Maddox, Klengel & Ressler, 2015).

Webb (2013) refers to the intergenerational aspect of childhood emotional neglect, describing the “Well-Meaning-But-Neglected-Themselves” as the largest group of emotionally neglecting parents (p. 13). Webb suggests that in order to be able to be attuned to their children, parents need to be aware of emotions themselves; and if they have been emotionally neglected, this may not be possible for them; this fits with the stories my participants tell, and my own.

However, in their review of the long-term effects of child maltreatment of different kinds, Briere and Jordan (2009) also consider a “gene x environment” interaction (p. 382); that is, we are born into the world with our unique genetic make-up, or personality traits, but our early environment determines to some extent how we develop from birth onwards (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 11). This seems a logical explanation in the light of what is understood about the plasticity of the human brain (Wastell & White, 2012), the attunement of infants to their care-givers (Young et al., 2011), and the concept of human infant behaviours being “experience dependent” (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 55) or “experience expectant” (Fonagy et al., 2007, p. 291), and fits with my understanding of my own story.

Young et al. (2011) also refer to the “complex interactions between genetics and environment” (p. 889); and LaFreniere and MacDonald (2013), in their review of the recent advances in molecular genetics and their implications for bio-behavioural sciences, explore this complex interaction in detail, including individual susceptibility or sensitivity to harsh or positive environments. Overall, although it necessarily takes a largely bio-behavioural and deterministic stance, and despite the challenges of technical language and specific disciplinary terms, this paper was a good fit with my own belief that humans “work,” and that when we don’t function well, it’s usually as a result of trying to adapt and survive in a hostile environment.

### *Long-term effects of childhood emotional neglect*

I started this research project with an assumption that childhood emotional neglect has a lasting impact; evidence from the literature and the data seems to support this. Any childhood maltreatment may have a negative impact on social or emotional

development, with a cumulative effect over time of early maltreatment (for example, Luke & Banerjee, 2013). Although the evidence remains inconclusive and controversial, psychological maltreatment may have specific long-term effects, and the effect of psychological maltreatment may carry more long term risk than physical maltreatment. The perception of emotional neglect appears to have a long-term impact, leading to a range of adverse outcomes in later life.

Over 20 years ago, in a review and summary of existing research carried out with rigorous inclusion criteria, Trickett and McBride-Chang (1995) concluded that, despite the challenges and limitations of research into the phenomenon, there could no longer be any doubt that any form of child maltreatment has “significant adverse effects on the development and adjustment of children, adolescents and adults” (p. 324). The authors list a range of long term effects, including impaired social and emotional development and impaired cognitive and academic performance, although this is in response to all forms of maltreatment, including physical, sexual and emotional abuse, not emotional neglect alone.

Young et al. (2011) note that the early years of life are the period when the human brain develops most rapidly and extensively, and that there is evidence from the worlds of both animal and human developmental research that to facilitate this development, infants are “programmed to tune in to caregivers” (p. 896); so it seems likely that early experiences, whether positive or negative, will have a lasting effect. The events of early infancy may be “unrememberable and unforgettable” (Gerhardt 2015, p. 30; citing Watt, 2001, p. 18), and inform our expectations and behaviour throughout our lives.

A frequent critique of child maltreatment research is that it relies too heavily on self-report measures of subjective experiences, and therefore lacks objectivity, or relies on personal recall, which may be considered unreliable or biased (McLeod et al., 2007). Carpenter et al. (2009), however, adopted an experimental design, using a specific test (dexamethasone/corticotropin releasing hormone; Dex/CRH) for endophenotypes relevant to mood disorders in healthy adults without psychiatric disorders, but who self-reported childhood emotional abuse, to explore whether this might be a reliable test for vulnerability to certain mood disorders and physical illnesses. Carpenter et al. found that participants who remembered an emotionally neglected childhood exhibited a “significantly diminished cortisol response” (ibid, p. 69).

Whilst cortisol hyperresponsivity, (that is, too great a response to stress hormones) is associated with a range of physical illnesses, diminished cortisol response (insufficient ability to respond to stress hormones) is associated with a range of physical and psychological problems, including depression, chronic fatigue syndrome, chronic stress, and fibromyalgia (Carpenter et al., 2009). The authors also found that the effect increased with the age of the individual, and was independent of demographic factors, other forms of maltreatment, and any previous diagnosis or current symptoms of psychological illness. One might expect the effects of childhood to lessen with time, but apparently this is not the case. This may support my decision to interview adults, rather than children, about their experiences, despite the problems of unreliable or biased recall; it may only be with the passage of time that the effects of childhood emotional neglect become apparent, even to the individual concerned (Trickett & McBride-Chang, 1995).

Although an experimental design was used to measure stress response, Carpenter et al. (2009) used subjective self-report measures of childhood experiences, relying on retrospective recall and self-ratings. This introduces the potential for recall bias and subjectivity, or individual personal differences (though some authors dispute the extent and effect of biased recall: for example, Dannlowski et al., 2012). Furthermore, the researchers did not measure duration or chronicity of stress exposure, or assess other possible contributing factors. For example, the potential for genetic effects was not included, nor were parental factors such as mental illness, which may affect the quality of parental care. And whilst there is clearly value in an objective, large scale study of a measurable, physiological response to stress, it is questionable whether experimental research can accurately recreate real-life conditions.

A further limitation of Carpenter et al. (2009) is that although the title refers to emotional abuse, and although within the paper, a distinction is made between emotional abuse and emotional neglect, the definitions of childhood emotional abuse and childhood emotional neglect seem to overlap. For example, one of the questions used in the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) to assess childhood emotional abuse is “I thought that my parent wished I had never been born” (Carpenter et al., 2009, p. 71). This, to me, represents a perception or a state of mind and reflects a relationship, rather than an event or action, which seems to fit the definition of emotional neglect rather than emotional abuse.

Dannlowski et al. (2012) explored the long-term consequences of child maltreatment in 148 healthy subjects, using functional and structural magnetic resonance imaging to



measure amygdala responsiveness to threat-related faces. The authors found that amygdala responsiveness, previously established as indicating vulnerability to depression and PTSD, was most strongly associated with memories of childhood emotional abuse and emotional neglect, although they acknowledge that the sample size was too small to generalise about the specific effects of different types of child maltreatment; the potential for biased recall is also a limitation. However, the observation of “limbic scars” (p. 286), measurable changes in the structure and functioning of the brain “even decades later in adulthood” (ibid), seems to match my participants’ description of permanent damage (for example, Kate, myself; see page 225).

LaFreniere and MacDonald (2013) cite evidence from both mammal and human research that adverse early (especially maternal) experience has an impact on the developing infant. For example, in rats, different maternal grooming patterns have been found to affect “gene expression” in pups (p. 95), creating changes which are “stable and for the most part irreversible” (ibid), and have the potential to be inherited by the next generation (p. 96). In humans, although the authors caution that such research is still in its infancy, a relationship has been established between a harsh social environment and “brain epigenetic changes” (ibid), which may prepare us for survival in a dangerous environment by increasing vigilance and defensiveness, yet at the same time make us more vulnerable to stress, distress, psychological problems, and potentially suicide (ibid).

Although some studies recognise a relationship between childhood emotional neglect and certain types of psychological problems in adulthood, others dispute the direction

of the link, and the importance of other factors. McLeod et al. (2007) question the link between rejecting and controlling parenting, and childhood anxiety. In particular, the authors criticize retrospective studies, suggesting that “anxious adults generally remember their parents as being rejecting and controlling” and that “adults with mood disorders give biased accounts of parenting” (p. 157) which they claim may not reflect reality; although others found that respondents underestimate, rather than overestimate, the impact of childhood events on their adult psychological wellbeing (Mullen et al., 1996), and childhood memories are not always inaccurate (Rothschild, 2006; van der Kolk, 2014).

McLeod et al. (2007) concede that there may be a correlation (though previous findings were inconsistent even on this), but not necessarily a causal link. Of a small number of longitudinal studies, not included in their meta-analysis but reviewed briefly, McLeod et al. (2007) suggest two possible pathways; “child behavior eliciting parental behavior, and parental behavior eliciting child behavior” (ibid, p. 165). They also note the findings of twin studies which suggest that genetics and environmental factors other than parenting may be more influential.

I have frequently asked myself whether my parents’ behaviour towards me shaped *me*, or whether my behaviour towards them influenced *them*. There may be a partial answer in a meta-analysis of 126 observational studies (comprising 15,034 families in total), of gender-differentiated parenting (Endendijk, Groeneveld, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Mesman, 2016). The authors argue that the findings of studies with the youngest age group suggest that, at least in terms of parents’ gender-differentiated use of controlling strategies, this is unlikely to be elicited by pre-existing gender

differences in the child's behaviour, as gender difference in children's behaviour is less marked at this age. In other words, if there is a causal link, it is more likely to be in the direction of the parents' behaviour affecting the child's, rather than the other way round. However, the authors note that very few of the observational studies focused on harsh physical discipline or psychological control; the observational studies were deemed to be more objective than self-report/questionnaire studies, but the focus was on specific behaviours in structured, non-natural settings with an experimenter present; and social desirability may have influenced the results of self-report studies (ibid).

Wright et al. (2009) suggest that whilst emotional abuse and emotional neglect are the least studied of all forms of child maltreatment, they may be the most prevalent.

Furthermore, it may be the participants' perceptions or evaluation of childhood events that may have the biggest impact on their future mental health, rather than the events or experiences themselves. For example, perceptions of emotional abuse and neglect in childhood were associated with a larger effect than having a parent who was an alcoholic, or other child abuse experiences. Young et al. (2011) similarly found that children's perceptions may not reflect actual emotional neglect, but may nevertheless affect development and future events; and Bögels and Brechman-Toussaint (2006) note that children's beliefs about their parents' intentions may be as important as the parents' behaviours. This seems particularly relevant to my autoethnographic enquiry, as my data comprises the subjective childhood memories of adult participants.

\* \* \*

## **Dramatic interlude**

*Dramatis personae in order of appearance*

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET

BABA YAGA

THE GRINDYLOW

SOPHIA

CHORUS OF ACADEMICS

ANGELA

*Scene: Marshland; fog swirls around, and the landscape is confusing; shapes are indistinct, blurry. Is that a tree in the distance, or a human form? Is that firm ground ahead, or a bed of reeds?*

*THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET and BABA YAGA are standing on a grassy mound in the middle of the marsh: The CHORUS OF ACADEMICS is to one side on firm ground, heads turned away.*

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET: See! See! (*Loudly and crossly, stamping her feet*). What happened to me was a bad, bad thing, and look what it's done to me!

BABA YAGA: (*Sweetly, appearing as a beautiful woman*) I don't know what you mean. I did my best to be a Good Mother, and I'm very pleased with how you and your sisters all turned out (*smiling a self-satisfied smile*).

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET: (*Petulantly, pouting*) But I didn't feel loved, and I didn't feel wanted. That's called '*Motional* 'Glect. Lots of clever people who

know much more than me have looked very hard at it, and they say that it can make you poorly when you're a grown-up!

BABA YAGA: I don't know what you're making such a fuss about (*still smiling sweetly*). Nobody ever laid a finger on you. You had enough to eat and drink and clothes to wear—why, you even had birthday parties!

*THE GRINDYLOW emerges from the swamp nearby.*

THE GRINDYLOW: (*Reaching out for THE LITTLE GIRL's feet*) There's no evidence for emotional neglect, you know. No hard facts. No-one can see it, touch it, measure it. It's all just based on memories, and we all know how tricky memories can be, don't we? Slippery little things, memories, getting all mixed up in our silly little minds...

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET: (*More doubtful now*) Yes, but... in between the birthday parties, the other 364 days of the year, I felt like I was somehow... I don't know, unimportant, like I didn't matter?

BABA YAGA: But we were very busy! Daddy was working very hard! I don't know what you expected us to do, with three children, a dog, and a parish to run! Do you think *you* could have done any better? (*The smile has faded, her face is contorted with anger and her voice is harsh*).

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET: (*Tearful, head hanging*) I'm sorry, I know, I *know* you were busy—but that was the problem. You were always so busy getting things done, I felt like you didn't somehow have time to *be* with me, to see me, to listen to me. There was always one more phone call to answer, one more meeting to attend. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound critical. I know you were doing your best, and I probably wasn't a very easy child—of course you were a Good Mother, and no, I don't think I could have done any better...

THE GRINDYLOW: (*Grasping THE LITTLE GIRL's ankles and pulling her towards the water*) Yeah, have you done any better? Have you? (*Sneering*).

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET: (*Sobbing*) I don't know, I don't know! I've tried—I've *really* tried, but I worry that I've got it all terribly wrong!

SOPHIA *enters, stepping confidently from grassy hummock to grassy hummock, and reaches out to THE LITTLE GIRL.*

SOPHIA: (*Calmly, gently*) But Little Girl, it's not anyone's parenting that's under investigation here. Don't get drawn into an argument about who's better or worse. Remember, what you're researching is "The experience of childhood emotional neglect." You're trying to describe a phenomenon, not prove cause and effect, or attribute blame. Look at the literature. What does it say? How does it support or inform your thesis, and where are the gaps that your research might fill?

*The CHORUS OF ACADEMICS suddenly snap their heads towards the group and speak as one:*

CHORUS OF ACADEMICS:

We need to be sure that you know the score;

You have to be seen to be thorough.

Have you checked and cross-checked? Have you followed each lead?

Have you looked from all angles, read all you can read?

We know that it's dreary, and your eyes may be weary,

But you have to be seen to be thorough.

*ANGELA steps forward from behind THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET.*

ANGELA: The literature search and review has proved one of the most challenging aspects of the research process. It triggers all my insecurities; I won't ever feel like I've read enough, or been evaluative enough, I know that now. But what I have been able to do is carry out an extensive search of the electronic databases using a recognised method, make appropriate choices about what to read, and review the most relevant papers to give an overview of what has already been written about childhood emotional neglect, and determine what I'm adding to the body of knowledge. And I've mapped out what I did, and why, so others can follow my trail.

\* \* \*

*Internalizing problems associated with childhood emotional neglect*

Emotional neglect appears to be associated particularly with internalizing problems, including anxiety, fear and helplessness, and catastrophizing. Depression was one of the most consistently noted consequences of emotional neglect.

Whether different kinds of maltreatment cause different problems in later life continues to be debated. For example, in a questionnaire survey of 199 adult mental health service users (both inpatients and outpatients), compared to a US normative control sample of 971 cases, Fitzhenry et al. (2015) looked at the relationship between child maltreatment and adult psychopathology specifically in an Irish context, and support the view that any kind of child maltreatment appears to lead to adult psychopathology, including anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, alcohol and substance abuse, and eating disorders. Fitzhenry et al. (2015) found no clear association between different types of child maltreatment and different types of psychopathology in adulthood,

although the authors acknowledge that the small number of cases for each type of disorder, and the reliance on participant recall, were limitations.

Kuo, Goldin, Werner, Heimberg, and Gross (2011), however, found a significant association between childhood emotional abuse and neglect and social anxiety, trait anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. As in other studies (for example, Brown et al., 2016; Buckholdt et al., 2014), the authors found childhood emotional abuse and neglect to be particularly associated with “internally-focused symptoms” (p. 471) (anxiety, depression and low self-esteem), unlike childhood sexual and physical abuse, which are more commonly associated with externally-focused symptoms (aggression and sexual promiscuity; Briere & Runtz, 1988, 1990). However, the authors comment that both emotional abuse and emotional neglect were “highly correlated” in their sample (p. 472), and therefore question whether these two constructs, and outcomes in adulthood, can really be treated as separate issues, but conclude that “a history of emotional trauma is associated with negative adult clinical symptoms among individuals with SAD [Social Anxiety Disorder]” (ibid).

An individual’s sense of self seems to be damaged by emotional neglect, leading to low self-esteem. Wright et al. (2009) noted shame, and the role of shame in preventing an individual processing trauma, as a specific outcome; this may be linked to the potential for heightened risk of PTSD (Glaser, 2002). Self-blame was commonly noted (for example, Briere & Jordan, 2009, p. 376; Gerhardt, 2015, p. 154; Howe, 2005, p. 100), and consequently, the denial of childhood emotional neglect (for example, Webb, 2013, p. 203). As Howe (2005) explains, self-blame is safer for dependent children than the alternative of acknowledging that their parents are not capable of or willing to look



after them properly (p. 102). However, this survival strategy may unhelpfully persist into adulthood (“It must be me”; see “Childhood Emotional Neglect Internalized”, page 224). This may also underlie the participants’ experiences captured in the theme of “Denial” (page 355).

A poor self-image was noted in some studies; for example, a sense of oneself as a disappointment, and not living up to expectations (Wright et al., 2009); and a sense of shame. Drawing on evidence from the animal world, Gerhardt (2015) suggests that withdrawal and depression are a survival strategy; withdrawing is a better option than fighting to the death (p. 143). This fits with the underlying sense that some participants in my study described of being in competition with their parents; it also fits with the suggestion from therapy with trauma victims that they may have become stuck in the “freeze” mode (Rothschild, 2000, p. 81). Another aspect of this survival strategy may be the tendency to blame ourselves, rather than our parent (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 154).

Drawing on previous empirical work, Glaser (2002) noted that “hostility and rejection affect the child’s self-view” (p. 711), potentially resulting in hostility towards others, depression, and “other internalizing problems . . . particularly in girls” (ibid, citing McGee, Wolfe & Wilson, 1997). McLeod et al. (2007) found that both a controlling parenting style, and rejecting or withdrawing parents, increased child anxiety (see page 124); Gerhardt adds depression (p. 134) and a “constrict[ed] capacity for pleasure and reward” (p. 140) to the possible outcomes of an insufficiently loving childhood.

Of specific relevance to my research is the finding of “novel evidence for the role of emotional neglect in depression” in O’Mahen et al. (2015). The authors examined

whether avoidance and rumination, two emotion regulation strategies associated with depression, are associated with different forms of childhood maltreatment, hypothesising that behavioural avoidance would be associated with emotional and physical neglect, and rumination with emotional and sexual abuse. Depressed individuals may have a bias towards recall of negative events (MacLeod et al., 2006; Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006); however, O'Mahen et al. suggest rather that it is the occurrence of negative events or a negative relationship with caregivers that may leave an individual vulnerable to depression in adulthood. Several participants in my study describe feelings of depression (for example, Alice, Alan); I did not recognise my own periods of depression until many years later, illustrating the way in which emotional neglect may leave us triple-deprived (see page 128). O'Mahen et al. (2015) propose that since emotional abuse also occurs in the majority of physical or sexual abuse, often pre-dating and continuing beyond any physical abuse, the long-term psychological consequences of the whole range of child maltreatment may be explained by the common element of emotional abuse, although the authors caution that their findings may have limited generalisability, as the sample was restricted to pregnant women; and that the participants' memories of their childhoods may have been affected by current depression.

Mullen et al. (1996) examined associations between types of child maltreatment (sexual, physical or emotional abuse) and negative outcomes in adult life, the interaction between different kinds of maltreatment, and the potential impact of environmental factors such as disruptive or disadvantaged home lives. The authors are cautious about assuming a causal relationship between any abuse and psychological problems in adult life, commenting that the kind of home circumstances which leave

children at risk of abuse may also of themselves result in vulnerability to psychological distress. Nevertheless, they found an “independent association between sexual and emotional abuse and problems in the areas of mental health, sexuality and social functioning” (p. 19). Overall, the authors found that there were more similarities than differences between sexual, physical or emotional abuse in terms of negative long-term consequences, although they also noted a general tendency for sexual abuse to be linked to sexual problems in adulthood, physical abuse to be associated with marital breakdown and emotional abuse to be linked more particularly to low self-esteem (ibid).

Dumitrescu, Dogaru, Duta, Zetu, and Zetu (2014) focused on two specific outcomes for emotional neglect; body mass index and oral health behaviour. The authors propose a mechanism by which emotional neglect may influence these in adult life: emotional neglect leading to low self-esteem, and low self-esteem in turn leading to decreased self-care. Although this paper was written in what I found to be impenetrable statistical language, it satisfies positivist standards of objectivity by using measures of specific behaviours instead of relying on subjective self-assessment of mood.

Drawing on attachment theory, and clinical experience and theory of social work, Howe (2005) suggests that the psychologically maltreated child’s tendency towards self-blame as a survival strategy may result in low self-esteem and depression in adolescence, leading to “alcohol and drug abuse, sexual promiscuity and suicide” (p. 100) among other negative outcomes; although it is important to note that, because Howe uses the term “psychological maltreatment” to cover emotional neglect and emotional abuse, not all of these necessarily result from emotional neglect as a stand-

alone experience. Glaser (2002), too, notes that children may come to “believe in and act out the negative attributions placed upon them” by hostile and rejecting parents (p. 703); this seems to fit with my theme of “Childhood emotional neglect internalized” (224).

Glaser’s review (2002) also concludes that being exposed to confusing or traumatic events or interactions (such as domestic violence or a parent’s suicidal behaviour) may lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (p. 711). Where different forms of child abuse occur alongside each other (as is often the case), psychological maltreatment appears to be a greater risk factor for child development than physical abuse (*ibid*, p. 698); and as with other forms of abuse, the impact of emotional abuse and neglect lasts into adulthood (*ibid*, citing Hart, Binggeli & Brassard, 1998), which reflects my own experience and that of my participants.

Dannowski et al. (2012) suggest that limbic hyper-responsiveness and reduced hippocampal volumes, rather than resulting from depression or PTSD caused by events in an adult’s life, may be caused by childhood maltreatment which has in turn left the individual more susceptible to depression or PTSD in later life. This suggests a causal link, and in the direction of childhood maltreatment causing psychological problems in later life, rather than psychological problems in adulthood leading to biased recall of the childhood environment. Wright et al. (2009) also found childhood emotional abuse and neglect to be associated with anxiety and depression, vulnerability to further harm, shame, self-sacrificing behaviour, and dissociation, which fits with my participants’ stories.

The meta-analysis of 124 studies by Norman et al. (2012) found a consistent, dose-responsive relationship between non-sexual childhood abuse and adverse health outcomes in adulthood, from depressive disorders and risky sexual behaviour to drug use and suicidal behaviour. A key finding was that “neglect in childhood may be as harmful as physical and emotional abuse” (p. 24), although the authors do not clearly differentiate between emotional neglect and other forms of neglect, or emotional abuse and emotional neglect, even though some of the papers included in the meta-analysis do make this distinction.

Young et al. (2011) found significantly higher rates of depression and other psychiatric disorders at age 15 among a group of children who perceived their parents as neglectful or controlling at age 11, compared to classmates who perceived their parents as “optimal”. However, it is important to recognise that genetic susceptibility may play a part in determining the consequences of early trauma. For example, in a study of the impact of early maternal separation in mice, Anisman, Zaharia, Meaney, and Merali (1998) found the long-term negative impact was only measurable in strains of mice already identified as vulnerable, whereas hardier strains showed virtually no impact.

Although the Anisman et al. (1998) study is from the animal world, it seems plausible that some human babies are born more sensitive than others because of their genetic make-up, their experience in the womb, or a combination of both; Gerhardt (2015) refers to the popular description of babies as “orchids”, who are highly sensitive and requiring careful handling, or “dandelions”, who are less sensitive and able to thrive in almost any environment (p. 35). Variations of the serotonin gene may be responsible for this; children who have the short allele of serotonin have been found to be “more at

risk of depression in response to the stress of loss, rejection or humiliation” (ibid, p. 200). However, Gerhardt also suggests that babies who are described as “difficult” or “sensitive” may only be difficult or sensitive in response to a lack of caregivers’ emotional responsiveness or availability (ibid, p. 35).

A key finding of an investigation by Klein et al. (2007) into the role of childhood neglect in riskier sexual behaviour, leading to increased risk of HIV infection, was that being neglected led to diminished self-esteem. Whilst the authors acknowledge that this may also be true for other types of maltreatment, they suggest that there are unique consequences to being neglected as opposed to other forms of maltreatment. Neglect leads, they suggest, to a sense of being “insufficiently important to be attended to” (p. 49), which may match Howe’s concept of the psychologically maltreated child who feels “ineffective” (2005, p. 116). However, the definition of neglect used by Klein et al. (2007) blends both physical and emotional aspects; for example, “not being provided with adequate food, clothing, shelter” (physical neglect), “and/or basic emotional needs like love, encouragement, belonging and support” (emotional neglect) (p. 40).

Wright et al. (2009) suggest that shame has a role in preventing an individual processing traumatic experiences, in turn increasing feelings of fear and helplessness, and catastrophizing; this may be relevant to the transmission of emotional neglect from one generation to another. I found this paper particularly valuable as it discusses the findings from an attachment theory perspective, and points to the relevance of the findings for counselling services. The authors clearly differentiate childhood emotional neglect and other forms of neglect and abuse, and include useful definitions; however, a

limitation of this paper is that the sample of college students lacks diversity in terms of race or ethnicity, age, SES and level of education.

### *Cognitive ability and perfectionism*

Child maltreatment literature typically reports a negative impact on cognitive ability and/or academic performance, especially for neglect; there may be a complex relationship between perfectionism and fear of failure, leading to either over-achieving or under-achieving.

In a review of emotional abuse and neglect, Glaser (2002) notes “lower academic achievement” as a potential outcome (p. 711, citing Erickson & Egeland, 1996); and in a study by Young and Widom (2014) on the long-term effects of child abuse and neglect on emotion processing in adulthood, there is an assumption that child neglect results in lower academic performance. It is important to note, however, that this was not apparent among my participants, all of whom had some level of tertiary education.

Gerhardt (2015) lists perfectionism as a potential outcome of a childhood that lacked sufficient love and positive input, as individuals strive to gain approval or avoid causing offence (p. 130); Cori (2010) describes the dual strands of over-achievement (striving to gain approval) and under-achievement (not attempting anything challenging because failure is too risky; p. 113). Both of these aspects of perfectionism match my own experience and my participants’ stories (for example, Rachel, Mickey, Harriet).

### *Emotional problems*

Difficulty with emotions may include hostility towards others, angry, non-compliant behaviour, and dissociation; also alexithymia, or an inability to recognise, describe, or process emotions. Fear may lead to children not being able to recognise their own feelings, thoughts, and desires; and emotionally neglected children may be unaware of their own need for help.

Brown et al. (2016) examined whether alexithymia (the inability to recognise, show, or communicate emotions) accounts for the links between different childhood maltreatment types and internalizing problems (symptoms of depression, anxiety and loneliness) in emerging adulthood. The authors found that emotional neglect was “the only form of maltreatment uniquely associated with alexithymia” (p. 25), and conclude that “associations between emotional neglect and symptoms of depression, anxiety and loneliness were partially explained by alexithymia” (p. 20), but call for further research to explore this relationship further. Aust, Hartwig, Heuser, and Bajbouj (2013) also found a significant association between alexithymia and early emotional neglect in a German population.

Brown et al. (2016) hypothesise that because emotional neglect may lead to children suppressing, denying or distancing themselves from their own emotional needs, they may be at greater risk of developing disordered affect regulation than children experiencing other types of maltreatment. Alexithymia as a coping mechanism in a harsh environment seems to fit my participants’ experiences; although the authors acknowledge that reliance on retrospective recall and the homogenous sample limits the generalizability of their findings.



Fonagy et al. (2007) note that when a child's attachment system is activated by "perceived threat, loss or harm" (p. 298), the intense arousal and overwhelming fear that result effectively switch off the child's ability to mentalise. Of particular relevance is the theory that the brain areas which are deactivated when the attachment system is activated include those which facilitate our attention to our own emotions (ibid); this may explain why participants who were often left feeling frightened and alone, or were left in the care of a parent or caregiver whom they found frightening, have often found it difficult to recognise or describe their feelings, thoughts and desires in adulthood.

Fonagy et al. (2007) consider family size and birth order, suggesting that younger children benefit from "listening to talk about mental states" (p. 300, citing Jenkins et al., 2003), although this was not the case for the participants in my study. The quality of the parent-child relationship, combined with secure attachment patterns and the parent's mentalisation was also considered as a factor in normal healthy child development, although the authors caution that it is not always clear whether the parent's behaviour affects the child's ability to mentalise, or whether the child's lack of mentalising elicits more controlling behaviour in the parent.

Young and Widom (2004) assessed emotion processing abilities in individuals with documented histories of childhood abuse and neglect and a matched control group followed up into adulthood, building on previous literature which demonstrates that child maltreatment of any sort disrupts normal emotional development. They point to problems of definition around child neglect; yet neglect is inadequately defined or differentiated within this paper. For example, different categories of child

maltreatment are described as “physical and sexual abuse and neglect” (p. 1372), but it’s not clear whether “neglect” refers here to physical neglect or emotional neglect.

Cori (2010) suggests that when mothers seem “stingy or withholding or burdened by having to provide”, children may feel that they cannot ask for anything, and learn to “hide or minimize” their needs (p. 86); this was the experience of several participants (for example, Cathy, Miranda).

Luke and Banerjee (2013) acknowledge that context is important, but point to the findings of neuroscience which support the argument that early childhood maltreatment in itself impairs development; for example, affecting the “experience-dependent” formation of synapses in the brain (p. 280), which in turn may affect the infant’s developing social understanding in areas such as empathy, affect regulation, and attachment. Bruer (1999), however, cautions against over-reliance on and misinterpretation of the findings of neuroscience, which can only tell us part of the story of human interaction.

### *Difficulty with relationships*

Difficulty with emotions may lead to difficulty with relationships. Several authors noted social withdrawal, which may be an adaptive strategy (Gerhardt, 2015); loneliness and/or social anxiety; feeling “unworthy of” love and protection, and a fear of intimacy (Howe, 2005, p. 104). Wright et al. (2009) suggest that role-reversal and/or compulsive caring in childhood may increase the risk of “non-reciprocal or exploitative relationships” in adult life (p. 66), with the potential for self-sacrifice and vulnerability to further abuse later in life.

Although Glaser (2002) acknowledges a lack of consistent information about relationships between different forms of child maltreatment and specific long term outcomes, she notes that emotional neglect in the early years is associated with significant problems, including “social withdrawal, angry noncompliant behaviour” (p. 711).

Flett, Goldstein, Pechenkov, Nepon, and Wekerle (2016) tested the hypothesis that “a history of being mistreated by others contributes to a sense of not mattering” (p. 52), and found that the strongest association was between a history of emotional neglect and not mattering. Furthermore, reduced mattering, resulting from childhood maltreatment, led to increased loneliness and social anxiety, which in turn may lead to a range of problems later in life. However, the sample in this study was limited to undergraduates, giving a homogenous age group, possibly not representative of the general population. The authors also acknowledge the wider social context, referring to the fact that they are studying the phenomenon in an individualistic society, whereas the only other previous study to explore the link between mattering and social anxiety was from China, a collectivist society, where an individual’s sense of self may be less significant than in a Western context.

Howe (2005) suggests that the developing child may adopt the defensive or adaptive strategies of “compulsive compliance”, that is, the tendency to behave as others wish, and “compulsive self-reliance”, that is, minimising, avoiding or being dismissive of any emotional or physical pain, in order to survive what feels like a hostile environment (p. 103). Describing the avoidant attachment style and emotional self-sufficiency (p. 124),

Gerhardt cautions that it may put individuals at risk if they attempt to be too “nice” or too “strong” (2015, p. 113).

If parents are incapacitated because of depression, drug or alcohol abuse or trauma, far from receiving the care and protection that they need, children may have to care for and protect their parents in “a form of role-reversal” (Howe, 2005, p. 115). Howe suggests that neglect may have a “more severe and adverse impact” on the developing child than abuse, although at this point he does not make it clear whether “neglect” refers to emotional neglect, physical neglect, or a combination of both, and the long-term impact may depend more on the meaning for the individual than the actual category or duration of maltreatment.

Self-awareness and awareness of others seem to be closely linked (Fonagy et al., 2007), and childhood relationships may therefore be important in preparing the infant for a specific social environment (ibid); early deprivation thus affects the development of social bonds, and there is some evidence (mainly from animal research) which suggests that this may be a factor in addictive behaviours (ibid).

Gerhardt (2015) offers evidence that the human brain prefers to have its expectations confirmed (p. 63), which may explain why the participants in this study adopted, for example, the strategy of compulsive self-reliance. This may also underlie the acceptance of “low-key, often unsatisfactory” adult relationships (p. 132), such as described by Miranda, Heather, and Finlay (page 232).

The reader may recognise some of these themes in the short film, “*All My Bruises Were Inside*” (Chapter 4, page 157), which presents the results of my thematic analysis of the data.

***What does my research add to the body of knowledge?***

Based on my review of the literature, despite more knowledge about the prevalence of emotional neglect, and possible long-term outcomes, I suggest that we still have only a partial understanding of what the experience of childhood emotional neglect actually feels like. What my research adds is the participant’s own voice; an insider view of childhood emotional neglect which may help to improve our understanding of the felt sense of emotional neglect for the child. This may also inform the design of larger scale inquiries; and my work may enhance future attempts to define childhood emotional neglect. Furthermore, my research may offer some insight into the mechanisms by which emotional neglect leads to adult problems.

## **Chapter 4: “All my bruises were inside”**

*A short film about childhood emotional neglect.*

In this film (running time approximately 40 minutes), all the major themes are articulated, and all the participants, including myself, are heard. “Zoe” and “Hal”, the composite characters who represent the 12 participants and myself, are played by actors from a local amateur dramatic company; the scene is an interview room like the ones where I interviewed the participants. Although the original idea, the script and the filming were all my own work, I could not have completed this without the technical support I received from the Keele University Media Department and Audio-visual Services.

Control & click to go to the film, or copy and paste the link into your browser:

<https://youtu.be/b5m6jCWxloM>

See Appendix A (page 414) for the transcript.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

As explained in the literature review, precise definitions of childhood emotional neglect remain elusive. The participants' experiences entailed what might be categorised as both emotional neglect and emotional abuse, and in my thematic analysis of the data, I created themes and sub-themes for both. In this discussion chapter, I focus mainly on emotional neglect, the things that didn't happen (Webb, 2013), "omissions", rather than "commissions" (Cori, 2010, p. 18; Music, 2009, p. 154); although the distinctions are often blurred, and incidents of emotional abuse may be features of the emotionally neglectful landscape.

Throughout this discussion chapter, I privilege the participants' remembered stories (Muncey, 2010), looking for points of convergence in the literature, rather than starting with the literature, and looking for illustrations in the data. The main focus of this study is a nuanced description of childhood emotional neglect; however, I also draw on theoretical frameworks as an aspect of the autoethnographic commitment to examining the phenomenon through different lenses.

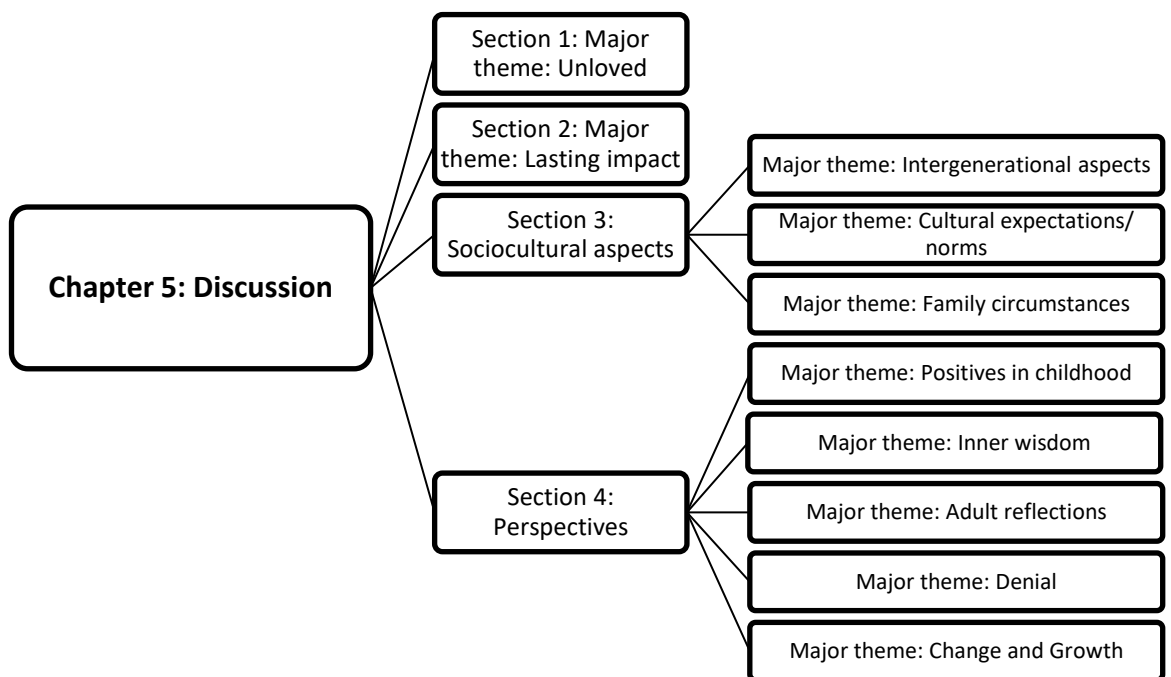
Initially, I planned to apply these theoretical frameworks systematically to the data, as well as considering the cultural, societal and historical contexts. On reflection, I realised that this strategy was taking me closer to an objective study, and further from the heart of autoethnography. At times, ANGELA and THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET would like to let the participants' stories speak for themselves, and let the reader/audience make of them what they will (Turner, 2013); but SOPHIA and the

CHORUS OF ACADEMICS remind us that more is required for a PhD. So I remain conscious of the literature and psychological theories, and refer to them where relevant, but strive to balance this with what makes this thesis autoethnographic and original: that is, using my subjective experience to make sense of the data.

I was aware throughout of parallel processes. By day, I would sit at my desk, busy “doing” analysis; by night, I would lie awake in the dark, thinking, reflecting, focusing (Gendlin, 1978/2003), asking myself self-searching questions: What did that feel like? What was that about? What was going on for me, as a child, as a parent? In what follows, I draw together these parallel processes, along with the literature I reviewed and wider reading from my previous and current work.

The discussion chapter is arranged in four sections (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Arrangement of major themes and themes in discussion chapter





In the model of major themes (Figure 6, page 91), I placed the overarching theme “Unloved” at the centre. This is at the heart of the experience that I am trying to describe. What it feels like to be unloved by our parents is the answer to the main research question, and merits the most attention; this, therefore, is the subject of the first section of this discussion chapter.

Whether a direct cause and effect relationship can be established between adverse childhood experiences and long-term outcomes may be subject to continuing debate in the psychological literature, but for the participants and myself, there is no doubt that we can see the lasting impact in our adult lives; “Lasting impact” is therefore the subject of the second section.

In the third section of the discussion chapter, I draw together three major themes: “Intergenerational Aspects”, “Cultural Expectations/Norms” and “Family circumstances”, under the umbrella term “Sociocultural aspects”. These are conditions or circumstances which may have contributed to our experiences of childhood emotional neglect, although by no means inevitably or universally.

A fourth and final section, “Perspectives”, brings together the remaining major themes. These include more positive and hopeful aspects of our childhood experiences: happy memories; our inner wisdom; positive changes and personal growth; and our adult reflections and understanding, including, for some, not blaming our parents for the harm caused.

The model of the chapter structure above (Figure 10) implies neat distinctions between themes; this is far from the case. There are overlaps and close similarities between themes and sub-themes; however, I have chosen to retain these as separate-and-overlapping themes, rather than merging them, to honour my commitment to creating a nuanced account of childhood emotional neglect.

I make extensive use of data extracts throughout the discussion chapter. Some are brief “soundbites”, but some are longer interview extracts, in which the participants have space to tell their story; this is an important feature of my autoethnography. I present some interview extracts as dialogue between myself and the participant, demonstrating how both of us, and the reader/audience, gain deeper access to the subject matter (Etherington, 2004a, p. 25); illustrating how the interviewer plays an active part in the construction of the participant’s narrative (Ellis, 2004, p. 61); and providing the context in which the data is constructed (Etherington, 2004b). Elsewhere, if I added nothing but minimal verbal prompts (“mmm”, “aha”), or repetition of the participant’s exact words or phrases, I include just the participant’s words. Sometimes I edited these extracts, as participants interrupted their narratives with factual details, or with anecdotes that were tangential to the main point of the story. This is not a criticism; on the contrary, I see it as an advantage of the unstructured interview, but I was conscious that it might make the discussion chapter difficult to read. Where I have edited longer interview extracts, I indicate this by spaced ellipses.

## **Section 1: Unloved**

*Major theme: Unloved. Themes: Not shown love; Not wanted; Not seen, not heard; Not celebrated; Not protected; Conditional approval; Parent role; Bullying and emotional blackmail; Mocked and humiliated; Had to manage alone.*

(See Appendix B, page 435, for models of themes and sub-themes).

The feeling of not being loved, of not being wanted, or of being rejected, occurs across the data set. In this section of the discussion

chapter, which corresponds to the major theme,

“Unloved” in the model of the themes (Figure 6,

page 91), I explore some of the individual themes

which I created from the participants’ remembered

childhood experiences of not feeling loved or

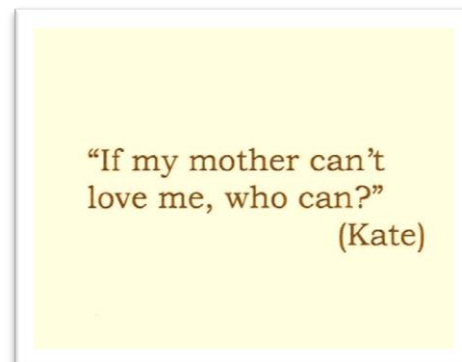
wanted, often illustrated in their interviews by vividly remembered events and things

said, or left unsaid. One striking feature of the themes of “Unloved” is the frequency of

“Not” and “No” themes and sub-themes, such as “Not shown love,” and “No emotional

connection”. These highlight the sense of emotional neglect as an absence of

something desirable, rather than the presence of something undesirable.



### ***Not shown love***

*Sub-themes: Not hugged or cuddled; No warmth; No emotional connection.*

Love is intangible, subjective, harder to operationalise and identify than other aspects

of parenting, such as providing food and clothing. Not all of the participants named

“not shown love” directly; sometimes I inferred it from their descriptions of childhood

feelings or events. Cori (2010), drawing on clinical practice as a psychotherapist as

well as theoretical knowledge of child development, suggests that that love is usually

expressed by parents most effectively by non-verbal means such as “touch, tone of voice, eyes and facial expression, body language, and attentiveness” (p. 14).

Cathy remembers the lack of hugs and cuddles, although she makes light of it, saying: “We don’t do this huggy thing”. Being held lovingly may be one of the most important experiences for a young child’s psychological development (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 58), and Cori (2010) suggests that the lack of physical affection may lead to “touch hunger”, a craving for physical contact (p. 101); yet the participants in this study frequently describe not being hugged or cuddled.

Participants also describe a lack of warmth or other expressions of affection. Heather makes a distinction between *knowing* she was loved, and *feeling* loved, contrasting her childhood memories of her mother, whom she experienced as cold and distant, with her memories of her father, whom she experienced as warm and playful: “I didn’t feel any warmth with my mum, there was no warmth . . . I’ve not thought of how to describe it before, but that’s the difference—with my dad it’s warmth, with my mum it’s . . . stiff, it’s hard”. Lack of warmth, alongside an absence of physical affection, may feel like a lack of love (Howe, 2005, p. 91; Cori, 2010, p. 71); both Cori (2010) and Webb (2013) note the distinction between “knowing” and “feeling” love among their emotionally neglected adult clients. Cori refers to the “dance” between mother and baby; the reciprocal interaction made up of eye-contact, mirroring facial expression, and playful movement towards and away, which conveys emotional connection (2010, p. 133).

Finlay remembers that for him to approach his mother with “any kind of emotional difficulty wouldn’t have been welcome”, and David notes the “emotional link that’s

missing between us”, reflecting the sense of being somehow disconnected from our parents; not intimate, not close emotionally. This seems to fit Cori’s description of the child who is not “emotionally met” by his mother (2010, p. 98), perhaps suggesting a mother who was herself undermothered and consequently uncomfortable with emotional talk (ibid, p. 185).

Infants appear to be acutely conscious of and attuned to the *psychological* presence, or absence, of their mother (Cori, 2010, p. 78; Gerhardt, 2015, p. 49, p. 147; Young et al., 2011, p. 889). Body language, facial expression and eye contact all convey our psychological presence (Cori, 2010, p. 113). Perhaps, when we were not feeling “emotionally met” by our caregivers, we were sensing their psychological absence.

If parents have difficulty managing their own emotions, especially anger or hostility, they may deny such feelings in their child (Frankland & Sanders, 1995/2004, p. 49). Rather than parents regulating their children’s emotions, children learn to regulate the parent’s, by denying or hiding their own feelings (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 41). Although only a small, cross-sectional study, Buckholdt et al. (2014) concur that parents’ reactions can teach children that “emotions are unacceptable and cannot be tolerated by their parents” (p. 324). Such children may grow up sensing that feelings are not allowed (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 39), and consequently be blind to their emotional needs in adulthood (Webb, 2013, p. 12).

This discomfort or unwillingness to engage with emotions seems to match the definition of psychological maltreatment (including emotional neglect), offered by the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC), which includes

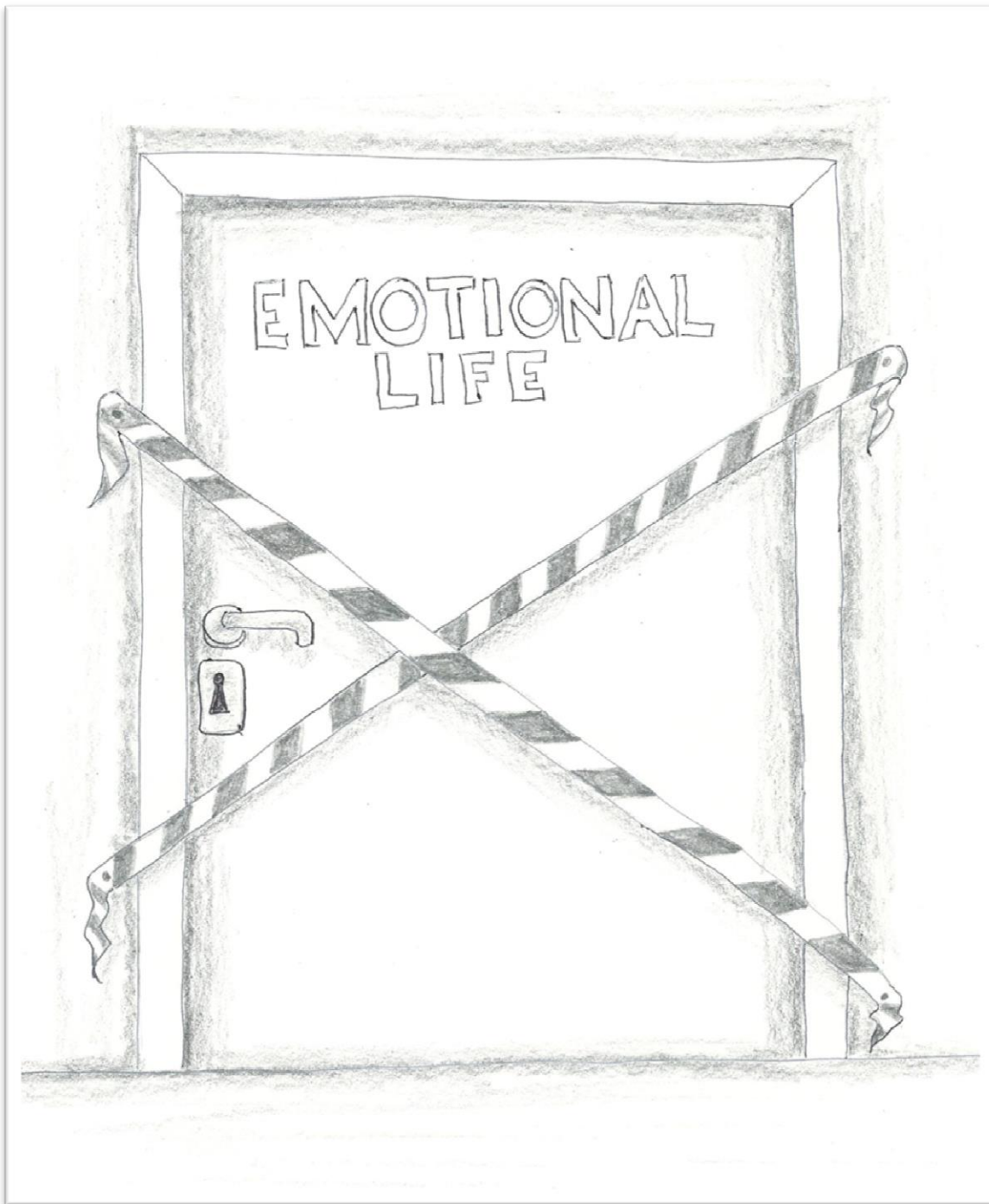
“Denying emotional responsiveness (ignoring child’s needs to interact, failing to express positive affect to the child, showing no emotion in interactions with the child)”, (1995, cited in Glaser, 2002, p. 702).

Across the entire data set, participants referred to a lack of connection, a lack of emotional talk in the family, or discomfort with emotions and feelings-related conversations; there was “functional communication” but no talk about feelings (Cori, 2010, p. 102). A secure attachment may be significant in terms of our readiness for “collaborative and cooperative” social life (Fonagy et al., 2007, p. 291); for a social animal such as a human, social survival may be as important as physical survival. A child’s perception that mother is emotionally absent is therefore potentially “a threat to survival, and therefore a trauma to the child’s nervous system” (Cori, 2010, p. 76); furthermore, amongst traumatized individuals, being out of touch with the connection between emotions and bodily sensations can lead to “a lack of self-protection and high rates of revictimization” (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 99).

My own mother wasn’t willing, or wasn’t able, to engage in conversation about emotions; like Gerhardt’s mother, she was “articulate and vocal”, yet avoided feelings-related talk (2005, p. 117). A reflective journal entry (13/09/14) reads:

An early morning image, reflecting on Mum & her emotional distance: I probably won’t ever know why she was so emotionally unavailable, to me at least, but this is what it felt like:

Figure 11: No emotions allowed



\* \* \*

## **Dramatic interlude**

*Dramatis personae*

SOPHIA

ANGELA

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET

BABA YAGA

THE GRINDYLOW

CHORUS OF ACADEMICS

*Scene: The Library. SOPHIA is sitting at a desk, surrounded by books, one of them open in front of her. ANGELA and THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET enter, holding hands, BABA YAGA and THE GRINDYLOW following on their heels. ANGELA looks anxious, and THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET has obviously been crying.*

ANGELA: Sophia, we need your help.

SOPHIA: *(Looks up, smiling)*. What is it, Angela?

ANGELA: We've been at the 11<sup>th</sup> Keele Counselling Conference this weekend, and we've been hearing about autism. I'm suddenly wondering if that's what it's all about, after all, and I don't know what to do!



SOPHIA: (*Closing the book she was reading, and holding up the cover to show them; it's Daniel Kahneman's Thinking, Fast and Slow*). WYSIATI.

ANGELA and THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET: What?

BABA YAGA and THE GRINDYLOW *edge nearer to listen.*

SOPHIA: WYSIATI. It's what I've just been reading about. It's a common problem with research. As researchers hone in on the fine details of the phenomenon they're researching—whether that's a psychological issue or the life cycle of the fruit fly—as they develop their thesis, assemble the evidence that will prove their hypothesis, it's easy for them to simply not see alternative explanations. You've been looking at the experience of childhood emotional neglect, and seeing the world through that lens, so you've been explaining everything in terms of childhood emotional neglect—that's not a criticism, Angela, that's just what researchers do. WYSIATI.

ANGELA and THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET, BABA YAGA and THE GRINDYLOW: What?

SOPHIA: WYSIATI. It stands for What You See Is All There Is. In other words, once you've got an answer, you stop looking for any further explanations. It's especially a pitfall for experimental psychology. You develop your hypothesis, you run a couple of experiments that appear to prove the hypothesis, so you conclude that X results in Y, and you stop looking. You don't notice that Z might have been a factor, and you never

look at whether X only results in Y under conditions ABC, so you don't realise that X results in something completely different under different conditions.

ANGELA: (*Fearfully*). So what are you saying? Am I wrong?

*THE GRINDYLOW reaches out one hand towards ANGELA's ankles, and BABA YAGA prepares to speak. SOPHIA holds up her hand, and they pause.*

SOPHIA: I'm not saying you're wrong at all, Angela. I'm just saying it could be really valuable to look at the literature on autism, and see if that's relevant.

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET: (*Starting to cry again*). It's 'Motional 'Glect! I've got 'Motional 'Glect! I don't want it to be something else!

ANGELA: (*To SOPHIA, apologetically*). This is what she's upset about. We were arguing about it on the way here. I said, maybe Dad, or Mum, or both, were autistic, and that's why they couldn't do emotion.

BABA YAGA: (*Huffily*) Well, I don't think it's very nice to label people.

ANGELA: (*Anxiously*) But some of the feelings described by my participants, some of the themes I've created, closely match the experiences of some autistic individuals. What do I do? I can't just ignore it!

CHORUS OF ACADEMICS:

You can't put it all in, it simply won't fit  
It's all about making decisions,  
Keeping in this bit, and taking out that bit,  
And revisions, revisions, revisions!

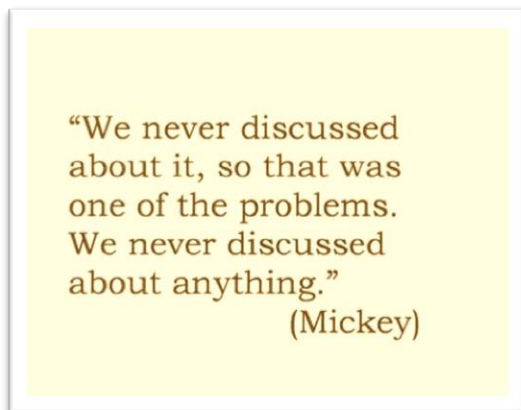
\* \* \*

Am I autistic? Was Mum? Was Dad? I can't help but notice that some of the themes I created during thematic analysis seem to correspond to autistic traits, such as a preference for doing things alone, finding social situations difficult, problems with emotion-laden communication, and finding it difficult to make new friends (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Skinner, Martin, & Clubley, 2001, p. 15). Maybe there are similar fruits, but from different roots. Lieberman (2015), drawing on extensive research, considers two hypotheses in relation to autism: The "Broken Mirror" hypothesis, and the "Intense World" hypothesis. The Broken Mirror hypothesis argues that individuals with autism can't mirror, or imitate, the behaviour of others; some experimental data cited by Lieberman (2015) supports this. However, other experiments indicate that autistic individuals may, conversely, be "hyper-imitators", but problems with mentalising, or Theory of Mind, prevent them understanding what they should imitate in experiments (ibid, p. 166).

The Intense World hypothesis suggests that autistic individuals are not less sensitive (as popularly believed), but more sensitive than others. Very young children who have been identified in fMRI scans as having a larger amygdala typically go on to develop

autistic traits. Such children have an “enlarged mechanism for socio-emotional sensitivity” (Lieberman, 2015, p. 175), and therefore experience heightened anxiety, “enhanced threat detection”, and don’t “habituate to faces” (ibid, p. 176); that is, become gradually more relaxed with repeated exposure. Such children find the social world overwhelming, and therefore avoid social contact out of self-preservation. Mentalising is central to adult social behaviour, but is experience-dependent; we need to develop the capacity to mentalise through exposure to appropriate experiences in childhood (ibid, p. 168). Children who are overwhelmed by social interactions, and therefore avoid them, deny themselves the opportunity to develop mentalisation (ibid, p. 177). Maybe children whose primary caregivers are not sufficiently attuned and responsive, and who therefore don’t develop a sufficiently robust stress response, or simply don’t experience sufficient early social contact, are similarly affected.

Brown et al. (2016) found links between different childhood maltreatment types and



“We never discussed about it, so that was one of the problems. We never discussed about anything.”  
(Mickey)

internalizing problems (symptoms of depression, anxiety and loneliness) particularly in emerging adulthood; specifically, they found a unique association between emotional neglect and alexithymia (the inability to display or communicate emotion), which seems to confirm that the

lack of emotional expression or talk about emotive subjects in participants’ families is significant. Alexithymia may mimic autistic traits; or autism may overlap with alexithymia.

Alan remembers that his mother “didn’t show her emotions too much”, but adds: “I’ve definitely got a stiff upper lip, but I think that could be British”, referring to the popular perception that the British have a tendency toward emotional self-restraint (Gerhardt, 2015). Not showing emotion may be result from an individual being a “low reactor” to stress, who may have a “flattened” cortisol response, appearing calm and not reacting, but prone to occasional outbursts of aggression. This may be associated with “more or less continuous emotional unavailability,” resulting either from the British “stiff upper lip”, or a parenting style where physical punishment is used to “curb . . . emotions” (ibid, p. 85).

Yet neither Alice’s nor David’s families are of British origin, and they describe a similar lack of emotional connection in their family lives. Alice attributes this to her parents’ upbringing; “[Mum’s] come from a very strict background and a very disciplined background . . . there’s no emotional—there’s no emotions, you don’t express yourself or anything like that”. David also remembers that there was little family communication about emotional problems “like heartbreaks, or, you know, stress levels, and stuff like that . . . it’s just not something that I’ve ever been able to communicate with them”.

Mickey, from Eastern Europe, remembers that even after a traumatic family loss, “we *never* discussed about it, so that was one of the problems. We *never* discussed about anything”. Fonagy et al. (2007) point to the value of “listening to talk about mental states” (p. 300, citing Jenkins et al., 2003) in developing a child’s capacity for mentalisation, or mind-mindedness, and learning to tolerate negative emotions; it seems this was lacking for the participants in this study.

Rachel's story illustrates several aspects of "Unloved"; the lack of warmth, physical affection, or emotional connection, and a lack of appropriate boundaries (Cori, 2010, p. 14). It was only in adulthood that Rachel was able to identify this as a lack of love, but she believes it had destructive consequences in her teens. Rachel describes how she was materially well-provided for, but like Cathy, she remembers that "I never had hugs"; and her parents didn't seem to notice her: "Not even a 'Rachel, you seem upset today, how're you doing?'" which Rachel believes led to her becoming "emotionless".

Cori refers to the child who is not shown sufficient affection as "craving love" (2010, p. 76). Rachel believes that a lack of love, whether expressed verbally or communicated through warmth, physical affection or being attuned and responsive to mood, led her to seek attention from older boys:

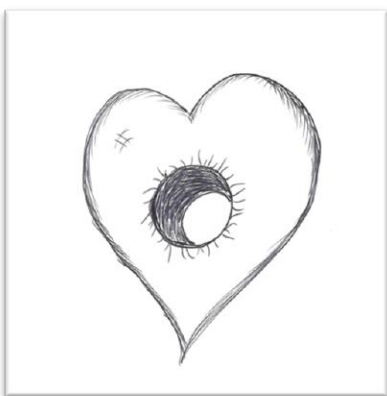
[Mum] was paralytic, she'd never know that I was sneaking . . . older teenagers . . . I'd sneak them back, they'd maybe stay for a couple of hours . . . sometimes they'd be there in the morning and she wasn't bothered . . . not a, "What on earth do you think you're doing, young lady," or "You can get him out right now".

I remember as a 17-year-old feeling starved of love and desperate for physical contact; the only way I knew to get it was through romantic relationships. Howe (2005), writing from a social work perspective, suggests that the emotionally neglected child may suffer from depression and low self-esteem, which in turn may result in, among other adverse outcomes, sexual promiscuity (p. 100). I was fortunate; the boyfriend

that I threw myself on at a friend’s house-party had more self-restraint than me; but with more opportunities, I could have become sexually promiscuous. Briere and Runtz suggest that sexual promiscuity is one of the externalizing behaviours more commonly associated with childhood sexual abuse (1988; 1990), but note that, as different kinds of abuse and neglect often overlap or co-occur, it is difficult to distinguish precisely the adult outcomes. Rachel’s explanation that a lack of loving attention in childhood meant she “craved attention off blokes” seems a plausible pathway to me.

During the focus group, Miranda describes her childhood feeling that, although her mother would “talk as if we’re best friends, and as if we’re really close and everything’s lovely”, she felt that “her actions didn’t match what she said, so I was often confused and thought that it must be me”. When parents appear to be doing the job of parenting appropriately, but the child experiences a lack of emotional connection, the child may feel confused and blame himself (Webb, 2013, p. 45). Kate and Harriet similarly describe the confusion that they experienced when the public image that their mothers projected didn’t match their private experience; when the talk didn’t match the actions.

Figure 12: A hole in the heart



Cori (2010) suggests that: “To feel that you aren’t important to your mother . . . is felt as a hole in the heart” (p. 75). This is a vivid memory for me, although in the following excerpt from my reflective journal, I acknowledge that there is an alternative explanation:

Reflecting on Cori’s description of not mattering to your mother as feeling like “a hole in the heart” (2010, p. 75). As a young child (less than six years old, for sure; maybe four?) I remember thinking that I had a hole in my heart; this persisted through childhood and early adolescence; it eased as I went through secondary school (away from home). Did I have an inner sense of what was lacking? Or was it just that I had heard my parents talking about a girl in my class who had been born with the condition? (Reflective journal, 19/09/17)

Ultimately, if not actively shown love, Cori (2010) suggests, a child may conclude, “I am unlovable as I am” (p. 17). As Kate asks in her individual interview, “If my own mother can’t love me, who can?”

### ***Not wanted***

*Sub-themes: Rejected; Not belonging; Can’t reach Mum; Not good enough*

In my first bracketing interview, I describe my childhood sense of not being wanted, reinforced by a recently discovered letter from my father to my mother before I was conceived, in which he wrote: “We mustn’t have any more babies, because it upsets you so”. This “confirmed for me the feeling that . . . I wasn’t loved, that I wasn’t wanted”.



Not feeling loved by your parent is “deeply painful” (Howe, 2005, p. 90), and for the young child, who is so dependent on his parents, also frightening (ibid). In focusing on emotional neglect, as opposed to emotional abuse, I see a subtle difference between having a perception or belief (which may be completely erroneous) that we are unwanted, and being told that we are unwanted (when there may be an element of truth, at least in the heat of the moment). For some participants in this study, the feeling of not being wanted was reinforced by words or actions. Miranda, for example, remembers her mother saying: “If only I hadn’t had you, I would have [emigrated], if I hadn’t been tied down by all you bloody kids”.

Whilst some participants experienced the hurt of actually being told to their faces that they were unwanted or an imposition, Finlay describes a lingering sense of being a disappointment because he wasn’t a girl. I have, at times, wondered if my own vague sense of not being wanted, of somehow not measuring up, stemmed from being born the “wrong” sex; as an adult, I often wondered if my father had hoped for a boy. I had no evidence of this during childhood, but recently a casual remark from my oldest sister seemed to confirm this:

Dad ignored me . . . I felt like I was irrelevant, unseen, not known, not understood, not valued for what I was. Was it my un-boyness that made me irrelevant? Just a few months ago my sister confirmed that I *was* “one last shot at a boy”. (Reflective journal, 17/09/14).

If parents are preoccupied with having a child of one sex or another, this may indicate a “failure to recognize or acknowledge the child’s individuality” (Glaser, 2002, p. 703).

If very young children are “programmed to tune in to caregivers” (Young et al., 2011, p. 896), it seems likely that they will be highly sensitive to disapproving looks, or the absence of the approving looks which appear to promote healthy neural development (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 59). Not yet being aware of the cultural significance of sex and gender, very small children may infer disapproval of their core selves.

Based on the experience of her adult clients in therapy, Cori suggests that the child who doesn't feel welcomed or wanted may conclude, “Maybe it would be better if I weren't here” (2010, p. 16); Wright et al. (2009) also note a “desire to hide or disappear” (p. 65). Kate comments bleakly at one point in her interview: “I just have felt on many, many occasions . . . I wish she hadn't bothered, because I have felt so damaged by it”. This may indicate the way in which emotional neglect can lead to suicidal behaviour (Howe, 2005, p. 100; Norman et al., 2012).

The sense of not belonging, of being an outsider, even in our own families, was a common experience among participants. Alan describes feeling like he “shouldn't be there” and “completely outside the family”. In the first bracketing interview, I describe my own strong childhood memory:

I was about eight years old, planning to run away because I had more or less convinced myself that I was adopted, I felt I was so much less part of the family than my older sisters were.

I just didn't feel like I belonged; I didn't feel wanted, and I honestly didn't think I would be missed. This confirms Hildyard and Wolfe (2002), who found that children

who were abused or neglected in childhood were more likely to run away from home; although this applied almost equally to children who were physically abused, and those whom the authors describe as “throwaways” (ibid, p. 689), implying neglect, including emotional neglect. Cori (2010) noted a similar sense of not belonging and feeling “out of place” (p. 68) among her emotionally neglected clients.

For Finlay, the sense of not belonging in his family is captured by an early childhood memory: “A feeling that I was in the wrong place, like I was in the wrong family”, and “actually sort of hoping that, or wishing that my real parents would come along and, you know, reclaim me and take me away”; Finlay can place this memory as before the age of seven. Kate also describes longing to be rescued: “I remember . . . lying in bed . . . looking out the window, just thinking: ‘Is somebody gonna come and rescue me?’”

The relationships between childhood experiences and parenting practices, and the direction of any links, are still debated in the psychological literature (Buckholdt et al., 2014; McLeod et al., 2007); there is, I sense, an implication in this literature that if only we had been more affectionate as children, then surely our parents would have formed secure attachments with us. However, the participant stories suggest that we ourselves were capable of making close connections. Heather describes enjoying a close relationship with a neighbour, and Miranda remembers being “known as a cuddly child”: she “liked cuddling aunties and uncles . . . I had lots of big cousins and I’d sit on their laps for hours on end, apparently”.

This fits with the notion of infants as primed for attachment (Bowlby, 1969/1997, p. 216). However, I noticed in several of the participants’ stories, including my own, a

sense of our own ability and willingness to give love being thwarted or rejected, captured in the sub-theme “Can’t reach Mum”, which may have had a long-term effect on our mental images of ourselves as loving and lovable (Howe, 2005). In the first bracketing interview I describe my sense that:

I couldn’t get close—I couldn’t get in—[Mum] wouldn’t let me in . . . I feel like I was kept at arm’s length—and I think therefore I have learnt . . . to keep people at arms’ length.

Kate uses a powerful metaphor to describe her sense of not being able to reach her mother, and her own ineffective attempts at attachment: “I think for a long time I tried to make her love me . . . She was always like the carrot on the end of the stick, just out of reach”.

When a child hears only criticism and no praise, or fails to attract a parent’s attention at all, she may develop an “internal working model” of herself as “not good enough, or even ‘bad’” (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 137). So although we started life hard-wired for attachment, we may quickly have learnt that our attempts at attachment were not welcome; yet being human, we continued seeking attachment wherever we could.

I now have more understanding, that my mother was perhaps just passing on to me what had been done to her in childhood, and possibly with the best of intentions, but at the time I could only infer criticism or disappointment from the absence of any direct praise of me; a sense that I was somehow “not good enough”. This was a common experience for participants. Cathy remembers that with her father, “it didn’t seem to

matter how well I did . . . it was never quite enough”, and Muhammed describes how his father’s constant criticisms left him with the feeling of not being good enough, “because that’s what we see from his reactions. Why is it not good enough? What else do you want?”

### ***Not seen, not heard***

*Sub-themes: Invisible; Ignored; No direct praise or feedback; True self not recognised or prized.*

According to the adage popularly attributed to the Victorians, children were expected to be “seen and not heard”; but the participants in this study felt that they were *not* seen, and not heard. In the first bracketing interview, I describe my feeling of simply being below my father’s radar:

He was busy, and I often felt that he just didn’t see me. He didn’t see me, he just didn’t notice me. I was down here (indicating knee height), you know, he was up here (indicating shoulder height), so he was looking at the big things, the grown up things.

This sense of not being seen may correspond to an absence of “mirroring”, described as a parent’s attempt to see the child as he or she truly is, and respond with empathic understanding of the child’s world (Music, 2009, p. 143). Just as mirroring supports a child’s development, a lack of it may hinder the development of a “clear sense of self”, leading to self-doubt (Cori, 2010, p. 96; Webb, 2013, p. 14). Harsh, critical comments can destroy a child’s self-esteem, or prevent it developing; but so may a lack of direct feedback of any kind.

In my third bracketing interview, I describe my sense that:

In the absence of any words to describe myself, I don't know how I am . . . if nobody gives you any kind of verbal commentary on how you are and what you're doing and . . . what you look like . . . you're fumbling around in a bit of a fog trying to make out who you are.

As Miller (1979/1997) suggests, the child who is not accurately or sufficiently mirrored in childhood may grow into an adult who “for the rest of his life would be seeking this mirror in vain” (p. 31).

Webb (2013) emphasises children's need to be validated by accurate feedback, and whilst she acknowledges that this may come from others, such as peers and teachers, she suggests that the most powerful comes from parents (p. 80, p. 82). I am conscious of my ongoing preoccupation with external validation; as Cori (2010) suggests, “when we are consistently not seen, it can lead to feeling invisible and an uncertainty that we are real” (p. 16). A sense of being invisible, unseen or unnoticed in one way or another seemed to arise for all the participants in this study, corresponding to the description of children who are “overlooked or even under-looked” (Music, 2009, p. 143), and the concept of “not mattering” (Flett et al., 2016).

Perhaps invisibility kept me safe. If, as seems likely, my parents were too overwhelmed by their own emotional needs or demands on their time to be sufficiently attuned and attentive to mine, any demands I made for attention might have felt threatening to them. Howe refers to parents' “defensive exclusion” of attachment

related information, possibly resulting from their own experience of neglect and rejection (2005, p. 114). When I was a new-born baby, my mother may have interpreted my crying as a criticism, and become angry with me, because of her own need to “get it right”. Or perhaps she failed even to register that I was crying, because crying triggered fear in her, because of her own frightening childhood experiences. Cori (2010) suggests that a mother may be unable to recognise and meet her child’s “childlike qualities” (p. 71) appropriately because her own developmental needs were not supported, were thwarted by hardship or abuse, or because she was forced to grow up too quickly. This might fit with a parent who lived through a world war, or endured a similar trauma or hardship.

Participants’ experiences of not being heard ranged from being left to cry as infants, to being systematically ignored as a form of punishment, or parents simply not knowing what kind of person we were as we grew and developed. Heather recounted an early memory of being left crying alone as an 18-month-old infant, which she shared during the focus group. She describes how, around the time that her family was moving house (a potentially stressful event for a small child), she remembers being in the cot in her aunt’s home:

The cat was trying to scratch me through the bars, and I was huddled up in the corner trying to keep away from—well, his hands, it felt like, and I was screaming, and nobody would come, I could hear people downstairs, but nobody would come . . . but they said that I was always crying, wouldn’t sleep and everything, so I assume they used to leave me a lot.

The evidence from neuroscience suggests that being left crying alone is highly stressful for infants (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 84). Highly stressed babies appear to have too much cortisol, but too few cortisol receptors, which can lead to damage in the hippocampus, (ibid). Carpenter et al. (2009) found a lasting, measurable difference in stress responses in individuals who self-reported a history of childhood emotional abuse, and further, noted that this effect increased with the age of the individual (see page 134). This is consistent with Howe (2005), who maintains that the “damaging psychological consequences accumulate over the years” (p. 90). Gerhardt acknowledges that inevitably babies will sometimes be left crying alone; however, as a deliberate child-rearing strategy or routine, as appears to have been Heather’s experience, it may have potentially harmful consequences for the development of stress regulation (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 84).

Mickey experienced being systematically ignored as a form of punishment or control from a young age (five or six years old), which might be categorised as psychological maltreatment or emotional abuse, rather than emotional neglect, matching the 1995 APSAC definition of psychological maltreatment which includes “spurning” (cited by Glaser, 2002, p. 702). Mickey remembers imploring his parents, “Could you please just talk to me, please do something,” but they refused to respond, which he believes “created a very, very bad feeling” in him. Mickey found being ignored in this way so distressing that he remembers begging, “Could you please beat me, and don’t, don’t do that?”

Gerhardt stresses the importance of the parent’s role in teaching infants that conflict is inevitable in close relationships, but that the relationship can be restored, the cycle



known as “rupture and repair” (2015, p. 153). When this does not happen, very young children are left vulnerable to harm:

If the child learns instead that he cannot turn to mum or dad for comfort when he is distressed, because they ignore him or punish him even more, then he will be stuck in stressful feelings, with cortisol running high, unable to turn it off. (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 153).

At a very young age, Mickey sensed the harm being done to him, but felt powerless to change the situation. He perceives this as having been an especially painful form of punishment for a child to endure, to the extent that he remembers wishing that his parents would beat him, rather than just ignore him. This appears to support Music’s hypothesis that neglect is potentially more harmful than abuse, because of its deadening effect (2009, p. 153). It is important to point out, however, that the participants in the current study who were beaten as a form of discipline (Finlay by a teacher, David by his father) do not remember it as a positive experience.

Rachel remembers feeling that her true self was not seen or prized, because she was “expected to be into business or work in an office or do something financial, but that’s never been me, I’ve always been a people person”; but when she discussed training as a counsellor, her father’s response was, “What on earth would you want to do that for?” One aspect of competent parenting is recognising and prizing a child’s “individuality, including personal attributes and characteristics, thoughts and feelings” (Howe, 2005, p. 96). A lack of this may correspond to Music’s description of the child who is “under-looked” (2009, p. 143), and not fully seen for who they truly are.

Cori (2010) suggests that parents convey respect when they accept their children's unique interests and choices, and that not doing so may leave children feeling unworthy and unable to fulfil their potential, tending to be "too accommodating to other people," rather than "standing up for what they want for themselves" (p. 14). Webb (2013) describes a client who wanted to play the guitar, but was encouraged to take up the violin instead (p. 206). I remember my own desire, at the age of 11, to play the violin; Mum insisted that I learn to play the piano first (I never progressed to the violin). For years, I accepted the wisdom of this in musical terms; however, more recently, Mum told me that she too wanted to play the violin as a child, but had been made to take piano lessons instead. Now, I wonder whether she had unthinkingly denied me what she herself was denied.

Sometimes, I have questioned whether the participants and I have unreasonably high expectations of our parents. Perhaps it's unfair to compare them to fictional parents such as Atticus in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960), "Mother" in *The Railway Children* (Nesbit, 1906), or more recently, Lily Potter (Rowling, 1997); or theoretical parents that I have read about in parenting manuals such as *The Secret of Happy Children* or *Raising Boys* (Biddulph, 1998a & 1998b). After all, mothers only need to be "good enough" (Winnicott, 1953). Are we mourning the loss of something that could never have been? Perhaps our childhood emotional neglect is a figment of our imaginations. Yet Howe suggests we can define emotional neglect by:

Looking at what a developing child should expect from a competent, caring parent. If a parent fails to recognize, respect or value these basic psychosocial

and developmental needs, then some form of emotional abuse or neglect is likely to result. (Howe, 2005, p. 96).

Glaser (2002), drawing on research, clinical practice and theoretical frameworks, suggests that childhood emotional neglect may best be conceptualised without reference to the behaviour of parents (which may have many underlying causes and meanings) or interactions between the parent and child, concentrating instead on what children need in order to support their psychosocial development and well-being.

Bruner (2002) argues that “if we lacked the capacity to make stories about ourselves, there would be no such thing as selfhood” (p. 86). Reflecting on the human need to tell ourselves about ourselves, to create our stories of “who and what we are, what’s happened, and why we’re doing what we’re doing” (ibid, p. 64), and the interconnectedness of human sociability and our storytelling nature, I wonder: is this at the heart of emotional neglect? If our own parents aren’t interested in hearing our story, we become nothing? And then as we grow up, struggle to become anything?

### ***Not celebrated***

*Sub-themes: No birthday parties; No joy; Tight with money; Mustn’t brag.*

Several participants remember a lack of celebration or a lack of joy in childhood, echoing Music’s “unenjoyed” children (2009, p. 143). Both Alice and David remember that their birthdays were not celebrated in the way that was the norm in the society around them. David, however, acknowledges that this was understandable, given his

parents' own experiences: "They weren't very big on presents or anything like that, I guess that's just from what they know—I don't think they've ever celebrated birthdays much either—because we're from Pakistan, and we're from a quite poor area".

Birthdays and birthdates may have had less significance in their families' cultures of origin (Karmi, 2002/2009, p. 7). For Cathy and myself, being allowed to feel "special" on our birthdays was one of the few highlights of childhood, along with family holidays, although Cathy remembers that even birthdays were tinged with anxiety: "I never wanted a party because I never thought people would want to come . . . I thought people would forget, and that I would be hurt".

Cori (2010) believes that the messages, "You're special to me" and "I enjoy you" are important for children to hear in order to grow up with a healthy sense of being valued, though these are not usually communicated verbally (p. 14). Music (2009) in particular emphasises the importance of positive affect for healthy child development, and notes that the literature focuses on the presence or absence of negative factors which are detrimental to a child's development, but rarely discusses the positive factors which promote normal development.

For some participants, there was a general sense that there was no fun, no joy, no playfulness in childhood. Finlay simply commented that "there wasn't a lot of joy, growing up", echoing word for word a comment my sister made recently about our childhood home. David makes a similar remark: "It's almost like happiness wasn't really there . . . I wouldn't really say we were ever really fully happy".

Biddulph describes “Vitamin F, for fun” as one of the essential ingredients for happy children (1998a, p. 26), and notes that fun can be passed back and forth between parents and children. Healthy children are naturally joyful, and their joyfulness can be contagious; but I remember times, during early motherhood, when I was depressed, and completely lost my sense of humour. During those periods, my children’s laughter was irritating, rather than infectious; or worse still, it felt like a personal attack on me, and I couldn’t join in the fun, let alone generate it. Perhaps this was also true for the parents of some participants.

Reflecting on joy and playfulness, I asked myself: When did I play, or not play, with my own children? I do remember some occasions of rough-and-tumble play; however, I also remember times when I felt guilty for not being busy and productive, and made less time for playfulness. Perhaps this was partly fuelled by my own sense of not being good enough, of not being valued for who I was, and therefore having to justify my existence by “doing”; maybe I was influenced by the Protestant work ethic, or by the generally goal-oriented society I had grown up in.

I struggled to place the sub-theme “Tight with money”. I recognised this in my own story, but was surprised to find it occurred in several participant interviews; in the early stages of analysis I also coded “Money’s worth” and “Denial of wealth”. It seemed to relate to some carefulness with money or difficulty with giving. On the one hand, it may belong with the major theme of “Family circumstances” (page 312), reflecting actual financial hardship; but my subjective interpretation is that it actually belongs with the “Unloved” themes.

Heather's description of a childhood incident confirms my sense of this. Heather remembers how she always "tried to please [her mother] when it comes to buying presents", striving to "think of something that she'll like", but experiencing instead "a lot of rejection there". In a poignant moment in her individual interview, when she became quite tearful, Heather remembers:

[Dad] bought [Mum] a lovely coat one year, it was a long box, and he was so pleased, and I think it ended up in an argument because she—not that she didn't like it, she said it was a waste of money, and she rejected it; I mean, she did wear it, it was just, I felt for my dad.

As she goes on to describe, even now, when it comes to buying presents for her mother, "we're always wrong . . . you're wasting your money, she's very money orientated . . . saved hard, and she won't spend her money now".

Maybe I'm vindicated in seeing "Tight with money" as an aspect "Unloved", after all, rather than "Family circumstances". If parents are "stingy or withholding" or seem "burdened by having to provide", suggests Cori (2010, p. 86), children may feel that they are in some way responsible, and sense that "their needs are too much", and as a result, children may develop a tendency to "hide or minimize their needs" (ibid). Cathy describes how:

When I was little, you didn't want anything being bought . . . I can remember wanting to go on a school trip, and I never asked to go on school trips . . . I felt

that they would end up having to say, “No”, and I couldn’t bear that . . . I’d learnt not to ask because I didn’t want to cause upset by asking.

So although Cathy remembers that logically, there was evidence that her parents had sufficient money, she learnt not to ask in order to shield her parents from her demands, linking this sub-theme to the “Parent role” theme (page 205). “How horrible would that be of me, to ask my parents to give me something that they couldn’t afford to give me? Because that would hurt them, and I mustn’t hurt them”, Cathy says. According to Cori (2010), the emotionally absent mother’s unwillingness to give may lead to an all-pervading atmosphere of scarcity, where “deprivation can be so deeply branded into your consciousness that it becomes a lens through which you experience life . . . there’s never enough money, never enough love, and never enough joy” (p. 111).

Another aspect of not being celebrated is feeling that we weren’t allowed to enjoy our successes or positive attributes. There may be subtle differences between parents either passively overlooking or actively dismissing their child’s successes; and the anxiety that seems to arise for some parents around giving direct praise and celebrating achievements, perhaps for fear of making us conceited. Rachel remembers that “there was never anything good kind of noted, or any achievements . . . or I’d have the achievements but then they weren’t recognised”. For example, she says, “I’d get a swimming badge, but—ooph! Other people were better than Rachel, Rachel was in the bottom class . . . It was dismissed”, although she remembers that her failures were noted:

But then things that I'd struggle with would be, you know, top of the list, like, "Rachel can't really ride a bike," and, "Rachel's no good on roller skates," or "Rachel doesn't play golf" . . . it was as if I could never do anything to make [Dad] proud.

Cathy describes feeling embarrassed when she did well, and that "it just wasn't talked about". Rather than her parents being pleased, as she had hoped, she describes how her academic success was played down:

It was like (gesturing pressing down with hands) . . . it was just, "Oh, yes, but we don't brag" . . . I can't remember exactly what was said, but I remember feeling, "I shouldn't really be very pleased about this—it's a bit bigging myself up, to be pleased about that".

I suggested that perhaps she couldn't risk appearing to be proud of herself, as Cathy had already described pride as a "sin", and she concurred: "Yes, I mustn't look like that, so it all got squashed down". This may be linked to cultural norms around pride and sinfulness. I remember being admonished that "Pride comes before a fall"; both Cathy and myself came from religious families.

### ***Not protected***

*Sub-themes: Not protected, not defended by parents; Not cared for; Illness not acknowledged or validated; No appropriate boundaries; Childhood anxiety*

Several participants recounted instances when they felt they were left physically unprotected, from infancy and throughout childhood. Heather's mother worked at



home, but this still often left Heather unsupervised. Heather has a memory of “doing headstands on the gatepost at the bottom of the drive” at the age of three and a half or four years old, and she puzzles over the discrepancy between her perception of her mother as both “very protective”, and simply not there supervising her.

To the modern, Western ear, this lack of supervision may sound like physical neglect, as well as emotional neglect (Cori, 2010, p. 102). Yet there is undoubtedly a historical and cultural context here, as unsupervised play was much more common in previous generations, and still is in many parts of the world (Guldberg, 2009); and Cori (2010) warns that emotional neglect may manifest not only as under-protectiveness, but also as over-protectiveness (p. 74).

Harriet remembers the terror of being at home alone as a six-year-old when there were intruders outside: “I was home alone, absolutely terrified, I was under the sofa, I remember being under the sofa, but Mum was at work, she was always at work”, which links the sub-theme “Not protected” with a wider sociocultural theme of women, especially single mothers, striving to balance motherhood with fulfilling work outside the home, and workplace practices which do not support or encourage this.

For a child, it is a frightening experience to feel unprotected, physically or psychologically (Cori, 2010; Howe, 2005), yet this is a common experience for emotionally neglected children. One of the harmful effects of fear is that when the attachment system is activated by perceived threat, the brain areas which enable us to attend to our own emotions are deactivated (Fonagy et al., 2007). This may explain why the participants in this study, who experienced frightening childhood experiences,

have sometimes struggled in adulthood to recognise and name their feelings; it may also explain why a generation of parents who experienced major trauma such as world war during childhood grew into adults who could not facilitate an emotional connection with their children.

Children are dependent, and they need protection; they need to know that someone has them in mind, and is there to help (Cori, 2010, p. 103). Undermothered children left to fend for themselves without a mother-figure providing protection may become hypervigilant (ibid, p. 113). Both Kate and Harriet were left alone routinely while their mothers were at work; Kate describes how at the age of eight or nine, she would regularly “come home from school on the bus to an empty house and having to get everything ready, you know, set the fire and do things like that”. Harriet describes a similar memory of letting herself into an empty house after school, when her mother wasn’t home from work till after 8 pm, and “spending an awful lot of time alone”. The themes overlap; I could have used these same data extracts to illustrate the sociocultural themes of work or child-rearing practices under the heading of “Cultural expectations/norms” (see page 294), but the more significant feature for this autoethnography of childhood emotional neglect is the terrifying sense of being unprotected, alone, left to fend for oneself.

As well as feeling that they were not protected physically, several participants describe feeling that they were not protected psychologically. When there were problems at school, Alice felt that rather than defending or supporting her, her mother seemed to blame her: “The lesson we were always taught was, ‘If they’ve bullied you, there’s a reason why they’ve bullied you, and you need to do something about it’”.

Reflecting on this aspect of emotional neglect in the light of my own experiences, two memories come to mind: one from my school years, and one from early motherhood.

When I was 13 years old, I had a teacher whom the entire class agreed was not doing a good enough job of teaching us. I complained to my parents, and persuaded my father to speak to the head teacher, which he did. However, when she dismissed my concerns, he readily accepted her explanation that I was just being over-sensitive and that there was no cause for concern. My father apologised for having troubled the head teacher; I felt that he effectively agreed that I was a silly girl who knew nothing. The teacher we had complained about was later dismissed when it was proved beyond doubt that he was not fit to teach; but my father's failure to stand up for me, and his willingness to believe the head teacher rather than me, left me feeling misunderstood and completely unprotected.

Fast forward some 30 years; I have taken my children with me to the village hall for an event organised by our neighbour, with whom we have always been on good terms.

Part way through the evening, she approaches me in the middle of the hall and starts to berate me, in front of the children, about the fact that she feels they now ignore her and her husband, when they have done so much for our family in the past. I feel utterly humiliated; all I can do is mutter an apology in defence of myself, to the effect that it's not how I've brought them up, and that it's not the example I've set them. We leave at once, and as soon as we get home I burst into tears.

It's only later, in the light of a more recent conversation, that I connect these two events in my mind. Chloe, a colleague, tells me about her childhood:

If ever we did anything wrong, and someone came to the door saying, "Your kids did this, or that," my Mum would say, "My kids would never do that!" and slam the door in their face. Then she would round on us, and say, "Well, did ya?" And of course, if we did, there was hell to pay.

Suddenly, I get a glimpse of what it feels like to be protected by a parent. I feel a sense of loss all over again that I was not protected by my own parents; always doubted, and the other person (adult or child) always believed instead of me. I also feel a crushing sense of shame at my own inability to defend my children when our neighbour verbally attacked us.

If it's normal or instinctive behaviour for parents to protect their young, why do some parents fail to do this? When I reflect on my own experience as a parent, I believe a number of *conditions of worth* (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1990, p. 240), or childhood messages were operating. These included: "Respect your elders and betters"; "Don't answer back"; "Don't make a fuss". On top of this, my neighbour had on many occasions been very kind to us, and I had come to see her as something of a surrogate mother, as my parents lived some distance away and were very busy, meaning that I didn't see them very often. Suddenly, someone to whom I had become attached appeared to be angry with me. My attachment behaviour was triggered; I was upset, and became tearful. Linking this to Gerhardt's explanation of the neuroscience underpinning attachment theory, if I was exposed to too much stress and insufficient

loving handling in infancy, it is likely that in threatening situations, my brain is flooded with more cortisol than it can cope with, and I'm overwhelmed with fear and distress (2015, p. 84). In terms of social learning, however, it could be that, never having seen parental protectiveness modelled, I simply didn't know what to do in this situation.

Cathy described a childhood sense that her illness was not somehow "valid", because her youngest sister had been more dangerously ill: "I had whooping cough, and that was completely overshadowed by my sister having whooping cough, because she was young and it was dangerous, so my whooping cough didn't exist". Cathy remembers that one day, when the family had gone out leaving her alone, she was struggling to breathe:

And the realisation hit that I might never get another breath . . . I'll never forget it, I can remember exactly where I was, I can remember the weather, and I was in the house, but I can still remember it was a sunny day outside.

The vividness of this memory, including the details of the weather, suggests that this incident had the quality of trauma for Cathy. A parent's "lack of emotional responsiveness" may be associated with "untreated injuries and ignored illnesses" (Howe, 2005, p. 96), although Cori (2010) suggests that, on the contrary, emotionally neglecting mothers may be *more* attentive during a child's illness (p. 96).

I notice my own inability to take care of myself; for example, not taking time off work or family responsibilities when ill. I feel that I shouldn't be ill; I'm not allowed to be ill. To some extent this was what Mum modelled; even later in life, she would only tell

us afterwards if she had been ill, and would never ask for help, or give herself time to rest. Another possible explanation may be childhood instances when my illness was doubted. I remember when I was around eight years old, telling Mum before school that I didn't feel well; she sent me to school anyway. Later, she had to come and collect me because I had been violently sick; I had infectious hepatitis. Maybe she was busy, and my illness was an inconvenience; or maybe she was concerned that I should grow up to be a good worker, and not a shirker.

When I put this together with something that Mum told me much later in life, however, it takes on a different colour again. When my older sister was young, Mum kept her off school frequently because she felt she was delicate and not well enough for school, and she later acknowledged that this had a negative effect on my sister's education; so perhaps I was sent to school, whether well enough or not, to make up for what my sister missed. The reasons why these events occurred, then, are clearly complex and may have multiple explanations, even within one family.

Another aspect of not feeling protected is a lack of appropriate boundaries. Rachel experienced the lack of boundaries as freedom when she was growing up, but she can now see this left her unprotected, and at risk of harm. She remembers that:

At the age of 13 I'd just be in my bedroom sitting on the windowsill with music, smoking . . . I didn't have any boundaries whatsoever, because I think [Mum] was that bothered about drink, that it was as if I was never really important.

Rachel continues:

I started going clubbing at 13 or 14, getting in at 4 o'clock in the morning—bearing in mind that I had school the next day; Mum was paralytic in the house, never really heard when I got in . . . I think part of me, if I'm honest, thought it was amazing because I had all this freedom at such a young age . . . I could do whatever I wanted . . . but at the same time, I had no care.

When her alcoholic mother was unable to put in place appropriate rules and boundaries, Rachel may have lacked a “secure sense of holding and containment”, which can feel like being unloved (Cori, 2010, p. 17).

### ***Conditional approval***

*Sub-themes: Praised for being good; Not allowed to be a child; Not allowed to be ourselves; Trying to please others: be nice, don't cause offence.*

Unlike the “acting out” or externalizing behaviour often seen in physically abused children (Music, 2009, p. 143), emotionally neglected children are often exceptionally well-behaved. According to Howe (2005), this may be an adaptive survival strategy, as children quickly learn that being self-contained and self-sufficient, behaving as their parents expect them to, is the best way to avoid disapproval.

Miranda remembers: “I was incredibly well-behaved, I was incredibly good, always . . . I think I'd worked out quite early on that the best thing was just to be incredibly good and to tend to my Mum's needs and wants”. Miranda goes on to describe how she “did well at school”, which was “very much praised, but particularly in public”. Cori (2010) describes the child who is praised, but particularly for what the mother values (p. 96); this seems to match Miranda's experience.

According to Howe (2005), some parents may be able to cope with family life only when everything goes smoothly, and their children are quiet and calm, neither too happy nor too sad, looking after themselves, and not making any physical or emotional demands of the parents (p. 103); and Cori (2010) describes emotionally neglecting parents as “more comfortable seeing their children as little adults than responding to them as children”, or families where “children were not allowed to be loud, exuberant, or messy” (p. 100). As Miranda says, the message we received in childhood was: “Don’t be childish—for God’s sake, don’t be childish!” This matches Howe’s description of parents whose caregiving or attachment behaviour towards a child is deactivated on any occasion when the parent is faced with “attachment-saturated events”, which may encompass much normal child behaviour (2005, p. 97).

Alice remembers a strong sense that she and her sister were not allowed to be normal teenagers, or “to be stroppy, moody, or—all those normal things that kids do”. I suggest that she and her sister were not allowed to be themselves, and Alice concurs:

Looking back, that was a big issue, that we weren’t allowed to be ourselves, we had to hide everything about ourselves, personality-wise . . . it’s not like we were doing anything wrong . . . she just didn’t think that that’s how kids should behave.

Emotionally neglecting parents may feel uncomfortable with emotional arousal, from which children may quickly learn simply not to display or even feel their own emotions (Buckholdt et al., 2014, p. 324; Howe, 2005 p. 91). Webb (2013) describes the



experience of one composite character, Robyn, whose emotionally neglecting family taught her that “any feelings she had that were not upbeat, fun or positive must be kept to herself and carefully hidden” (p. 108).

Rogers’ conditions of worth (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1990) could be a useful framework for understanding the way in which a developing child might sense that he himself is not acceptable if he has, or expresses, certain feelings (especially those deemed “negative” by society), and learns not to allow those feelings into awareness. Our parents’ attitudes towards emotions are also linked to the “ability to manage, accept and express” emotions in adult life (Buckholdt et al., 2014; Webb, 2013, p. 199). Eventually, Webb suggests, individuals who have this experience growing up may learn to hide their emotions even from themselves, resulting in intense loneliness and even suicidal behaviour (ibid, p. 109).

Being nice, being polite, not causing offence, may be particularly British traits (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 85). However, it may also be a pattern of behaviour that is particularly fostered among girls; the Global Early Adolescent Study, conducted over 15 countries, found that “girls are taught to be nice, polite, and submissive” (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2017, p. S6). In itself, being taught to be polite may not sound detrimental; however, coupled with a lack of self-worth, whether that comes from childhood emotional neglect or other factors, the imperative to “be nice” may over-ride a girl’s self-preservation instinct and leave her vulnerable to harm (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 133).

Harriet describes two instances of childhood sexual abuse when her fear of causing offence seems to have over-ridden her self-preservation instinct. In the first, a man whom she considered a father-figure:

Put my hand on his willy, and I remember thinking, “How do I take my hand off his willy without offending him?!” (Laughs, claps hands). Isn’t that terrible? I remember thinking, “How do I get out of here without—” so I stayed there for a bit longer, and then I said, “I feel better now,” and went.

In another, unrelated experience of sexual abuse, Harriet describes how as a 16-year-old, she went back to an abuser’s house again, after a first incident of abuse. She couldn’t refuse: “How could I say no? Because I was brought up to be polite”. So although these are clearly instances of abuse, emotional neglect was arguably a factor in both.

Cathy describes feeling mortified if she thinks she has caused offence:

The unconscious, the underneath side of me just operates in that, it operates in that world of, “Don’t piss people off,” “Don’t upset them, be nice to them,” “Sacrifice what you need to do in order for them to be alright”.

Wright et al. (2009) note self-sacrifice or “an excessive focus on the desires, feelings, and responses of others, often at the expense of one’s own needs . . . in order to gain love or approval” (p. 66), which seems to match Harriet and Cathy’s experiences.

Not being a nuisance, not making a fuss was an imperative for several of us. Miranda reflects that “that’s kind of like my whole thing in life, I suppose—to be nice, and to be no trouble, and to not kind of cause any issues at all”, linking this theme with “Lasting impact” (page 222).

\* \* \*

## **Dramatic interlude**

*Dramatis personae*

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET

ANGELA

SOPHIA

CHORUS OF ACADEMICS

*Scene: The research office, mid-November. ANGELA is working at the computer; there are books strewn all over the desk. THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET is playing on the floor nearby; SOPHIA is seated at the other side of the desk.*

ANGELA: I’m excited by what I’ve been reading about Object Relations Theory (ORT) in this psychology text book. It’s flagged up my worrying lack of basic knowledge of psychology that I didn’t even know Bowlby was part of that school of psychology; but ORT makes sense to me. This fits with my understanding of the world:

- Human infants are born with a powerful instinct to form relationships with others; the “object seeking tendency”
- We form mental representation of the world and others with whom we have significant relationships; our “inner” or “internal world”
- The relationship with a primary caregiver is of particular importance in psychological development (Russell, Jarvis, & Gorman, 2004, p. 147)

Listen to this! “The inner world is populated by mental representations of ourselves and all the people with whom we have—or have had—significant relationships . . . “internal objects” [which] serve as templates for future relationships. Thus, if we have experienced abusive relationships and so have abusive internal objects, the likelihood is we will fall into further abusive relationships”. That’s from Russell et al., 2004, p. 148.

And just listen to this: “Winnicott described the concept of the ‘good enough’ mother, and how infants might develop a ‘false self,’ with a tendency to be compliant, when the mother is not able to respond to her baby”! That’s from Russell et al., as well. That could be an exact description of Miranda’s experience!

SOPHIA: Careful, now. It sounds like you’re taking a rather reductionist approach.

ANGELA: Oh, I know, I know. And that’s the beauty of autoethnography—I’ll keep coming back to the data and looking at it through different lenses; different psychological theories, and the lenses of culture, history, society. Of course there’s

more than one potential cause, just as there's more than one perspective, more than one "truth" for each of us. I do believe that, you know.

SOPHIA: And do you have sufficient up-to-date, reliable references? Are you sure some of these psychological theories haven't been replaced with other, newer ones?

ANGELA: (*Suddenly looking anxious*) My heart sinks at the thought of all the reading I've still got to do, the references I still have to follow up. My list of references to follow up is now as long as an academic paper itself! (*Wails*) I'll *never* know enough!

CHORUS OF ACADEMICS:

Theory, theory, dull, dusty and dreary,

But you ought to know who said what, when:

All this reading and referencing might make you weary,

But you really *must* know,

And *show* that you know,

*Exactly* who said what, where, and when!

\* \* \*

Miranda describes how she and her brothers frequently felt that they were an inconvenience, and that her mother "begrudged doing things for us when she had to, and as soon as we could do them for ourselves she wanted us to do them ourselves", matching the description of emotionally neglected children as "seen by their parents as

worthless, irritating, bothersome, flawed, unwanted and inconvenient,” (Howe, 2005, p. 90), or “a burden” (Cori, 2010, p. 17)

I am conscious, at the same time, of my own tendency to encourage my children to do what they could for themselves as soon as they were able, believing I was fostering healthy independence. Now, looking back, I wonder how it felt to my oldest children, when I said that if they wanted packed lunches for school instead of dinners they would have to make them for themselves, as I wouldn't be able to now that we had a new baby; they were only *seven and five years old!* In trying to encourage independence and capability, have I instead left my children feeling that they have to do everything for themselves, and can't ask for help (Howe, 2005, p. 98)? And yet we live in a society where independence and the ability to act on initiative are highly valued—more so than interdependence and help-seeking—so perhaps I was actually preparing them for the culture of the adult world they would inhabit. In the focus group, Miranda also shares her memory that: “If my Mum came down she'd shout at you because you'd disturbed her sleep”. This suggests a mother who was having difficulty coping with the demands of motherhood, finding her children “irritating, bothersome” (Howe, 2005, p. 90), rather than consciously encouraging independence.

### ***Parent role***

*Sub-themes: Always felt grown-up; Responsible for others; Tend to Mum's needs; Hypervigilance.*

The boundaries between this and the preceding theme overlap, but in creating separate themes for “Conditional approval” and “Parent role”, or “parentification” (Wright et al., 2009, p. 62), I highlight the subtle distinction that I see between a passive behaviour (trying to avoid disapproval by “being nice”, and “being no trouble”), and a more

active behaviour (having to “be grown up”, and “be responsible”, especially for siblings or parents).

We may not have been able to identify in childhood that we had to parent our parents; now, however, with the benefit of adult perspective, we can recognise this pattern of behaviour. Miranda describes her mother as “probably quite uncertain and insecure”, and believes that this resulted in her mother giving her “the parent role . . . ‘Be grown up . . . be responsible’”:

I just thought that I just had to please her . . . I’ve felt more recently as if—I was there to make her feel better, I was there to serve her; she wanted a little girl for what a daughter would give her, which means that she wasn’t seeing who I was . . . I think I was always trying to do anything to get my Mum to be pleased.

This corresponds to Glaser’s “failure to recognize or acknowledge the child’s individuality and psychological boundary”, especially “using a child to meet their own unmet needs” (2002, p. 703). This form of parent-child role-reversal is recognised in the literature (Bowlby, 1969/1997, p. 377; Wright et al., 2009, p. 66), and according to Howe (2005), frequently occurs when parents are “depressed, co-dependent, alcoholic, domestically abused [or] traumatized” (p. 115). Child carers may come to the attention of statutory authorities when the parent(s)’ problems are diagnosed. However, the participants in this study had parents who were apparently functioning normally, though unable to be sufficiently emotionally or psychologically available; so the problems went undetected.

Finlay describes the vague childhood feelings he remembers as:

Constantly feeling unsure of what was expected of me, what I was supposed to do, how I could—because looking back, there’s a very strong impression that I had to earn, love and, well, maybe it wasn’t love, kind of acceptance; I had to do something in order to earn it, and as it were, I had to perform.

Finlay relates current interactions with his mother to his childhood sense of having to perform, and having to somehow meet her needs: “That’s my sense of it as an adult, and I think as a child I had that sense that my kind of . . . place, as it were, was to provide, fulfil her emotional needs”. As Finlay says, he is only able to put a name to the feeling as an adult, but “as a child, it was just a sort of overwhelming sense of insecurity and unease, and I suppose fear, as well”.

Cori (2010) suggests that one of the important messages children need to learn from their parents is “You can rest in me” (p. 15), but when children sense that “being with Mother is not a safe place to be ourselves”, they may learnt to “stay alert or perform” and “never fully feel at home with her” (p. 17). This seems to fit with Miranda and Finlay’s experiences.

Cathy remembers that, as the oldest of four, she had to substitute for her parents:

When I was little, I watched, and I felt responsible for my siblings, and if I didn’t look after them that would bring down such a tirade, and I think that’s



partly because [my parents] couldn't, they hadn't got the spare energy and the spare time.

Furthermore, during the focus group, Cathy describes how she also felt responsible for the family's financial situation:

I was about eight, and going into a bit of a panic because I'd realised that things like bills happened . . . I became very aware that there was an electricity bill to pay, because it had underfloor heating, and this was a big deal this electricity bill because it was expensive, so I began to worry about, "And where do you get the money for the electricity, and who do you write to for the electricity, and what else do you have to do for the house?" and quizzing my Mum.

Asking our parents about the details of running a family home may be a helpful way of learning about adult life; however, Cathy was asking because she felt that "at any point I might have to step in and do it, and I didn't know what to do, and I felt utterly overwhelmed by it". Drawing on her adult clients' experiences, Webb (2013) describes the emotionally neglecting parent who "allows, encourages or forces his child to behave as if he is a parent, not a child" (p. 62), including children who must learn to parent themselves, their siblings, and even their parents.

However, Webb makes a distinction between this and the child who ends up in the parent role as a result of "real hardship" such as a parent's illness or disability (ibid). For example, when children can see that a parent is working long hours to put a meal on the table, or is physically disabled (blind, or in a wheelchair), or when a parent's

mental illness is diagnosed (perhaps requiring hospital stays, visits to the doctor's surgery or the pharmacist to collect medication), they may still be at risk of not having their emotional needs met, but they may be able to understand, even from a very young age, that this is not because they are unworthy of attention; there is evidence that children as young as one year old have the capacity to distinguish between an adult's inability, and unwillingness, to perform an action (Fonagy et al., 2007). Furthermore, when our parents are putting on a pretence of everything being fine, not only may the family fail to attract any statutory or even familial support, but we as children may conclude that we are not worthy of any support.

Cori argues that children need a home which provides a cooperative environment, without "continuing crises you need to solve, or wonder how to endure when you're too young to solve anything" (2010, p. 65). Cathy's experience, however, was of a home where there were crises to solve or endure, and her sense of responsibility for her parents continued throughout childhood. In her individual interview, she describes how she did the only thing within her power, which was to be good and undemanding:

CATHY: I was totally focused on them and their loss, and things not being right and not being nice for them, and worrying about that, and fretting about it—and not being able to do anything about it,

ANGELA: Feeling responsible but powerless,

CATHY: Feeling responsible and powerless, except that I could be good and not demanding and do—

ANGELA: The thing that was within your control was managing yourself, so that you weren't—

CATHY: Yeah, so I did that, to the *n*th degree.

Glaser (2000) describes the complex interaction between the sensitive mother (or primary caregiver) and baby, which stimulates and regulates the baby's developing brain and nervous system, and includes helping the baby to become familiar with the cycle of rupture and repair (see page 183). When this does not happen, however, for example if the mother (or caregiver) is depressed and unable to engage with the baby, the baby may grow into a child who is either aggressive, or hypervigilant (p. 101); Cathy's extreme anxiety about the family's financial situation in the extract above could be seen as an example of hypervigilance.

### ***Bullying and emotional blackmail***

*Sub-themes: Controlled; Parents judgmental, critical, strict; No autonomy as a child; Feeling powerless.*

The boundaries between the themes are blurry again; but I perceive a subtle difference between a lack of protection or defence from others bullying us (see "Not protected", page 191), and being verbally attacked or bullied within our own family. Deliberate bullying, name-calling, and insults may be conceptualised as emotional abuse; whereas emotional blackmail may occur when a parent is unaware of, or disregards, the child's individuality or psychological boundary in an attempt to meet their own needs (Glaser, 2002, p. 703), without necessarily any awareness of the impact on the child or any intention to cause harm, which I would define as emotional neglect. Similarly, I perceive a difference between learning to be good all the time because parental approval is withdrawn when we misbehave (see "Conditional approval", page 198); and instances of active parental criticism, harshness, nagging, which may constitute emotional abuse. I also see a subtle difference between experiencing our parents as actively controlling us (emotional abuse), and a sense of helplessness, powerlessness,

or a lack of autonomy (which may arise from emotional neglect). In this discussion, I focus mainly on the aspects that I see as emotional neglect; though once again, the distinctions are blurred.

English is a second language for Mickey, and although he is fluent and articulate, on one occasion he seemed to struggle to find the right word. In the co-constructed data extract below, I tentatively suggest the term “emotional blackmail”, which he agrees is the right phrase, although “controlling” or “conditional approval” might also fit:

MICKEY: It didn't matter how important it was to me, I always had to be at that point at that particular time (bangs on table for emphasis) . . . there would be some times I just couldn't, and that was a very, very bad—I don't know, they were very upset, they would make me feel bad, and they were like . . . er, “Oh, you love your friends more that you love us,” er, and . . . that was my mother and then my father, both of them, er, “You wouldn't care, even if we die,” or something like that, “You would still love your friends more,” which is obviously ridiculous, how can you say that to a teenager? Um, but that would have gone on and on, so for example, if I would have come home and eat with them, everything fine. If I wouldn't, all this, um, how would you say it? Um, I can't find the right words, kind of, something that would make you feel bad about it.

ANGELA: I mean—a, a phrase that comes to mind is “emotional blackmail”,

MICKEY: Exactly. Emotional blackmail. Exactly. So, “If you are going to do this, we are upset with you.”

When parents doubt or misjudge their ability to control their child's behaviour, they may become over-controlling (Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006). This may be expressed as direct orders and commands; but perhaps parents who lack self-confidence, or depend on their child's love and approval for their own sense of self-worth, can only resort to emotional blackmail.

Alan remembers that when he was 14: "At that time the age of adulthood was 21, and I can remember distinctly thinking to myself, 'I've got another seven years of being controlled by these people,' and feeling really depressed by that". Although a lack of appropriate boundaries may lead to feeling unloved (as in Rachel's story, page 173), Webb (2013) found that among her emotionally neglected clients, children whose parents were over-controlling often felt they had missed out on childhood (p. 63).

Reflecting on my own early parenting, I remember feeling a strong need to be in control all the time. I may have been passing on unthinkingly the authoritarian parenting style that I had experienced growing up (Webb, 2013, p. 19); another reason, however, might have been that I was still very dependent on an external "locus of evaluation" (Rogers, 1951, p. 150). Relying on the approval of others for my sense of worth, I remember a constant fear of being judged a "bad" parent. I believed that a "good parent" was one who kept everything under tight control; and that a "good child" was one who did as he or she was told. This would fit with Howe's description of the home where the parents are only comfortable when family life is under control:

A sense of comfort and safety is felt when the world is in order, no one is making demands or in distress, and children are being as their parents would

wish them to be; self-contained, self-sufficient, and with their attachment systems deactivated. (Howe, 2005, p. 103).

A parent's own inability to tolerate distress might have different causes, including not having been helped to develop emotional regulation in childhood, and might lead to a need to control. Furthermore, children may quickly learn that their distress frightens, or angers, their parent(s), and therefore learn to hide strong feelings and become controlled in their behaviour (Howe, 2005), linking this theme to "Conditional approval" (page 198), and "Parent role" (page 205). It was only after reading *The Continuum Concept* (Liedloff, 1975/1989), when my two older children were pre-schoolers and before I had my two younger children, that I made a conscious effort to become less controlling, and more trusting that my children would behave well without coercion.

Being unfavourably compared to others was a common experience across the data set. Alice felt that she was "always being compared", and remembers that her mother would comment, "So-and-so is doing this, and so-and-so is doing that, why don't you do it?" David describes experiencing the same judgmental treatment from his father both in childhood and now:

[Dad] used to compare me a lot to other kids, and I don't think he realised what kind of impact that actually had on me when I was growing up, because he still does it do this day, to be honest . . . he keeps on reminding me, "Oh, this guy's doing this now, or that guy's a lawyer here."

David acknowledges that his father was probably unaware of the impact of his behaviour; yet constant (unfavourable) comparisons, in the absence of direct praise, seem to leave us feeling that we somehow don't measure up.

Finlay describes a similar experience of being compared to others, but wonders if the tendency to compare was a consequence of his mother's background: "She's from the . . . what you'd call privileged background, wealthy background . . . you know, they have expectations of their kids". He goes on to describe similar comparisons to Alice and David, above: "She'd tell us, 'Oh, So-and-so's doing this'", while Finlay felt that although he was "getting by", working in a shop "wasn't the sort of job that gave her any sense of pride in her kids".

This theme, then, may be linked to cultural norms or expectations, although neither Alice nor David was from the same privileged, wealthy background as Finlay; for whatever reason, the child's own wishes, needs or desires are overlooked (Howe, 2005, p. 96). This may illustrate Glaser's fourth category of emotional neglect, defined as "Failure to recognize or acknowledge the child's individuality and psychological boundary", including "Using the child for the fulfillment of the parent's psychological needs" and "Inability to distinguish between the child's reality and the adult's beliefs and wishes" (2002, p. 704). Whether our parents were relying on our achievements to bolster their own fragile egos (the former), or whether they were unable to recognize that we had our own paths that we were on (the latter), the outcome was the same; we were not in our parents' minds.

In the analysis section of the methodology chapter, I explore the subtle differences between feeling controlled, feeling that we lack autonomy, and feeling powerless (page 94). Evidence from neuroscience appears to show that “persistent powerlessness and unrelieved, chronic stress” is not only distressing, it is also damaging for the developing infant’s brain (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 89). From birth to adolescence, the participants in this study recount numerous incidents of powerlessness, whether they describe it as being controlled, having no autonomy, or feeling helpless. Hendrick (2016) charts the trends in parenting from the 1920s to the present, describing “childism”, analogous with racism and sexism (p. 2), as commonplace in modern Britain, and examines the social, political and cultural reasons why we may have ended up in an age of controlling, conditional, and “narcissistic” parenting (ibid); I explore this further under “Sociocultural aspects” (page 274).

### ***Mocked and humiliated***

*Sub-themes: Embarrassed, humiliated, undermined; Mortified, shamed; Daren’t make a mistake.*

Again, I try to draw out the nuances between remembered actions or events that left us feeling humiliated or undermined, and our vague sense that we were not permitted to make a mistake or fail. The fear of embarrassment, shame and humiliation are closely linked to the fear of making mistakes for several participants. Finlay added these two comments immediately after his interview, the first relating to childhood classroom experiences; “I would be keeping my hand down, sitting at the back of the class, head down; offering an answer risks being humiliated”, and the second relating to longer term goals: “I had to do something that fault could not be found with; it wasn’t so much criticism that I feared, as ridicule and humiliation”. Social rejection is one of the most painful experiences for humans (Lieberman, 2015, p. 40); no wonder Finlay tried to avoid it.



Cori describes clients and participants feeling “belittled and shamed” when they were not mirrored by their emotionally neglecting mothers (2010, p. 96). Reflecting on my own experience of feeling humiliated by my mother, I recalled this incident from early motherhood:

It’s our oldest daughter’s christening, and I’m in the kitchen with Mum and my aunt, and other friends and relatives are there in the background. I’m telling Mum how well I get on with my health visitor. I tell Mum, “She says the sort of things I like to hear.” Quick as a flash, Mum comes back with, “You mean, she doesn’t dare disagree with you!” She says it with a smile, and outwardly I go along with the joke, but inwardly I’m hurt and confused. It takes me several years to unpick it. Was she calling me a bully, aggressive? Am I? (Reflective journal, 05/09/18)

I have become conscious of my tendency to play the joker in certain situations; I enjoy making a witty observation, getting a laugh. Playing the joker may be normal human behaviour; however, Cori (2010) suggests that when a mother is emotionally absent, her baby may learn to withdraw, or may try to charm her or his mother, and try to act as antidepressant (p. 79). I wonder now: is this what I learnt to do? And was that what my mother had learnt to do? Although it’s from early adulthood, the example from my daughter’s christening was typical of childhood, too—a light-hearted remark that cut me to the quick, or showed me up in front of others. Miller (1979/1997) suggests that humiliating her children may be the only revenge for a mother whose own experience

of emotional neglect is still beyond her conscious awareness (p. 84). Perhaps this was true for some of our mothers, and our fathers, too.

Parents may be unwilling to acknowledge their power over their children, either out of the fear of what we may have done to our children (Webb, 2013, p. 200), or out of a belief that we as parents are less powerful than other influences, such as culture or peer pressure (Cori, 2010, p. 3). Rachel, describing her father's critical and shaming comments over the years, acknowledges that her father probably "doesn't really think about . . . the power of what he says, or how he says it". Alice, similarly, describes how her mother disclaims her own power: "I remember her saying to me, actually, 'Well, you should have just ignored what I said, why do you have to listen to what I said?'"

Yet because humans are social animals, and the human baby's brain has evolved to develop in the context of social relationships with others, parents' (or caregivers') behaviour towards their infant during the first 1,000 days is likely to be one of the most powerful influences (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 11). Although there are critics of the "first three years" approach (Bruer, 1999; Wastell & White, 2012; White & Wastell, 2017), it makes evolutionary sense that the human infant's world view should be to some extent shaped by early experiences. Biddulph (1998a) suggests that parents, all-powerful figures in their children's eyes, "hypnotise" their children by repeated messages, whether positive or negative (p. 3). As Alice says to her mother, "We were kids, how were we to know that we should have ignored you? We looked at you as if you guys know everything, you're always right, and you've had more experience, and surely whatever you said was right?"

Being repeatedly criticised, mocked and humiliated, ignored, or rejected may have caused early damage to our self-esteem (Howe, 2005, p. 90), and it is likely that we will have internalized some of these negative messages in childhood (Glaser, 2002, p. 704; Howe, p. 102), feeling that our “core self [is] a disappointment”, that we have “not lived up to expectations” and are “not worthy of love” (Wright et al., 2009, p. 65).

Webb (2013) reports that “The emotionally neglected client . . . has a ruthless internal voice” (p. 212). I am certainly conscious of my own ruthless internal voice, represented in the dramatic interludes in this thesis by BABA YAGA and THE GRINDYLOW. I felt, growing up, that if I made a mistake, I would be totally rejected; scorned, mocked, humiliated. This may indicate that I had not experienced sufficient cycles of rupture and repair in earlier childhood to be confident that when I made a mistake, I would be forgiven; or perhaps I had a deeply rooted awareness of my mother’s inability to cope with anything going wrong, so I just had to make sure nothing did.

### ***Had to manage alone***

*Sub-themes: Managing feelings alone; Feelings dismissed/downplayed; Don’t need or want anything (physically or emotionally); Not able to tell.*

A sense of having to manage alone, both physically and emotionally, was common across the data set. Whilst some aspects of having to manage our physical care alone may be seen as physical neglect, they may also imply an element of emotional neglect (Howe, 2005). I focus here mainly on emotional neglect, such as being expected to be responsible for our emotional regulation at an early age. Miranda vividly describes the experience of having to manage her feelings on her own when she was young:

If I was told off . . . or I didn't feel that I could say something, maybe, I didn't feel—because I often felt that it was unfair, and I couldn't speak for what I wanted . . . so I went upstairs and I had a purple teddy (laughs), and I would just bite the teddy really hard (said through clenched teeth), because I couldn't say anything, or shout, or cry, or anything, I would just bite really hard.

Reflecting on this now, Miranda comments, “so I must have been terribly frustrated, terribly, sort of—yeah, I felt put down”. Rachel describes how she had to manage her emotions alone, saying that she learnt to become “emotionless” and to “bottle up” or “supress” feelings.

In this environment, children lack the opportunity to “explore and reflect on themselves as psychological and emotional beings” in the presence of a responsive and attuned caregiver (Howe, 2005, p. 98). This may negatively affect the developing child's capacity for mentalisation, which in turn may leave him or her disadvantaged in future social relations (Fonagy et al., 2007, p. 297).

These participant experiences seem to confirm the feature described in the literature as an “imperative to manage alone” or “compulsive self-reliance” (Bowlby, 1958). These may be “defensive and adaptive strategies” (Howe, 2005, p. 103); in particular, Howe suggests that as a survival strategy, such children may learn ways of behaving that “either keep themselves or others at an emotional distance” (ibid). This is, in my view, subtly different from the kind of behaviours described under “Conditional approval” (page 198); in the stories told there, participants described themselves as continuing to

approach their parents, trying to please in order to gain approval. This may be the difference between an anxious form of insecure attachment, and an avoidant one, where “all attachment-related experiences are played down or avoided, dismissed or derided: when in pain—physical or emotional—do not display it; just carry on” (Howe, 2005, p. 103). This may be the pattern that our parents learnt, and unthinkingly passed on, linking this theme to the intergenerational aspects explored in the third section of the discussion chapter.

Fonagy et al. (2007) link attachment theory and the concept of mentalisation, providing a possible mechanism by which insecure attachment may affect our capacity for a healthy emotional life. The authors suggest that the brain areas which are deactivated when the attachment system is activated, in other words, when the infant feels threatened or afraid, include those which facilitate attention to our own emotions (p. 298). This may explain why some participants have found it difficult to feel their own feelings. Mickey, in particular, describes how he struggled to attend to his emotions:

I remember in one of the counselling sessions, and my counsellor said to me, “How do you feel about it?” . . . And I just couldn’t pinpoint it, I was like . . . I just couldn’t say, “I’m upset,” or “I’m happy,” or “I’m sad,” (banging table for emphasis), or I’m whatever, I just couldn’t pinpoint that feeling, so yes, I definitely had, and even probably now have a bit of a problem in expressing, or kinda acknowledging how I feel and expressing what I feel inside.

The tragedy of emotional neglect is that all the parents described above, if asked, would probably say, and truly believe, that they loved their children. However, Webb (2013)

suggests that to “love” is different from being responsive and “in tune” (p. 65); and parental responsiveness and attunement are crucial to a child’s development (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 65).

### ***Summary of “Unloved”***

In this first section of the discussion chapter, I have attempted to map out the major theme, “Unloved”, selecting stories from the data which offer glimpses into the internal world of the emotionally neglected child, using my own experiences and my subjective understanding of the phenomenon to explore it further. I have strived to address the topic systematically, theme by theme, to ensure that I don’t overlook any significant aspects, although the boundaries between the themes are frequently blurred. In the next section, “Lasting impact”, I adopt the same strategy to explore what the participants in this study, including myself, believe are the long-term consequences of our childhood experiences.

## **Section 2: Lasting impact**

*Major theme: Lasting impact. Themes: Childhood emotional neglect internalized; Not noticing self; Compulsive self-reliance; Compulsive caring; Contradictory feelings; Can't change; (Fear of) history repeating itself; Self-critical; Not good enough; Avoiding conflict*

(See Appendix B, page 436, for models of themes and sub-themes).

During data collection, as well as my primary interest in participants' experiences of childhood emotional neglect, I had a secondary question in mind:

How do you feel this has affected you in adult life?

All of the participants addressed this secondary question without my having to ask it; often in considerable detail, and quite early on in the interview.

Even where it is acknowledged in the psychological literature that there may be an association between childhood emotional neglect and adverse adult outcomes, the direction of the relationship is often questioned (see page 136). In other words, childhood emotional neglect may cause depression, anxiety, relationship problems or other psychological difficulties in adult life; conversely, individuals who are depressed or anxious may be more likely to remember their parents as emotionally neglecting (Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006).

Music (2009) also cautions against “confusing symptomatology and aetiology” (p. 143); in other words, just because participants in this study, myself included, display some behaviours identified as potential consequences of childhood emotional neglect,

that does not “prove” that we have experienced this. There may be other causes; I try to offer competing arguments where I can.

To the participants in this study, however, including myself, the relationship between our childhood experiences and our adult behaviours, and the direction of the relationship, seems clear. The second overarching theme that I have chosen to explore in detail, therefore, is the sense that our childhood experiences continue to influence us throughout our adult lives, represented by “Lasting impact” on the model of major themes (Figure 6, page 91). Some of the “Lasting impact” themes seem directly linked to the “Unloved” themes (for example, “Not noticing self” seems directly linked to the “Not seen, not heard” theme (page 180); but others (for example, “Can’t change”), are less obviously linked to a single, specific “Unloved” theme. I have listed the themes that I created above; but a linear list is a misrepresentation. Rather, it should be a web of themes; interconnecting strands, gossamer-thin, creating binds and double-binds as strong as steel.

Rothschild (2000), writing about psychotherapy with trauma survivors, believes that a sub-set of clients who present with symptoms of PTSD may be those who have “never developed resilience” (p. 8); or, when there are no identifiable traumatic events in the individual’s history, rather than a single traumatic event, they may have experienced “chronic, prolonged stress” within a “dysfunctional family” (ibid). Such individuals, Rothschild suggests, experience a loss of ability to discriminate between internal and external stimuli; they lose, in other words, the ability to distinguish between the *experiencing self* and the *observing self* (ibid, p. 130). This may be linked to the



emotionally neglected child's lack of opportunity for mentalising (Fonagy et al., 2007; see page 120).

Curiously, none of the participants describe themselves as “anxious” in adulthood (although Miranda does describe herself as an anxious child); yet a sense of fear and anxiety runs through all the participants' stories, including my own. Perhaps this demonstrates our way of “not noticing” ourselves; we simply don't notice how we feel; or we don't have a name for it (Brown et al., 2016; Music, 2009). If “affect labelling” (the ability to name our feelings accurately) plays an important role in psychological well-being by helping us to manage feelings (Lieberman, 2015, p. 219), it follows that its absence may be detrimental.

### ***Childhood emotional neglect internalized***

*Sub-themes: Emotional neglect the worst; Etched on my brain; It must be me; Difficulty in intimate relationships.*

In the first bracketing interview, I describe my understanding of how “my experience of childhood emotional neglect . . . I have in some way sort of taken into myself and carried on doing to myself, all my adult life”. This is what I mean by “Childhood neglect internalized”. Although I created separate themes for several aspects of this, what unifies the themes seems to be the attitudes we hold towards ourselves. Whatever messages we received in childhood, we perpetuate in our adult lives in some form or other (Howe, 2005, p. 102). Cori (2010) suggests that it is precisely because we cannot talk about the pre-verbal messages that we received as small children that we may end up acting them out in our adult lives (p. 132).

Hildyard and Wolfe (2002) concur; neglected children tend to internalize problems, although the authors do not always distinguish between physical and emotional neglect. This may relate to the concept of internal working models (IWMs), or schema (Bowlby, 1969/1997, p. 378); we build up a mental picture of ourselves and of the world around us, and behave accordingly. Glaser (2002) similarly suggests that children may “grow to believe in and act out the negative attributions placed upon them” (p. 704); in other words, the way that our parents behaved towards us becomes the way that we behave towards ourselves. Informed by my own sense of this, I see it occurring in different forms across the interviews; and in my own behaviour, even now, in my adult life.

Despite the caveat that we should be wary of making assumptions about cause and effect, the participants in this study all have a strong sense that their childhood experiences have directly affected their adult lives. Kate describes how she’s “constantly waiting for it all to go wrong”, and believes that stems from:

That cycle that was, as a teenager and a child . . . it would be awful and horrendous and then we’d come back out of it, and then, you know, she’d do something nice once in a while . . . Which became exaggerated in the scenario where it didn’t happen very often, and then we’d come back round and it would all go crap again, and I just think perhaps that is why in my head it just feels like something’s got to go wrong.

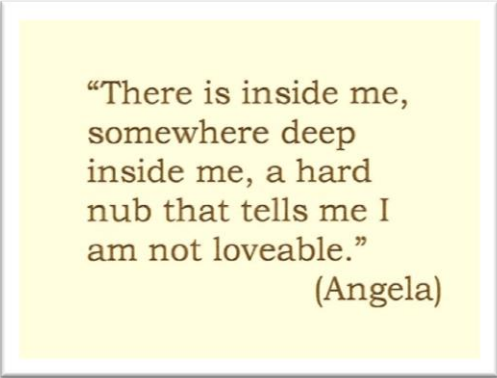
Kate shares her frustration that even though:

I've had a lot of talking therapy, and I've worked through a lot of stuff, I can recognise it—I said to my counsellor, “I just wish I could remove parts of my brain, where it's engraved, where it's etched,” because I can see it, I can recognise it, I understand it quite well, I think, and I can't change it, I don't know how to change it.

Kate describes herself as “never been happier than I am now in my life, I'm more settled, I'm more emotionally and mentally well,” which seems to contradict the widely held view that it's the negative bias caused by current depression or negative mood that colours our memories of childhood (Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006; Norman et al., 2012; MacLeod et al., 2006).

Kate's description of the experience as “etched” on her brain is especially striking; Carpenter et al. (2009), and Dannlowksi et al. (2012) both found long-term effects of

childhood emotional neglect in the brain; the long term effects are also acknowledged by the self-help books (Cori, 2010; Webb, 2013). The “limbic scars” referred to by Dannlowksi et al. (2012, p. 286) fit with Kate's sense of emotional neglect as



“There is inside me,  
somewhere deep  
inside me, a hard  
nub that tells me I  
am not loveable.”  
(Angela)

“engraved” or “etched” on her brain. The evidence from epigenetics appears to be that “early adversity can alter the function of the genes responsible for stress reactivity”, which may leave individuals more vulnerable to trauma and PTSD in later life (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 159).

Like Kate, I'm frustrated that despite considerable conscious effort to achieve some healing, I still seem to carry hurt:

There is inside me, somewhere deep inside me, a hard nub that tells me I am not loveable. Consciously, cognitively, in my head, rationally, logically, I can argue it away, tell myself that it's not true: and yet it's there, that feeling is there. So I still have this deep insecurity—if I'm not *doing* the things that make me acceptable, *will I be loved?* (Reflective journal, 24/01/16).

Several participants shared a strong feeling that it was the emotional neglect they had experienced as children that had the most devastating impact on them. Harriet and Kate experienced childhood sexual abuse, but both felt that they had been able to process this, and put the events behind them, whereas they feel that emotional neglect continues to affect them in their adult lives.

Muhammed, too, believes his experiences still affect him today, saying that “still it has a really strong impact on my life and it's—actually, it's ruined my life.” In particular, Muhammed believes his childhood experiences continue to affect his adult relationships, describing himself as “distant to males”, which he relates to his difficulties with his father; and “very much dependant on women and . . . in my relationships I generally go for like strong female figures and I get attached to them”, which he relates to his mother's inconsistent emotional availability in childhood.

Despite caveats about the potential bias of depressed individuals having more negative memories of childhood, there appears to be an association between childhood

emotional neglect, or a perception of childhood emotional neglect, and depression in adult life (Kuo et al. 2011; O'Mahen et al., 2015; Young et al., 2011), whilst Fitzhenry et al. (2015), in an Irish study, found depression to be associated with all forms of child maltreatment.

Several participants describe feeling low, unhappy, or depressed in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, and link this directly to their childhood experiences. Alan can't remember any family occasions when he was happy, but can remember "quite a lot of occasions when I was *unhappy*", leading to despair and depression during his early teens. Following on from an earlier data extract where he describes the feeling of being controlled by his parents (page 212), Alan remembers:

I think it's not unusual really for teenagers, but I used to sleep a lot, simply because I was happier asleep, and . . . that is a distinct memory, um, that; waking up was always, you know—that's a feeling I've never had since, you know, the, er, waking up was bringing back all the unhappiness.

Alan adds that "I once or twice thought about the possibility of suicide, but not, you know, I never actually . . . got anywhere near actually planning it".

This concurs with O'Mahen et al. (2015), who found childhood emotional neglect to be linked to depression in adulthood. Dannlowski et al. (2012), suggest that limbic hyper-responsiveness and reduced hippocampal volumes detected in depressed adults, rather than being the result of current depression or PTSD, may in fact be the result of childhood maltreatment which has in turn left the individual more susceptible to

depression or PTSD in later life. Similarly, Young et al. (2011) found significantly higher rates of depression and other psychiatric disorders at age 15 among the group of children who perceived their parents as neglectful or controlling at age 11, compared to their classmates who perceived their parents as “optimal”; and Cori (2010), lists depression and suicidal behaviour as a consequence of emotional neglect (p. 110). Alan’s experience would seem to confirm this.

When she reflects on the lasting impact of her childhood experiences, Harriet appears ambivalent, suggesting at first that “to a degree there is a benefit in it, too, because I think you become a more resilient adult—sometimes”. However, she then goes on to say: “Sometimes I feel I’m so damaged that I mustn’t expose myself, and I do really, more as an adult now—sometimes I think, ‘Phew, I got away with it!’ My brother absolutely, outwardly, didn’t get away with it”.

Whilst there may be other explanations, I see Harriet’s ambivalence, describing herself as both “so damaged that I mustn’t expose myself”, and “a more resilient adult”, as another facet of the way in which we internalize our experience of emotional neglect. Deep down inside, we know that we are hurting, yet we continue to present a coping face to the world. We may not actually *be* resilient at all (see page 223), but we’ve learnt how to put on a good *performance* of resilience, because this was required of us in childhood (Howe, 2005, p. 101). In close friendships, in intimate relationships, even to ourselves, we may find it difficult to show the extent of our distress, because childhood experiences taught us that distress would be met with hostility, disapproval, or fear.

Another aspect of the theme “Childhood emotional neglect internalized” is our tendency to blame ourselves for problems, for which I created a sub-theme, “It must be me”. Heather sees a connection between her mother’s words to her as a child, and the way that she now blames herself for disagreements or conflict with others: “I can remember her saying to me, ‘Well, what’s wrong with you, why don’t people like you?’ And, that has stayed with me, you know”.

Later in the interview, Heather describes her tendency towards self-doubt whenever there’s conflict between herself and another:

In that moment, there’s this self-doubt that pops up, you know, “There’s something wrong with me that—” you know, “It’s me, it’s my fault, I’ve done something wrong, I’ve got it wrong,” and I don’t know whether that comes from this childhood thing, or—and I don’t know how to stop it happening, and I wish I did.

Although I have used this data extract to illustrate “It must be me” under the theme of “Childhood emotional neglect internalized”, there is a potential link to the tendency towards self-doubt, a sub-theme of “Not good enough” (page 255); it may also be an aspect of “Compulsive caring” (page 244).

Mickey makes a distinction between an action or an event, such as being hit, which even a young child may recognise as something that a parent should not do; and an absence of action, such as being ignored, which is harder to define as harmful:

If you get slapped on the face, it's "Oh, why did you slap me?!" and then you're not—you don't feel that kind of introvertedly being upset, because you can take all your upset—and I'm talking about a five year old now—"It's my parent! Why did he hit me?" But if they don't [hit you], you'll just keep everything in here (indicates body), like, "Maybe it is my fault, maybe I did do something," and I think it's what I did, I always thought that I was—that there was something wrong with me.

Mickey believes this feeling of being at fault has stayed with him, and continues to affect him today: "They never hit me. So, and that probably again connects with the next thing . . . it's my fault, I need to fix it"; this may overlap with feeling responsible for others (see "Compulsive caring", page 244).

Mickey's understanding of trauma or distress held within his body, "in here", seems to fit with the findings of Rothschild (2000) and van der Kolk (2014), and new thinking on emotional pain. According to the popular saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me". However, the relatively recent understanding of emotional pain as experienced in much the same way as physical pain seems to contradict this (Lieberman, 2015, p. 50). Furthermore, Howe (2005) suggests that the potential consequence of parents repeatedly telling children that they are "weak or useless, a waste of space or beneath contempt" may lead to a situation where the child believes that "the carer's anger and hostility . . . is entirely warranted" (p. 102). Young, dependent children cannot afford to admit that their parents are not sufficiently capable of caring for them and protecting them well; this is too frightening to tolerate. It is safer, therefore, for children to believe that the parent is "good", and that they are



“bad”. Cori (2010) concurs that children may believe that hurt and abandonment must happen because they are “bad or unlovable”, although this may be below conscious awareness (p. 75).

Another aspect of “Childhood emotional neglect internalized” is the difficulty that all of the participants in this study have experienced in our adult relationships, although the nature and the extent of these difficulties vary. Trickett and McBride-Chang (1995) found that there had been little research into the sexual relationships and “marital adjustment” (p. 324) of adults who were neglected as children, although it’s not clear whether this refers to emotional or physical neglect. However, if early childhood relationships form the template for all future relationships (Bowlby, 1969/1997), then the emotionally neglected child may start off at a disadvantage; most of the participants spoke about their difficulties with friendships and adult relationships without prompting, suggesting it was a significant area of concern for them.

Finlay believes his childhood experiences made him “wary” in intimate relationships:

It used to take me a long time to get to a feeling of trusting anybody; I think there was always this sense of . . . if anybody showed any kind of interest in me, any affection for me, I think, quite frankly I think I was—again, not consciously, I think I was suspicious, I was, like, “What do they want of me?” you know, (laughs) . . . as if I was entering into some kind of obligation, or something, you know.

Although he had friendships, Finlay says that:

In intimate relationships I think it was more, just more destructive, and—I think it's, yeah, it definitely made it more... difficult to find a place of trust, you know, it's difficult . . . in a situation like marriage, it's, er... yeah, I think that caused, er, enormous difficulties.

Difficulty reaching a place of trust was a common experience for participants. If we have not learnt from our parents, our primary caregivers, that it is safe for us to be our true selves, and that if we ask our needs will be met, we may, like Finlay, remain wary. Muhammed traces a fear of abandonment in romantic relationships directly to the threat of his mother leaving home when he was young; others, like Finlay, experience a more general doubt or suspicion about the other's motives, which as Finlay found, can be very destructive in an intimate relationship. Cori (2010) found that her clients with emotionally absent mothers typically had difficulty receiving love and establishing intimate relationships, perhaps because “being intimate requires being vulnerable and showing needs and feelings”, which may be harder if we have developed a “self-sufficient, avoidant attachment style” (p. 110).

Emotionally neglected individuals may remain in abusive or unsatisfying relationships, because the need for love is “so desperate that the individual can't leave”, or because any relationship feels “better than nothing” (Cori, 2010, p. 106); and lacking the model of an attuned and responsive primary caregiver, such individuals may have lower expectations that their needs will be met in intimate relationships (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 132).

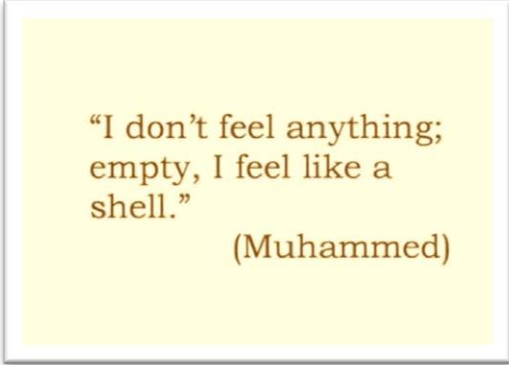
Conversely, the emotionally neglected may choose to avoid relationships altogether for fear of hurt and rejection (Cori, 2010, p. 106). They may also grow into adolescents and adults who are drawn to similarly deprived individuals, leading to mutual frustration and misery (Howe, 2005, p. 111); Serbin and Karp (2004) report the findings of intergenerational studies that women who are already socioeconomically disadvantaged typically choose partners who compound these disadvantages, again suggesting low expectations.

For some of us, like Kate, the underlying problem may be that we can't believe that we are lovable, and need constant reassurance: "I still find myself questioning probably more often than average, you know, 'Are you sure you still love me? Do you want me?' This—you know, 'Are you sure, sure you want to be with me?'" Kate sees a direct link between her mother's emotional unavailability in childhood, and her problems in adult relationships, describing how she has sometimes "developed really strong feelings for somebody, that kind of traditional—clichéd 'unrequited' thing, and I think that there are reflections there of what happened, and that carrot on the stick that—if I just try harder..."

### ***Not noticing self***

*Sub-themes: Not knowing who I was, what I wanted; Can't acknowledge own achievements, success, positive attributes; Can't see self in relation to others.*

Miranda describes her "compulsion, to not upset anybody, to not complain, to not be demanding, to not to have any needs and wants", and as she goes on to explain, if you have learnt not to have any needs and wants, "you can't really assert them if you don't have them, and for a long time I felt like I didn't have any, I was just so... *nothingy*;"



“I don’t feel anything;  
empty, I feel like a  
shell.”  
(Muhammed)

Muhammed says, “I don’t feel anything—empty, I feel like a shell”. Cori (2010) distinguishes between the experience of those who had harsh, critical parents, and those who had “emotionally flat or absent” parents, who consequently struggled to form

a clear sense of self (p. 107), which may describe Miranda and Muhammed’s experiences. The emotionally neglected child may grow into an adult who has “difficulty knowing what he feels, what he wants, or that either matters” and experiences an “empty, disconnected feeling” (Webb, 2013, p. 63).

Webb (2013) suggests that adults with low self-esteem typically “exaggerate their weaknesses and downplay their strengths” (p. 80), and that this may be as a consequence of emotional neglect in childhood. However, she also points out that “just as often, emotionally neglected adults paint *inaccurate* pictures of themselves, not necessarily negative, but simply *off*” (ibid).

Brown et al. (2016) similarly suggest that emotional neglect may lead to children suppressing, denying or distancing themselves from their own emotional needs, the phenomenon described as alexithymia. Mickey sees a connection between not having his own needs in awareness in adulthood, and his inability to recognise his feelings and desires in childhood: “I wasn’t looking at myself, I wasn’t realising what I want, what I need, not even with myself”. Describing what might appear from the outside to be indecisiveness, or unwillingness to take responsibility, Mickey links this to finding it

hard to identify his desires in his adult life, which he is now trying hard to do; and elsewhere, Mickey describes his struggle in counselling sessions to name his emotions.

Emotions were not talked about in my childhood home; but I clearly sensed that they were undesirable, as this memory from my early teens shows:

I'm not sure exactly how old [I am]. I'm in church. As I kneel at the altar for communion, I long passionately to be older, grown-up—sixteen. Then I'll be an adult, and I won't have feelings any more. (Reflective journal, 27/01/17).

This aspect of “Not noticing self”, then, may be directly linked to the sense of “No emotional connection” in childhood (page 164).

Recently, I have become acutely conscious of my inability to notice myself; I simply don't see what I am doing as *anything*. One of the consequences of this is that I never feel like I am doing anything at all, so I always feel that I should be doing more than I already am, in order to be “good enough”, or to justify my existence. It means that I am continually seeking acknowledgment or recognition from others; because I can't see myself, I need others to see me, and I need others to tell me that what I have done is enough. It also means that, if I achieve something of significance, such as passing my driving test, or gaining an academic award, that achievement instantly becomes “nothing”; if I can do that, it can't be that difficult, so anyone could do it. Claiming any achievement still feels deeply uncomfortable; perhaps, like Cathy, I have a deep-rooted fear of “bigging myself up” (see “Not celebrated”, page 191).

### ***Compulsive self-reliance***

*Sub-themes: Learnt self-reliance early on; Became own parent; Wanting to manage alone; Not turning to parents for help; Not asking for help; Difficulty accepting help or gifts; Difficulty making friends; A loner.*

Compulsive self-reliance has several facets, most of them destructive; I have tried to draw out some of the nuances here. Finlay explains how emotional self-reliance affected his adult relationships:

So I learnt to be completely self-reliant, and emotionally self-reliant . . . and maybe that kind of caution has, had very damaging effects on relationships as an adult, because there was always kind of a sense of reserve and caution (puts hands up to form a barrier).

In his relationships with others, Finlay believes he was continually wary, anxious about what might be expected of him, and therefore put up protective barriers, the defensive or adaptive strategy of keeping emotional distance (Howe, 2005, p. 103). Finlay describes feeling more comfortable alone, while paradoxically craving company:

It's like I'm more comfortable in that isolation, but I wasn't happy when I was on my own, either (laughs), so I was happiest when I was with other people and I'd had a few beers so all the anxiety and the worry about, the inhibitions were, and that fear, that anxiety was gone away . . . and all those kind of protective barriers come down to an extent.

In the initial thematic analysis, I also included this under the theme of “Inner wisdom” (page 339), reflecting Finlay’s creative solution to his conflicting fear of intimacy and need for company: having “a few beers”.

Miranda describes herself as having “all the classic self-reliance”. When choosing a university, she says:

It would never have occurred to me to speak to my parents, so whether that was just me being terribly independent or them not being interested, or me not feeling as if they would have an opinion or be interested—I don’t know, I can’t say . . . but certainly by the time I was, sort of, maybe 16 onwards—I mean, I always felt like an adult, but I certainly behaved then like an adult . . . as if it was all down to me.

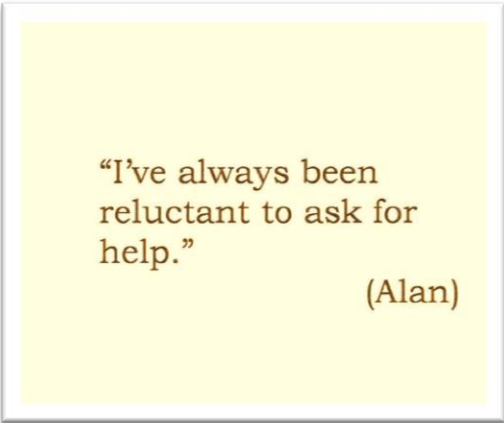
Being independent, being able to manage alone is not necessarily problematic, and is viewed positively in most Western industrialized societies. However, as a compulsion, managing alone may be less a sign of healthy, mature independence, and more a damaging inability to reach out and seek help, or a desperate need to prove ourselves. Miranda links her self-reliance directly to the sense of having to manage alone in childhood (see page 204):

And I think I actually did have to sort things out for myself, I think, again, my mum begrudged doing things for us when she had to, and as soon as we could do them for ourselves she wanted us to do them ourselves; so yeah, I don’t think she would have put herself out.

I am conscious of how I still struggle, as an adult, to express my needs, both physical and emotional; I see this as having developed out of a childhood imperative to “not be a nuisance” or “not make a fuss” (see “Conditional approval”, page 198, and “Had to manage alone”, page 218). In my first bracketing interview, I explain that:

I won't ask for help, because I've been conditioned through childhood to think I've got to manage on my own, I've got to sort things out for myself, and my distress isn't that great anyway; there are people that need [help] more than me, it's not that big a problem; “I'm OK, I can manage, I'm fine, don't worry about me.”

Maybe this self-reliant behaviour was required of me in childhood because I was the third child in a family that only planned to have two; or maybe I learnt early that if I wanted approval I had to be undemanding, self-sufficient. Cori (2010) suggests that “*need* is a dirty word for the undermothered”, or “a source of shame and something to hide”, and this may lead to some individuals finding it “almost impossible to ask for help” (p. 109).



“I've always been reluctant to ask for help.”

(Alan)

Alan remembers being assessed as having a high need for autonomy, adding that he has “always been reluctant to ask for help, partly because it might be painful to be refused”; but also because accepting help:



Puts you under an obligation in some way, and I don't know whether that's as a result of my experience, of course, it may just be me, but I think possibly, you know, wanting to be autonomous is, you know, as a result of that, because of the way I felt controlled.

There may be two elements to this, then; reacting against being over-controlled in childhood, and a sense of shame for needing anything. Cori (2010) suggests that “for those with a self-sufficient style, it's a long journey from ‘I'll do it myself’, to ‘I'm so happy for your help’” (p. 191); and Hill et al. (2012) found that those who have experienced emotional neglect in childhood may not seek help (in the form of psychotherapy), believing that they themselves, or their problems, are not worth bothering with.

Compulsive self-reliance (Bowlby, 1958) has been noted in children who care for their physically disabled parents (see page 208). In recent years, the role of children in caring for parents with a diagnosis of mental illness has also begun to be recognised; however, when the parent's mental illness is diagnosed, and the family is known to authorities, the child's carer role may be recognised and support put in place—even if this is too little, and too infrequent (Dearden & Becker, 2004; Becker, 2007). This was not the case for the participants in this study.

Rogers' conditions of worth (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1990) may also be relevant here. Alan felt that his parents expected him to “sit in the corner, and not be a nuisance, and not cost them money, too”. Having learnt that his needs and wants were

unacceptable in childhood, it is easy to see how hard it might be to ask for help in adulthood. Howe (2005) suggests that children who are psychologically maltreated (including, but not limited to, emotional neglect) learn to be contemptuous of their neediness, distress or weakness, and that “psychological survival . . . depends on the self being strong, unaffected by feeling, independent, self-reliant, self-contained and without compassion” (p. 103). This is a bleak and lonely place for a child to be.

Alice describes finding friendships, as well as intimate relationships, difficult: “I feel like I am always going to struggle with any kind of relationship, I don’t have any friends at all . . . and as long as I’m feeling this way, I don’t think I’m ever going to have that”. Cori (2010) suggests that securely attached children are better at initiating friendships (p. 45), whereas those who are emotionally neglected and therefore insecurely attached may lack social confidence (ibid, p. 75).

All through my childhood and into my early adult years, I experienced a feeling of not fitting in or not belonging, a common experience among Cori’s emotionally neglected clients (2010). This is described in the literature as “social withdrawal” or “limited peer interactions” (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002, p. 679). It is suggested that neglected children are “predominantly avoidant in their peer interactions” (Kaufman & Cicchetti, 1989), “are unpopular with peers” (Erickson & Egeland, 1996; Erickson et al., 1989), and “have fewer reciprocated playmates than other children” (Bolger, Patterson, & Kupersmidt, 1998; all cited in Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002).

In the first bracketing interview, I reflect on my memory of moving to a new home and a new school when I was six years old:

That feeling, on the edge of the playground, is an actual memory, it was quite a close knit community and I didn't fit in . . . looking back now I think I could have done if I had thought people would like me, but I think I had that tendency to hold myself aloof because I already expected not to be wanted.

This seems to confirm Howe's description of the child who learns to keep an emotional distance between self and others (2005, p. 103); Cori (2010) describes the "outsider complex" among her emotionally neglected clients, resulting from "not feeling like a treasured part of a family" (p. 110). Cori suggests that this may lead to individuals "longing to be part of something . . . yet deeply ambivalent and uncomfortable putting yourself in that situation," potentially resulting in chronic loneliness (p. 110).

Alan describes the sense of relief he felt when he realised that he could leave home and live independently:

I got a job, looked for a bedsit and just moved out, and that . . . [I was] 18, and still legally not an adult at that time, so, but, anyway I went, and I was never happier! I couldn't really cope by myself, I'd not had much opportunity, but, er, but I knew—it felt so good.

Feeling safer alone, preferring our own company, or avoiding the company of others can be an indication of an avoidant attachment style (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 113). It may also result from insufficient or inappropriate "social biofeedback" in infancy; that is, when children have not received enough information about their own feelings to be

confident about interpreting the moods and emotions of self and others (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 42). It seems that areas of the brain involved in “judgements of social trustworthiness” may be deactivated when attachment behaviour is activated in the infant (Fonagy et al., 2007, p. 298); so perhaps adults who were insecurely attached as infants have not had the opportunity to develop confident judgements of social trustworthiness in others.

My own understanding of the “Compulsive self-reliance” theme used to be that, born in hospital at a time when babies were routinely separated from their mothers except for feeding times, I may have simply learnt that I was on my own. Lately I have started to reflect on another explanation. My mother prided herself on being a “good mother” and even said to me once, that as I was her third child, by the time she had me, she knew what babies needed, so I never had to ask for anything. One possible outcome of this is that I was so well cared for that I did not learn, through the normal struggle of experiencing a need, asking for help and that need being met, an appropriate level of resilience (Lazarus, 2003; Rothschild, 2000). Another possible outcome, however, is that on the odd occasion that I had a need that my mother hadn’t anticipated, she experienced this as criticism of her; something that she may have found very difficult (Howe, 2005). If she, like me, was struggling with her own sense of never feeling good enough, then acknowledging, even privately, that she had misjudged a situation and failed to provide something I needed may have been intolerable for her; any failure had to be mine. If this feeling was not in her conscious awareness, however, she may have conveyed her disapproval only through her facial expression or body language; as a pre-verbal infant, I would likely have been very sensitive to these non-verbal communications. I imagine I would have quickly learnt not to need anything; or learnt

that if I needed something, it was better to keep that need to myself (Fonagy et al., 2007, p. 314).

### ***Compulsive caring***

*Sub-themes: Attuned & attentive caregiver; Can't tolerate distress in others; Put self out for others.*

Several participants describe a tendency towards compulsive caregiving. Of course, thinking of others is not problematic in itself, as long as we are thinking of others as well as ourselves, and not to our detriment. Miranda describes herself as an intuitive caregiver, whether with family or friends, and relates this to her childhood need to be sensitive to her mother's feelings:

I'm very good at picking up—because, again, I think that's another thing, and we haven't spoken about this, but I think I have become... highly... or was very early on trained to pick up my Mum's feelings . . . whether she's cross, whether she's not, without her saying anything, what she needs, whether she's happy, I'm a very—and I've been told this—intuitive caregiver.

Miranda also relates this to the way in which she may appear indecisive, for example, letting a friend choose which film to watch, because:

If I had said, "I want this film," and the other person had secretly wanted the other, I think I would be able to tell, and I would not enjoy my film, because I would feel like I'd put them out, I'd feel like I'd made them do something they didn't want to, so it's often easier just to let them choose.

Compulsive caregiving has been identified as a feature of maternally deprived adults (Bowlby, 1977; Howe, 2005, p. 103), so perhaps the experience of childhood emotional neglect explains the decision of several participants, including Miranda, to train as counsellors, though not all the participants have chosen caring roles. Compulsive caring may be seen as a displacement activity, in that caring for others may help us to avoid facing the pain of our own unmet needs; or it may come from having learnt to be attuned to a parent, as Miranda describes above, linking this theme with the themes “Conditional approval” (page 198) and “Parent role” (page 205).

Mickey shares his insight into one of the ways in which what might appear to be a caring attitude may not actually reflect genuinely caring for the other person’s feelings. When he seems concerned about another: “It’s more of a caring about *my* feelings that I’m upset . . . that [upset] face just brings bad feeling in me, and I want to get rid of it, that’s the only sense”.

So perhaps what is seen by others as compulsive caring is actually an individual’s desperation to resolve his or her own discomfort, possibly arising from a childhood experience of needing to soothe a distressed or anxious parent’s feelings. Put another way, children who have anxious and self-absorbed parents may learn to put their parents’ needs first, thus learning to attend to others rather than to their own needs, and feeling valued only in terms of what they can do to meet the parent’s needs (Howe, 2005, p. 91). This appears to be confirmed by some of the participants’ stories; Mickey certainly sees his sense of being responsible for the happiness of others as a lasting impact of his parents’ behaviour towards him in childhood (see “Bullying and emotional blackmail”, page 210).

### ***Contradictory feelings***

*Sub-themes: I don't trust that feeling; Push-me, pull-me.*

One aspect of this theme is the contrast between the public perception of a happy family, and the individual's private experience of distress, such as Rachel's feeling that the material advantages of her home life masked the emotional deficit. The hidden nature of emotional neglect means that it is "less likely to be reported or come to the attention of the child welfare authorities" (Howe, 2005, p. 90); Webb (2013) describes emotionally neglected clients who, like Rachel, grew up in homes that outwardly had the "trappings of a lovely childhood" but where "the thing that was wrong was invisible" (p. 113).

This may lead to confusion lasting well into adulthood. Miranda starts her interview by saying:

I think my experience is slightly confused. I think it's not, um, well, (huh), it is—I don't think it's blatant emotional neglect; I think it's a state of confusion, so it is emotional neglect in private, and it was a sort of overwhelming, "Isn't everything wonderful, aren't we very connected, aren't me and my daughter so incredibly close!" in public... so I think I just grew up terribly confused.

Harriet acknowledges that she perpetuated the public illusion, because "it was easier to think that Dad cared, and to think that Mum lived a glamorous lifestyle, and I was just a lucky girl", although, Harriet says, "There was the dark side, which people didn't see". This links the theme of "Contradictory feelings" to a sociocultural theme, "Maternal

role” (page 302). Harriet comments that: “people would just say, ‘Oh, you’re talking nastily about your Mum’, because nobody would believe you, in those days, would they?” Mothers and motherhood are sacred, and criticising them “off-limits” (Cori, 2010, p. 1; Hays, 1996); so that inner feeling of “it must be me” still lingers.

The contradictory feelings described by participants include their sense of both craving and avoiding closeness, especially with parents. I have tried to capture the complexity of this experience, using the participants’ own words for the sub-themes, “I don’t trust that feeling”, and “Push-me, pull-me”. Miranda describes her conflicting, contradictory feelings, even now, as an adult:

It doesn’t always feel very... authentic, it’s more like, “Well, I know I love them, they’re my parents, you know, I know that Mum must love—” . . . but I definitely can’t do showy expressions of feeling at all, whereas she can do that, the showier the better, but the reality, the actual, what she’ll give me, what she’ll offer, a real connection? . . . There’s this “push-me-pull-me” kind of thing going on . . . maybe that comes from what was from her, there was the overtly, “Oh, I do love you, aren’t you wonderful,” or, “Isn’t Miranda wonderful,” you know, more to other people, but then the backing off.

Miranda continues to feel confused by the contrast between the public and the private, leaving her unable to trust her mother’s affection as authentic.

I suspect that for most of my adult life I maintained a “false self” (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 110) in relation to my parents, and possibly in relation to others. Having learnt early



that my attachment behaviour (crying, making demands) was met with disapproval or, worse still, withdrawal, it's likely that I, too, withdrew. Harriet's metaphor conveys her own "Push-me, pull-me" relationship with her mother:

The way I always think about it is I'm in a kayak on a lake, and I used to be in Mum's kayak, and it was really choppy, then I got into my own kayak and it was still quite choppy, and now I just get further away into calmer waters, and every now and then I might go a bit closer if she needs a bit of help, but if it gets tricky, I go back into the calmer waters.

### ***Can't change***

*Sub-themes: Anger, resentment; Can't forgive; Can't move on.*

Although one theme in the final section of this chapter is devoted to the ways in which participants believe that they, or their parents, have changed, grown or developed over time (see "Change and Growth", page 360), this particular theme captures the struggles that participants describe with what seem to be persistent, immutable feelings of anger, hurt and resentment as a result of their childhood experiences.

Muhammed expresses anger towards his father, which he describes spilling out into everyday life:

Sometime I get really still angry to him, because when I unpack childhood, it always comes up, like . . . it's because you were not loving me, because you were not caring [for] me, because you were too critical of me, and I'm—uh!

I tentatively offer him the metaphor of a wound, or a scar, prompted partly by the concept of “limbic scars” from the field of biological psychiatry (Dannlowksi et al., 2012, p. 286), and Muhammed replies, “Exactly . . . occasionally it bleeds, you know . . . all the frustration, the anger comes out”.

Rachel remembers noticing the contrast between her friends’ close relationships with their parents, and her lack of closeness with her own: “[My friends] had mums at home and they had really close bonds with their parents, and they’d go shopping and they’d do the girly stuff and I never did”. As Rachel goes on to say, even now:

I can meet new people . . . and they’ve got such a special bond with their mother that even now I can feel jealous—I’m aware of that—I get this real sharp feeling of jealousy. Part of me can think, “That is lovely,” but a bigger part thinks: “I can’t believe I’ve never had that”.

Perhaps a little frustration, or anger, is bleeding out here.

Alice describes how she feels continually knocked back by her mother’s behaviour in the present: “Every time you start to feel positive and you think, ‘OK, I’ve forgiven them, and I’ll move on,’ she’ll do something, and it just takes you right back, and this is why I can’t move on”.

Anger surfaced in my MSc dissertation, but I chose to ignore it. I have always struggled with conflict, and been afraid of my own angry feelings, as well as other

people's angry feelings towards me; I would frequently describe myself as "upset" when really, I was angry. Recently, in supervision for my counselling practice, I uncovered a metaphor for this. Talking about my fear of anger, and wondering where that came from, led me to reflect on the atmosphere of veiled anger at home; I sensed anger, but it wasn't usually expressed overtly.

Trying to trace my feelings back to their source in childhood. Found myself saying that anger—and other so-called negative feelings—were not allowed . . . Probably because mum herself was afraid of—what, conflict? Emotion? But anger wasn't expressed at home; it was veiled, with occasional outbursts. And then what came was that it was like living in a house full of bombs—that shook me—I didn't know that was in there! But no-one acknowledged that there were bombs that might go off. So I learnt to tip-toe around, terrified of setting something off. (Reflective journal, 07/12/16).

Figure 13: House of bombs



This fits with Howe's description of homes where there is an atmosphere of "suffused tension" and "wariness", with anger below the surface (2005, p. 91), contrasting starkly with Cori's "happy home", where "you're not all holding your breath" (2010, p. 65). In my childhood home, I suspect we were *all* holding our breath!

Mickey also comments: "I did have... difficulty in expressing what I feel, especially expressing anger". Earlier, he had described an incident when "I was so upset, and I punched the wall . . . and I had a very bad fracture on my hand, I had a plaster cast". I noticed that Mickey described himself as "upset", whereas what he seems to be demonstrating is anger, even rage, which seems to be similar to my experience. But anger was not permissible for me (Myhr, 2014, p. 49); perhaps this was Mickey's experience, too.

Attachment theory places the responsibility clearly with parents for helping children to learn to handle strong emotions, including those considered "negative", such as anger (Fonagy et al., 2007, p. 301; Gerhardt, 2015, p. 201). When parents are unable to fulfil this role in infancy, children may grow into adults who find strong emotions difficult (see also "Had to manage alone", page 218).

***(Fear of) history repeating itself***

*Sub-themes: Noticing some of parent in self; Trying to be different; Not wanting children.*

One of the ways that humans learn is by mimicry, so perhaps it is inevitable that we sometimes behave in the way that our parents behaved (Bandura, 1977). David recognises that: "I can notice some of my Dad in me, like, the way I am with my brother and stuff". Harriet describes her older brother as "history repeating", though

she emphasises her own conscious effort to behave differently: “I think I’ve drummed anything out of myself that I could—if I see any evidence of it I try very hard to”.

Later, however, in an electronic message, Harriet adds:

I am not sure I conveyed the fundamental paranoias that have run through my life: That I would become her; that I would fail to have the loyalty gene and only be able to put myself first. Again not as bad now as when I was a young person but I check myself constantly.

Some participants were aware of recreating childhood conditions in adult relationships.

Reflecting on the lasting impact of childhood emotional neglect, Miranda says:

I certainly have recognised it in partners; I pick people who—they’re not similar to my mother—well, technically they are (laughs)! I do say jokingly that I’ve married my mother twice, people who can be on the surface very, “Oh, yes, I love you, I adore you, we’re going to do this, we’re going to have this life, er, blah, blah, blah,” but then they can’t back it up, the substance isn’t there, and because of something they will turn away from me again . . . And that’s what my mum was like, that’s what my first husband was like, really, as soon as it got in the least bit difficult, as soon as I was in the least bit demanding.

Miranda’s story may illustrate the pattern of picking “partners who are unavailable in ways that are similar to how a parent was unavailable,” (Cori, 2010, p. 152). The human brain evidently prefers to have its expectations confirmed, no matter how

unpleasant (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 63), which might explain why some of us seem to have subconsciously chosen romantic partners with whom we have recreated childhood patterns.

Muhammed believes that “people also have like this tendency to be like their parents and then find someone like their parents to get married, so that’s why I am really worrying”, because, he continues, “I really don’t want to be someone like my father at all!” Later, Muhammed laments his lack of an appropriate role model:

I don’t know what kind of father I will be in the future, because I didn’t see a loving father figure, so I don’t know will I be able to love my children, because I don’t know how to show it. It’s not because I am evil or something; I don’t know how to do it, I didn’t experience it . . . how can you like imitate it if you didn’t see it, you know? Children learn by imitation, they see from their role model and they imitate it. I didn’t see a role model.

Muhammed’s fear may be understandable, given the common finding that emotional neglect is passed on from generation to generation; Miller (1979/1997) describes “emotional legacies” which are handed down from one generation to the next without anyone really realising (p. 6, p. 195; see also page 275), although Fearon, Shmueli-Goetz, Viding, Fonagy, & Plomin (2014) suggest that the intergenerational transmission of caregiving patterns is less strong than some claim, and that differences in attachment style may be influenced more by genetics than parenting (p. 1038). In any case, passing on emotionally neglecting parenting from one generation to the next

is not inevitable; several participants in this study describe the conscious efforts they have made to behave differently towards their own children (see page 351).

### ***Self-critical***

*Sub-themes: Self-critical, self-punishment; Critical of own story; Crying/failure is weak.*

I retain separate themes, “Self-critical”, and “Not good enough” (below), to preserve subtle differences between ways in which participants were harsh or hostile in their attitudes towards themselves, and a more global resignation and helplessness—as if saying to ourselves, “I’ll simply never measure up”, our “core self a disappointment” (Wright et al., 2009, p. 65).

Heather describes herself as “quite an emotional person anyway, I do cry easily . . . I mean [as a child] I *did* cry, but you know, it does feel, when I cry even now, I hate it, because it feels like a weakness”. Reflecting on the childhood origins of this, Heather says: “I think my dad didn’t know what to do when my mum cried, and so perhaps I picked that up from there”. Cathy, too, describes feeling “so furious because I blubbed” during a challenging presentation.

Cori (2010) suggests that “if your mother was impatient with your needs or rejecting, you’ll tend to have little tolerance yourself” (p. 190), and Webb (2013) finds that among her clients, “expressing guilt, discomfort or self-directed anger for having feelings” is an indication of childhood emotional neglect (p. 202; see also Glaser, 2002, p. 704; Howe, 2005, p. 99). Although we cannot assume that childhood experiences and adult symptoms necessarily demonstrate cause and effect (Music, 2009, p. 143), nevertheless, I noticed that several participants spoke about themselves during the

interviews in what sounded like a “critical parent” voice; describing herself as sometimes being “silly”, Miranda comments, “but that sounds awful, and feels awful, for me to say now—silly is just *awful!*” This may link to the tendency for participants to be critical of the way in which they told their stories, or questioned whether their stories were “good enough” for me (page 259).

### ***Not good enough***

*Sub-themes: Not feeling worthy, deserving; Lack of confidence; Never good enough; Difficulty receiving feedback; Self-doubt; Low aspirations for self; Fear of failure; Must do better.*

Here, I focus on sense of not being “good enough”, especially the lingering doubt that we will *ever* be good enough, which pervades the data. I explore different versions of “not good enough”, starting with not feeling worthy or deserving, feeling less than others, or unworthy (Wright et al, 2009).

Alice describes her general feeling:

Just that they’re all better than me and... I can’t talk to people that are better than me, but then I’m always at the bottom, so there’s no-one to talk to because I think I’m the only one at the bottom... and everyone else is sort of higher than me.

In this extract, Alice illustrates a possible mechanism by which low self-esteem, whatever its origins, may lead to further loneliness and isolation. Considering herself less worthy than others, Alice feels unable to initiate friendships, thus losing out on social contact. This fits with the frequent reference in the literature to the emotionally



neglected child as socially isolated (Brown et al., 2016; Flett et al., 2016; Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002; Music, 2009).

It may be useful to distinguish between the sense that we ourselves are in some way defective, not good enough, tainted with a fatal flaw (Webb, 2013, p. 71; Wright et al., 2009), and the belief that our actions will never measure up. Hildyard and Wolfe (2002) found that child neglect (including, although not limited to, emotional neglect) leads to poor academic performance; similarly, Glaser (2002) found lower academic performance to be particularly associated with psychological neglect, although this may not be the case for all emotionally neglected children. Whereas Cori (2010) suggests, from her clinical experience, that “being loved . . . creates resilience” (p. 74), enabling individuals to overcome set-backs and disappointments, Alice describes herself as lacking aspiration and “at the bottom”. This matches Webb’s depiction of an emotionally neglected client who “folded quickly and gave up” in the face of criticism (2013, p. 83); it may also reflect the “anxiety and helplessness about the future” found by Wright et al. (2009, p. 66).

The emotionally neglected child experiences deep despair. Alice alludes to having had suicidal thoughts when she describes how helpless she felt growing up, indicating the depth of sadness and despair that she felt: “I felt helpless for many years . . . I sometimes think that; I used to think, ‘Well, why haven’t I—sort of—topped myself here? . . . Why haven’t I killed myself?’”

Whether it resulted directly from an experience of emotional neglect, or whether emotional neglect led to a downward spiral of withdrawal, lack of social interaction

(see, for example, Brown et al., 2016; Flett et al., 2016; Music, 2009), and lack of achievement (Young & Widom, 2014), combined with sociocultural factors (Luke & Banerjee, 2013), Alice reached adulthood with a deep sense that she was unworthy, undeserving, less than others.

I describe my feelings in my first bracketing interview:

I'm trying, but I don't know if I'm getting it right. And I was talking to my counsellor about this . . . and she said, "Angela, how much evidence will you need before you believe you're good enough?" And the thing is, I don't think any evidence will ever be enough, this is such a huge gaping hole.

This echoes Cori's evocative description:

For the undermothered child, the hole where Mom should have been can feel as big as the universe. When we come back to it as an adult, we may feel that there is no way to fill it—that it's unfillable (2010, p. 176).

When using the NVivo software to conduct my thematic analysis of the Round 2 data, I created a word cloud from the data, and was surprised, and initially disappointed, to find that "think" was the most commonly used word; I had expected something more meaty, to do with love, rejection, or distress. At the time, I reflected that as individuals who grew up in emotionally cold or flat landscapes, the participants in this study might be more comfortable with thoughts than with feelings, our use of language itself a clue to the lasting impact of childhood emotional neglect.

However, Bechdel says of her habit of adding “I think” to all her diary entries:

It was a sort of epistemological crisis. How did I know that the things I was writing were absolutely, objectively true? All I could speak for was my own perceptions, and perhaps not even those. (Bechdel, 2006, p. 141).

Perhaps the frequent use of phrases such as “I don’t know” (used 321 times in the transcripts) and “I think” (889 times), “sort of” (413 times), may reflect an all-pervading self-doubt, a fear of claiming knowledge. If I claimed knowledge, would I threaten my parents’ fragile sense of self? Cori (2010) suggests that self-doubt among her emotionally neglected clients stems from a lack of accurate mirroring (p. 96), or harsh, critical, judgmental comments from parents (p. 107). Subconscious envy may also arise in a parent-child relationship (Grosz, 2014), linking this to the sub-theme of “Parents’ own struggles” (see page 287).

This may be linked to a defensive survival strategy (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 143). When sending work to my academic supervisors, I typically include an apology or self-criticism in my e-mail: I’m “really uncertain” about drafts of the analysis and discussion sections in August 2015, and fear that I might be “going completely in the wrong direction” with them. In April, 2016, I say of my draft methodology chapter that “I’m not as far on with this as I had hoped”, and so on.

Seeking reassurance from my academic supervisors that my work is of the required standard is appropriate; however, I notice my tendency to get a few criticisms in before

anyone else can. Several participants showed a similar pattern of self-criticism and self-doubt, questioning whether their stories were “good enough”, or what I wanted, or whether they had told them in the right way, overlapping with the preceding theme, “Self-critical”. Muhammed, for example, apologises in an e-mail: “I hope this story is still related with your study and I didn’t waste your time”, and “I am sorry I threw over you all my issues”. He explains: “After the interview I felt sorry as I took too much time of you. I generally feel like this, I feel guilty or responsible of anything wrong around”, possibly linking this sub-theme to “Compulsive caring” (see page 244).

This tendency to apologise was common among the participants. I wondered at first if it might be an aspect of Britishness; we have, as a nation, apparently, a tendency to apologise even when it’s not our fault (Fox, 2004). However, Muhammed and several of the other participants grew up in non-British societies, so perhaps it results from the experience of childhood emotional neglect, linking this theme to “Conditional approval” (page 198).

Harriet describes how the fear of failure limited her at work, remembering that she did well, “but I was never brave, because I remember thinking, ‘If it goes wrong, there’s nowhere to go’; there was nowhere to go”. I am conscious that for years, I limited myself to voluntary or low-paid work. Whilst I can justify my decisions with any amount of pragmatic, logical reasoning, I believe there was also an element of playing safe, not daring to take any risks, for fear of failure, or rejection. Cori (2010) found among her emotionally neglected clients that the fear of failure and perfectionism could lead either to over-achieving (being driven to do better all the time, chasing an elusive feeling of being good enough), or under-achieving (not trying for fear of failing), as the

individual holds back from attempting any task where success is not certain (p. 68). I am still acutely conscious of the feeling of not being good enough, the shame that brings, and the need to justify myself in order to gain, or retain, conditional approval; and how that leads to both perfectionism and self-limiting behaviour.

The fear of failure is a recurring experience across the data set. For some, this takes the form of a tendency towards perfectionism, driving us to try harder, to do better; for others, it has become limiting, as the fear of failing prevents us even risking trying. David explains, “I’ve noticed how—I mean, even if they’re my friends, if they do something better than me, I’m like, ‘No, I need to be better’”. He continues, “nothing against my friends, or anybody else”, but it’s “the way I’ve been brought up is just like, I need to be better, I need to do more, I need to be much better”. In David’s case, however, this may have arisen partly from an actual need to do more and be better than his peers, as a Muslim of Pakistani origin competing against unconscious bias or racial prejudice.

Gerhardt (2015) describes the individual who, lacking “emotional confidence” as a result of insufficiently warm and responsive or attuned parenting, may seek self-esteem elsewhere (p. 130); or may feel compelled to be “perfect in every way so that you do not give offence or upset the people on whom you depend” (ibid), linking this theme to “Conditional approval” (page 198).

Mickey believes that the fear of failure and consequent withdrawal of parental approval when he performed poorly drove him to excel at school, “because it was so important to me to make everything perfect to make my parents happy”. In an e-mail some

months after his interview, Mickey recounts how after getting a “bad grade” at school, “when I wanted to speak to [my parents] they didn’t listen and they even made me feel bad about it”, after which he punished himself by not going out to play with friends.

It’s interesting to note that Mickey initially describes seven out of ten as a “bad grade”, when 70% often equates to a merit or a B grade, second only to distinction or A grade; he acknowledges that this “normally isn’t that bad” but it was his “first ever failure from perfect”. This illustrates the danger of building our self-esteem or sense of worth on achievements; when we fail to do well, we are crushed. It may be that:

In therapy, the small and lonely child that is hidden behind her achievements wakes up and asks: “What would have happened if I had appeared before you sad, needy, angry, furious? Where would your love have been then?” (Miller, 1979/1997, p. 17).

This may be the very question that the emotionally neglected child dare not risk asking.

### ***Avoiding conflict***

*Sub-themes: Stunned/stopped in tracks; Can’t argue.*

Heather sees her inability to defend herself as stemming from childhood experiences:

I think everyone’s bullied at some stage, but it’s whether or not you become a victim, and I suffer from, and it’s kind of like an immobility, or almost stunned, like, I don’t know what to do, don’t know how to react, and I don’t react, because there’s this fear of rejection and humiliation.

It may be that we are the children of permissive parents who avoid conflict because they themselves are uncomfortable with it and “simply don’t say ‘no’ often enough” (Webb, 2013, p. 26). Alternatively, Webb suggests that children may quickly learn that negative emotions and argument are not tolerated in their family (ibid, p. 108; Buckholdt et al., 2014, p. 324). This may have been Heather’s experience.

In my second bracketing interview, I puzzle out my own particular difficulty with conflict. I describe how in a previous work role, I described myself as:

“Unmanageable,” and I realise that, rather than saying “the manager was managing me badly,” I’ve turned it into, “it’s me . . . I’m the problem, I’m unmanageable,” because it’s almost impossible for me to challenge somebody who’s in authority over me—because it wasn’t possible to challenge my parents’ authority over me.

Taking responsibility for being “unmanageable”, rather than challenging the manager for her poor management skills, enabled me to avoid conflict: in the end, I left the job without ever confronting the manager. It was easier to keep it in, to blame myself. And yet, as I explain later in the bracketing interview, it’s not that I have a problem with authority figures in general:

It’s when I feel somebody has authority over *me*, so hence the difficulty with the manager—I find it very difficult to stand up to, or argue against? Both sound wrong; I find it very difficult to hold my own against somebody whom I perceive as being in power over me, and I believe that comes from the

childhood experience that to argue back, to disagree with my parents would have brought disapproval.

Reflecting on this, I find myself wondering: If we don't get the chance to fall out and break away, do we remain children in relation to our parents? How does that happen—because we're conditioned to “be good”, because we sense that our parents are too fragile to cope with our rebellion, or anger, or because we fear that the parent-child bond is too fragile to endure? If children grow up believing their parents are too vulnerable to cope with conflict, if their parents don't model healthy conflict resolution, perhaps children are condemned to remain childlike, unable to having the falling-out that enables them to separate and finally grow up.

There may be another explanation for this difficulty with conflict. Cathy describes a recent experience of having to “screw up all of my courage” to have a difficult conversation with her father. Although her father is older now, and:

He's not been really bad tempered for years . . . it took huge courage, I was aware that I felt sick, I'd got butterflies in my stomach, because I didn't want to upset him, I didn't want him to get angry.

One of the long-term effects of childhood emotional neglect may be that the potential for conflict triggers the same physical sensations that we experienced as small children, when we were terribly afraid of a parent's anger, and when the withdrawal of our parents' approval felt like a threat to our survival (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 88); so we avoid it at all costs.



Kate describes how difficult she finds it to argue, and relates this directly to her childhood experiences:

I learnt that the best way to react was to not say anything. Because if you said something, anything, even if it was, “I’m sorry,” there would be a negative reaction, so now, I can’t argue, I can’t get the words out, I can’t—so I tend to sulk (both laugh) if someone’s upset me, which is deeply frustrating for a 37-year-old woman but I can’t—I find it really difficult to verbalise . . . It’s safest . . . to say nothing.

Harriet, too, describes how she avoids confrontation:

Malcolm and I have never argued . . . I know that’s not a good thing, because I back away from confrontation. I walk away, and I go and pull the duvet over my head and hide, and I just can’t do confrontation.

As Gerhardt (2015) explains, the mother’s “disapproving face” triggers a baby’s stress hormones (p. 65). For babies, stress may feel life-threatening, and thus have the quality of trauma (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 88). Therefore, emotionally neglected infants may suffer from PTSD, or at the least, be more prone to PTSD in later life (ibid; Dannlowksi et al., 2012, p. 286); and I believe that this may be the origin of my own fear of conflict.

During the Counselling Psychology MSc course in 2013, in a classroom Gestalt exercise, I played out my “Top Dog” and “Under-dog” (whom I called “Barker” and “Cringe”). When faced with Barker’s anger, Cringe’s defence was to roll over, feet in

the air, the classic submissive pose of a dog; perhaps this is the only defence of the emotionally neglected child (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 143).

Alternatively, Mum's disapproval (or fear) of any strong emotions may have left her unable to manage the rupture and repair cycle (see page 183) sufficiently well to regulate my emotions, particularly if I was naturally a sensitive child. She may also have unintentionally passed on to me, or modelled for me, a fear of conflict; Dad was prone to angry outbursts, and I sometimes witnessed conflict between him and my oldest sister when she was in her teens. This frightened me: I remember fists banged on the dinner table, and violent threats made, though never carried through. Maybe it frightened Mum, too; I remember her always trying to smooth things over.

### ***Summary of "Lasting impact"***

As in the first section, the data extracts in this section illustrate the way in which themes overlap, within and across the major theme, even across the overarching themes which form the four section titles. The feeling of not being good enough is similar to, but not exactly the same as, the tendency towards being self-critical; the inability to handle conflict may be related to the lack of self-esteem, but also to bullying and humiliation in childhood, as well as the tendency towards internalizing; that is, the habit of assuming that we are the ones at fault, rather than the other. Sometimes participants themselves make a direct link between an adult behaviour or feeling, and a childhood memory; at other times, informed by the literature and my own reflections, as well as the participant's story, I make a connection. Several of the themes address participants' experiences within their families (both nuclear and extended), but I cannot

always separate these from the wider social contexts in which their families are embedded.

Another researcher might apply a specific theoretical framework, leading to a different grouping of the themes and sub-themes; I have tried, instead, to remain faithful to the participants' stories, and have consciously avoided fitting the stories to a single theoretical framework.

Certain elements of this section bring to mind Masters' concept of "emotional self-cannibalism": "The purely abstract self-harming: the grinding over your failures, the refusal to remember anything good" (2006, p. 121).

Although the relationship between parenting or the familial environment and adult outcomes continues to be debated, the participants in this study (including myself) see our childhood experiences as being directly linked to some of our long-term difficulties. This is not to say, necessarily, that we necessarily blame our parents; we are often able to see them as victims of victims, and as having done the best they could in the circumstances (see "Adult reflections", page 345, and "Denial", page 355). The next section of the discussion chapter, "Sociocultural aspects", addresses some of these circumstances.

\* \* \*

### **Dramatic interlude**

*Scene: The living room in ANGELA's home. ANGELA is seated at the table, her laptop open in front of her; her feet are resting on THE GRINDYLOW, curled up under the table. BABA YAGA, in miniature form, is captured behind the glass of a picture frame on the table. SOPHIA is sitting opposite ANGELA, still reading, and THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET is playing on the floor by ANGELA's side. THE CHORUS OF ACADEMICS is dozing on the sofa by the fire in the next room.*

ANGELA: *(Leans back from the laptop)* I don't know if I can do this. If I have a right to do this. If my story's legitimate.

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET: *(Rubbing her eyes)* I'm tired, and I'm lonely. *(Neither SOPHIA nor ANGELA answer her).*

SOPHIA: But it's not just your story, Angela. What about your participants? Your *twelve* participants?

ANGELA: Yes, you're right. Maybe I should just write about them? Re-write the thesis as a straightforward thematic analysis, or an interpretive phenomenological analysis, not an autoethnography. Write myself out of it *(ANGELA starts to look and sound relieved).*

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET *starts to cry. Again, neither takes any notice of her.*

SOPHIA: *(Incredulous)* Write yourself out of your own story? Would you do that?

ANGELA: Yes. No. I don't know!

*THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET* cries louder, and now SOPHIA and ANGELA notice, and turn to her.

ANGELA: (*Sharply*) What?

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET: What about *me*? Nobody's listening to *me*! You're just going to ignore me like you always do!

ANGELA: (*Shocked*) I'm sorry! I didn't mean to ignore you. Come here (*puts her arms out to THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET, and gathers her onto her lap*).

SOPHIA: Maybe you should stop doubting yourself, Angela, and start listening to The Little Girl with Big Feet. Time to stop doubting and start believing?

ANGELA: But that's just it—I can't stop doubting! This is where content and process merge—my whole PhD is an act of *showing* childhood emotional neglect, as well as *telling* it.

*THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET* starts sucking her thumb anxiously.

SOPHIA: I'm not sure I understand. Can you explain?

ANGELA: Well, for example, the fact that I'm doing my PhD now, in my fifties, when my children are grown and my husband's semi-retired, could be construed as an example what Gloria Steinem said in 1983; that the lives of women can sometimes be found "between the lines" of their writing (cited in Brettell, 1997, p. 236). I never thought I was clever enough, or that I was allowed to put my own needs before the family's needs, or that I could belong to that group of academics.

SOPHIA: And the feeling of not belonging? Can you say more about that?

ANGELA: Not belonging anywhere. Not feeling like I belonged in Psychology, because I don't have an undergraduate degree in Psychology; not feeling like I belonged with my PhD cohort because I was part-time to start with, and older, and married, and a mother. Not feeling like I belonged in Psychology because my methodology was so different from the cognitive, experimental psychology that a lot of the PhD students are engaged in at Keele. And that only got worse when Psychology moved from the Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMSS) research institute to the Faculty of Natural Sciences, part-way through my PhD.

SOPHIA: But surely that didn't make much difference?

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET: *(Takes her thumb out of her mouth long enough to say sulkily)* We didn't get invited to nice parties anymore.

SOPHIA: Nice parties?

ANGELA: (Laughs) She means, we didn't get invited to the creative, qualitative conferences or meetings that we used to hear about when Psychology was part of HUMSS. The environment changed around us; it felt like trying to dance in a world where everyone else was marching.

SOPHIA: But you've written about the justification for dancing, if you want to use that metaphor. Couldn't you have just danced anyway?

ANGELA: Maybe, if my experience of childhood emotional neglect hadn't left me prone to compulsive compliance, terribly uncomfortable with conflict, full of self-doubt. I wasn't brave enough. I wanted to please everyone; and I knew that I might end up pleasing no-one. Nothing I did was ever going to feel like it was enough—that's partly how I ended up with so many participants! Perhaps I should have written a self-study, like my heuristic MSc dissertation... but then, I needed the participants to help me see the parts of my own story that I couldn't even see myself, because of the very thing I was trying to study.

SOPHIA: Because being emotionally neglected as a child left you unable to recognise or name some of your feelings, as well as unable to trust your instinct sufficiently to argue for conducting and presenting your research the way you wanted to, creatively and dramatically?

ANGELA: Exactly. And I felt I had to lay some sacrifices at the altar of positivity, to appease the Gods of conventional research methods.

SOPHIA: “The Gods of...” Come on, now, Angela, you know there aren’t any “Gods of conventional research” really; they’re just in your head.

ANGELA: (*Quietly*) They’re very real in my head.

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET: (*Takes her thumb out of her mouth again*) Tell her ’bout the purple lady.

SOPHIA: The purple lady?

ANGELA: (*Laughs*) She means when I was in a café in town, talking to someone about the research, and a woman from another table came over to say she’d been listening, and what I’d said had made sense of her experience for her.

SOPHIA: Meaning...?

ANGELA: I think what The Little Girl with Big Feet is trying to say is that story-telling, talking creatively about the research, is powerful and meaningful; but while I felt able to do that away from the research office, inside the Psychology building I felt constrained, like I had to conform to some research-culture norm. Even if it was just in my head.

*BABA YAGA’s tiny hands are hammering on the glass of the photo frame; she seems to be trying to speak. ANGELA calmly and gently turns the photo frame face-down on the table.*



ANGELA: And it's not just in my head—when I sent an abstract for my MSc dissertation to BACP, they rejected it on the grounds that “there didn't appear to be any data”, because the data was what I had written in my reflective journals. And although a Qualitative Psychology Forum was established at Keele at about the same time as I started my PhD, the emphasis at the open day seemed to be on equipment for capturing qualitative data—audio and video recording equipment, spectacles with hidden cameras, high quality headphones for listening to interviews—confirming that there is still a prevailing belief, as Sarah Wall wrote in 2008, that data is external material, found outside ourselves, not within ourselves.

SOPHIA: But Wall wrote that paper over ten years ago. Sure things have changed since then?

ANGELA: (*Quietly*) It was only *six* years ago when I started my PhD. And no, I don't think things have changed much since then.

SOPHIA: So if you knew all that already, why on earth did you choose such a difficult methodology for a PhD?

ANGELA: Because it felt like the only honest way; I could not write objectively about childhood emotional neglect, as if it didn't concern me, as if it wasn't my story. And I couldn't write totally freely, without any reference to conventional notions of truth or objectivity, as if I hadn't grown up in the 1960s, with positivist attitudes to science and knowledge deeply engrained. Autoethnography was the methodological approach that

seemed to give me permission to try, even if there was ultimately a risk of failing, to balance those tensions with the desire to write creatively, to change hearts as well as minds, to provoke action. In the end, the reader/audience will have to decide whether I succeeded, or failed.

\* \* \*

### **Section 3: Sociocultural aspects**

*Major themes: Intergenerational aspects; Cultural expectations/norms; Family circumstances.*

(See Appendix B, page 437, for models of themes and sub-themes).

Although the main focus of this autoethnography is the felt sense of childhood emotional neglect, I chose this methodology because I wanted to go beyond the individual experience and examine it in its social, cultural and historical context. During their individual interviews, participants provided me with rich and detailed information about their sociocultural backgrounds, resulting in the major themes, “Intergenerational aspects”; “Cultural expectations/norms”; and “Family circumstances”. In the model of the major themes (Figure 6), I grouped these together under the umbrella term, “Sociocultural aspects”. This third section of the discussion chapter corresponds to these sociocultural themes.

There may be differences between the way that mothers and fathers behave towards sons and daughters (Endendijk et al., 2016), or the way that girls and boys experience or respond to childhood emotional neglect (Glaser, 2002, p. 711). There are also different cultural expectations of mothers and fathers, to some extent depending on the way in which gendered roles are constructed in different societies (Hays, 1996). I could have created a separate theme for “gender”; however, I was concerned that focusing on gender might take me too far from the felt sense of childhood emotional neglect, so I chose to make only limited reference to this.

I had to make difficult decisions about how to group some of the themes and sub-themes; once again, I have tried to remain true to the participants’ stories and my

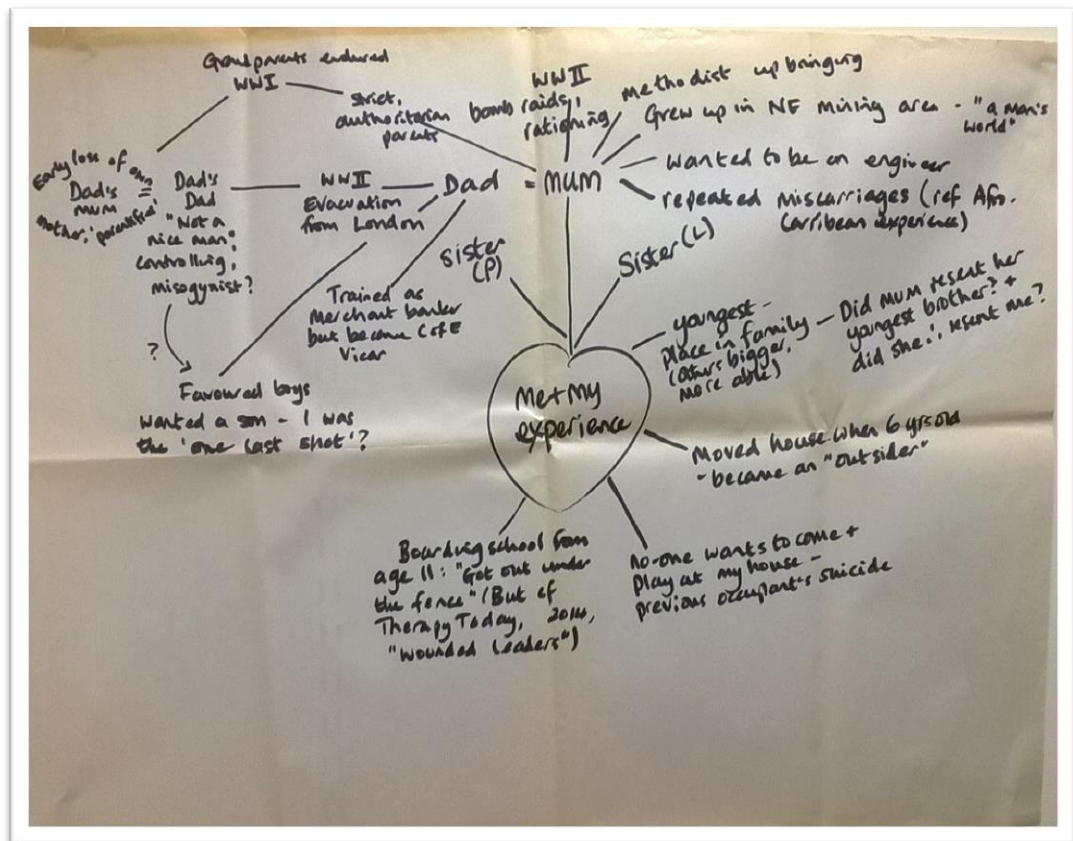
interpretations of them, rather than being over-influenced by the literature or psychological theories.

**Major theme: Intergenerational aspects**

*Themes: Parents passed on what they experienced; Parents' own struggles; The intergenerational conundrum*

The intergenerational aspect of my own experience of childhood emotional neglect became apparent early on. Between recording and analysing the bracketing interview, and recording the first individual participant interview, I reflected on my experiences in a mind-map (see Figure 14). I started with “me and my experience” at the centre of the page, and worked outwards; by the time I had finished, I realised I had written far more about my parents’ experiences than my own.

Figure 14: Mind map (15/10/14)



Fragments of stories that I had been told over the years came back to me. My mother, who rarely criticised other adults in front of me and encouraged me to be “nice” to others, once said that my father’s father, who died before I was born, was “not a nice man”. I know that my father’s maternal grandmother had died, when his mother, my Nanna, was quite young; when her father re-married and had further children, Nanna, as the oldest daughter, was expected to bring up the younger children (but nobody ever said, “That must have been hard for her”). I suspect that my father was something of a misogynist; or perhaps he just held an unconscious bias, which may have been typical for a generation brought up by parents who themselves lived through the introduction of votes for women.

I know that my grandparents would have endured WWI, though I know nothing about their experience of it; it wasn’t talked about. I also know that my parents were young teenagers when WWII broke out; Mum grew up in a mining area in the North East of England close to the docks and industrial areas that were frequently targeted in air-raids; Dad wasn’t evacuated from his London home, though his younger brother was. What effect did that have on them? One of the few wartime memories that Mum shared was about her younger brother taking “the family’s entire sugar ration in one cup of tea”; another was that they got cracked eggs from the farm, so they were lucky. They never talked about what it felt like to have bombs fall around them. Now, I find that omission revealing.

Mum had a strict Methodist childhood; her father was head teacher in the local primary school and a lay preacher in the chapel. Mum was the oldest of three; I know that she

often resented her youngest brother, who came in with his friends and bounced on her bed when she was a teenager, and may have been indulged, as the youngest. She grew up in a North East mining area, a “man’s world”, and described herself as being surrounded by men. She wanted to be an engineer, but engineering was not considered a suitable career for a woman, and she was encouraged to become a teacher instead. Another story, told only once, briefly, was that Mum had suffered a number of miscarriages before my oldest sister was born; these repeated losses, or the experience of war-time losses, may have made it harder for her to invest in us emotionally (Hays, 1996, p. 24). All these events and circumstances are likely to have shaped my parents in some way or other; the same is true for the parents of each of my participants.

Since Fraiberg, Adelson, and Shapiro (1975), it has been recognised in the literature that patterns of parenting or caregiving behaviour may be passed down from one

“She never used to hug me or anything, and she said that her mum was the same with her.”

(Heather)

generation to the next. I do not mean to suggest that children who are maltreated will inevitably go on to maltreat their own children, as this is clearly not always the case (see “Reflecting on having own children”, page 351). However, I do believe that when we look back with understanding and compassion, we can often

see that harsh or emotionally disengaged parents experienced harsh or emotionally disengaged childhoods themselves (Howe 2005, p. 91), although Howe includes emotional abuse as well as emotional neglect in his concept of psychological maltreatment; and Fearon et al. (2014) suggest a genetic explanation for attachment styles.

### *Parents passed on what they experienced*

Although there frequent references in the literature to emotional neglect being passed down from generation to generation (Assel et al., 2002; Buckholdt et al., 2014 Cori, 2010; Gerhardt, 2015; Howe, 2005; Serbin & Karp, 2005; Webb, 2013), there is often little detail of what that looks like, sounds like, feels like, from the inside. This is what I wanted to know: How do we carry emotional neglect within ourselves, and hand it down? This is harder to find in the literature. There is also an apparent contradiction, in that grandparents are sometimes described as a positive feature in the participants' childhood (Yorgason, Padilla-Walker, & Jackson, 2011); I explore this below (page 290).

I did not specifically ask about the intergenerational aspect in participant interviews, but I was attuned and listening for it: and it was there. Participants themselves often recognised that emotional neglect was a pattern that had been passed down the generations; during the analysis phase, I frequently created codes or themes such as: "Parents had difficult/strict upbringing themselves", "Grandparents critical/distant/reserved/formal". At the start of her interview, Heather comments that her mother recently apologised to her for the fact that "she never used to hug me or anything", adding, "she said that her mum was the same with her".

Cathy, too, says of her mother: "Her mum was—when you say about this not, not being emotional, her mum was very like that, she was very ladylike, she was very genteel", adding that she doesn't remember "any emotion from my grandmother, none at all; she was very distant". David acknowledges that his father's experience might have been

even worse than his own: “I’ve heard how my Grandad was towards my Dad: he was quite an abusive person, as well, and I think my Dad’s probably experienced more childhood neglect than I ever had”.

It is important to note, however, that these are all adult reflections, and that we did not, as children, have this adult perspective and understanding available to us; we just experienced the hurt, and the sense that something was not right (see “Inner wisdom”, page 339).

Mum never directly criticised her parents; I believe she idolised her father. But some of her stories hinted at harsh, authoritarian, or controlling parents:

I’ve just had my fourth baby [I remember], and Mum has been to stay to help me out for the first few days after the birth. She’s made us some cheese and pickle sandwiches for lunch, and as she puts them on the table, she says, “I don’t know if they’ll be alright.” I’m astonished. She always had a tendency to apologise as she put a meal on the table: This might be overdone, or that might be underdone, and she hopes there’s enough salt/not too much salt in the gravy. I’d noticed this a while ago; I’ve also noticed that I have a tendency to do it, too, and I’m trying to change. But—sandwiches! “Mum!” I say, “It’s cheese and pickle sandwiches! What can you possibly have done wrong?” We talk a little about praise and criticism. She explains, “When I was growing up, my Mum and Dad would only make a comment if I was doing something wrong; if I was getting it right, they wouldn’t say anything.” She used to play the organ for the local chapel, and she tells me: “I hated it if people came and told me I’d



done well. I used to long for them to say nothing; then I'd know that I was playing well." This is a revelation. (Reflective journal, 18/10/14).

This links the intergeneration theme with preceding themes, such as the lack of direct praise (see "Not seen, not heard", page 180, and "Not good enough", page 255). This conversation helped me to make sense of some childhood experiences, at least in my head; it has proved harder to heal the wound that they left in my heart.

Mum's childhood stories were usually about events, rarely about feelings; she never showed distress or any other emotion as she told them. She would recount the most distressing anecdote with a grin or a chuckle; Webb (2013), too, describes her emotionally neglected clients whose memories tend to be "events rather than feelings" (p. 202), and who typically tell "emotionally intense stories in a way that is completely devoid of emotional content" (ibid, p. 204).

Whilst expressing caution about assuming cause and effect, Bögels and Brechman-Toussaint (2006) suggest that a parent's beliefs about their own ability to control a situation, or their interpretation of a child's behaviour (for example, as more negative than it actually is), may lead to them becoming over-controlling; so perhaps parents who lack confidence, or are anxious about their social standing, may over-compensate by exercising over-harsh discipline. Parents who were themselves emotionally neglected in childhood, doubting their effectiveness, or lacking a sense of belonging and connectedness, may therefore become over-controlling parents.

The authoritarian parenting style of the Victorian and Edwardian eras is described as cold, unloving, distant, or controlling, involving withdrawal of affection to discipline children (Miller, 1979/1997, p. 9; Russell et al., 2004; Webb, 2013), linking this theme to the following major theme, “Cultural expectations/norms”, where I explore some of the cultural norms that possibly influenced our parents and their behaviour towards us, or directly affected us.

Those of us who are older, or had older parents, may have been affected by this parenting style being passed down without question from one generation to another. Webb (2013) describes “perfectly good people, loving their child, doing their best, while passing on accidental, invisible, potentially damaging patterns” to their children (p. 12), and suggests that the most common group of emotionally neglecting parents is the “well-meaning-but-neglected-themselves” (ibid, p. 65).

Finlay describes a family history of loss and separation on his mother’s side, potentially leading to a legacy of emotional neglect: “My mother’s mother was born in the 1890s, her mother died during childbirth, or shortly afterwards, so this was my grandmother; she never had a mother”. Finlay explains that his grandmother was brought up by relatives, but that when her father remarried, his grandmother was “taken back and left standing on the dining room table—she was just dumped on the dining room table with her stuff, and just left,” as Finlay explains, “with a father, who by all accounts was a bit of a tyrant, and not really a pleasant man and, again, she probably didn’t know him well”.

Cori (2010) suggests that mothering is partly instinctive, or passed from one generation to the next “by women who were well-mothered themselves” (p. 3); but acknowledges that some aspects of mothering may be learnt (although Hays argues that much of what we consider instinctive mothering is actually culturally constructed; 1996, p. 72). Finlay’s story shows how a family history of loss and separation—through no-one’s deliberate fault—may leave a woman without a model of mothering to learn from. This prompted a reflection:

Tearful while reviewing discussion chapter. If you know how (to love your children)—fine. But what if you don’t know how, and have to learn? You need to break it down into steps. People tell me, “Oh, just love your children.” But how? How is it done? (Reflective journal, 15/09/17).

### *Parents’ own struggles*

During the analysis phase, this theme included codes or themes that I created such as, “Parents’ own childhood losses/abuse/distress”, “Parents’ self-harm”, “Parents’/grandparents’ relationship problems”, and “Parents don’t feel good enough”. Some of these themes have travelled from one grouping to another; at one point I saw some of these as aspects of our unique family circumstances (the third of the three major themes in this section), but when I revisited the data for a complete re-analysis, I decided that the individual participant stories suggested this theme belonged to the intergenerational theme. My justification for this is that our parents’ struggles often relate to their own unmet childhood needs, so may reflect the way in which emotional neglect can be handed down from one generation to the next. Parents may be God-like

in their children's eyes, but if they can't acknowledge their power, they may be unable to facilitate their children's development of a sense of self, autonomy, and power.

At times, Harriet uses the words "cruel", "selfish", or "manipulative" to describe her mother, yet I feel there are glimpses of the wounded, vulnerable child inside her mother, like a Russian doll: "[Mum] wants it from every way, she wants to—there is *never* enough. Nobody will ever be good enough, and there is never enough".

Figure 15: Russian doll



Whereas the securely attached adult is no longer preoccupied with "getting other people to see or support them" (Cori, 2010, p. 45), and can therefore focus on meeting the needs of others, if our infant attachment needs are not met, they may remain a significant preoccupation throughout adulthood (ibid).

Rachel recounts a conversation with her father in which he tried to explain to her some of his own understanding of why he found it hard to be affectionate. He'd lost his own father when he was ten years old, and was put into care, whilst his brother stayed at home, "So he'd lost out on a lot in his kind of family".

Howe suggests that "unresolved childhood losses and traumas" may prompt parents to be hostile towards their children (2005, p. 97). Rachel's father not only lost his own father at a young age, he then suffered the further traumatic loss of being sent from

home, a trauma potentially magnified by the fact that his brother stayed at home. There may have been very sound practical reasons why this had to happen; Rachel does not specify whether her father's brother was older or younger, or more vulnerable in some other way at the time (for example, because of illness). It may have seemed incomprehensible to a ten-year-old boy; perhaps Rachel's father made sense of it in the only way he could, and carried the invisible scar into adulthood.

Alan hinted at a past trauma in his father's family, but one that was not talked about openly: he says of his paternal grandfather that "there was a rumour—of course, we don't talk about the family—that his mother committed suicide, but I've never been able to confirm that", adding, "I don't have good relations with my father particularly".

Not talking about what were considered painful or shameful events in front of children was the norm when I was growing up; it probably was for Alan, too. Suicide was a criminal offence in the UK until 1961, so it is perhaps understandable if it was only spoken about in hushed tones or behind closed doors. However, the impact on Alan may have been that he felt disconnected from part of his family story. There may have been a pervading sense of shame in the family, which as a child he sensed, but could not fully understand.

Another factor indicated by the field of epigenetics is that parents' altered genes, in response to trauma in their lives, may be inherited by their children (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 162). So the impact of suicide, separation, or war, famine, or other trauma, whether unique to a family or experienced by a whole community, may be passed on to subsequent generations not only through ways of relating, but also through our genes.

Cori (2010) suggests that mothers who emotionally neglect their children may themselves be undermothered, either women who are holding unprocessed trauma in their bodies, or the daughters of women carrying unprocessed trauma (p. 94). What seems to be significant is whether or not the mother has been able to recover from her traumatic experience, rather than the nature of the event (ibid; Howe, 2005, p. 97). I found this particularly telling, especially as most of the participants described their parents as avoiding, or being uncomfortable with, strong emotions, indicating a potential difficulty in processing painful emotional events or trauma. This may indicate an intergenerational legacy of problems around mentalising (Fonagy et al., 2007, p. 297), which in turn may be linked to the ability to empathise (Lieberman, 2015).

One intriguing theme was that of parents being in competition with their children. This may seem strange; parents, as adults, are clearly more powerful than their children, so there is no need for them to feel threatened or to compete. However, it does make sense if we consider our parents to be struggling with their own feelings of not being good enough. Finlay puzzled over his sense that he and his brothers “didn’t measure up” (see page 214). Despite a sense that there was “this kind of expectation on us to do these kind of things” (the sort of professional jobs that were the norm in his mother’s social circle), Finlay feels that at the same time, “she was making sure that none of us would ever—I may be being really twisted here! (Laughs)—but it’s almost like she brought us up to make sure that none of us would outshine her.”

Finlay questions his interpretation, yet I have a sense of a truth here. Fonagy et al. (2007) assume minimal competitive pressures in the parent-child relationship (that is,

the norm is for parents not to be in competition with their children), enabling the development of the “subjective self” (p. 299); this may not have been the case for Finlay. In evolutionary terms, withdrawal and depression may be a survival strategy, as defeat is preferable to death; so perhaps “a child who is devalued and criticised will also accept his low status in order to survive” (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 143). This may explain the self-limiting, playing safe, and low aspirations described by some participants.

\* \* \*

### **The fog**

I’m in the fog again, cold, lost, confused. I don’t know the way through this discussion. There are so many stories that I could include to illustrate the themes, to light the path, and I don’t know for sure which are the “right” ones to choose. There are so many theoretical frameworks that I could apply, and I don’t know which ones will lay the surest path across the marsh.

There are some familiar landmarks, though. Here’s one: Alice talks about how she felt her mother was in competition with Alice and her sister. That has a familiar ring to it. I stop, and spend a little while with this thought. I don’t know if I ever used those words to describe my own experience, but I could.

When our oldest daughter was born, labour was induced, not because I had gone any length of time over my due date but for the sake of hospital politics. When my husband phoned my parents to tell them that they had become grandparents for the first time, the

first thing Mum said was, “At least I waited until I had my third before I had to be induced!” At the time, I felt crushed. She probably did say “Well done!” and “How lovely!” and all the conventional things, too, but they were overshadowed by the sense of her saying, down the line from all those miles away: “Ha! I won!”

Now, in the light of my new understanding of childhood emotional neglect, and the way that it may be passed from one generation to the next, I have a slightly different view of this exchange. The fog is lifting a little, and I can see more clearly. If, as I now believe, my mother experienced childhood emotional neglect herself, she, like me, will almost certainly have spent the rest of her life not feeling good enough, and therefore always trying to be better, just to be enough.

\* \* \*

Reflecting on his psychotherapy practice in a series of case histories, Grosz (2014) suggests that parents “often envy our children their treasures—growing physical and mental strength, liveliness, joy, material comforts. But above all else, we envy our children their potential” (p. 92). However, this is an unconscious envy, below the level of awareness, and therefore is often expressed as a criticism or a deflating comment, or a complaint that a child is unappreciative: “You don’t know how lucky you are,” or “I never had such-and-such like this” (ibid), both of which I heard as a child.

I know that I have sometimes experienced this very same emotion. I have found myself thinking these very same words; it has taken a conscious act of will not to voice them. With the benefit of counselling training, learning to allow uncomfortable or



undesirable emotions into awareness, with better understanding, with more self-acceptance, and a greater ability to get my attachment needs met in a healthy way, I find I am more able to rejoice in my children's opportunities and successes, their abilities and their experiences. Now, I can think to myself: "I'm so glad you're able to make use of the opportunities I didn't have; or had, but didn't make use of because of a fear of failure." This may simply not be possible for some emotionally neglecting parents.

Between having my first two children and my third, I became familiar with Liedloff's *continuum concept* (1975/1989, p. 34). The basic principle of the concept, that babies have evolved to survive, and can be trusted to grow up into responsible adults without excessive discipline or instruction, challenged my learnt behaviour as a parent. I had grown up with sayings such as "Spare the rod and spoil the child" (although I don't actually remember being beaten, just the occasional smack), and "Making a rod for your own back" (for example, picking up babies every time they cry); "Toddler Taming" (Green, 1992) was still recommended reading when my oldest was an infant, linking this theme to the next major theme in this section, "Cultural expectations/norms" (page 294). My maternal instincts were buried deep; yet they were there. Even at the time I was conscious of how difficult I found it to leave my oldest daughter to "cry it out": although I continued to do so, like Miranda's mother (page 296), because I believed it was correct.

By the time I read Liedloff, I was training to use counselling skills in a voluntary role and learning about client-centred counselling (Rogers, 1951). Liedloff's continuum concept felt like a good fit with this, and with my lived experience of becoming a

mother. Through the experience of giving birth to and breastfeeding my four children, I learnt to trust my body, which I had been taught was untrustworthy, and I learnt to trust my children to take responsibility for themselves in a way that I don't think would otherwise have been possible for me.

However, modern, Western industrialized societies are not continuum-correct societies (Liedloff, 1975/1989, p. 141); and children need to be socialised into their own society (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 66; Lieberman, 2015). This makes the task of parenting very difficult; there is a danger of the pendulum swinging too far in one direction or the other as we try to correct what we perceive as the mistakes of our parents' generation (Grosz, 2014, p. 20; Webb, 2013, p. 19).

Fearon et al. (2014) argue for a genetic component to attachment styles in adolescence; however, I have chosen not to explore this in detail as it would take me too far from the central question of what emotional neglect feels like to the child growing up, and it would require an entirely different kind of study. One aspect of this, however, is the possibility that some infants are actually more sensitive than others. Variations of the serotonin gene appear to make individuals more, or less, sensitive to harsh or emotionally neglectful treatment (see page 148), leading to greater, or lesser, vulnerability to depression or other adverse consequences in adulthood; so-called "orchids" and "dandelions" (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 35). Research in this area suggests that, given optimal parenting, the more sensitive infant will show no more vulnerability to adverse consequences in adulthood than an individual with the less sensitive version of the gene; it is the genetic make-up of the individual, in combination with the environment, which produces a given outcome (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 166). Again,

although this seems relevant to the current study, I have chosen not to explore it in detail.

### *The intergenerational conundrum*

The “Intergenerational aspects” theme presents an apparent contradiction. I argue above that parents may pass on what they have experienced to their own children; yet in the final section of this discussion chapter, “Perspectives”, I have created a theme for “Grandparents positive” (page 334). However, this suggests a simplicity that is far from the truth. Grandparents were not always experienced as close, warm and supportive; and even when they were perceived as warm by their grandchildren, they may have been harsh or distant towards their own children, the participants’ parents. The relationships may be complex, and complicated by any number of factors in the wider family environment, the sociocultural context of the family, and external events.

David describes feeling simply disconnected from his paternal grandmother, who was ill at the time of his interview:

My Dad, he’s worried that she could go any time, and he wants me to ... see her one more time, I told him, uh... You see, I do not want to say that I’m not close to her, I don’t really want to go, but I feel that is my responsibility to go, because she was there when I was young, and so I told him I will go, but it’s just—a bit weird, like, she says she’ll happily die when she sees me, and I’m just like, but why?

For Alice, visiting her maternal grandparents was a source of stress and distress, because of the bullying she experienced from her uncle whilst there; and she describes her mother as having had a strict background (see page 172). Alice herself expresses frustration that her mother doesn't seem to have been able to reflect on her childhood experiences, and behave differently towards Alice and her siblings (see page 351).

Although Rachel experienced her grandparents as warm, affectionate and playful towards her, she also remembers:

That was my Mum's mum, I mean they've never had a close—my Nana's died now, but, when my Mum left my Dad, they kind of sided with Dad, and I just don't think they ever really got over the fact that she behaved the way she did . . . because they used to say: "But you've got everything!" . . . They just thought she had everything.

This may link to the idea of parents envying their children their opportunities and successes (page 287); grandchildren may somehow be exempt from their grandparents' envy.

During his interview, Muhammed puzzles over his memory of his paternal grandparents as loving and playful, whilst their son, his father, was so harsh and critical towards him:

My father's mum was very loving and very caring and like unconditional love-giver, and I think it was the only time in life . . . it was the only time that I

experienced unconditional love, from my grandmother, the mother of my father. So I don't know, how did he grow up in that family, and turn into such a—you know, terrible person? And my grandfather was also—the father of my father was also very, er, like funny, and like he was making jokes, and he was very loving figure as well.

So if Muhammed's grandparents were warm and affectionate, why wasn't their son? Perhaps the answer lies partly in the concept of "multiple selves" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9), or configurations of self, rather than a unitary self; we may behave in different ways in different situations, or in relation to different people (Mearns & Thorne, 2013, p. 31). In particular, a parent's unprocessed childhood trauma (see page 285) may trigger a strong emotional response, often expressed as hostility, only during interactions with their own children (Fraiberg et al., 1975; Howe, 2005, p. 97). If, for example, parents are anxious about their ability to control their children, it may lead to them becoming harsh and over-controlling (Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006); they may feel less directly responsible for their grandchildren's behaviour, and therefore be more relaxed.

Perhaps there is another explanation, linked to the theme of "Change and Growth" (page 360). Reflecting on the apparent contradiction, Muhammed says of his paternal grandfather:

I don't know how he was when he was young, but in that age, when I met him, he was very funny and like, cool guy, he wasn't controlling or something like

that . . . he was beyond 60, so he was very like—no critics, accepting everybody as they are, and providing unconditional love.

Perhaps Muhammed's grandparents were harsh and controlling with his father, or emotionally absent because of trauma or stress, but with time, maturity, or changing circumstances, they may have changed and developed as individuals. Alternatively, perhaps his grandparents were influenced by a social construction of the role of "grandparent", just as women, and men, may be influenced by social constructions of "mother", and "father". Muhammed hints at this when he says, "As well, I think, kind of what grandparents are for . . . for me, the grandmother figure was unconditional love-givers, and caretakers". If ideas about motherhood or parenting that seem intuitive are actually internalized messages from our culture of origin (Hays, 1996, p. 72), this may hold true for grandparents, too.

Another aspect of this puzzle is the participants' own beliefs about parenting. One of the sub-themes of "Adult reflections" is "Reflecting on having own children" (page 351). Those of us who are parents describe ways we have consciously chosen *not* to behave with our own children; those who are not yet parents express a strong desire to behave differently. This appears to directly contradict the theory of cold or emotionally distant parenting or attachment styles as intergenerational (page 275). The explanation may be related to unprocessed trauma (see page 285); the participants in this study may naturally have a more reflective nature, or may have had access to more fictional writing, which is thought to facilitate the development of mentalisation and empathy (Kottler, 2015, p. 41).

There is another piece in the puzzle; the “missing” piece. My focus is on the absences, the things that were missing from our childhoods. Whilst we may be able to identify actions or behaviours that we want to avoid recreating for our children, it’s harder to know what was missing, and provide that for our children, if we never experienced it.

Looking beyond the individual, attitudes towards children and ideas about parenting have changed (see page 297). We may simply be fortunate to have access to more theoretical knowledge about human behaviour; in the 1920s, when my parents were born, Freud was still developing his theories, and Carl Rogers was still in training. Our parents may not have been able to allow painful feelings into awareness, but we now live in a culture where this is more widely (though by no means universally) acceptable, enabling us to reflect on our childhood experiences, which may in turn help us to avoid recreating them for our children.

In summary, then, parents seem likely to pass on to their children what they experienced, unless they have had an opportunity to reflect on and process negative experiences; the grandparent-grandchild relationship may be fundamentally different to the parent-child relationship; and we do not remain fixed as individuals, but are constantly in process, influenced by the society around us, our own changing circumstances, including fluctuating levels of stress and income, degree of maturity, and knowledge.

***Major theme: Cultural expectations/norms***

*Themes: Childbirth/childrearing practices; Maternal role; Father’s role; Parents & work*

In the second major theme under “Sociocultural aspects”, I have brought together a number of themes which seem to relate to culturally constructed values, roles and practices. Particularly during the focus group, though also during individual interviews, participants often reflected, without prompting, on the sociocultural and historical contexts of their childhoods. There is sufficient material here for a separate thesis; I have chosen to keep the discussion of these areas relatively brief, although the theme of childbirth and childrearing practices is of particular interest to me. There is also considerable overlap with other themes and major themes; for example, I could just have easily have placed some of the participants’ references to childrearing beliefs under “Intergenerational aspects”.

### *Childbirth/childrearing practices*

There are two strands in this theme; the hospital and childbirth practices that were current at different periods, and general childrearing advice, including prevailing attitudes towards children (Hays, 1996; Hendrick, 2016).

As a breastfeeding counsellor for a major UK pregnancy, childbirth and parenting charity, I read widely about childbirth and childrearing practices, and learnt to critique current beliefs and practices in the light of what I learnt from other communities around the world, including those less influenced by industrialization and modern Western lifestyles. I heard scores of parents-to-be express their hopes and fears about impending parenthood, frequently including the desire not to repeat what they had experienced from their own parents, not to turn into their mothers or fathers. I spent time with hundreds of mother-and-baby dyads in the early days and weeks of their life together; and watched many of those babies grow into toddlers, school children, and



eventually young adults, enabling me to witness their interactions with their parents as the whole family grew and developed over time. All of this has inevitably informed my thinking whilst conducting this research; though most of it will not make its way directly into the thesis.

In their individual interviews, participants referred to the child-rearing practices and advice of the day, and the impact that these may have had on us as infants. Miranda says that: “Mum was of the view that if the baby cried, you put it in the pram down the shed for, you know, it was wrong to pick it up, because you would spoil it”; this was common practice at the time (Howe, 2005, p. 91).

In the first bracketing interview, I explain that I was born during a period when “if babies were born in hospital, they tended to be separated from their mothers for the first

“She was told not to hold me because I would smell the milk and it would upset me.”

(Miranda)

couple of weeks and only brought to them for feeding.” Both Miranda and I believe that this practice of leaving babies to cry and separating babies from their mothers may have had a lasting impact on our ability to form a secure attachment. As discussed above (see Heather’s story in “Not shown love”, page 182), the evidence of

neuroscience appears to be that this is a very stressful situation for an infant. Being left alone to cry potentially “undermines the baby’s confidence in the parent and in the world”; the only options left to an infant in are to cry louder, or withdraw (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 111).

Bowlby acknowledges the interactive nature of attachment, suggesting that the infant may initiate and influence attachment (1967/1979, p. 203); this may be relevant for those of us who were born in hospital at a time when babies were routinely separated from their mothers, as we may not have been able to give our mothers sufficient cues to trigger their attachment to us. Bowlby theorises that humans have evolved to be sociable, and begin to interact with others from birth (p. 216), and that infants develop attachments towards those who are emotionally attuned and responsive, whether or not those individuals meet the infant's physical needs (p. 217). However, he also acknowledges that the baby's personality, or condition at birth, may affect how the mother perceives her baby (p. 341); and the mother (or primary caregiver) brings her own personality, personal history of family relationships, and cultural beliefs and practices to her interactions with her baby, which in turn may affect how she responds (p. 342).

It may be unfair to expect our parents, who were new parents in the 1950s or 1960s (or 1990s, in the case of the younger participants) to have parented us in the way that we might now choose to bring up our own children. Parenting styles, beliefs, and expert advice have all changed over the past 60 years (Hays, 1996; Hendrick, 2016). I know that I have been influenced by books such as *The Secret of Happy Children* and *Raising Boys* (Biddulph, 1998a, 1998b). Reading *The Continuum Concept* (Liedloff, 1975/1989) changed my whole attitude to children (see page 213); and I have learnt a lot from accessible psychological texts such as *Families and How to Survive Them* (Skynner & Cleese, 1983). My father commented once that my children were lucky, because his generation didn't have access to such resources; I think this may have been

intended as a rare compliment, indirect praise of my mothering; though I couldn't help hearing it as envy.

Attachment theory emphasises the importance of physical affection and eye contact in promoting healthy infant development, especially the growth of the “social, emotionally intelligent brain” (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 59). Yet at various periods, child care experts have advocated a parenting style which appears to instruct parents to deliberately withhold the physical affection and loving eye contact that babies need to thrive.

Alan was aware that such a parenting style was prevalent during his infancy: he refers to Truby King, “who was writing books about bringing up children based on his experience of farm animals or something; children should be kept outdoors all the time, and not shown any affection”. Alan does not know for sure that his mother followed Truby King's advice, but he reflects in the interview that, as a healthcare professional, “she might well have read his works as part of her training”. So some of Alan's experience may have resulted from his mother following the recommended best practice at the time, an example of “unintentional” neglect (Friedman & Billick, 2015, p. 254).

Similarly, during her individual interview, Miranda acknowledges that in not holding her, her mother was following the recommendations of the time: “It was 1970 . . . and if you weren't breastfeeding, you know, baby stayed down in the nursery”.

Her mother had decided not to breastfeed, after a previously unsuccessful attempt with

Figure 16: Angela in pram



Miranda’s brother, so she “was told not to hold me because I would smell the milk and it would upset me; so I get that”. Normal practice at the time was for new mothers to have two weeks in hospital after giving birth, so Miranda assumes that for “the first two weeks of my life I wasn’t anywhere near her.”

Again, in the focus group, Miranda emphasised that her mother was doing what she believed was correct. Once home from hospital, her mother followed the current practice of “putting us down the garden or down in the shed when we cried, because she was told that was the thing—that was what she thought she had to do”.

I know that I spent many hours in my pram, apparently content to lie down when I wanted to sleep, and sit up when I was awake, as my mother used to tell me with great pride. She was not being deliberately cruel in leaving me alone in my pram; it was the norm—and I think it also suited her circumstances at the time.

I have frequently asked myself, over the past five years, was it her, or was it me? I explored this in the third bracketing interview:

In other words, was it something about my birth in hospital at a time when babies were separated from mothers, that meant when Mum eventually took me home . . . I was already—I already had a barrier up, of “Don’t worry about me, I can manage,” because that’s what I’d had to do in the first two weeks? So—you know . . . I have asked, “Was it her, or was it me?”

According to attachment theory, babies are hard-wired to develop a close bond with their primary carer, whether their mother or another from the close family circle (Bowlby, 1969/1997, p. 216). This may suggest that when a baby fails to form attachment, it is probably because the mother has been unattuned or unresponsive, either because she is psychologically unable to be, or because she has been physically prevented, whether by illness, or by hospital practices. Developing a detached or avoidant attachment style may then be a defence against the pain of rejection; according to Cori (2010), children may “turn away because it hurts too much to turn toward another and not be met” (p. 81). Recent developments in the neuroscience of social pain and physical pain seem to add weight to this argument (Lieberman, 2015).

According to Cori (2010), mothers may “turn away out of their own wounding. Mother and child can get into a state of mirroring each other in which both are rejecting the other, building walls in response to the other’s walls or unavailability” (p. 82). This brought tears, when I read it:

I just feel so sad, reading Cori; children turning away in hurt from mother because they can’t bear the pain of not being met, and mothers feeling hurt—

“they turn away out of their own wounding”—overwhelmed with sorrow. What a tragedy! So much loss. (Reflective journal, 19/09/17).

As well as the effect of early interactions between mother and baby, and the way these may have been interrupted by hospital practices of routine separation, general beliefs and attitudes towards children may have been an influence. Webb (2013) suggests that “authoritarian parents” may be “rule-bound, restrictive and punitive” and follow “inflexible and unbending” child-rearing practices, as indicated by the popular sayings, “Children should be seen and not heard” and “Spare the rod and spoil the child” (p. 19). A “Baby Boomer” (born between 1946 and 1964) or older is like to have been brought up by authoritarian parents (ibid); some of the participants in this study were born during the Baby Boomer period, and others were born to parents who were born during that period.

Despite a rise in awareness of baby-led regimes and attachment parenting, popular child-care gurus still advocate inflexible, insensitive regimes. The highly popular *The Contented Little Baby Book* (Ford, 1999) advocated a hands-off, strictly regimented approach to baby care; the Channel 4 documentary, *Bringing up Baby*, first aired in the UK in 2007, was widely criticised for potentially causing harm to infants who were subjected to the “controlled crying” approach for the programme (Winterman, 2007).

More recently, Rachel Waddilove, described variously as a “leading maternity expert” and “maternity nurse to the stars”, is quoted in a newspaper article as saying that mothers have “lost the plot” in following baby-led regimes such as demand feeding and attachment parenting (Hughes, 2016). “Babies mustn’t think the world revolves around

them,” according to Waddilove; and “babies need to learn to be on their own” (ibid). In fact, thinking that the world revolves around them may be precisely what babies need, although toddlers and older children undoubtedly benefit from a wider perspective; and being on their own may be the worst possible fate for babies (Gerhardt, 2015).

Gerhardt (2015) acknowledges that it may challenge a prevailing discourse to say that parenting, especially mothering, is important, as this appears to fly in the face the women’s liberation agenda and the fight for equality. Mothers experience competing and contradictory pressures, both external, from the media, from child-rearing experts, from their local communities or families; and internal, from conflicting desires to live up to their own idealised versions of motherhood, whilst at the same time continuing to pursue whatever career paths or lifestyle choices they made pre-children (Ekinsmyth, Elmhirst, Holloway, & Jarvis, 2004; Hays, 1996). Being baby-led may be desirable from the baby’s point of view, and “intensive mothering” (Hays, 1996, p. 6) may be the current cultural norm in the Northern hemisphere; but this can make it hard for women to satisfy their own need to engage in the adult world outside the home, especially in a society which is generally so child-unfriendly, and where workplace norms make it difficult for parents to combine work and family life.

### *Maternal role*

In the first bracketing interview, I acknowledged my own bias, that I believe the mother-child bond and the maternal role to be the most significant in childhood: “I might not be right, but my feeling is that it’s the maternal relationship that is the most important . . . biologically, that is the norm”; although Hays (1996) argues that

worldwide, it is more usual for the care of infants to be carried out jointly by women and older children, rather than the child's mother (p. 20). Attachment theory has been criticised for over-emphasising the mother-child bond, which may have been a particular preoccupation either for Bowlby or for men of his generation and social class (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 109); although Bowlby does acknowledge that even when the biological mother is present, an infant may choose others from the extended family as primary caregivers (1969/1997, p. 305).

Despite footnotes which make it clear that "mother" stands for anyone who takes on the mothering role, and that this may be the father, much of what is written about parenthood tends to share this bias towards the maternal role. Cori (2010) writes that "the impact of Mother is unparalleled" and that without a mother who is "attentive, capable, caring", children are at a disadvantage (p. 3). Webb (2013) refers fairly evenly to "parents" throughout most of her writing, yet highlights the crucial importance of the mother's "emotional attunement" to her infant (p. 199). Gerhardt (2015) similarly refers to "parents" frequently, but places greater emphasis on the mother-baby relationship.

Today, motherhood is a "sensitive topic" (Cori, 2010, p. 3), with some aspects of motherhood "sacred, inviolable" (Hays, 1996, introduction); although at the same time, mothers are often blamed for social problems (Wastell & White, 2012, p. 400; White & Wastell, 2017, p. 2267). For some participants, the contrast between their mother's public performance of this sacred role and her behaviour towards them in private causes confusion and pain (see "Contradictory feelings", page 246). Miranda says of her mother:



She'll say to people, "We have a very close relationship," and she'll put things on Facebook about the bond between mother and daughter . . . and a friend of mine, her mother will put things on and she'll go back with something about the wonderful mother, and I can't do that, I can't say those things.

Harriet makes a similar comment about social media and motherhood:

You read stuff on Facebook—somebody's mum had died, and somebody else had said, "It's a tragedy, and whatever age you lose your mum, the person that would love you whatever, stick up for you, dah-dah-dah," and I read this thing, and I thought, "Well, you obviously think every mother's like that—lucky old you!"

Feeling that we don't have a close emotional connection with our mother, or feeling that she dismisses us, may be particularly painful when it contradicts "our collective image of what a mother is supposed to be" (Cori, 2010, p. 99).

Hays (1996) describes the current social construction of "intensive mothering" (p. 6), which entails taking infants or children to clubs and classes, massage, buying designer fashions; but also, negotiating rather than expecting obedience to rules, and being "constantly attentive to the child's wishes" (ibid). Whilst this degree of intensity in the maternal role is relatively recent, Heather describes her mother as "very much a homemaker, she was cooking and cleaning and that . . . my mum was just so busy, her priority was the house being clean, food and, you know, the laundry done". This may

have been the 1950s or 1960s social construction of mothering: “She thought she was being a good mum, because she fed me, clothed me, and, you know, everything was clean, the house was clean . . . my toys would be tidy”. However, while her mother was preoccupied with being a good mother, or at least, performing the practical aspects of motherhood, what Heather craved was attention: “I just wanted company with someone”. Webb recognises, among her emotionally neglected clients, those whose mothers (or parents) gave them “excellent physical care” and who had a “lovely home and plenty of food and clothing” (2013, introduction); Cori (2010) also describes the mother who is outwardly performing the core functions of “mother” (the visible, practical ones), but remains emotionally absent (p. 100).

Glaser (2002) places the responsibility squarely with parents for making sure that the parent-child relationship is not “abusive or neglectful” (p. 698). Furthermore, “if the parents are unable to cope, the responsible action is to seek help” (ibid). Thinking about myself as a parent, I recognise now that there were times that I could not cope as a parent but did not seek help, either because I had internalized a message that I somehow wasn’t “allowed” to seek help, or wasn’t deserving of help; or because I had learnt from early experience that when I called, no-one would answer. I can see now how I failed. My handwritten note in the margin reads:

If you can’t cope—get help! But how do you do that if childhood conditions of worth mean you can’t admit to not coping??

A cultural expectation that women will intuitively know how to be mothers makes it doubly hard for emotionally neglected women to seek help or support. Some aspects of

mothering may be instinctive or intuitive, although to what extent a mother responds to (or fights against) her instinct may depend on “personal, cultural and economic” variables (Bowlby, 1969/1997, p. 241). Much parent-child behaviour is socially constructed, and culturally specific (Hays, 1996). Girls who have grown up with younger siblings, or in extended families with younger nephews and nieces, may have learnt how to do motherhood by observing; but where the nuclear family is the norm, children may have limited opportunities for learning about parenting in this way. As the youngest of three, with no extended family living nearby, I had none. So the cycle continues, despite our best efforts. Caught in a double-bind, we cannot cope on our own, but we cannot admit to not coping, even to ourselves (Myhr, 2014, p. 50), so we struggle alone.

Alan, in his late sixties, wonders whether the cultural or societal pressures on his mother to marry his father when she became pregnant, may have affected her ability to respond to him, her first child: “I think she had quite a strong resentment . . . I don’t know whether that had anything to do with having to get married in the situation she was in, at that time there was strong pressure to get married.” He suspects that “there may have been tensions between my father and her parents, with whom they had to live for a while”; however, he also goes on to say:

I think my mother was very intelligent and very much resented that she didn’t have the educational opportunities that—you know, the thing to do in her time, was become a nurse if you were bright; she didn’t get the chance to go to university, and, you know, the first child *did*, i.e., me!

Alan wonders if this lack of opportunity, or being forced early into the role of wife and mother, caused his mother to hold lifelong resentment. This may be an example of a parent's unconscious envy for their children and the opportunities that they have, that the parents were denied for whatever reason (Grosz, 2014, p. 92; see page 287). I have resisted, to some extent, the concept of the "narcissistic parent" because of the negative connotations of the term. However, it may be helpful to consider that sometimes, parents are so consumed with their own unmet childhood needs for attention that they simply can't attend to their child's (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 181).

Reflecting on his mother's experience, Finlay comments that: "[Her neighbour] said something along the lines of, 'You could have done something with your life', so—as if bringing up children wasn't doing something!" Despite his mother's claim to be happy with her life choices, Finlay senses her bitterness and resentment. As Finlay was born in the 1950s, perhaps his mother was one of the many women who felt they had little choice but to marry and have children, what Cori describes as "reluctant mothers" who would have preferred to be doing something different (2010, p. 94). Finlay's story also reveals a double standard in our culture; motherhood and the maternal role are sacrosanct, and yet bringing up children is not considered to be "doing something with your life".

I sensed resentment or unconscious envy when my own mother told me, many years ago, that she could have had a musical career, but "the war broke out and all the good music teachers went to fight, and then after the war I married your father, and that was the end of that." At the time, she told me this story without any emotion, and I accepted it without question. It was only later that I reflected on what it might have

meant to her, and thought about the sociocultural and political context. Married (middle-class) women, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, were not expected to work; the maternal role was seen as more important. On both sides of the Atlantic, this was partly influenced by the need for demobbed soldiers to go back into the workforce, taking back the jobs that had temporarily been carried out by women during the war effort (Ulrich, 2007, p. 157). Hendrick (2016) suggests that it was also due to a politically motivated drive to re-establish the home and family as the central, stable heart of society after the disruption of two world wars. Certainly, when I was growing up in the 1960s, my perception was that women either worked, or got married and raised a family. I remember thinking, when I was 13 years old, that no-one would want to marry me, so I would have to have a career.

### *Father's role*

The role of “father” is also socially constructed. During the 1950s and 1960s, the period that some participants were growing up, if the mother was typically the homemaker and bore the main responsibility for child care, the father was generally “out at work,” bearing the main responsibility for financial support of the family (Bowlby, 1953; Cori, 2010). This also appears to have been true for some of the younger participants, who were growing up in the 1990s. Rachel’s account is poignant:

Dad has always lived for work, he was a very ambitious man—he was never really around throughout our childhood . . . if he was at work he wouldn’t be in until we were in bed, at weekends he was generally dining out with clients or playing golf or travelling, so he was generally quite absent in the kind of early years . . . he was never really the kind of dad that would, kind of have a kick

around with my brothers or play-fight, or read stories in bed, we never really had any of that.

Elsewhere in the interview, Rachel acknowledges that this was typical for the time: “I mean, a lot of my friends’ fathers, they *were* workers”, although she adds, “maybe around a bit more often than mine”; she also goes on to say that these friends had mothers who were at home for them, whereas Rachel’s alcoholic mother was not emotionally available.

Several of us perceived our fathers as “a background figure” (Finlay), “distant” (Miranda and Angela), or “disconnected” (Harriet), not engaged in our emotional lives. In the focus group, however, Miranda describes how her father, despite being the worker and financial supporter of the family, “quite solid, quite distant and busy, and responsible, and I think felt the responsibility of finances and all the rest of it”, at the same time undertook some of the caring role typically perceived at that time as the mother’s domain: “If I was crying in the night, it would be my Dad that would come down, not my Mum”. Cori (2010) suggests that “good parenting by a father” may compensate for an “emotionally absent mother” (p. 95); however, Miranda goes on to question how much this was out of genuine care for her, and how much it was out of a need to tend to her mother’s needs:

I think now, with reflection, he was . . . my Dad looks after [Mum], and makes her life easier, so perhaps it was, “Keep quiet, you’re going to wake your mother, don’t upset your mother,” type of feeling, so he would come down and do that, rather than have her be cross . . . And I did feel as if he cared, and he

was very patient, but I think also there was this—“Oh, I’ll try and make life easier for your Mum.”

My sense was that my father was just too preoccupied with his own concerns to engage with me, and that his generation (born in the 1920s) did not see children as individuals in their own right. As I explain in my first bracketing interview, I felt that “he wouldn’t ever engage my sisters and me in serious conversation because, I think, he didn’t seem to think that it was worth doing”. My sense was that he would dismiss us; if I asked him about something that was going on in the world, his answer was often, “Oh, it’s a very complex matter,” as if it wasn’t worth trying to explain it to us.

Attachment theory sees the mother as offering a secure base, fathers as encouraging exploration and excitement; van der Kolk cites psychologist John Gottman as saying that “mothers stroke, fathers poke” (2014, p. 113). It may not always be so; more recent developments in attachment theory suggest that, whilst developing children need both safety and stimulation, they will elicit the necessary behaviour from either primary attachment figure, whether male or female (Bowlby, 2016). In some cases, the participants in this study may have benefited from having at least one parent able to meet some of their attachment needs; Heather and Kate, for example, both remember their fathers as positive influences during their childhood (see “Positives in childhood”, page 334).

### *Parents & work*

Glaser (2002) includes “overwhelming work commitments” (p. 703) as one of the reasons why parents may not be able to be fully psychologically or emotionally

available and responsive to their children; Webb (2013) describes the “workaholic” parent (p. 45) as potentially emotionally neglecting, conveying a message that business is more important or more interesting than the child, with potential adverse effects on self-esteem; although because such children are often materially well-provided for, the problem frequently remains hidden (ibid).

My father, like Cathy’s parents, worked from home, yet remained psychologically unavailable, as I describe in the focus group: “My Dad actually worked at home, but was still very distant, he had a study, and we weren’t allowed in”. I wasn’t aware as a child, but I realise as an adult how incredibly stressful he found his work; it’s likely he had little emotional energy to spare for family. If, as Gerhardt (2015) suggests, it is not so much the absence of a primary attachment figures that is distressing for infants, but “the quality of [their] presence” (p. 93), then our fathers’ absent-minded, preoccupied physical presence may have had an equally detrimental effect on us as if they had been physically absent, working outside the home. Finlay’s father was a farmer, and therefore physically present more often than would be the case for most families at that time, yet Finlay says: “He was in and out of the house quite a lot through the day . . . but he was very much a background figure in my childhood”.

There may be a tension between an infant’s need for mothering and the “women’s liberation agenda and fight for equality” (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 37), or between “women’s work on behalf of the sacred child” (Hays, 1996, p. 97), and a woman’s need to feel she is productive and engaged in the adult world, a person in her own right (Ekinsmyth et al., 2004). Rachel acknowledges the possible negative effect of her mother not being actively engaged in something, whether paid or voluntary work, describing it as “a big



shock for Mum” when she and her two brothers all started school at the age of four, “because I think she’d gone from being busy with three kids to all of a sudden being at home, with not a lot to do, really”. Hays (1996) notes that in the majority of countries, children become productive in the family by the age of six; however, Alice, whose father worked from the age of 13, and whose mother “never had a life of her own”, believes the fact that her parents “weren’t allowed to be children” was one of the contributing factors in her own experience of emotional neglect.

Another cultural theme that seemed relevant was the part that school and education may have played in our childhood; however, in the interest of keeping within the word count for this thesis, I have not included this in the discussion. I thought in the early stages of data collection and analysis that religion might, like education, prove to be a significant theme; however, religion did not seem to be particularly significant other than for Cathy and myself.

***Major theme: Family circumstances***

*Themes: Maternal absence; Mother’s mental health; Parents’ relationship; Moving house/moving school; Place in family; Small town/small community; Family losses/disconnections*

Some of the themes which I have created for this major theme overlap with cultural or intergenerational aspects; at different stages of the analysis I have positioned them differently. However, for the purpose of this discussion section I have chosen to gather the themes below under the heading “Family circumstances”, as they seem to relate more to the immediate family environment than to the wider cultural setting.

### *Maternal absence*

Several participants experienced either actual maternal absence, or the psychological absence of their mothers; I discuss both here. During the focus group, Cathy recounted that her mother had been hospitalised in infancy for tuberculosis (TB) at a time when this meant a long period of separation (overlapping with the theme of hospital practices). This separation could have affected the development of secure attachment between Cathy's mother and her own mother (Bowlby, 1961, in Bowlby, 2005), with subsequent implications for her mother's ability to form a secure attachment with Cathy. Cathy's story prompted Miranda to share in turn that her mother's mother had TB and was cared for in a sanatorium, meaning that "she was away from my Mum when my Mum was about eight months old until she was about two, so quite a long time", which may have implications for attachment and relationships within the family. Muhammed also experienced early separation from his mother due to her illness, during which time he was cared for by his grandparents; Muhammed describes how this led to him stopping breastfeeding, which he believes to be "one of those important relations . . . between the baby and his mother"; this imposed early weaning may have had a detrimental impact on attachment.

Rachel was older when she experienced separation from her mother. She went to live with her father after her parents separated, when she was eight years old, and was looked after by "paid nannies", so she experienced actual maternal absence from this age. However, she also experienced the psychological or emotional unavailability of her alcoholic mother from a much earlier age: she remembers, "My Mum started drinking as soon as we went to school at four . . . so when Dad was at work, Mum was usually asleep".

Several participants experienced mothers who were psychologically unavailable or absent, even when physically present. Muhammed remembers that: “My Mum . . . was also not like, consistently there—physically there, but she was somewhere else, her mind was somewhere else”. Other participants describe similar experiences of their mothers being physically present, but emotionally or psychologically absent. The quality of the caregiver’s attention may be as significant as physical presence:

For a baby, the most painful experience of all seems to be not being able to get mother’s attention. Babies make the most protest when their mother’s attention is switched off, as if this is even more unbearable than maltreatment (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 147).

Both physical and psychological or emotional absence may therefore be of crucial significance in the experience of childhood emotional neglect.

### *Mother’s mental health*

As well as the pressures of balancing work and home life, and the cultural contradictions of the maternal role (Hays, 1996), the mothers of some participants may have been suffering from undiagnosed depression or mental illness.

Heather, Rachel, Kate, and Harriet all describe their experience of their mothers’ suicidal behaviour.

“I remember periods where she’d have a breakdown in the corner and she’d say she’d want to die.”  
(Rachel)

This is Heather's story:

[Mum] was on these tablets, and I can remember her, she, she was crying, she was on the floor in the kitchen and the tiles were, were like a turquoise green and cream, light cream, and she'd got all these tablets spilled out on the floor, and she'd got saliva, and she was trying to put the tablets all into her mouth, and she was crying, and, um, and I, I ran up the road, and, to, I must only have been about six.

This must have been a terrifying experience for a six-year-old. Heather witnessed her mother, the person whom she expected to take care of her, not only incapable of looking after Heather, or herself, but in a reversal of roles, actually needing Heather to look after her (see "Parent role", page 205).

This is Rachel's story:

I remember periods where she'd have a breakdown in the corner and she'd say she'd want to die, and I used to think, "Oh, great, I'm definitely not important now, even I can't keep her alive." She never did take her own life, but to hear that as a child—I thought, "Oh, well, am I that bad, that she wants to just leave?" [I was] probably six, or seven? . . . And she'd take herself off and sit under a tree in the paddock, and she'd just sit there for hours, like, we'd be at home, and she'd just go and sit in the paddock, just randomly.

As an adult, Rachel can understand that her mother must have been suffering deep psychological pain to behave like this; as a child, she was only aware of the hurt and rejection implicit in the realisation that she wasn't important, or that she wasn't worth staying alive for, in her mother's eyes. It is easy to understand how this might lead to a feeling of worthlessness or "not mattering" (Flett et al., 2016).

More recently, Rachel explained to her father why she couldn't leave her mother after her parents divorced, no matter how bad life was at home: "Mum used to say, if I ever moved back in with you, that she'd kill herself, because she couldn't live without me". Rachel heard two conflicting and confusing messages from her mother; "You're not worth staying alive for", and "I can't live without you". Either way, her mother did not seem to have Rachel in mind.

Kate remembers her mother directly blaming her for her problems and threatening to kill herself, leaving Kate terrified:

I just remember her having a complete meltdown with me, really shouting, saying, "It's all your fault!" And, you know, "If I didn't have you, I wouldn't be in this mess!" and that kind of thing, and "I'm going, I'm going out, I'm gonna go and kill myself, and then you'll be happy!" And I was only probably like eight, nine, something like that, and that happened a couple of times, that threat to commit suicide, and she'd go off in the car, and I'd be absolutely beside myself.

Reading this as an adult, and especially as a counsellor, I can feel empathy for Kate's mother, a single mum struggling to bring up her daughter alone, and probably battling her own inner demons. However, if I put myself in Kate's shoes, I feel distraught for that little girl, who didn't know where her mother had gone, or whether she would ever come back; and believing that she was somehow responsible.

Harriet describes her mother's repeated suicide attempts, continuing into the present day. One childhood memory, when Harriet was about ten years old, is especially vivid:

I remember one particular night she said to me, "Come and kiss me goodnight because I'll be dead in the morning, I've taken all the drugs".

Harriet remembers not knowing what to do, but feeling terribly responsible, and afraid. These incidents fit with Glaser's third category of childhood emotional abuse and neglect: "Developmentally inappropriate or inconsistent interactions with the child," including "exposure to confusing or traumatic events and interactions," such as "domestic violence and parental (para)suicide," (2002, p. 704). There is a threat to life, and we are powerless in the face of that threat. Not only that, but there is no-one to turn to for help, because the person we would naturally turn to is part of that threat. This is the essence of a traumatic experience.

One of the underlying factors may have been that these women became mothers too soon, before they were ready emotionally, or financially; although my mother was an older mother (she celebrated her thirtieth birthday a week after my oldest sister was born), and Cathy, too, describes her mother as an "older mum". Another factor may

have been lack of support, either from family or community. According to an often-quoted African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child”. Some of our mothers may have been struggling to raise us in isolation, especially if they had moved away from their extended families; or if their partners were not able or willing to offer anything other than financial support.

Several participants described their mothers as unhappy, depressed, or often crying. Miranda remembers: “Some of my earliest memories, my Mum was on the phone to her mother *every* day for hours—I think she was very unhappy”. Harriet reflects on her mother’s depression and unhappiness several times throughout her interview: “I’m sure she suffered from depression, she was on all sorts of, whatever they had in those days, Valium, and, you know, stuff like that, and . . . she was very unhappy”. As a child, she remembers that she was puzzled by her mother’s tiredness, and distressed by her crying:

I said to my grandmother once when I was down there with Mum, “Why does Mum sleep all the time?” Because she always used to sleep, if she wasn’t working, she used to be in bed, and obviously, looking back, that’s depression, isn’t it? And she said, “Well, she’s, she’s very tired, Harriet, she gets very exhausted” . . . there was never any explanation for all the time in bed, or, of course, I would wake up and hear her crying. And that—that used to actually upset me more than anything, this endless crying.

This is strikingly similar to Gerhardt’s memory of her own mother, whom she describes as “highly articulate and vocal”, yet not able to verbalise her feelings (2015, p. 117). In

the absence of this mechanism for regulating distress, Gerhardt's mother "took to her bed, deliberately avoiding people when her feelings became too painful" (ibid, p. 124). Perhaps this was the only survival strategy available to some women, at the time.

A depressed mother's lack of facial expression causes infants intense distress, as evidenced by the "still face" experiment (Cori, 2010, p. 80). My sister and I once discussed the fact that, even though it was never diagnosed, our mother probably had postnatal depression (PND); she certainly had several of the risk factors for it, according to the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (Cox, Holden, & Sagovsky, 1987). This may have affected her ability to respond to us as we needed; the fact that PND was not recognised at the time would have meant that she would have struggled, and suffered, alone.

### *Parents' relationship*

Several participants commented on the quality of their parents' relationship. Kate recognises the sociocultural context in which her teenage parents were forced to marry: "She was really young when she had me, the marriage—well, it was a shot-gun wedding in the real sense of the word". As soon as Kate's mother told her parents that she was pregnant "there was a very quick wedding". As Kate goes on to explain, she's from a large island off mainland Britain:

So the community's very small and everyone knows everyone, and particularly then, it was much more of a farming community (reeled off in a list-ticking tone of voice) . . . so everyone knew everyone, and the village that I grew up in, it was, you know, tiny, so, you know, there would have been a lot of



embarrassment for my grandparents; and being an island community as well, you're about 20 or 30 years behind the trend, so it must have been a difficult time.

Themes overlap in Kate's story. It may have been that her grandparents' strict Methodist beliefs, or a more general cultural concept of childhood as a time of "innocence" (Hays, 1996, p. 25), left Kate's mother ignorant of the facts of life; living in a small community, and cultural expectations and norms about marriage and parenthood at that time and in that particular place may have left her parents with no choice but to marry. Kate wonders if her mother's teenage pregnancy was a conscious act of rebellion, describing her mother elsewhere as taking pride in her role as the "black sheep" of the family. Kate's parents divorced when she was two years old, and although Kate's father remained an involved and positive presence in her life, and her grandparents were supportive, Kate acknowledges that being a single parent may have been challenging for her mother.

Cathy's parents remained married, but Cathy is aware now as an adult that they had relationship problems: "My mother nearly had a breakdown as well, she nearly left my father—nearly left all of us . . . and she lost her wedding ring, she'd lost that much weight". As a child, Cathy felt an overwhelming sense of responsibility for herself and her siblings, as well as a fear of rejection. Now, she can connect childhood incidents with times when her parents were experiencing difficulties in their marriage. At the time, Cathy may not have known, consciously, that there was a problem with her parents' relationship; but looking back, she suspects that she sensed the tension.

When a mother is in an unsupportive or abusive relationship, or when much of her energy is consumed by supporting her partner, it may be difficult for her to be sufficiently emotionally present for her children (Cori, 2010, p. 94). Several other participants refer to their parents' relationship problems. Rachel's comment is poignant: "I never saw Dad love Mum".

Rachel, Kate, and Harriet all describe the break-down of their parents' relationships; both Rachel and Harriet describe their mothers having affairs, sometimes resulting in secrecy and deception. Although my parents always presented an image of a conventionally happy marriage to the outside world, and I have no conscious memory of actual physical violence between my parents, I remember a tense and threatening atmosphere at times; and I may have witnessed actual violence. As I recount in the first bracketing interview: "I never saw it, but I know that [my father] did hit my Mum, my sister saw once, so I suspect it had happened on other occasions as well".

Harriet frequently witnessed domestic violence. After her parents separated, her mother had volatile and violent relationships, in which Harriet describes her mother as the more volatile and violent partner. Harriet describes how sometimes it was a "glasses thrown across the room sort of relationship, and Mum's rages—we used to hide—I used to hide in the wardrobe, because I remember, when it was going on the rages were horrendous".

Witnessing domestic violence is recognised as having a harmful effect on children; Glaser (2002) includes "exposure to domestic violence" alongside parental (para)suicide as one of the categories of "developmentally inappropriate or inconsistent

interactions with the child” (p. 704). Apart from the overwhelming terror in the moment, a fear of history repeating itself has been recognized in children who witness domestic violence (Mullender, et al., 2002, p. 96), linking this to an earlier theme (page 251).

### *Moving house/moving school*

Several participants describe moving house, involving a change of school. In “Compulsive self-reliance” (page 241), I describe my own feeling of not fitting in when I changed schools at the age of six. Cathy’s family moved several times during her childhood, and she believes this had a negative impact on her, although at the time the effect on her was below her level of conscious awareness:

I would have been just turned nine, and that would have been, that was my fourth school, and we’d moved house five, six times, and in between times I’d felt unsettled, and—my fourth school, it was, and every time we moved—I thought I was okay, but I wasn’t.

Cathy remembers experiencing stomach problems after one of the family’s house moves; she now believes this was a symptom of how unsettling she found the frequent moves and changes of school. In the focus group, Cathy describes her old school reports showing that at each school she would be quiet at first, gradually contributing more, and then moving school again when she would be “back to square one . . . so it had had a devastating effect, but I had no knowledge of that at all, no recollection”.

Cathy's teachers, then, were possibly aware that she was be struggling, but at the time (late 1970s to early 1980s), there may have been little awareness of childhood emotional neglect as a potential problem. As long as children were in school, and appeared to be adequately clothed and fed, and in the absence of visible signs of abuse such as bruises or burns, it may have been difficult for teachers to raise concerns. This may still be the case today; teachers continue to find it harder to identify emotional abuse than physical abuse, and are often reluctant to report or take action because they are uncertain about the extent and severity of emotional abuse or neglect, and sometimes unaware of the harm it can cause (Torok & Tiirik, 2016). Furthermore, like Cathy, many emotionally neglected children will be quiet, conforming, well-behaved, often mature for their age—the kind of pupil a classroom teacher may long for—unlike physically or sexually abused children, whose “acting out” with physical aggression or verbal hostility may draw attention to their needs (Music, 2009, p. 143).

Harriet, too, experienced frequent house moves, often with a change of school as well, and sometimes across continents, which she believes left her craving stability:

Rather than getting home and realising that the house had been sold again (laughs), she did that twice! And we'd go and stay with another family! I mean, Jesus, why couldn't you tell me that you'd sold the bloody house again! She'd just do it, she'd just sell it . . . we had so many houses.

Perhaps, for some of the participants in this study, moving house and changing schools affected our ability to make friendships among our peers. I think I spent more time socialising with adults than with people of my own age; also, we lived in vicarages

which were set away from the main community. Watching local children walking to school together in the morning now, I reflect on the fact that I walked to school from an early age, but never with anyone else, because all my classmates lived on the housing estates near the school. Cathy's family, similarly, lived in tied houses, at least one of which was "in a forest", which may have increased her sense of isolation, and reduced the opportunities for making friends. Family is important, but friends may be more so (Pinker, 1997, p. 449). If our family environment left us feeling unlovable, and on top of that, we moved to a new area and a new school, where we had to start all over again, we may have been severely hampered in our ability to make friends (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002), linking this theme to "Compulsive self-reliance" (see page 237). Furthermore, moving home may have left our parents without their own support network, with a possible negative consequence for their emotional wellbeing; and in turn, potentially denying them a circle of friends through which we could either develop our own friendships (by socialising with their friends' children), or see our parents modelling friendship.

### *Place in family*

Friedman and Billick (2015) suggest that birth order is a factor in child neglect (although physical and emotional neglect are not clearly differentiated), with younger siblings more at risk (p. 256). Oldest children, however, may be emotionally neglected because younger children have greater needs, as in the case of Alan, who was the oldest in a family of four children where two children were disabled; or because they are expected to take on a parent role, like Cathy, who always felt responsible for her younger siblings. Conversely, for many years I made sense of my own feelings of inferiority in terms of my position as the youngest of three children in a family where

everyone was already bigger, older and more capable than me. Yet Fonagy et al. (2007) suggest that younger siblings benefit from their position in the family, in that they may have the opportunity to hear more “talk about mental states” (p. 300); that was not the case for me, as I don’t remember any talk about mental states in my family.

I had no intention of recruiting a representative or large enough sample to make generalisations about any of the themes in this study, but it is interesting to note the wide variety of birth order positions among the participants in the table below (see Figure 17):

Figure 17: Birth order of participants

Participant	Only child	Older of 2	Oldest of 3	Oldest of 4	Middle of 3	Middle of 4	Youngest of 3	Younger of 2	One of triplets
Miranda					*				
Heather		*							
Cathy				*					
Rachel									*
Alice							*		
David			*						
Mickey	*								
Alan				*					
Muhammed					*				
Finlay						*			
Kate	*								
Harriet								*	
Angela							*		

The participants themselves had observations or thoughts about birth order. Cathy comments,

I think position matters; when I said about my brother, I was like the spokesperson, they say about middle children being invisible, the hidden child, they're not the first to do anything and they're not the youngest either, and I think that's a manifestation, [brother's name] became invisible because he morphed into a bit of me, he lost his own identity.

Several participants commented that their siblings experienced their childhood differently. Cathy, again, compares her younger sister's experience to her own:

She had the opposite teenage to me . . . I felt very insecure with Dad, and she didn't, she felt very secure with him, so hers was very different; she was quite challenging, she would go out and drink, and she went out and had sex, and she did—you know, she hung around the shops; you know, all the things that I would never have dared to have done.

Each parent-child relationship is unique, which may result in our siblings having very different experiences our own (Cori, 2010, p. 207). The circumstances around birth may vary, too: David wonders if some of the difference between himself and his younger siblings is because “they were both born in hospital, whereas I was born at home”, linking this to the practice of routine separation of mothers and babies in hospital (page 295).

However, Cathy also recognised that by the time her sister was growing up, her parents were less stressed by work; the family business had been sold, “which changed everything”. So their different experiences in the same family may reflect siblings'

different personalities (being more or less sensitive, for example), interacting with each parent differently to form a different relationship; perhaps in combination with changed family circumstances (parents less stressed by work, or more financially stable; Wastell & White, 2012, p. 403). Parents may also grow and develop with time. I am aware how I have changed as a parent with each successive child, learning more from the experience of parenting; I return to this theme in the final section of the discussion chapter, “Change and Growth” (page 360).

### *Small town/small community*

There is popular concern in the Western industrialized world about the social isolation that may come about from living in large, impersonal cities (Davern & Gunn, 2014), but some participants describe the negative effects, such as pressure to conform, that may result from living in a small community, possibly overlapping with “Not protected” (page 191). Trying to understand why his parents may not have felt able to defend him when he was beaten at school, Finlay reflects that: “Being a small town,” where “everybody knew each other”, the teacher who beat him was “not a friend of my parents, exactly, but . . . he was an acquaintance, they knew him from outside of school, I think they were frightened of offending, my mother would—well, both my parents, but my mother especially”.

With the benefit of an adult perspective, and in relation to another childhood incident, Finlay now suspects that his mother may have been concerned about her reputation in the community, her anxiety about whether or not he had been well-mannered at a child’s birthday party “so completely out of proportion, this fear about her standing in front of her friends and her children being properly brought up”. Perhaps Finlay’s



mother also lacked confidence in her mothering, especially if her own mother found it difficult to model warm and attentive mothering (see “Intergenerational aspects”, page 275); perhaps she was too dependent on external approval to risk offending those who were in a position of authority in the community. Similarly, Kate suspects that living in a small island community may have added to the pressure on her teenage parents to marry (see page 319).

Perhaps this is a clue to our parents’ insecurity. Living in a small town or village, the question, “What will others think?” may never be far from our minds; social isolation is uncomfortable for humans, so there is always a pressure to conform in order to be accepted (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 66). As the vicar’s family, I felt we were doubly constrained; highly visible, and expected to live up to a higher moral standard than those around us. When my sisters and I all chose to co-habit with our partners before marrying (“living in sin,” as it was considered then), I remember feeling indignant that my mother’s concern was not so much that we might go to hell, but “What will I tell the neighbours?” Parents who themselves were more secure, confident and less concerned with the good opinion of others, less anxious for approval, might have been better able to withstand the pressure to conform, and consequently better able to defend us. In a larger town or city, it’s less likely that anyone would know, or care.

### *Family losses/disconnections*

Several participants described childhood trauma, shock, or distress; separations and losses, including the loss of grandparents; and family conflict and negativity, such as feeling distanced from the extended family. Mickey referred to a number of close

family deaths, which may have left his parents traumatised and therefore unable to be as emotionally available and responsive towards him as he needed:

Now I think what, kinda, clearly made the, let's say, the disconnection in our relationship, or what broke us really bad, was when my grandmother died. Um, we are a very small family. I'm the only child, my mother is the only child, my father has a sister, who he wasn't speaking with for years and years—of course, that's a different discussion—and, kind of, so we are a very small family—and my grandmother. Because all my other grandparents died.

Gerhardt (2015) suggests that disorganised attachment may result from the parents' own unresolved childhood traumas, which may lead to them dissociating, being frightening towards, or frightened by their child (p. 43). Mickey also describes a very distressing incident when he was about ten years old, when he was the one who discovered his paternal grandfather in a comatose state after he suffered a stroke:

He was all sitting in a—I'm not describing the whole of it, but it was horrible, so he was sitting in his own faeces and vomit and everything, it was all—and I remember being shocked, and looking at it, and trying and shaking him and, “Are you sleeping?” (Said tenderly and sweetly, as a child might), trying to wake him up—nothing, and so it went on kinda two or three seconds, and I went to my father, and I said, “Um, you need to come upstairs, because . . . I think Grandfather is sleeping?”

Although Mickey's father came upstairs, Mickey remembers that his father asked him to call the paramedics, which Mickey describes as:

A bit strange, because, "What, you want me to speak to the paramedics?" How is a ten-year-old—and they were asking me, you know, all those questions, er, I don't remember very clearly now, er, "What's his name, what does he do," er, phew! "Past medical history," all those things—what does a ten-year old—? And I was like, "I don't know!" And I was trying to kind of sort it out, and then I think he died the next day.

Mickey's story illustrates the "Parent role" theme (page 205); it also matches Glaser's description of the emotionally neglecting parent who exposes a child to a "confusing or traumatic event" (2002, p. 704). However, what may be more significant is that Mickey was not allowed to attend the funeral, and the event was never talked about again, so the family had no opportunity to process the trauma; it appears to be the extent to which grief and trauma remain unresolved that causes harm to the emotional life of the family (Howe, 2005, p. 94).

When my maternal grandfather died when I was eight years old, like Mickey, I was excluded from the funeral, sent to stay with distant relatives. At the time I didn't question this; as I got older, I assumed that I was, perhaps mistakenly, being protected from the distress of the funeral. When my maternal grandmother died, when I was in my twenties, I gained another perspective. Mum insisted on travelling back from the funeral (some 200 miles) alone, which puzzled me. "Leave her be," my uncle said, "she'll prefer to be on her own." Perhaps I wasn't being protected from my own

distress; perhaps my mother couldn't bear to see our distress; or couldn't allow us to see her distress, linking this to the discussion of parents' discomfort with emotions or displays of emotion (see page 164).

### ***Summary of "Sociocultural aspects"***

I am aware of rabbit holes that I could disappear down, like Alice, the tunnels leading in all directions. I am conscious that I have only scratched the surface of some of the sociocultural themes. I have focused mainly on the aspects of my own culture, whereas I could have explored the impact that growing up under communism and a totalitarian regime may have had on Mickey's parents, or the experiences of families migrating from the Indian subcontinent (Alice and David), but shortage of space made this impractical. This has been one limitation of having participants from a variety of cultural backgrounds; I have barely started to explore, when each of the themes in this section of the discussion chapter could itself be developed into a thesis. I have tried to show where one theme overlaps with a preceding or following theme, illustrating the sometimes difficult decisions I may have made about where to place a theme, and the interpretive nature of this research.

One of my concerns throughout has been to bring greater understanding to the experience of childhood emotional neglect; for my own benefit, for the benefit of the participants; for the benefit of the reader/audience, and for the wider benefit of anyone who is concerned with this area of human life (Holman Jones et al., 2013, p. 35).

Examining the social, cultural and historical context within which I and the participants experienced emotional neglect has been an important aspect of bringing greater understanding to, and making more sense of, our experiences.

I have tried to make it clear that I'm not blaming my own parents, or anyone else's parents, for any harm experienced by any of us in childhood, whilst at the same time, not wishing to deny that harm was experienced. Again, examining the sociocultural contexts of our childhoods has been an essential element of this. In the following section of the discussion chapter, which focuses on our adult reflections, I explore further the tension between not blaming, and not denying harm.

#### **Section 4: Perspectives**

*Major themes: Positives in childhood; Inner wisdom; Adult reflections; Denial; Change and Growth*

(See Appendix B, page 438, for models of themes and sub-themes).

This fourth section of the discussion chapter brings together the remaining themes, which may be seen as offering some perspective. These include what I choose to portray as the more positive and hopeful aspects of our childhood experiences; positive memories, our own inner wisdom, our adult reflections and understanding of our childhoods, including, to some extent, not blaming our parents for any harm caused; and change and personal growth. I believe it is important to recognise that we are not merely victims of victims; we are also survivors. Children may feel powerless in relation to their parents; but they are not completely without agency (Mullender et al., 2002, p. 4). Some of the following themes reflect the way in which we were able to get our developmental needs met during childhood.

However, this group of themes incorporates conflicting sub-themes. Some of the reflections focus on the grown-up children's better understanding of a situation with the benefit of adult perspective, with the result that they are able to forgive, or at least understand, a parent's behaviour. Sometimes, however, adult reflections lead to a deeper realisation of how damaging an experience or a parent's behaviour was. "Denial" straddles two major themes, "Adult reflections" and "Lasting impact". Our frequent protest of "Ah, but it wasn't really all that bad," or words to that effect, may come partly from a place of healthy adult re-evaluation of childhood events or feelings; and partly from a place of continuing to take the parent role and protect our parents' fragile self-esteem by not blaming them for any deficit in our childhood.

### ***Major theme: Positives in childhood***

*Themes: Grandparents positive; Relationship with Dad; Materially provided for; Friendships; Refuge out of doors*

Despite the gaps, even emotionally neglecting parents often support some aspects of their children's development, and it can be valuable for healing to recognise that there are "pieces of yourself that are solid and real" (Cori, 2010, p. 176). During their interviews, participants sometimes acknowledged positive elements in their childhoods, whether these were protective or supportive figures within their extended families, or places outside the home where they felt valued, safe, or free to be themselves.

#### *Grandparents positive*

In the psychological literature there is a focus on the harmful effects of negative experiences, and the remedying of harmful interactions or behaviours; but children need positive experiences in order to develop normally, not merely an absence of harmful ones (Music, 2009, p. 151). Rachel remembers experiencing unconditional love from her maternal grandparents, which she believes "definitely counteracted" the effect of her home life. She remembers that "I always knew that they cared about me, I could never do any wrong in my grandmother's eyes . . . I'd say, to put it bluntly, the sun shone out of my bum as far as my Nan was concerned". Rachel's grandparents acted as substitute parents, providing some normal home life, such as "meals round the table", but also the vital element of play:

We'd play the board games and, you know, we'd make the swords out of the canes from the garden, and play with the lids on the dustbin, they're my childhood memories; they'd take the duvet covers off the bed (laughs), and my

Nana would hold one end and my Grandad would hold the other, and they'd do "Nellie the elephant" (both laugh), and I've still got funny memories of that.

Grandparents are often recognised in the literature as potentially a supportive element in children's development (Yorgason et al., 2011); this was the case for several of the participants. When they were described as a positive influence, grandparents were often remembered as involved in play, or providing a warm or emotionally close relationship with their grandchild (though not always; see page 290).

### *Relationship with Dad*

Parenting and childhood emotional neglect literature typically focuses on the maternal role, overlooking or minimizing the role of the father (Bowlby, 1969/1997; Cori, 2010; Webb, 2013). I have explored the role of fathers to some extent under "Cultural expectations and norms" (see page 308); however, I return to the theme of fathers here as a positive factor. For Heather, Dad was warm and playful; for Miranda, he was patient or attentive, and played a caring role; and for Finlay, he may have played the role of protector. Kate's parents separated when she was two years old, but her teenage father continued to be involved in her life, and she remembers having a "brilliant relationship" with him from the age of nine years until his early death. From the age of 18, Kate went to live with her father, and she remembers the unconditional love he showed her:

We weren't very good at sort of talking about our feelings, but if we were out in the car we'd go for a drive round the island and we could talk to each other because we didn't have to look at each other. And he'd say, you know, "I love



you no matter what, you know, you can tell me anything and I'll still love you" .

. . and he'd say, "There's nothing you can do or say that would make me love you any less."

Kate's experience seems to confirm that, despite often being overlooked or marginalised in the parenting literature (Hays, 1996), fathers may provide significantly more than financial support (Cori, 2010, p. 95).

### *Materially provided for*

Several participants acknowledged being materially well-provided for in childhood; having a privileged or glamorous lifestyle; enjoying extra-curricular activities or private education; and for some, though not all, holidays and birthdays were a happy time (see page 187). Harriet is quick to say of her childhood that "parts of it were incredibly privileged, and parts of it were incredibly interesting". Rachel, similarly, describes a middle-class lifestyle that outwardly appeared happy (Cori, 2010, p. 113): "From the outside looking in, I was lucky, I was privately educated, you know, I had lovely friends, my grandparents would take me horse-riding at the weekends, we had a big garden".

Whilst higher socio-economic status (SES) or material wealth clearly doesn't preclude childhood emotional neglect (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 118), poverty can itself be a source of immense stress for parents, or may exacerbate a difficult situation (ibid). Those of the participants who identify themselves as middle or higher SES recognise that they may have benefited from the buffering effects of wider educational and extra-curricular opportunities afforded by a middle-class upbringing (McKnight, 2015).

### *Friendships*

Rachel comments on the value of friendships both during childhood and in adult life: “I always had a lot of friends, and I always mixed well, so it was never like I was withdrawn from spending time with people”. Rachel reflects that she has always valued her friendships, “probably more than relationships I’ve got with family members”, and comments that “even now as an adult, I’ve still got those friends, and I’ll still make time for them, I feel really lucky, in the friendships that I’ve got”.

Rachel’s story contrasts with most of the participants, who found friendships hard to initiate (see page 241); and seems to disconfirm the literature, which frequently refers to social withdrawal among emotionally neglected or psychologically maltreated children (Cori, 2010; Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002; Howe, 2005). It may have been that Rachel was advantaged by being one of triplets; she and her two siblings may have been able to socialise each other, so that it was relatively easy for Rachel to make friends outside the home; or it may have been that home life was so bleak that Rachel was compelled to make friends outside the home.

Friendships may be hard for the emotionally neglected to initiate, but they are painful to be without (Lieberman, 2015); membership of organised groups has provided a means of gaining social contact for some. Reflecting on my own tendency to join clubs and societies, and to find a place within them, I think this meets an inner need to feel like I belong in a way that I didn’t feel like I belonged in my family. Finlay, too, enjoys groups and organised activities. He explains how on walking holidays, he may stay in shared accommodation: “I actually quite like being in the dormitory, I still find

it strangely comforting having other people around, sleeping”. As he explains, there’s “no need for any interaction or sense that I’m expected to perform a function in the group, so maybe I’m completely at ease among other people snoring!” This may be how Finlay has learnt to accommodate his conflicting need for human company, and anxiety about social interactions (see “Compulsive self-reliance”, page 237; and “Seeking company”, page 341). Perhaps in these more formal or structured communal settings we can find a place for ourselves, and enjoy the company of others without the stress of trying to meet unspoken expectations.

### *Refuge out of doors*

Finlay remembers that growing up on a farm, the outdoors was the only place he found refuge: in particular, “there was a bit of woodland with a little burn running through it, there was a wee place there with a sort of tree growing over it, and there was a little hidden place”. Finlay adds, “I remember having that sense of it kind of being a refuge”. Finlay’s experience seems to closely match Miller’s description of the emotionally neglected child who finds refuge in nature, somewhere to be at peace “without hurting the mother or making her feel insecure, reducing her power, or endangering her equilibrium” (1979/1997, p. 11).

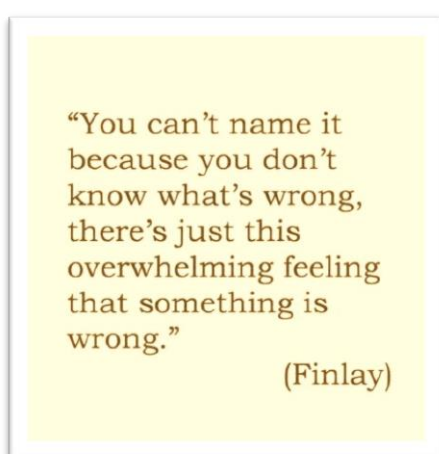
Alan, too, describes how he found refuge out of doors, as well as by joining after school clubs and escaping into books: “I tried to be out of the family as much as possible, and as I got older it got easier . . . I spent a lot of time on my bike, cycling round the countryside”. I remember going for long walks alone, although spending time out of doors was much more common during my 1960s childhood (Guldberg,

2009). Perhaps what is significant is the aloneness, rather than time spent out of doors; and the sense of dread that I used to feel on returning home.

***Major theme: Inner Wisdom***

*Themes: Inner wisdom; Wanting to be rescued/Wanting to escape; Seeking company; Aware of alternatives*

According to Rogers' theory of personality, all living organisms have an "actualising tendency", a drive to be the best version of ourselves that we can be (1980, p. 44). This



informs my research, as well as my client work, and the theme of "Inner Wisdom" reflects this. In the example above (page 337), on some level we know that we need connection, so we continue to strive to get it by any means possible; if we find it difficult to get connection through friendships with our peers, because childhood emotional neglect has left us feeling unlovable, we may seek out membership of a club or society, or join a profession where we get a sense of connection. I wonder now, on reflection, if it was not so much that I had no sense of worth, but rather that I had to bury my sense of worth in order to gain approval; this may have been true for other participants, too, and would sit comfortably with the person-centred counselling concept of the organismic self and the actualizing tendency (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1990, p. 137).

During analysis, I used the term "inner wisdom" for those instances where participants described a childhood sense that something was "not right", even though at the time they could not identify what was wrong, as well as those occasions where they seemed

to be driven to find a way of meeting their needs, no matter how destructive in the long term (such as using alcohol to ease anxiety in social situations; page 342).

### *Inner wisdom*

Several participants refer to a general sense that something was missing, or “felt wrong”, even in childhood: Finlay remembers his “overwhelming feeling that something is wrong”, which led to him fantasizing about being rescued by his “real” family (page 178). When David describes physical abuse at the hands of his father, he remembers: “The one thing I—growing up, I was, like, ‘That is absolutely wrong, you shouldn’t hit a kid,’ that was just growing up”.

As a child, Mickey seemed to sense that, for him, emotional neglect was even more harmful than physical abuse (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 147). When his parents deliberately ignored him as a form of punishment, it left him feeling so bad that he remembers begging his parents to beat him, rather than ignore him (page 183). Mickey explains:

I think there’s another insight to that—if they beat you, it’s their fault. Because they did something. If they don’t, it’s your fault. Or at least, it’s how I felt. If you get slapped on the face, it’s “Oh, why did you slap me?!” and then you’re not—you don’t feel that kind of introvertedly being upset, because you can take all your upset—and I’m talking about a five year old now—“It’s my parent! Why did he hit me?”

Mickey’s sense that being beaten would have been preferable to being ignored seems to confirm the idea that “intrusion is at least stimulating, whereas neglect is deadening”

(Music, 2002, p. 154); although even when a parent hits a child, the child may feel responsible, as this is the only available way of making sense of why the parent would behave in such an obviously harming and hurtful manner (Howe, 2005, p. 102).

### *Wanting to be rescued/Wanting to escape*

Kate and Finlay both have vivid memories of wanting to be rescued (see page 178); Kate remembers wishing that her mother would hit her so that there would be bruises, because then, she thought, someone might notice and take her into care.

In the counselling literature, boarding school is often described as a negative experience for those who were sent from home at a very young age, or experienced bullying there (Duffell, 2014), but Finlay and I both found it a place of safety; and Harriet remembers begging to go to boarding school in order to escape a home life where she felt emotionally and physically isolated and unprotected, and responsible for her mother's mental health, and frequently witnessed domestic violence. Alan escaped by spending as much time as possible out of doors, away from his home (see page 338), as well as escaping into books, and sleep (see page 228); and although I didn't follow through on it, at the age of eight I planned to run away (see page 177). Wanting to escape may be indicative of an avoidant insecure attachment style (Howe, 2005, p. 103); or it may reflect our inner wisdom that home was not the safest place to be.

### *Seeking company*

Several participants refer to the importance of friendships in their lives (see page 337), which suggests the opposite of avoidant, compulsively self-reliant behaviour. The drive to seek company may be an illustration of the actualising tendency in action;

however, when we already feel unlovable, meeting our need for the company of others can be extremely difficult. In “Compulsive self-reliance”, Finlay reflects on the two competing impulses (see page 237), “needing the company of other people but at the same time, not being able to enjoy it”. He goes on to explain,

I think before I often use to use alcohol to—because alcohol’s brilliant, absolutely magic stuff if you suffer from anxiety, alcohol, it just makes it go away, it’s gone, and at last you can kind of relax, and I can absolutely understand how people get caught up in the drink.

Finlay’s experience may match that of Webb’s composite character, whose childhood of emotional neglect had been left him “emotionally crippled and alone” (2013, p. 100). As Webb says, “no wonder he drank” (ibid); this seems to fit with the idea that addictive behaviours are “a common response to childhood pain that has not been metabolized” (Cori, 2010, p. 112). However, using alcohol may also be a creative way of enabling us to meet a need for connection, reflecting our inner wisdom.

One of my great sorrows, when I reflect on my childhood, is the sense that I had the capacity to be loving and giving, and that this was not met with joy, and facilitated (see page 178). I describe this sense in the first bracketing interview:

In my experience, children come into the world primed to give love and affection, I don’t now believe that they do have to be taught how to give it, I think they naturally come pre-conditioned to give it, (sigh), so one of the losses that I think I’ve experienced is in childhood, my own ability to be loving and

giving wasn't welcomed, wasn't accepted, so I lost that ability, I think, I lost that opportunity to be loving and giving.

Finlay shares his similar belief in an e-mail, responding to my analysis of his interview: "I suspect that love is something that is innate in humans in the way language is"; although he recognises that "we still have to learn how to put our potential to love into practice".

This seems to correspond with the theory that human infants are programmed to form attachments (Bowlby, 1969/1997, p. 216; Cori, 2010, p. 62; Lieberman, 2015), but also, that the development of the social brain, like language, is "experience-dependant" (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 55). That is, we all have the capacity; but we need certain experiences in order for that capacity to develop and be fully realised. For some of us, growing up in families with limited emotional connectedness, our capacity for attachment and social connection may never have been fully realised.

### *Aware of alternatives*

Although some of the conditions of our childhoods may have been typical for our generation or culture of origin, they were not necessarily universal, or inevitable; several participants were aware of alternatives, even as children. Cathy remembers seeing "other people with their families, they were so affectionate, and warm . . . their dads would cuddle them, or their Mum would cuddle them, or kiss them, and I'd get—there was none of that". Even growing up in what he describes as a "macho" Middle Eastern society, Muhammed remembers that it was different for his friends, which



puzzled him: “I was going out visiting my friends’ houses and seeing that their father was like friend with them, ‘Oh, how is it possible?’”

Kate says of herself that “I always used to become really attached to people,” believing that “as a teenager I was looking for that replacement mothering figure”. She remembers going to her best friend’s house, and enjoying being able to share in the closeness there:

She was one of four siblings . . . and then her mum and dad absolutely doted on them, and each other, so it was just such a lovely place to be, [I was] desperate to be a part of it.

The contrast between these other families and our own may have highlighted our sense of loss, taunting us with glimpses of what we were missing. Focusing on the negative, far from being a moral failing, appears hard-wired into the human brain and may have a positive function, driving us to seek to improve our circumstances (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001); so negative bias could be seen as an aspect of the actualizing tendency, or our inner wisdom. Perhaps our awareness of warmth and connection within other families also gave some of us hope; an image of what we might strive to recreate in our own lives, a glimpse of what being loved and wanted might feel like.

***Major theme: Adult reflections***

*Themes: Adult understanding; Acknowledging past hurt; Reflecting on having own children*

I consciously chose to interview adults and work with their retrospective memories of childhood, despite the inherent challenge of misremembered experiences and biased recall (see page 41; also page 124). I reasoned that children still living out their childhoods may not yet be in a position to reflect on their experiences. David, one of the younger participants, commented that: “When I was a child I didn’t pay much attention to how life is, I’ve only really started reflecting on this stuff fairly recently,” which seems to validate my decision to interview adults. It may also be unethical to challenge children’s perception of their parents while they are still dependent on them.

One of the potential advantages of interviewing adults is that they may have had the opportunity to reflect on childhood experiences and start to make their own meaning of events; although this is not necessarily the case, as allowing such thoughts and feelings into awareness can be too painful to bear. Alan, for example, one of the older participants, appears to have managed difficult feelings in adulthood to some extent by denial, saying at the start of his interview: “I’ve put a lot of things out of my mind.”

Among the participants in the first round (myself, Miranda, Heather, Cathy, Rachel), all the individuals had completed counselling training, which entailed an opportunity to explore current or childhood distress or trauma; personal therapy was a course requirement. Of the subsequent participants, only one, Alice, was a Counselling Psychology student; however, some of the remaining participants had previously sought counselling.

With or without the benefit of a reflective space in counselling, all the participants had reflected on their childhood experiences, and continued to reflect further during the course of this research project; and they offered their adult perspective on childhood experiences, including re-evaluating childhood memories with more understanding of events or circumstances at the time. During analysis, I arranged the participants' meaning-making adult reflections under three separate themes: "Adult understanding", "Acknowledging past hurt" and "Reflecting on having own children".

### *Adult understanding*

I saw three distinct strands in these reflections; recognition, re-evaluation, and forgiving. On several occasions, participants prefaced memories with statements suggesting they had only recently recognised that a remembered childhood incident was significant; at other points, participants re-evaluated childhood memories from an adult perspective, in the light of adult knowledge or increased self-awareness. Sometimes, though not always, this included a more forgiving or a more understanding attitude towards their parents.

Several participants shared adult reflections prefaced with "looking back," or "as an adult now I can see", or "with hindsight"; or followed a memory with, "I didn't see it at the time, but now...", or similar. During a telephone conversation after her interview, Heather describes the "feelings that you had as a child, you don't have words for; but you can put them into words as an adult".

Rachel, reflecting on her mother's suicidal behaviour, recognises that "we couldn't really understand that behaviour as kids, but now, looking back, she must have been in

a pretty bad place”. Again, thinking about her father’s relationship with his own mother, Rachel says: “It’s only as an adult, now, I’ve kind of, I’ve been able to piece it all together”.

Several participants shared further reflections which arose after the interview as a result of the process, including reading my analysis. After reading her interview transcript, Heather writes in an e-mail:

After the interview and later when I read the transcript it really felt enlightening and I felt a sense of pieces fitting into place into the puzzle that is me. I have since had Christmas and on Christmas Day I actually used some of the words, that came to me during the interview, whilst with my dad. I told him, “Thank goodness for you.” I told him how lonely I often felt as a child and that I didn't feel lonely when he was there.

However, adult reflections have not always enabled us to reframe childhood experiences more positively. Mickey describes how his feelings have changed over time:

Even though I was under the impression that it was my father that was the more aggressive verbally . . . somewhere in behind, there is maybe my mother connecting things.

One of the limitations of the literature reviewed for this thesis is that studies tend to give only a snap-shot of participants’ or respondents’ beliefs or attitudes, taken at a

particular moment in time, whether during childhood or adulthood, and usually in response to clearly defined and therefore limited questions. One of the advantages of the open-ended, unstructured, and co-constructed approach that I have adopted is that participants have had the opportunity to describe both their childhood feelings as they remember them, and their adult reflections on them now; and crucially, to add further reflections and modifications as their feelings evolve in response to the research process.

Three of the four participants who took part in the focus group (including myself) are parents themselves, and after analysing the transcript of this conversation I noticed I had created several themes that I described as “Hypothesising, justifying” themes. For example, Heather says:

I’ve got children now, and have problems, and you make mistakes, and you have regrets, and I just think, listening to other people, there is no way of being a perfect parent to any particular child, because the children are different, and you can only do your best, which I suppose is what our parents have done, given the information *they* were given when they were [new parents].

Becoming parents may have given us a different perspective (see “Reflecting on having own children”, page 351); however, I am conscious that all four participants in the focus group were qualified or trainee counsellors, so we may have felt the need to demonstrate our empathic understanding of our parents in front of each other. I have also reflected on whether this tendency towards hypothesising and justifying was influenced by the focus group feeling like a more “public” space compared to the

individual interviews, which may have felt like a more “therapeutic” space, so participants may have been influenced by perceived social desirability and the cultural construction of motherhood as sacred (see “Maternal role”, page 302).

### *Acknowledging past hurt*

In this sub-theme I include instances where either the participants themselves, or the parents of participants, have acknowledged that past events or experiences were hurtful, harmful, or inappropriate. For example, although Mickey believed that he had a “perfect” childhood until he was in his twenties, suggesting that he may have been trapped in a “false self” (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 110), he describes how realisation dawned: “I think I realised at that point that I’m upset, and then I started thinking backwards, started thinking about what happened in the past, ‘Oh, yes, I was upset there, and I had those feelings.’”

Cathy recounts a conversation with her mother where she felt there was some recognition that she had been given too much responsibility as a child, although she makes it clear that this was in no sense an apology. Cathy remembers that her mother, reflecting on the fact that she wouldn’t even leave Cathy’s youngest sister with responsibility for the dog at the age of 11, because “that would be too much for her”, exclaimed:

“Oh, my God, I left Cathy with two children to look after!” . . . and I heard that not as a criticism of [my sister], but a realisation that at an age when she would have left me without a thought, she couldn’t do that with [my sister]—so it wasn’t a criticism of [my sister], and it wasn’t an apology or a—“Oh, my God,

we did this, this was too much to ask you,” it was, “That was how it was,” and “Isn’t that odd, fancy that!” (Laughing) kind of thing.

Miranda suggests that her mother has acknowledged some of the harm caused by early experiences, though only reluctantly:

We’ve had long discussions, and I know she now feels quite—I think she does for a moment, and then she puts it to one side (chuckles), and goes, “Oh, no, it wasn’t that bad!” but that she has some understanding that perhaps her way of being in the early months, years of my life was perhaps not great for our connection.

Initially, I found it remarkable how few participants had any kind of acknowledgement from their parents. Yet perhaps it’s not so surprising, as the grown-up children continue to take the parent role towards their parents and protect them from distress; and the parents remain in denial, because awareness is too painful. Cathy, following on from the extract above, comments that her mother “hadn’t cottoned on, but then, I don’t know why she would, because I’ve always made it so that they wouldn’t realise”.

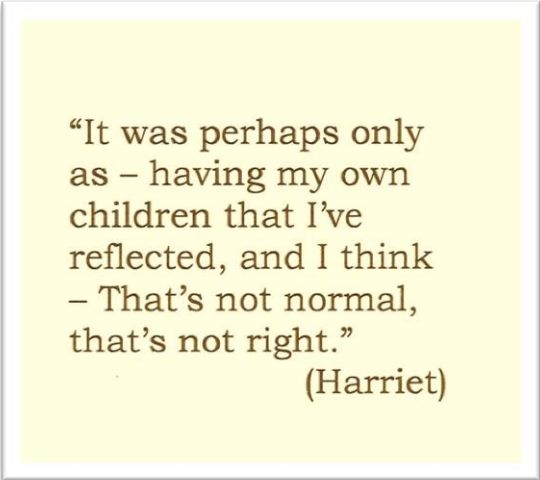
Alice describes her mother’s flat refusal to acknowledge some of her past behaviour even when challenged:

She’s sort of in denial, she’s, “No, no, I didn’t say that,” “No, I don’t remember saying that, no, I couldn’t have said that,” “Well, you did, because we both heard it,” and, you know . . . I think she just refuses to believe that she was like that at one point.

Cori (2010) concurs that many parents will try to deflect blame, refusing to acknowledge that they have so much power over their children (p. 3); and Miller (1979/1997) claims that society has colluded with this, and “protected the adult and blamed the victim” (p. 154).

### *Reflecting on having own children*

For the participants who have children, it was sometimes only when we became parents that we started to reflect on our own childhoods and question our experiences. Harriet, for example, says: “It was perhaps only having my own children that I’ve reflected, and I think— That’s not normal, that’s not right.”



“It was perhaps only as – having my own children that I’ve reflected, and I think – That’s not normal, that’s not right.”  
(Harriet)

During analysis, this led me to create a theme, “Becoming a parent”. As I explain to Cathy during her individual interview, “[My husband] and I have made some conscious decisions to do some things differently”; this was a common concern among those who are parents, so I created a second theme, “Striving to be different with own children”. Other participants, who are not yet parents, made comments such as Alice’s:

I always used to say to my Mum when we used to have these arguments that, if your Mum did it to you, why did you want to do it to us? If you didn’t like what she did to you, surely when you have your own kids, you’ll say: “I’m going to make a point not to do this to my kids?”



This led to a hypothetical theme, “Wouldn’t you do it differently with your own?”

However, as there is considerable overlap between all three themes, I have combined them here to avoid repetition, and I focus on two strands; looking back at our own childhoods through the lens of parenthood, and looking forwards to our own children, whether actual or hypothetical.

Sometimes, a specific incident or aspect of life with our own children may prompt an insight, such as Harriet’s reflection on homework. She remembers wondering, as a child:

“Why is everybody’s homework so good?” I remember thinking, “How come my homework is so different to everybody else’s?” I could never work that out, until I had my own children, and I spent this whole weekend with Roger doing one of his course-works, and I said—and he was worried it looked too good—and I said, “Rog, I could never work out why everybody else’s homework was better than mine, and it wasn’t Mum’s fault, she was working, but she didn’t get home till half seven, half eight at night.”

Not until she had her own children did Harriet realise what she had missed in childhood; a parent who supported her education by taking an active interest in homework. Harriet reflects on her role as a parent providing a “trampoline” for her children, implying cultivating resilience in them, and also acting as a springboard that her children can use to launch themselves into the world: “As long as they know they can come back to security, they’ll bounce higher and take more risks . . . rather than

just staying in a safe zone . . . if they do have foundations, they can bounce higher, can't they?" This fits with attachment theory's concept of a secure base; and Webb's description of emotionally attuned parents providing a "solid foundation" for their children (2013, p. 199).

Reflecting on parents' natural instinct to protect their children, and remembering how she was left unprotected against bullies, Alice wonders:

Did my parents not have that sort of instinct, that, when someone's bullying their child or, you know, insulting them, did they not have that instinct, that, "I should stick up for my child", that, "I won't tolerate this", and—where was that sort of response and that instinct?

Although as already discussed (see page 282), some of what is taken to be instinctive may in fact be socially constructed (Hays, 1996, p. 72), or learnt behaviour (Cori, 2010, p. 3).

Heather describes how in terms of emotional support, she "just didn't want them to have the same that I'd had, because somehow I must have linked it with this subconsciously"; and in terms of physical interaction: "With my children, I cuddled them and rolled around and played with them in the way that my dad did with me because I liked that, I just enjoyed doing it", making a conscious effort to do the opposite of her mother (Webb, 2013, p. 19). Miranda, similarly, reflects on her effort to be a different kind of mother to her son:

I want him to think that he has rights, I want him to think that he's allowed to take up his space in the world, and have the right to expect a certain something from those around him—whereas, of course, I've never expected anything from those around me.

\* \* \*

## **The fog**

Suddenly, out of the fog, a young deer crosses my path. I'm not sure who is more startled, me or the deer. She eyes me warily; I keep very still, hardly daring to breathe. She's so beautiful, delicate, sweet. I hardly dare speak, in case I frighten her away.

"It's alright, little one," I say at last, speaking very softly and slowly, "I won't hurt you." I know she can't understand the words; but perhaps she picks up my tone of voice, because she takes a step towards me.

"That's right," I murmur encouragingly, "you can trust me." She steps a little closer, keeping her eye on me, all the time her dainty little nose sniffing the air, alert for danger.

Very, very slowly, I put my hand out towards her, and for a brief moment she lets me touch her quivering flank, before darting away towards the trees and disappearing into the fog again. I feel strangely uplifted by this encounter; I have been honoured briefly by the presence of a rare and precious creature.

This is how I feel about my children. They are like wild animals—not wild in the sense that they are unruly or dangerous, but in that they are rare and beautiful creatures who are following their own paths. I have a duty towards them, to do them no harm, and to protect them in any way I can, but I do not own them; and they owe me nothing. If they choose to stay in my presence for a while, I feel I have been honoured.

\* \* \*

***Major theme: Denial***

*Themes: Denying the experience; Not blaming parents*

This major theme comprises two different but overlapping elements; denial of childhood emotional neglect, and re-framing from an adult perspective. The denial element includes the child's lack of awareness that there is anything wrong, which for some of us persisted into adulthood; it also includes the child's tendency towards self-blame, which may itself arise from childhood emotional neglect (Gerhardt, 2015, p. 154), resulting in ambivalence, and may also include denying the experience out of a sense of shame or a fear of hurting the parents' feelings (Webb, 2013, p. 203). This overlaps with the grown-up child's understanding of and forgiveness of parents, being able now to re-frame childhood experiences from an adult perspective, including seeing our parents as emotionally neglected children themselves—and continuing to protect them, as we did in childhood (see "Parent role", page 205).

*Denying the experience*

Several participants describe not being aware until adulthood that there was anything wrong. In a continuation of an earlier extract under "Contradictory feelings" (see page

246), describing herself as feeling “terribly confused” in childhood, Miranda adds: “I don’t even know that I really—well, I didn’t, I had no awareness of it at all, until probably about four years ago, during therapy, when I really began to think of things”. As children depend on their parents, they may “push out of consciousness any feelings of not being loved” until problematic feelings emerge later, often during therapy (Cori, 2010, p. 101), linking this to the concept of unresolved or unprocessed trauma (page 285).

As described above (page 349), Mickey remembers that until he was in his early twenties, “I was under the personal impression that I had a perfect childhood. My parents are perfect, we all love each other, there’s so much understanding and well-being, everything was perfect,” so he found it “very shocking, to kind of start seeing some problems”. Webb (2013) found that her emotionally neglected clients, too, typically remembered their childhoods as “mostly happy and healthy”; the irony is that we needed emotional awareness to understand what was lacking (p. 201). As Harriet explains, “to me, at the time, it was all just normal . . . because I didn’t know any different . . . my norms in England were quite abnormal!”

For Cathy, it was during the process of training to be a counsellor that she started to connect aspects of her childhood:

It wasn’t until I was doing the . . . I think it might have been the diploma—that that memory came back in a big way—it had always been there, I mean, I could remember, I can remember it really clearly, it had always been there, but it had never been something that I’d said out, until [counsellor training], and I’d never

thought how that had played out . . . and I hadn't made the connection with my stomach.

Cori (2010) refers to the “orphan complex” or “orphan archetype”; going without our parents' love feels, to the developing child, the same as being without parents, which is a threat to our survival. This is so painful, Cori suggests, that the feeling may be “deeply repressed” (p. 106); this may have been Cathy's experience.

Some participants rejected the label of “neglect” or “emotional neglect”, even whilst volunteering their stories for this research project. Miranda describes her childhood experience instead as “confusion”; Harriet insists, “It was just my childhood.” This may reflect what Cori (2010) sees as a client's resistance, and an inability to criticize an emotionally neglecting parent, even once we become aware of the harm caused us (p. 1). Although I am clear that my experience fits the criteria for childhood emotional neglect, in my first bracketing interview I acknowledge that I sometimes feel ambivalent about this:

One of the experiences I have repeatedly is of thinking about all this and then thinking, “Aw, you know, it wasn't that bad, really, you know, I didn't have that bad a childhood, what am I making such a fuss about?” And then I hear myself, and I think, “Yeah, that's straight out of childhood. Don't make a fuss about it; it wasn't that bad, you've got nothing to worry about, don't be upset,” you know . . . so that's the way I see it repeating, I can't even allow myself to say how bad it really feels like it was.

David denies or down-plays the harm caused to him: “It’s nothing that I can say to him, because I don’t want to break his heart by telling him how wrong he was, in terms of treating me . . . it’s just something I’ll sort of live with”. Heather, similarly, says, “my mum would be so heartbroken if she knew that’s how I felt with her . . . she thought she was being a good mum”. To some extent, this could be seen as the grown-up children protecting their parents, continuing the role-reversal that they experienced in childhood (see “Parent role”, page 205), and fits with Miller’s description of children’s tendency to “absolve the parents . . . of all responsibility” (1979/1997, p. 154). These extracts also fit with Webb’s description of clients who discount or play down the impact of their childhood experiences, questioning “the reality, importance or validity of their memory” (2013, p. 13), which may itself be an aspect of the lasting impact of childhood emotional neglect.

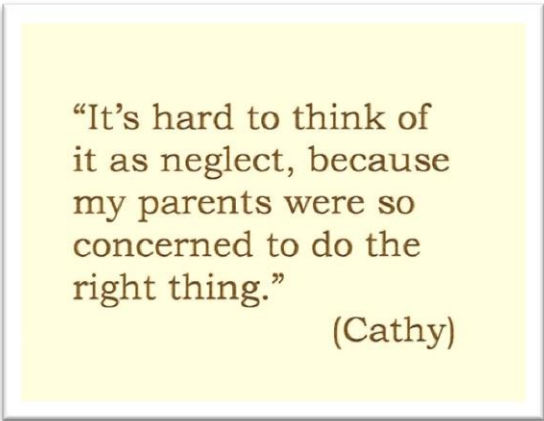
During the focus group, Cathy acknowledges the unreliability of memories: “I think one of the things that’s struck me is how things change over time—how your memories are unreliable”. Elsewhere, however, she recounts a “clear memory” with vivid details; several participants recall precise childhood incidents in considerable detail. As discussed in the methodology chapter (page 41), memories can be both unreliable (Rothschild, 2000, p. 151), and highly accurate (ibid, p. 152); and Knight, writing about survivors of sexual abuse, suggests that the memories of trauma survivors may be “psychologically true, even when they are not historically accurate” (2009, p. 19).

When I find myself doubting the accuracy of my own memories or perception of childhood, I remind myself that even recently, an old school-friend of my sister commented that she remembers “there was an atmosphere” in our house: so perhaps I

didn't imagine it all. Similarly, Harriet has carried the burden of her experience alone until recently, but now that she has started to talk to her uncle, he is able to validate her perception of her mother; and Muhammed's brother, although he seems to have been less personally affected by their father's controlling behaviour, can clearly observe it, and is able to validate Muhammed's childhood memories and experiences.

### *Not blaming parents*

Although I have felt, throughout the process, that it is very important for me to tell my story and the stories of the participants, it has never been my intention to cast blame, on my own parents or on anyone else. As I make clear in my first bracketing interview:



“It’s hard to think of it as neglect, because my parents were so concerned to do the right thing.”

(Cathy)

This is my experience, I'm not saying, “This is what was done to me,” and I'm not saying that anybody is to blame, I think my parents were very much victims of their experiences, their circumstances, their place in time.

Most of the participants are similarly anxious to make it clear that it is not their intention to blame their parents. David starts by describing his experience as: “Nothing that my parents were at fault that would affect me that way.” Cathy, similarly, started by saying: “It’s hard to think of it as neglect, because my parents were so concerned to do the right thing”; this absence of any intention to cause harm is widely recognised in



the literature (Cori, 2010; Friedman & Billick, 2015; Gerhardt, 2015; Glaser, 2002; Webb, 2013).

For others, however, there may just be no point in having that conversation. Harriet accepts that her mother won't change: "That's what she is, even as an adult", and "She creates trouble (said with emphasis) . . . and she's still doing it!" Harriet describes her mother's inability to face reality, or embrace anyone else's point of view:

If she doesn't like something, she just doesn't hear it . . . so she—I really do believe, with my Mum, and I've spoken to my cousins about this, and my brother—her version of the truth is what she believes, and I really, really, really do believe that, that her version is "The Truth". In her world. And anybody else's truth is—she just thinks is just—awful.

And Mickey, after reading an early draft of my discussion chapter, commented that I had been "too gentle" in my description of his emotionally neglecting parents. Perhaps I have been too forgiving, too understanding of our parents' struggles; perhaps I have been too afraid to speak up, still, even though my parents are no longer here to hear me.

***Major theme: Change and Growth***

*Themes: Counselling has helped; Parents have grown/changed/developed*

As well as a general theme of change and growth throughout individuals' lives, there were some specific themes that I noted in the participants' stories. Several mentioned that counselling has helped them come to terms with, or recover from, childhood experiences; others feel that their parents themselves have grown or changed, or that

“That’s the only thing I’ve noticed that’s changed, is that I wake up in the morning and I don’t have that horrible big knot anymore.”

(Rachel)

their relationships with their parents have developed over time. For those of us who are parents, becoming a parent has been a catalyst for change (see page 351).

Change, however, has not necessarily been straightforward or comfortable. Several of

the participants describe how hard they find it to shake off childhood patterns, and referred to the difference between knowing something cognitively, and being able to feel it. Alice describes her constant struggle to develop self-esteem:

I try to think positive . . . I try to think that, OK, I *am* worth something and I am worthy of respect . . . but because I don’t really believe it, it doesn’t really come across the way I want it to.

Perhaps we “cannot completely heal the scars of a childhood trauma” (Dannlowksi et al., 2012). As Alice says later in her interview, “that striving is there, but I feel it’s difficult, because I don’t really believe it”.

My own perception is that I have changed; I have grown, and continue to grow, although at times I still feel the pain and distress of childhood emotional neglect keenly. I describe this feeling in my first bracketing interview:

There’s still a huge part of me is a little girl that just wanted her mummy to love her, not judge her, not evaluate her, not tell her she was better or worse but

just—warts and all—just love her . . . but through the process that I’ve been through, actually, I think I have got bigger.

This may be an illustration of post-traumatic growth. Rachel, too, believes that as a result of her childhood experiences, she can “offer people maybe what I wouldn’t [otherwise] be able to offer them”, and comments that among her circle of friends, “if anyone’s upset, it’s always my house that they knock on, or even if they just want a cup of tea and they don’t want to talk, it’s my house”, reframing her childhood adversity as a strength.

Harriet, however, describes more ambivalent feelings about the long term effects (see page 229); and some of the literature suggests that in the case of child maltreatment, distorted thinking caused by the experience may prevent, or obscure, post-traumatic growth (Knight, 2009, p. 23).

### *Counselling has helped*

Six of the participants (including myself) had counselling during counsellor training; three more had sought talking therapy. Mickey describes how counselling helped him to start to make sense of his childhood experiences, and to begin to heal: “I explored that for a year or so, and I think I’m better now, I think I understand more things, even though there will always be that upset, but I think I will be better”. Although Mickey describes having ongoing difficulties, he finds that with more insight, “I think I realise it a bit more, and, um, again, I’m trying not to do it so much”.

One really joyful moment for me in Mickey's interview came when, after describing his huge difficulty in recognising and expressing his likes and dislikes, he talks about learning to sing:

I can actually start to recently to kinda know the things I like, even the things where it sounds silly, like singing—oh, I *never* sing in my life, and I just downloaded an app recently and started doing some singing and it's great—great fun! But, uh, it's not just fun, it's very, very important to me because saying to myself, "Oh, I like singing, it doesn't matter what voice I have, it will just make me feel good, and it's for myself," it is a very, very important step for me, because I can acknowledge what I like, what I need, and express it, and then probably slowly express it to others without feeling any embarrassment of those things.

Like Mickey, Muhammed was prompted to seek counselling, initially for anger management. At first he thought all his problems stemmed from his relationship with his father, but the process of counselling helped Muhammed to uncover other connections with childhood experiences:

This small, how can I say, like flashback comes to you, like your memories . . . then I go back to my childhood, and I am like actually, one second, my Mum was actually not that great either, because I remember certain moments when I was too alone, I felt myself left really alone and left on my own.

This insight enabled Muhammed to see a connection between his childhood experiences and his fear of abandonment in adult relationships; now that this is in conscious awareness, he can articulate it and begin to resolve it.

A valuable approach to healing from childhood trauma may be that provided by the concept of dual awareness. In helping trauma clients to overcome panic, Rothschild suggests that it is important to acknowledge (out loud or internally) “the reality of both selves simultaneously,” that is, “I’m feeling scared, *and* I’m not actually in danger”:

The message is, “Both realities count”, not “There is nothing to be afraid of”.

Accepting the two perspectives (that of the experiencing self and that of the observing self) simultaneously will often reduce anxiety quickly. (Rothschild, 2000, p. 132).

Rothschild suggests that “non-acceptance of the experiencing self’s reality” may increase anxiety, whereas acceptance reduces anxiety (ibid). In terms of this research, it is perhaps helpful for the participants to have their childhood distress and adult struggles acknowledged, at the same time recognising that their parents were only behaving in the way that was normal for their era, or their culture, or doing the best they could in their particular circumstances.

### *Parents have grown/changed/developed*

Sometimes, life changes us. Miranda describes how a traumatic incident may have prompted some growth and personal development in her mother:

Things are very different now, because when my brother died—and I do think she really grew up then . . . for at least the last ten years she’s kind of, as I’ve got to know myself she’s gone along with that and got to know me, too, and will say, she’s much more expressive about how she feels, even in private.

Even without any specific interventions, or the trigger of a particular event, people are capable of personal growth. Alice describes her parents’ changing relationship with their extended family:

They’re always trying to use us, and for a long time my parents didn’t see that, but now they’re starting to see it, and it’s like—my parents are coming up to sixty, and I’m, like, “Why has it taken you so long to know all this?” . . .

They’re sort of growing themselves, but it’s taking a long time.

Alice also explains how, thanks to her own growing awareness of what she missed out on in her own childhood, she has been a driving force for change within her family:

It’s only since [my sister’s son] was born that I’ve been saying that we need to start doing the things that we didn’t have, and going on holidays . . . I want him to know that he was loved, and worthy . . . because we’ve not had that, and we’ve grown up feeling sort of worthless, really, so I don’t want him to grow up feeling the same.

Cori suggests that when we start to recognise where our parents failed us, we can begin to take responsibility for changing our lives (2010, p. 207); Alice's story seems to confirm this.

As he is the oldest of his siblings, David wonders if his parents have learnt from their experience of parenting him, describing himself as the “experimental kid, if you will; just throw everything at me . . . learn from me, and then get on”, linking this theme to the discussion of birth order (see page 324). Later in the interview, however, David offers a different explanation: “I don't know whether my parents have learnt from what they did to me and been better towards my brother, or the fact that they are just changing the way society is changing”. Culture is not fixed but fluid (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 119); it changes, and people are changed by it (Hays, 1996; Lieberman, 2015, p. 190).

Parents, too, may grow and develop without any direct intervention, simply as circumstances change (Cori, 2010, p. 209). Some participants recognised that family circumstances had changed, which may have affected the behaviour of individuals within the family (Wastell & White, 2012, p. 403). Cathy comments that by the time she was 18, “the business had been gone for eight, nine years, and it took several years after [Dad] gave up with that before he was anything like normal”. Cathy thinks this may explain her youngest sister having a different experience growing up, although birth order and different personalities or degree of sensitivity leading to different interpersonal relationships may also have been influences.

After reading her interview transcript, Rachel describes in an e-mail how her feelings towards her father continue to change:

When reading the parts where I spoke of my understanding of how dad's upbringing had impacted his own ways of being/parenting and how much closer we now are—I felt full of love for my dad when reading the transcript, almost as if I know he really has been the best dad he could be.

The literature reviewed for this study is mostly silent on the subject of change and growth, focusing on the negative outcomes for children, and apparently seeing parents as fixed in their mental and behavioural patterns, rather than individuals continually subject to the influences of life and relationships, and capable of change.

### ***Summary***

The themes explored in this final section of the discussion chapter demonstrate that, although they experienced, and continue to experience, sometimes severe distress as a consequence of their childhoods, the participants are also often capable of empathic understanding for their parents, can recognise the value of some positive aspects of their childhoods, and are frequently able to offer alternative explanations for childhood events and experiences. The stories in the final theme, “Change and Growth”, are a testimony to human resilience and the capacity for positive forward movement, and may illustrate Rogers’ concept of the actualizing tendency (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1990, p. 137).



Throughout the discussion chapter I have continued to explore the themes which I created during the thematic analysis and illustrated them with quotes from the participant interviews. I have also included further analysis generated by my own reflections on the data, in a process akin to focusing (Gendlin, 1978/2003) or *indwelling* (Moustakas, 1990, p. 24), which enabled me to develop my subjective and intuitive knowledge of the phenomenon. I may, at times, have become too concerned with psychological theories—not that these are unimportant—at the expense of sociocultural context and autobiographical detail. Preoccupied with my need to “get it right” and achieve the academic ideal of my imagination, I have been in danger of forgetting that I have my own wisdom.

## **Chapter 6: Concluding thoughts**

Concise definitions of childhood emotional neglect continue to elude us, partly because it's a social construct, affected by social, cultural and historical factors (Iwaniec, 2006, p. 25). Yet the fact that an attitude towards children or childrearing was considered acceptable, necessary, or desirable 50 years ago, or 5,000 miles away, does not make it any less potentially emotionally neglectful, or harmful to child development. Perhaps the more authoritarian or more emotionally constrained parenting style of our parents' era, or our grandparents' era, was inevitable, or deemed necessary, given a state of war, famine, or economic deprivation; but maybe it was also to some degree, however unintentionally, abusive, and did cause harm, and maybe we are still feeling the consequences of this.

\* \* \*

### **The fog**

The landscape may still be blurry, but in writing the discussion chapter, some features began to emerge from the fog.

Only connect? In modern times, Western industrialized cultures at least have privileged intellect, reason, and productivity, or “doing” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003, p. 67); it is gradually becoming apparent that emotions, social connection, and “being” in relationship to others are equally important aspects of human life (Lieberman, 2015). The most damaging features of childhood emotional neglect may be the suppression of emotions, disruption to social connections, and a sense that you cannot simply be yourself: that you are not welcome as you are.

Invisible me. If your sense of self depends on how others respond to you (Lieberman, 2015, p. 192), then the experience of being unseen and unheard by your parents may leave you feeling invisible; you may not be sure if you're really there at all.

The survival game. In infancy, we're figuring out the rules of the game. You may learn that it's safer to roll over and submit, rather than risk parental disapproval; the "freeze" strategy. Be good, be nice, work hard (harder, harder, harder! Because it's never enough); but make sure you don't win, because Mummy (or Daddy) won't like it.

Ineffective. You may be driven, either by the desire for approval, or by the fear of disapproval, to do better, try harder (and yet never feel good enough); or you may engage in self-limiting behaviour—because what's the point?

Lonely and depressed, you feel lousy, but you're caught in a double-bind. You don't know what's wrong, because you've never had the sense of what's right; and you're not allowed to show distress or ask for help. In fact, you have to show the world that you're fine! You don't need any help; you can handle it!

Relationships are a minefield. Having learnt not to have needs of your own, you tend to the needs of the other, and blame yourself for everything; and if you become uncomfortable or unhappy, just put up and shut up, because expressing your needs, or getting into a fight, courts danger.

You're trapped in a cycle: Not of deliberate cruelty passed on from parent to child, but of absences and omissions recreated in one generation after another, because how can

we know what was missing? There's no intention to harm; just frightened parents trying to do their best, preoccupied with getting it right, and therefore getting it tragically wrong.

The sanctity of motherhood? A culture of intensive mothering; mother-blaming; anxious, narcissistic parenting; constantly changing and conflicting beliefs about children and their needs, mothers and their roles; the shifting sands of culture. How can anyone find their way?

Loss upon loss: Individual family losses, traumas or hardships preventing parents from providing sufficient nurturing—but emotionally neglected themselves, they can't recognise their own needs, or admit to needing help; and they're not allowed to show their distress, so no-one knows or offers help.

Even very young children can have a sense of something missing, something wrong. Maybe that heightens the sense of powerlessness, of fear. If you can deny there's anything wrong while you're still a child, you may be able to concentrate on other areas of life; academic achievement, sports, or hobbies, propelling yourself forwards until you reach adulthood, and can seek help.

Only connect: or only reflect? If unprocessed trauma plays a significant role in psychological maltreatment, then the opportunity to reflect on and process trauma must be highly valuable, not only for individuals, but for all they come into contact with.

Pandora's box? Reflection and processing trauma can be deeply painful; sometimes, it's easier just to keep on pretending, even to yourself, that everything's fine.

But there's hope: One positive relationship—a more effective parent, a grandparent, teacher, or neighbour—may save you. The participants in this study are survivors; there may be others out there who didn't have even one positive relationship, who don't even know that there's an alternative to the fog.

There are stories here of resilience, and recovery, which seem to reflect current thinking on the plasticity of the human brain; I'm optimistic for the future. Or is that just me and my childhood emotional neglect again? "It wasn't so bad, I'm fine, don't worry, I'll be OK?" I'll let you, the reader/audience, decide.

\* \* \*

Adult reflections and perspectives, the subject of the final section of the discussion chapter, have enabled some participants to reach a new understanding of themselves and their parents, often, although not always, achieving some degree of forgiveness; taking part in this research project seems to have enhanced that process for some. It was not my intention either to encourage or to discourage forgiveness; but for myself personally, through the reflexive processes embedded in this research, I have achieved a level of integration and acceptance that I had not previously reached.

Initially, I wanted to know whether recovery was possible; in the end, this proved to be outside the scope of my research project. I suspect that for several participants our

sense is that we survived the experience of childhood emotional neglect, much in the way that one might survive a car crash. We're alive, and walking, but we're left with an ache which will trouble us more in adverse conditions, and we will perhaps always walk with a slight limp.

### *What my research adds*

One contribution that my research makes may be the detailed reflections of adults who have identified themselves as emotionally neglected in childhood, offering depth rather than breadth. This may offer some guidance to future researchers in terms of the internal life of the emotionally neglected individual; what we perceive our experience to have been, and how we believe it has affected us in later life. Unstructured interviews enabled participants to give full, detailed accounts of their childhood experiences in a way not usually captured by questionnaire or structured interview approaches.

Understanding the experience from the inside may facilitate the design of further, larger scale studies which may result in more generalizable findings; Becker-Blease and Freyd (2006) found that when childhood trauma was added into a model of predictors of psychopathology in later life, this became the largest predictor, outweighing other factors such as genetics and biology (p. 218) or family history of psychological problems or mood disturbance (ibid, p. 224). Adding to the conversation by offering some of the details of the experience of childhood emotional neglect may enable more researchers to see the need to include questions about emotional neglect to other studies looking at the antecedents of adult psychological illness or distress, in the way that the ACEs studies have revealed the link between childhood trauma of all kinds and adult

health (Felitti et al., 1998). It may also inform professionals such as teachers and social workers about the experience of childhood emotional neglect, including the long-term effects, and potentially empower them to act sooner to support children and their families.

A recurring problem in the literature is the challenge of defining emotional neglect, and differentiating between emotional abuse and emotional neglect, and other forms of child maltreatment. I did not achieve my initial goal of developing a single, clear definition of childhood emotional neglect, but the knowledge offered within these stories may add an insider's view and enhance future definitions and understanding.

Childhood emotional neglect occurring on its own as a stand-alone form of neglect or abuse does not necessarily entail obviously wrong or harmful acts or behaviour towards a child, and does not directly result in visible wounds, injuries or deficits, such as a child being dirty or smelly, or inadequately clothed. For this reason, even when the relevant professionals (health visitors, social workers, teachers) recognise emotional neglect as occurring, they may find it harder to intervene than in the case of physical abuse or neglect, or sexual abuse (Dubowitz, 2007; Glaser, 2002; Toros & Tiirik, 2016). Dubowitz (2007) notes that, "a burn or broken limb naturally evokes strong responses. Strong cultural prohibitions against sex with children clearly make sexual abuse repugnant to most" (p. 603), whereas neglect, especially emotional neglect, is more insidious.

From the popular saying, "Sticks and stones" (see page 231), to the disparity in UK provision for mental health compared to physical health (BACP, 2014), it's clear that

we have been culturally conditioned to believe that physical injuries cause real pain, whereas psychological or emotional injuries don't. Yet emerging evidence from socio-cognitive neuroscience suggests that the brain treats both kinds of pain in the same way (Lieberman, 2015, p. 40). Despite growing awareness, the severity of the problem continues to be underrated, although increasingly, there is evidence that childhood emotional neglect is potentially at least as harmful as other forms of abuse and neglect (Glaser, 2002; Iwaniec, 2006; Music, 2009). Rothschild (2000) suggests that chronic stress during a child's developmental years results in an equivalent effect to PTSD (p. 80).

The ease with which I recruited participants within a university population may give some indication of how widespread childhood emotional neglect is, even amongst people who appear to be functioning well; though Wright et al. (2009) suggest that childhood emotional neglect as a stand-alone form of childhood maltreatment may be more common than other forms of childhood abuse or neglect amongst "high functioning" individuals such as university students (p. 60).

The fact that the participants in this study are all people whom society in general might consider to be functioning well, even above average, also illustrates how easily childhood emotional neglect may remain hidden. Such individuals may be doubly neglected, or even triply neglected, as our distress goes unnoticed by others, and even ourselves (Music, 2009, p. 143). Serbin and Karp (2004) note the high social cost of psychological distress or mental health problems, especially when there is a cycle of social dependency continuing from generation to generation (p. 334); however, perhaps because the costs of childhood emotional neglect are mostly internalized and absorbed



by the individual (Glaser, 2002; Hill et al., 2012), it seems no-one intervenes, no-one is concerned, no-one has us in mind (Music, 2009).

Several studies included in the literature review are limited in age range, whereas my participants range from mid-twenties to over sixty years of age. Others are limited by being restricted in terms of population, and although it was never my intention to claim a representative sample, my study includes both male and female participants, of different ethnic origins and countries of birth: although the majority (eight) are from the UK, two are from families of Asian countries of origin, one Eastern European, one Middle Eastern; and one has dual nationality (British and another nationality).

Much of the existing literature on childhood emotional neglect is based on questionnaire surveys, or experimental studies of interventions; I aimed to capture nuanced stories in real life. Participants told me their stories in their own contexts, moving back and forth through time; and they continued to keep in touch with me throughout the research process, adding to the data in the form of communications in real time, enriching the data. In writing the thesis, use of narrative style and literary techniques may enable me to reach an audience beyond researchers within specific disciplines and change hearts and minds (Holman Jones et al. 2013, p. 37).

### *Implications*

There are implications in this research; for us all, as social beings; for researchers; for practitioners, especially counsellors, but also teachers, social workers, and those involved in the prison services, for decision-makers, for society. We need to come out of the fog of confusion around childhood emotional neglect; we cannot stumble blindly

around any longer saying, “We’re not quite sure where we are, or what it is we’re looking at”. It’s my hope that other researchers will use this research to form the tools to search for others lost in the fog; I address some areas for future research below.

One implication for researchers may be that, because childhood emotional neglect is poorly understood, not clearly defined, and under-researched, it continues to be a neglected subject; if it is not already in the literature as a form of maltreatment, it may not be included as a potential factor in studies (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006, p. 225). Similarly, because psychological maltreatment, including both childhood emotional neglect and childhood emotional abuse, is not recognised as a Criterion A event for PTSD in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), clinicians may not diagnose PTSD in psychologically maltreated children, despite the severity of their symptoms (Spinazzola et al., 2014, p. S25). School teachers may be reluctant to refer children for support because they are uncertain about whether what they are observing is abusive behaviour; or because they are unsure how serious the problem is (Toros & Tiirik, 2016). This may be true for others who are in a position to intervene (social workers, health care professionals, even family members or neighbours), but are reluctant to do so because of uncertainty about what constitutes emotional neglect, and how potentially damaging it may be (Iwaniec, 2006, p. 9).

When terms with negative connotations such as “maltreatment” and “abuse” are used in the definition of emotional neglect, or when the definition appears to blame or criticise the parents or primary carers, this may also make those who are in a position to act reluctant to do so, for fear of making the problem worse (Glaser, 2002, p. 700); yet despite this, and despite professional concerns about the perceived difficulty of proving

such cases in the legal system, the potential outcomes of emotional abuse and neglect are sufficiently detrimental to development that there is a “professional imperative to intervene” (ibid).

A sense of “mattering” may moderate some of the harmful effects of maltreatment, and one caring relationship with a trusted adult may offer some protection (Flett et al., 2016, p. 55). This finding may have implications for school-based counselling services and others whose roles bring them into contact with either children or adults who have experienced childhood emotional neglect.

Although one study of children’s perceptions of emotional neglect found that children as young as 11 years old could reflect on their childhood and evaluate their parents as “optimal” or “less than optimal” (Young et al., 2011, p. 893), suggesting that some children know what’s wrong from quite early on, childhood emotional neglect is typically hard to self-diagnose (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006; Hill et al., 2012; Webb, 2013, p. 206). Not having had sufficient good input on recognising and articulating our inner world, we may not be able to identify what is missing (Herman, 1998, p. S148; Music, 2009); and conditioned by childhood experiences to believe that our needs or feelings don’t matter, that we should be able to manage alone, or that we’re not worthy of help, we may struggle on alone (Hill et al., 2012).

However, unmet needs don’t go away; they persist, or they change into something else, such as a psychological or physical illness, and we may spend the rest of our lives trying to get those unmet needs met (Cori, 2010, p. 110). Yet adults who experienced childhood emotional neglect may only come to counselling when they are “sent”, either

by a frustrated or concerned partner, or in my case, because it is a requirement of a training programme. Webb (2013) suggests that there are clues for the therapist (p. 202); perhaps counsellors and other healthcare professionals can become “emotional neglect aware”, just as they may be “dyslexia aware” or similar.

It has become clear to me through data collection and analysis, and through the literature review, that for many, the experience of childhood emotional neglect has the quality of trauma (Rothschild, 2000). It may be that because our earliest experiences are preverbal, they are potentially even more damaging than later verbal abuse such as name-calling, shaming or belittling, which we can, as adults, replay and edit, or delete. Our early infant experiences may not be “encoded and stored” in the way that explicit memories are, and these implicit memories, because they cannot be verbalized, “we tend to enact with others, to evoke in others, and/or to embody” (Cori, 2010, p. 133).

In client work, it may be important to validate the story of the “experiencing self”, as well as drawing attention to the reality of the “observing self” to facilitate healing and recovery (Rothschild, 2000). This may have been one of the advantages of autoethnography as a methodological approach; participants have had the opportunity to tell their stories, and have them validated, whilst at the same time being met as functioning adults, co-researchers, capable of stepping out of their stories and re-evaluating them in the light of adult experiences. Mickey, in particular, said that the value of taking part for him was the opportunity not only to tell his story, but also to read his story in the interview transcript; this may have enabled his “observing self” to reflect on and re-evaluate or integrate the experience.

Clients who have experienced childhood emotional neglect may feel, like some of the participants in this study, that their mothers loved them “dutifully”, but as they never felt fully seen or accepted for who they truly were, they never felt truly loved (Cori, 2010, p. 132). Such clients may be acutely sensitive to a counsellor who is “going through the motions” of acceptance and understanding in therapy, but is not truly present with the client. The particular challenges for emotionally neglected adults in counselling may include seeing themselves as persons of worth, recognising long-denied needs, and overcoming the shame of accepting help (Cori, 2010, p. 109; Hill et al., 2012).

Some aspects of the person-centred approach to counselling, specifically: noticing, validating, and attuning to the client like an “ideal mother,” may facilitate repair through the relationship (McMillan & McLeod, 2006). Rogers’ “necessary and sufficient” conditions for therapeutic change seem highly relevant; two people in psychological contact, the first (the client) in a more vulnerable or anxious state, and the second (the therapist) more congruent, integrated or psychologically well than the client, at least during their time together during therapy; the therapist’s unconditional positive regard towards the client, and empathic understanding of the client’s world, and the therapist communicating the “core conditions” to the client (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1990, p. 221). These seem in essence to be the very conditions that a child needs for healthy psychological development; to feel a psychological or emotional connection with the parent or primary caregiver, to be allowed to be vulnerable and dependent, to have a relationship with the parent or primary caregiver that feels honest and authentic, to be loved and accepted unconditionally, to be truly seen and understood, and to have these communicated.

Whilst it would be unrealistic and possibly unhelpful for parents to behave like counsellors towards their children (Sanders, 2002), it does seem to be essential for children to have at least one parent or primary caregiver who is sufficiently psychologically well to contain the child's emotions and aid emotional regulation, rather than a parent or caregiver who feels vulnerable and insecure relying on the child to regulate the parent's emotions.

Music (2009) suggests that when children who have been "deadened" by emotional neglect start to "come alive" (p. 150), they may first exhibit some unpleasant or undesirable behaviours that the therapist needs to acknowledge and accept, even if they seem alarming, such as aggressive or sadistic play (ibid, p. 154). I have seen this in my own clients; in children, through aggressive play, and in adults, through verbal expression of violent fantasies. This may be a necessary first stage; I remember needing to express anger before I could reach any degree of forgiveness or healing, and I strongly resented being told, in therapy, that I mustn't blame my parents; this felt like an invalidation of experiences that I was only tentatively and painfully starting to validate myself.

This may map onto Herman's three stage model for recovery from psychological trauma. The first stage, establishing safety, may correspond to a therapeutic relationship that is as free from threat as possible (Rogers, 1951, p. 517); the second, mourning what has been lost (which includes bearing witness to the client's story, and validating the reality of it for the client), may correspond to Rogers' conditions of acceptance and empathic understanding (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1990, p. 221),

before the client is ready for the third stage, rebuilding connections with the social world (Herman, 1998, p. S146).

Rothschild emphasises the importance of validating the trauma client's reality and managing dual awareness by acknowledging, out loud or internally, both realities simultaneously; for example, "I'm feeling scared, *and* I'm not actually in danger" (2000, p. 132). Rothschild stresses the importance of using the conjunction *and*, pointing out that to use the conjunction *but* "would imply negation" of the experiencing self's feeling of anxiety. This appears to be a small but crucial distinction: it may be that the feeling (in this case, anxiety) "escalates with non-acceptance of the experiencing self's reality" (ibid). The value of a person-centred approach to counselling, and an autoethnographic approach to researching childhood emotional neglect, may be this opportunity for acknowledging two realities: in my case, "I felt like I didn't matter", *and* "my parents didn't mean to cause me harm".

### *Limitations and areas for future research*

I am conscious that by involving participants from backgrounds that are markedly different from my own, I may not have developed the theme of cultural context sufficiently; for example, the way in which an individual's childhood may have been shaped by having parents who grew up in a more collectivist, Eastern society (Alice, David), or under a communist regime (Mickey), or in a turbulent Middle Eastern state (Muhammed). In exchange, however, I was able to satisfy my curiosity about whether childhood emotional neglect is a uniquely British problem.

I have mentioned the potential role of genetics (Anisman et al., 1998; Gerhardt, 2015; Fearon, et al., 2014; Serbin & Karp, 2004) and epigenetics (Gerhardt, 2015; Narvaez, Wang, & Chang, 2016) in attachment styles and therefore in childhood emotional neglect, but to explore these aspects further would have required a different kind of study, and would have taken me far from the heart of autoethnography; that is, the participants' stories and their lived experiences.

I have not explored the role of gender in depth, or differences between mother-daughter, father-son and mother-son, father-daughter relationships; this may be a valuable area for further research, but in such a small scale study, I might have implied generalizations that would not be appropriate for the methodological approach.

Similarly, I was aware that aspects of alexithymia and autism may overlap with the outcomes, as we perceive them, of childhood emotional neglect, and address this briefly in the discussion section; but I chose not to get drawn into argument about what I was studying, and stayed instead with my understanding of the phenomenon—and the participants'—as childhood emotional neglect.

I have touched on the subject of post-traumatic growth only briefly in the final section of the discussion chapter, "Perspectives" (see page 361). Almost all of the participants describe at least one positive relationship or factor in childhood, which may have enabled both survival, and possibly post-traumatic growth, by facilitating a sense of mattering (see page 378). However, this was not the main focus of the study, although as a counsellor it is of great interest to me; this too may be a valuable area for further research.



For future research, Luke and Banerjee (2013) suggest concentrating on children's perceptions of maltreatment. As my study demonstrates, because of variations both in context and in individual children's susceptibility, maltreated children are not a homogenous group; different children will both be affected differently by similar experiences, and make different meanings of those experiences (ibid).

And finally, this study is limited to university graduates, although not to psychology students or graduates, as is sometimes the case with psychological research. I am not claiming generalisability, or claiming any proof of prevalence, or cause and effect; but future research carried out in community settings and with larger and more representative samples may make this possible.

I am conscious of stones that I have left unturned, despite my desire to be thorough; but I reached a stage where I felt I had to finish for sake of my own wellbeing. This has been an emotionally exacting piece of research, both in terms of the subject matter and the methodological approach. Research is rarely carried out in a vacuum; I have been researching myself and others in the midst of life with all its messiness, writing about the experience of childhood and parenthood whilst bringing up my own children, and whilst enduring a number of significant family bereavements, including the death of my own mother. I found I was thinking about the PhD all the time; while exploring the ancient medina of Fez, while cooking tea in the kitchen—I couldn't escape it. It was time to come in from the fog. The price has been high; but there has been a rich reward from this deeply personal research.

\* \* \*

## **Dramatic interlude: Finale**

*Dramatis personae*

ANGELA

SOPHIA

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET

BABA YAGA

THE GRINDYLOW

CHORUS OF ACADEMICS

*Scene: A study. ANGELA is sitting at the desk, writing; THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET is playing contentedly on the floor; SOPHIA is standing by the bookshelves with her head on one side reading the spines of the books. BABA YAGA is hovering behind ANGELA's chair, reading over her shoulder; THE GRINDYLOW is curled up under the desk, apparently asleep. The CHORUS OF ACADEMICS are standing in the doorway.*

ANGELA: *(Leans back in her chair, puts her pen down).* Sophia, I think this work is finally coming to an end.

SOPHIA: *(Turns from the bookshelf and smiles)* Does that mean you won't need me anymore?

ANGELA: (*Laughs*) You know I'll always need you. I'll always need you to balance me; to remind me to stand back and look again more objectively, to consider different viewpoints.

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET: (*Tugging anxiously on ANGELA's sleeve*) And me? What about me? Will you still need *me*?

ANGELA: (*Puts her hand gently on THE LITTLE GIRL's head*) And I'll always need you, too. You're my sense of fun and playfulness. What would life be without that? Sophia helps me to be serious and level-headed. You save me from being *too* serious and level-headed! (*THE LITTLE GIRL climbs onto ANGELA's lap and puts her arms round her, snuggling up cosily and confidently*).

BABA YAGA: (*Sharply*) And me?

THE GRINDYLOW: (*Uncurls and starts to reach for ANGELA's ankles, but she stamps on his hands before he can take hold*). Ouch! That hurt! You—

ANGELA: (*Firmly*) Don't even start. You can just stay right there. I don't want to listen to a word you have to say *ever* again.

THE GRINDYLOW: (*Slinks back down under the desk, nursing his sore hands*) I was only ever trying to keep you safe (*sulkily*).

ANGELA: (*More kindly*) I know, I can see that now. But I *am* safe, and I can take care of myself now. I don't need you anymore.

BABA YAGA: (*Shrilly*) You still haven't said whether you still need *me*. Are you ignoring me? Please don't ignore me!

ANGELA: (*Turning to BABA YAGA*) I was coming to you. It's a little bit more complicated, and I'm trying to be fair. You see, I do understand now that on one level you were only trying to keep me safe. You were aware of the hidden dangers, the landmines underfoot, and you knew what the triggers might be. You guided me along a safe and narrow path; you kept me contained for my own safety's sake.

BABA YAGA: (*Smugly*) That's right. If you became angry, or sad, or wildly happy, you might have set something off! It was better to be low-key, calm, quiet, and *good*.

ANGELA: But on the other hand, that meant I never learnt to handle strong emotions; and I always felt that my feelings were an inconvenience, a problem. I learnt to limit myself. And you see—and I don't mean this unkindly, really I don't—I think I understand, now, that you were also doing it to protect yourself. Because *you* hadn't been taught to manage strong or so-called negative emotions, because *you* were afraid of bombs going off, you needed to keep everything calm for yourself. You had to keep the peace. Now, as an adult, as a counsellor, I've learnt to manage rupture and repair, so I can take a risk with strong emotions.

BABA YAGA: (*Sadly*) So you *don't* need me anymore?

ANGELA: I didn't say that. You're part of me; you'll always be there. And I think I do need you, to remind me that perpetrators are usually victims, too. Nothing is ever black and white, "either-or". Sometimes you appear as a beautiful woman, a maternal figure; sometimes you're a monster, a hag. You've got both in you; we all have. Just as I can be wise and foolish, silly and serious, playful and sober; you can be cruel and kind.

BABA YAGA: (*Shrinking a little*) I didn't *mean* to be cruel.

ANGELA: I know you didn't mean any harm; but harm was caused.

BABA YAGA: (*Shrinking a little more*) Are you very angry with me? (*In a small voice*).

ANGELA: I'm not really angry anymore. Mostly, these days, I'm just sad. I'm sad that you couldn't let me know that you loved me—and I think you did—but most of all, I'm sad that you didn't let *me* love *you*. I could have done, and I would have done, but you shut me out; I couldn't reach you.

BABA YAGA: (*So small now that ANGELA can pick her up and hold her in her hand*) Will you love me now? (*In a tiny voice, like a tinkling bell. By way of a response, ANGELA places a kiss on BABA YAGA's tiny head and enfolds her close alongside THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET*).

CHORUS OF ACADEMICS:

It's all well and good, this creative writing,  
As long as your references, quoting and citing,  
Are present and correct; i's dotted, t's crossed!  
These details all matter! No full stop must be lost!  
We need to be sure that—

THE LITTLE GIRL WITH BIG FEET: (*Loudly and rudely, from ANGELA's lap*) Oh,  
shut up, you boring old farts! Do you think anyone cares?

ANGELA: (*Laughing, and putting her finger gently on THE LITTLE GIRL's lips*)  
Hush, now! *I* care—I want to get this right. I want to tell the stories in all their  
messiness, but I want the serious, academic side, too. If I'm going to help anyone else  
find their way out of the fog, I need to tell the travellers' tales, *and* I need to include the  
maps—the literature review, the methodology chapter, the references. I reject “either-  
or”; I choose both.

(*ANGELA, THE LITTLE GIRL, and SOPHIA embrace warmly*).

\* \* \*

## **Epilogue: The fog**

I wake, and draw back the curtains. The fields around are shrouded in mist, but there is promise in the air. It's the sort of morning when you just know that before noon, the sun will have burnt off the mist, and it's going to be a glorious day. I stretch, and feel myself grow. The fog may come down again, but the sun will never be far away.

(Reflective journal, 07/12/17).

\* \* \*

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## **Appendices**

Appendix A: “All my bruises were inside”: Film transcript

Appendix B: Models of all themes and sub-themes

Appendix C: Models and figures from NVivo analysis of Round 2 data

Appendix D: Ethical approval paperwork

Appendix E: Analysis of first bracketing interview and section of transcript

## **Appendix A: "All my bruises were inside"**

*A short film about childhood emotional neglect*

(Transcript)

NARRATOR: Unwanted, unloved, unlovable; not seen, not heard, invisible. A little spoiler alert: These are some of the words people use to describe their experience of childhood emotional neglect. I'd like to introduce you to Zoe and Hal (these are not their real names, by the way). They're going to tell you their stories, and I'm going to slip in a few explainers here and there. At the end I'll tell you about some resources, and where you can get help if you've been personally affected by this film. Let's hear from Zoe first:

ZOE: It's hard to think of it as neglect, because my parents were so concerned to do the right thing; but there was just this feeling that I always had, this feeling that I wasn't loved, that I wasn't wanted, and I used to think that was because I was unlovable (*quite matter-of-fact*).

HAL: Actually, I don't want to go home and see my parents (arms folded, legs crossed). It's not a matter of time—I can find time if I want—but they didn't find time for me when I was a kid, so why should I do it for them now? (*Shrugs*). And it's not kind of a revengeful thing, it's like, I don't feel it now, I don't feel like any need for this. When Mum says to me—we talk on Facetime, you know—she looks at my face, and she's like, "Oh, I really miss you, why don't you come home?" (*Mimicking mother's plaintive tone of voice*), and (*shrugs*) I feel like an empty shell (*wistful*).

ZOE: I remember very early, I remember a photo being taken and I must have been only about two or three, and my Mum not wanting me to sit on her knee; and when I used to see other people with their families, they were so affectionate, and warm (*wistful*), and they would, you know, their dads would cuddle them, or their Mum would cuddle them, or kiss them—there was none of that (*abruptly*).

*(Pause: looks thoughtful).*

Mum actually apologised to me recently for not being—what did she say? She wasn't, you know, she never used to hug me or anything; and she said that her mum was the same with her.

HAL: I mean, I don't remember how old I was when my dad last told me that he loved me—I don't have any memory of him, you know, touching my head (*tearful*), playing with my hair affectionately, telling me, you know, “You're my good boy,” or kissing me or cuddling me—I don't have any memory, can you imagine this? And I can still see its impact on my life, in my adult relationships (*angry, frustrated; sits back, folds arms*).

NARRATOR: Being lovingly held is one of the most important experiences for an infant. Being held lovingly, and loving looks and smiles, actually help a baby's brain to grow. Very young children need an adult who is consistently emotionally available and responsive, or tuned in to their needs. Without this, babies can't develop a normal, healthy response to stress. Yet in Western society, leaving a distressed baby to 'cry it out' is still common practice, and even recommended by some parenting gurus. In fact, babies seem to become most distressed when their main caregiver (whether that's Mum, or someone else) is physically present, but emotionally absent (Gerhardt, 2015).

HAL: And, um, so my dad was, as I say, very critical, and there was no affection, you know, like no—no care, no affection, nothing. So I was always going to my Mum, I was too dependent on my Mum; but she wasn't like, er, consistently there, either—she was physically there, but she was somewhere else, her mind was somewhere else. So I had plenty of freedom; my dad was working all the time and my Mum was at home, but left me on my own all the time.



ZOE: When it comes to buying presents, you know, I try and think of something that she'll like (*warmly, affectionately*), and, there's a lot of rejection there (*sadly*). I can remember a lot of rejection for my dad as well, you know (*tearful*). He bought a lovely coat one year; it was in a long box, and he was so pleased, and it ended up in an argument because she—not that she didn't like it, but she said it was a waste of money, and she rejected it. I mean, she did wear it; it was just, I felt for my dad (*intense emotion*).

HAL: My dad has these cuts on his arms, very big cuts, like this long (*indicating inside of arm*), 35 centimetres, five or six or more, like that (*indicating again*). And you know, I've, um, I've only just realised as an adult that this is most likely, um, self-harm, self-induced, rather than anything else; when I was a child I just took it as it was, I never asked him. I remember, a couple of years ago I did ask him, "What happened to your arms? What is that?" He never answered. And it wasn't just once, it was at least four, five, six times; and he never, ever answered and explained. I said, "Why would you do that? Why would you do that to yourself?" He just changed the subject (*shrugs*).

(*Pause*)

But I've heard how my grandad was towards my Dad. He was quite an abusive person, as well, and he—I think if I'm correct, my Dad's probably experienced more childhood neglect than I ever have (*quietly*).

ZOE: When I was a child at school, I was probably about eight, and you know, you have childhood squabbles at school; and I came back one day—and I avoid telling her things even today, and I don't know whether it's from this (*slowly, thinking it through*); but I told her, you know, you tell your mum, someone's been horrible to you, and I can

remember her saying to me, “Well, what’s wrong with you, why don’t people like you?” And that has stayed with me, you know.

*(Pause; Zoe looks down at hands).*

*(Slowly)* I think the way I see it as being so damaging is that there was a lot of playing down of, or discounting of my feelings when I was growing up. It’s like, if you say, and I can remember doing this *(speaking more quickly, alternating voices between child and parent)*, “I’m hungry”—“You can’t be hungry, you’ve just eaten!” Or, “I’m cold”—“You’ve got a coat on, don’t be so ridiculous!” And “Don’t be ridiculous!” was said to me all the time. “Don’t make a fuss,” you know; “Don’t need anything, don’t want anything.” Don’t have any needs or wants; for God’s sake, don’t have any needs or wants! *(Laughs bitterly)*. And “Not make a fuss” will be written on my gravestone: “Here lies Zoe, who did not make a fuss!” It was absolutely vital to not make a fuss.

NARRATOR: If your parent rejects you, especially when you’re upset, you may not know where to turn for help. For a young child, there’s nowhere else to go other than inwards with the anxiety and hurt. Typically, children who are emotionally neglected learn not to seek comfort or safety when they’re upset or frightened. When their parents criticize, belittle and humiliate them, children often begin to feel defective and ashamed, and may eventually come to think of themselves as simply unlovable and without worth (Howe, 2005).

HAL: Anyway, things really didn’t go well between my Mum and my Dad, and so I remember at one point Mum was planning to leave home—she never did it, but she was planning it; she was packing a bag. I was like, I don’t know, maybe 12, and I remember that for days, I was begging her to take me if she left home; and I remember really clearly, every morning I would wake up and—I remember, when I woke up, the

first thing I would do was check whether my Mum was at home. Can you imagine how traumatic it was? (*Tearful*).

ZOE: Mum prides herself still, prides herself on not showing emotion; she actually said, “I don’t do emotion,” said with great pride. I think for a long time I tried to make her love me—but she was always like the carrot on the end of the stick, just out of reach, but—you know, I thought, “If I just try harder I’ll be able to reach that carrot,” and I was never going to reach it, it was always just out of reach (*wistful*).

(*Pause, thoughtful*)

So one of the losses that I think I’ve experienced in childhood is, my own ability to be loving and giving wasn’t welcomed, wasn’t accepted; I lost that opportunity to be loving and giving, you know, so I never had that feeling of connection.

HAL: And I only realised this very recently, because I had such a fear that my partner would leave me, and she was like, “OK, wait a second, why are you acting in this way?” And we started talking about childhood; and when you join the dots, then I can see how, actually, this is just a reflection of what happened in my childhood, because I was scared of losing Mum. And, I mean, she didn’t do it on purpose, it was just the circumstances she was in—but she never promised me, and—she never promised me that she would take me (*tearful*), and then I tried to, like, please her, to show her that I’m a good boy. So when I look back now, I can see, like, actually my Mum didn’t have the best experience of marriage, and, er, so she was emotionally—sometimes—most of the time, she was emotionally unavailable.

NARRATOR: Most parents don’t intend to harm their child, although harm is clearly often caused. Sometimes parents are not able to be sensitive to their child’s needs because they are overwhelmed by their own problems, such as mental ill health

(including postnatal depression), substance abuse, or stressful work commitments (Glaser, 2002).

ZOE: And Dad was very stressed with the business, so he really struggled with us; he was very—he was on the edge—I don't think he quite had a mental breakdown, but he was very close to it, very depressed, so—that was around. So my recollection is that I grew up being quiet (*touching hand to chest*); you could be amusing for a bit, but you couldn't complain about anything, and you couldn't be really happy because that would wind him up; and you couldn't be silly, because that was awful, being silly; and you daren't be stupid, because that was, you know, beneath contempt.

HAL: You know, I cannot remember, and I've thought about this, I cannot remember at any stage in my childhood, being with the family and feeling particularly happy. There must have been a lot of occasions when it was, you know, neutral. But I just can't remember us ever doing anything together, you know, when I thought, you know, "This is a happy time that I'm having;" but I can remember quite a lot of occasions when I was unhappy (*laughs bitterly*). And that came to a head when I was, I think I was 14, the last time I went on a family holiday with them, and I can remember distinctly thinking to myself, "I've got another seven years of being controlled by these people," and feeling really depressed by that.

ZOE: But if ever I did anything well, so if I did well at school, which I did, you know, I learnt to read very quickly, and was top of the class all the way through, and blah, blah, blah (*mocking, dismissive wave of hand*), that was very much praised, but particularly in public. "Hasn't Zoe done well, doesn't she play the piano beautifully—Zoe, play us something!" (*Clap hands together, miming delight*) like a performing monkey (*scornfully*).

HAL: And, you know, I used to—and I think it's not unusual really for teenagers, but I used to sleep a lot, simply because I was happier asleep; and waking up, I remember actually feeling depressed about the situation. I mean, that is a distinct memory, that; waking up was always, you know, and that's a feeling that I've never had since; waking up was bringing back all the unhappiness, a sort of heavy feeling, and worse than that sometimes; once or twice I did think about the possibility of suicide, but not, um, you know, I never got anywhere near actually planning it (*quietly*).

ZOE: And I was incredibly well-behaved; I was incredibly good, always. I never rebelled—I just thought that I just had to please her, you know. All the other kids apparently hated me; I mean, they don't hate me now, we get on well now, but they say when we were growing up, "You were so bloody perfect, it was like, God, I can't do anything because Zoe's already done it better!" (*Laughs*). And I don't know that I was trying to do it for me, but I think I was always trying to do anything to get my Mum to be pleased (*shrugs*).

(*Pause, thoughtful*)

But at the same time, I think there has been a real sort of, a real fear of ever claiming anything positive for myself, you know; not daring to claim to be good at anything or have any positive attributes. And I'm not really quite sure where that fear comes from, except, you know, a cultural or historical, taboo on—you know, sayings, like, "Getting too big for your own boots," Or, "Don't get cocky!" (*Laughs*).

HAL: But what I do distinctly remember feeling is, we were walking along the street as a family, and it was just the feeling of, "This is going to go on for another seven years"—in fact it didn't, because, I mean, I tried to be out of the family as much as possible, and as I got older it got easier; because I could do things at school, you know,

join things and go to those, and I spent a lot of time on my bike, cycling round the countryside, um, or just in my own head, reading.

ZOE: And it felt like there was a lot of resentment in the house, growing up, and, so that affects your kind of self-worth; there was quite a lot of shouting, you know, and a few occasions of, “I wish I’d never had you!” And the rages; I remember hiding in the wardrobe with the rages, but that was just normal (*quietly, head down*).

(*Pause*)

Sometimes I think, maybe she just wasn’t ready to be a mum; I always felt like I arrived too soon. In some ways, I think she was probably quite uncertain and insecure, so she’s kind of, almost given me, like, the parent role; kind of, “Be grown up, don’t be any trouble, be responsible.” So I always used to joke that we were like *Absolutely Fabulous*, that relationship; the adult role was definitely more on my side than hers (*laughs*).

HAL: I mean, it wasn’t so much that they made me do things, but basically I always felt that I was expected to just sit in the corner, and not be a nuisance, and not cost them money, too, because I think they were a bit tight about money; so, um, you know, their aim for me was to be as invisible as possible, and not to say anything and not to do anything that would cause any problems.

ZOE: I don’t have any happy memories of my parents together, and that’s fine, because it’s just the way it was; and I’m not saying that they weren’t happy, but I never saw Dad love Mum. So the problem was living with violent relationships that were very up and down, and dealing with Mum’s mental health on my own.

NARRATOR: In some cases, emotional neglect may occur when children are exposed to confusing or traumatic events and interactions, such as domestic violence, or a parent’s suicide or attempted suicide (Glaser, 2002).

HAL: Er, another thing I felt emotionally from my parents, was—mainly my Dad, my Mum was never really that horrible; it was that, er, he was—he used to compare me a lot to other kids. And I don't think he realised what kind of impact that actually had on me when I was growing up, because he still does it do this day, to be honest; he keeps on reminding me, "Oh, this guy's doing this now, or that guy's a lawyer here;" and I'm like, "I don't care, I just want to do what I want to do." He seems to think other people's success is what I should be judged on; that's one thing that I've always felt (*angrily*).

(*Pause; folds arms and leans forwards*)

Just last week I went back home, and again, he started comparing me with other people; he was (*wagging finger*), "Oh, So-and-so's a lawyer in Canada now," or whatever; and I'm like, "I don't want that." (*Shrugging*) I don't want any of that, you know? But he has the one image that he wants me to be in his head; and if I deviate from that at all, he seems to think, "Oh, you're going in the completely wrong direction" (*bitterly*).

ZOE: But no-one was aware of what was going on at home; it was so hidden. And I think it was perhaps the money overshadowed what was really going on, you know—it's shocking, shocking, really, how it never got noticed, to be perfectly honest; but I guess it wasn't as visible as a bruise, or greasy hair, or being smelly.

HAL: And growing up, I never had any sense of, um, I think there was nowhere, I don't remember anywhere that sense of having a refuge or somebody to turn to at all for comfort, you know? I think that sense of isolation was very strong, that there wasn't any—there was no comfort, no little safe harbour, no security in life, and, um, I suppose I learnt to be completely self-reliant.

ZOE: But there was always this—oh, going back—I'm sorry, I'm being very random! I said to my grandmother once when I was down there with Mum, "Why does Mum

sleep all the time?” Because she always used to sleep, if she wasn’t working, she used to be in bed, and obviously, looking back, that’s depression, isn’t it? (*Very quietly; head down, but looking up*). Or I would wake up and hear her crying. And that used to upset me more than anything, the endless crying. I do remember feeling, “This isn’t right and this isn’t normal, and I wish she was better” (*tearful*).

HAL: I mean, I loved my grandparents, that is the happiest times I can remember as a child, my mother used to take us once a week, every Thursday, and seeing my—my grandmother, my grandfather would still have been working then, and I loved them, I mean, they treated me really nicely, and sometimes I went to stay with them, and I think that was the happiest times I had as a child, because they were, they really treated me well, and, er, I used to cry when I left, I remember that.

NARRATOR: A supportive person, such as a grandparent or a neighbour, may act as an emotional lifesaver for the developing child (McBride, 2008).

HAL: There was just no kind of sense of there being anywhere a safe place to go, any kind of refuge; although by the time I was older I do remember, I actually had a kind of a little place that I went to, where there was a bit of woodland with a little stream running through it; there was a little place there with a sort of tree growing over it, and there was a little hidden place, completely hidden, in a hollow, so nobody could find you there unless they actually went there – so it was a sort of hidden little place, and I remember having that sense of that kind of being a refuge place, but obviously there were no people there! (*Laughs*).

ZOE: It was only when I began to get older that I started to notice the relationships other people had, particularly with their mother; they had really close bonds with their parents, and they’d go shopping and they’d do girly stuff, and I never did. And I’d say, even now, there are times where I can meet new people, and they’ve got such a special



bond with their mother that even now I can feel jealous—I'm aware of that. I get this real sharp feeling of jealousy. Part of me can think, "That's lovely," but a bigger part thinks—"I can't believe I've never had that" (*angrily*).

HAL: I mean, I think the overall impression or feeling of what it was like for me as a child was constantly feeling unsure, um, unsure of what was expected of me, what I was supposed to do, how I could—because looking back, there's a very strong impression that I had to earn (*pause*), um, love and (*pause*), well, maybe it wasn't love, um, kind of acceptance; I had to do something in order to earn it, and, as it were, I had to perform.

ZOE: So I'd say my overriding—what I feel I'm left with is this confusion, because I feel that my Mum will say things, she'll talk as if we're best friends, and as if we're really close and everything's lovely, but her actions didn't match what she said (*shrugs*).

HAL: It's like Mum's wanting—it's like she's needing, she feels needy, she needs this kind of response from me; and what she's doing, is she's kind of looking for—and that's my sense of it as an adult, and I think as a child I had that sense that my kind of (*pause*), place, as it were, was to fulfil her emotional needs. That's the feeling I have now, but of course as a child, it was just a sort of overwhelming sense of insecurity and unease, and I suppose fear, as well; so I guess that's kind of had a lasting effect, the unease, that kind of sense of (*pause*) being in company and of—I became aware of this quite recently, really, not being able to just be relaxed and enjoy the company of other people.

ZOE: Dad has always lived for work, he was a very ambitious man—he was never really around throughout our childhood; I mean, a lot of my friends' fathers, they were workers, maybe around a bit more often than mine, but he was never really the kind of

dad that would kind of have a kick around with my brothers or play-fight, or read stories in bed; we never really had any of that. I can't ever actually remember Mum ever doing any of that either.

HAL: Because there's always the sense of—and like I say, I only kind of put this into words quite recently, in the last few years, this sense of me always being on the lookout for what people are expecting of me, and what people are wanting of me; I think that's actually been a very useful insight for me.

ZOE: While I was playing, mum was, you know, very much a homemaker; she was cooking and cleaning and that. And she thought she was being a good mum, because she fed me, and clothed me, and, you know, everything was clean, so she wasn't a 'bad' mother; but I remember spending an awful lot of time alone.

*(Pause)*

So as a child, I was very lonely, and I can remember having friends to play, as I got a little bit older; I was never allowed to go to play at their house, because Mum was very protective, but if I had friends to play, I never wanted them to go home. I can remember holding onto the door handle and blocking the door, not wanting them to go!

*(Laughs).*

HAL: Um, and I think that impacts me even now. I can see it, I mean, even in relationships with other people, I can see when that happens. So for example, in the past my partner used to say, "You just can't, bear the thought of somebody being upset with you." And it's true, I can't, I just—well, I, I can a bit more now, because I understand, and even though I have that feeling, I can cope with it, if I realise what's happening, but for years I just couldn't! If somebody was just upset for a moment, I'd just, I had that urge to do something to sort it out, sort the problem out, and obviously it's all connected to what my parents used to do.

ZOE: I will put others first, and in fact, I'm a lot less like it now than I was, but I spent my whole life thinking everybody else was more important than me; and for years, I could never make decisions—my whole life has been decided on the toss of a coin!

*(Laughs).*

*(Pause)*

But I believe that the things that my parents did to me as a child, I tend to do to myself now; so I've kind of internalised it. Like, for example, Dad tended not to take me seriously, and I find it very difficult to take myself seriously; I tend to dismiss what I'm doing. I don't think I really had a voice, thinking about it, I can't remember being heard, and I just remember feeling, like, totally invisible; and I've realised that I don't notice myself. So I'd definitely say my upbringing has had a massive impact on my self-esteem, massively; I'm always kind of aware of, you know, "What do other people think of me? Am I OK? Am I accepted?" I just have no self-worth; that's a real big issue for me.

HAL: And I think this is how they emotionally blackmailed me—you used that word, and I think it's the right word—whenever they wanted something from me, they would start being upset. They would be like, "Oh, we're not going to talk to you." And I remember when I was a very small child, like five or six years old, I would just go to my parents and say, "Could you please just talk to me, please do something," and they would be like, *(slaps hands together)* nothing. They would just ignore me, and I think that kind of created a very, very bad feeling in me. And I remember that they said, "We're not gonna—er, we're not gonna beat you, so we're not causing harm, you will just be punished." So the punishment was, "We're not talking to you," *(said very quietly)*, which was, which, for me, was—I remember going to them and saying, "Could you please beat me, and don't, don't do that?" *(In a small child's voice).*

ZOE: I mean, until I was in my late teens or early twenties I just used to think, “Well, if my mother can’t love me, who can?” (*Sad, little girl voice*). All my bruises were inside, and I used to wish in some ways that she’d just hit me—I’d wish there were bruises, because I was desperate for somebody to (*laughs*)—it sounds ridiculous! I was desperate for somebody to take me into care; I was so miserable, I was so unhappy, when I was, I must have been about ten, I think—ten or younger, I remember lying—I had a cabin bed, looking out the window, just thinking, “Is somebody gonna come and rescue me?” I was just so unhappy, and so I felt completely unloved (*intense emotion*).

HAL: But now I’m trying to like overcome its consequences in my daily life, because the past is past, I can’t change it; but now I’m trying to like change its impact on me, like this attachment problem, or anger problem, stuff like this. And in the future I’m aware of this; I didn’t have the best father figure, so in the future, if I consider having a family, I really need to go to like—I want to go to a counsellor, I want to go to a—I don’t know, a group, a therapy group, or something, and I feel I want to learn it from scratch, because I really don’t want to be someone like my dad at all! (*Laughs bitterly*). And if there is a possibility that I’ll be like him, I’d prefer not to have any kids, because I don’t want to—I don’t want any young children, any young people to hate me, and have me ruin their life.

ZOE: I think I learnt eventually not to notice, not to feel my own feelings, which I think was making me emotionally cold. A lot of people have said that as I’ve grown up, that I’m—well, especially my Dad, I’m unaffectionate, I’m distant, I put my barriers up, “You were never an affectionate child, Zoe,” you know, “You’ve always come across as quite prickly, quite distant.”

NARRATOR: For some children, it may feel like the only way to survive emotionally is by being strong, unaffected by feeling, independent, self-reliant, self-contained and

without compassion. Such children may learn to keep either themselves or others at an emotional distance, and learn to be watchful and vigilant (Howe, 2005).

ZOE: But it's sort of a compulsive self-reliance, a feeling of, "I'm on my own with this, I've got to manage, I can't ask for help" (*savagely*)—I feel like asking for help is just not allowed (*pause*), just, you know, "I've got to handle this," so it's a compulsion, not to upset anybody, not to complain; not to be demanding, not to have any needs and wants. And for a long time I felt like I didn't have any; I didn't have any, I was just so (*pause*), 'nothingy.'

HAL: I had this conversation recently with my brother: he has the best relationship with his sons, and I was like—"How do you manage this?" I said to him, like, "I'm really surprised that you have such a great relationship with your sons, because, you know, we never saw this! How have you managed this, man?" (*Tearful*) I said this to my brother, you know? Because it's not the, let's say, the example we saw, it's not the role model we saw, it's not the father-figure we're used to. He loves his sons, which is great, you know! And he shows it! (*Takes tissue to wipe eyes*). The most important thing is, he shows it, you know; that's the important part. And I look at his sons, my nephews, and they're so cute, they're like so lovable (*sniffs*), and I was like them, you know, so why didn't my dad show love to me? That's the frustration (*tearful*).

ZOE: I'm never really relaxed, I feel like when I'm out in the world I have to be really defensive and I really need to have my guard up, I think that's why I struggle to make friends, as well, because I'm always suspicious, of everyone (*fearful, glancing over shoulder, miming fear of attack*). So in relationships, it takes me a long time, and I still find myself questioning—I don't know, but probably more often than average, you know, "Are you sure you still love me?" You know, "Are you sure you want to be with me?" (*Head on one side, miming uncertainty*). So I do think I probably need

reassurance more often than your average person (*head down but looking up, slightly embarrassed smile*).

NARRATOR: People who have not had all their emotional needs met in childhood may, when they become adults, stick to low-key, unsatisfactory relationships, making few demands of their partner out of a fear that they will be abandoned (Gerhardt, 2015).

ZOE: But on the other hand, I also find it very difficult to stand up to, or argue against?—Both sound wrong. I find it very difficult to hold my own against somebody, and that—I believe that comes from the childhood experience that to argue—to disagree with my parents would have brought disapproval. I learnt that the best way to react was not to say anything. Because if you said something, anything, even if it was, “I’m sorry,” there would be a negative reaction, so now, I can’t argue, I can’t get the words out—so I tend to sulk (*laughs*) if someone’s upset me, which is deeply frustrating for a woman of my age, but I can’t—the safest thing, is to say nothing; and my partner and I have never argued—I actually don’t think that’s a good thing—I know that’s not a good thing, because I back away from confrontation. I walk away, and I go and pull the duvet over my head and hide—I just can’t do confrontation.

HAL: So I don’t feel like kind of jealous or anything; I love my nephews and I show them lots of affection, but when I see it, like, it hurts me (*tearful*), because I didn’t have this experience and I see, like, this is what’s natural, so you must be really evil not to show love to your own kids, you must be somebody really like evil; what’s wrong with you? Why didn’t you show love to us? When I was their age, what the hell was wrong with you guys; why were you just angry with me? Of course I’ll break things, of course I’ll fight in the playground; I was just a kid, you know! (*Laughs bitterly*). What was wrong with you? You know—why were you so impatient with me? Why didn’t you love me? (*Angrily*).

ZOE: I think all my life one of the things I have done is not attempted things because I might fail, and failure was unacceptable. It's like I've got a black parrot on my shoulder, telling me that anything I do isn't good enough; it doesn't allow me to try, or to get things wrong. I'm scared of getting things wrong, worrying myself sick over failure before I've even failed; "I'm not good enough, I can't do this."

*(Pause)*

And another thing I remember thinking very clearly, with work, I mean, I did quite well at work, but I was never brave, so the impact—I think my emotional insecurity has governed my life, so I have never taken on things that I think I might fail at (*hangs head*).

One of the things that I still struggle with is when people make a judgement of me and it's not a true judgement, they've not seen me as I am; and for a long time I didn't realise what it was, but something would just hit a button in me (*tearful*), and I just thought I was being over-sensitive, which I've been accused of by my partner. But I'm learning, all the time, and understanding where it's come from, and I think understanding that, it's helping me to deal with things; but I can't stop the switches going on—like my Mum saying to me, "Well, what's wrong with you? Why don't people like you?" (*Tearful*).

NARRATOR: Psychotherapists who have worked with emotionally neglected clients often find that they're reluctant to criticize or blame their parents. Some suggest that motherhood is idealized, even sacred in many cultures, so it can be hard to acknowledge that we as mothers, or our own mothers, were less than perfect. At the same time, women may reject the idea that mothers are single-handedly responsible for their child's psychological and emotional well-being, pointing to other influences in the wider social environment. However, without blaming anyone, we can acknowledge

what did not go well in our childhood, and learn to take our rightful place in the world (McBride, 2008).

ZOE: But then I think, “Aw, you know, it wasn’t that bad, really, you know, I didn’t have that bad a childhood, what am I making such a fuss about?” And then I hear myself, and I think, “Yeah, that’s straight out of childhood! Don’t make a fuss about it, it wasn’t that bad, you’ve got nothing to worry about, don’t be upset!” (*Bitterly*). You know, so that’s the way I see it repeating, I can’t even allow myself to say how bad it really feels like it was, because I have this sort of inner critic telling me not to make a fuss and it’s not that bad and “other people are far worse off than you,” (*sighs*).

HAL: You know, when I look at myself, and my brother and my sister, what else would parents want for their children? Why aren’t we good enough for you? Why don’t you appreciate what you have? None of us are using drugs, none of us, you know, are addicts; all of us are educated, all of us are well-mannered, so what else do you want? Why don’t you appreciate us? Why is it not good enough for you? What else do you want? (*Intense emotion, tearful, angry*).

ZOE: I didn’t realise it until I looked back, because what you experience as a child is your norm; you know, you’ve got nothing else to compare it to, and it was perhaps only having my own children that I’ve reflected, and I think—“That’s not normal, that’s not right.” I don’t feel resentful, I feel really sad, I want to cry (*tearful*), because they would—(*tearful laugh*)—my parents would hate to know how it felt, and I can’t say that I had a really unhappy childhood, I have some happy memories of childhood; but as a child I remember being aware that, (*pause*) that things weren’t right. You can’t name it because you don’t know what’s wrong, there’s just this overwhelming feeling that something is wrong.

(*Pause*)



And now I have more understanding, that perhaps it wasn't that I was unlovable, it was more than Mum wasn't in a position to love me, she couldn't do it, without any blame of her, I'm sure she was doing the best she could. But it still left me with this, this feeling, there is inside me, somewhere deep inside me, a hard nub that tells me I am not loveable (*tearful*). Consciously, in my head, rationally, logically, I can argue it away, tell myself that it's not true: and yet it's there, that feeling is still there.

NARRATOR: Zoe and Hal are based on 13 men and women who took part in a research project about childhood emotional neglect at Keele University, Staffordshire, in the UK. If you have been affected by this, in the UK you can ask for help from your GP or The Samaritans, or find a counsellor to talk to. There are a number of self-help books written for people who have experienced emotional neglect; you can search for 'recovering from childhood emotional neglect' online, or ask in your local library or bookshop. See the resources listed in the notes for this film for academic references, self-help titles, and how to find a counsellor in the UK.

### CREDITS

'Zoe' and 'Hal' were played by Denise Arthur and Jordan Wingfield, both of Stafford Players;

The Narrator was Angela Blanchard.

"All my bruises were inside" was created by Angela Blanchard, PhD candidate, School of Psychology, Keele University in collaboration with the Media Department. Special thanks to Annabel Williams for editing and Sam Galantini for technical support, and to the research participants who so generously gave their stories.

Music composed and played by Angela Blanchard.

Thank you for watching. Please share this with anyone you think will be interested.

Pass it on!

*(The following not spoken: added as notes to the film online).*

### References and resources

#### Academic works:

Gerhardt, S. (2015). *Why love matters: How affection shapes a baby's brain* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: Routledge.

Glaser, D. (2002). Emotional abuse and neglect (psychological maltreatment): A conceptual framework. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 26(6/7), 697–714.

Howe, D. (2005). *Child abuse and neglect: Attachment, development and intervention*. Palgrave Macmillan.

#### Self-help books:

Cori, J. L. (2010). *The emotionally absent mother: A guide to self-healing and getting the love you missed*. New York: The Experiment, LLC.

McBride, K. (2008). *Will I ever be good enough?* New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Webb, J. (2013). *Running on empty: Overcome your childhood emotional neglect*. New York, NY: Morgan James Publishing.

If you want to talk to someone about this:

The Samaritans (UK): Tel. 116 123 (UK & Northern Ireland); E-mail [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org); Website [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

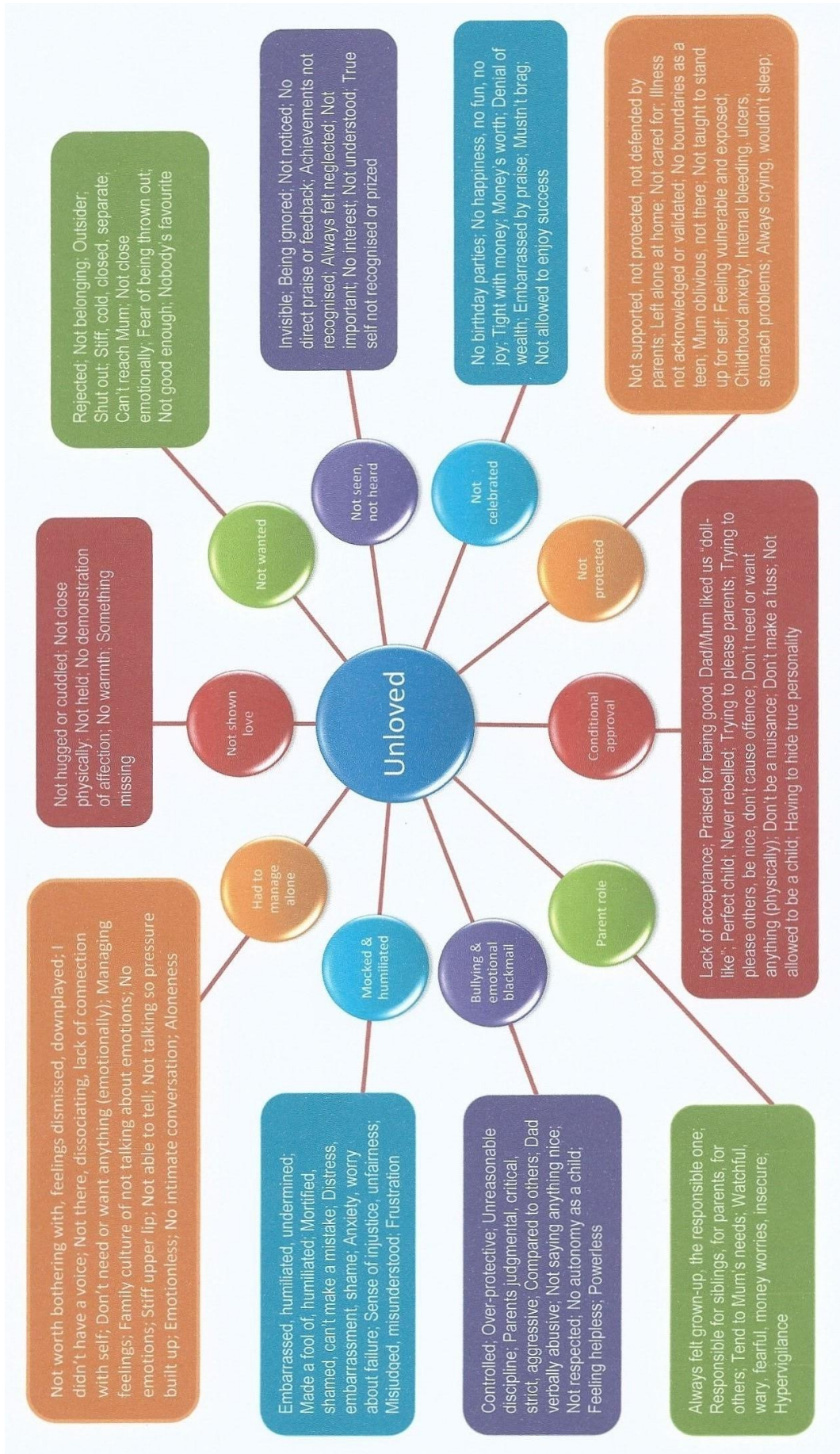
You can ask your local GP to refer you to counselling; this is usually free, although there is often a long waiting list. You can also choose to find a private counsellor. In the UK, counselling and psychotherapy are not currently (2018) regulated by the government. However, these are some of the counselling bodies which regulate counsellors and psychotherapists and are accredited by the Professional Standards Authority (PSA):

- British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)
- United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)
- British Psychoanalytic Council (BPC)
- British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)
- UK Association of Humanistic Psychology Practitioners (UKAHPP)
- Federation of Drug & Alcohol Professionals (FDAP)
- Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (IACP)
- Counselling & Psychotherapy in Scotland (COSCA)

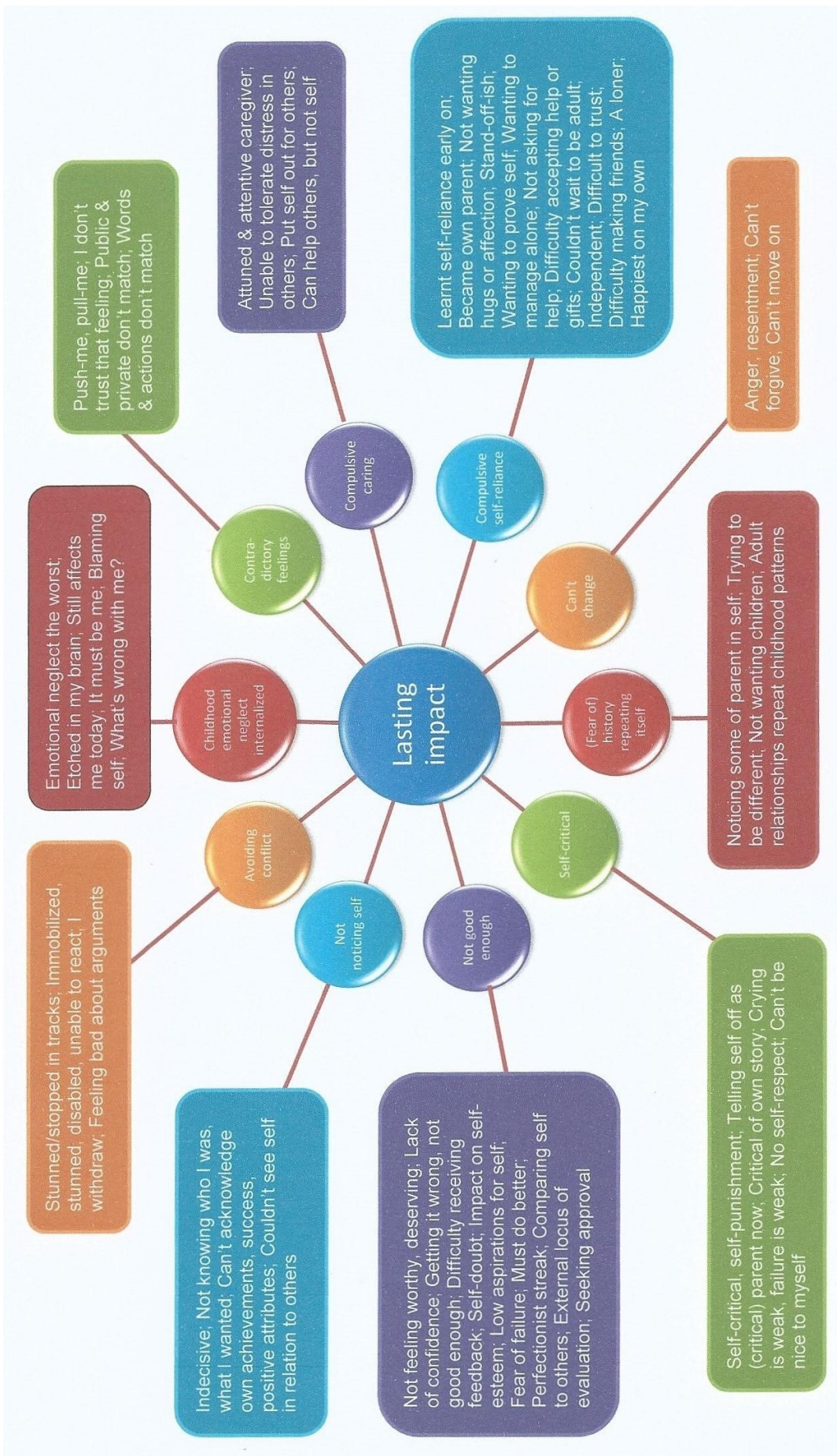
You can look for a counsellor by following the link to one of these counselling bodies and searching online; each body has a 'find a therapist' link on its website.

## **Appendix B: Models of themes and sub-themes**

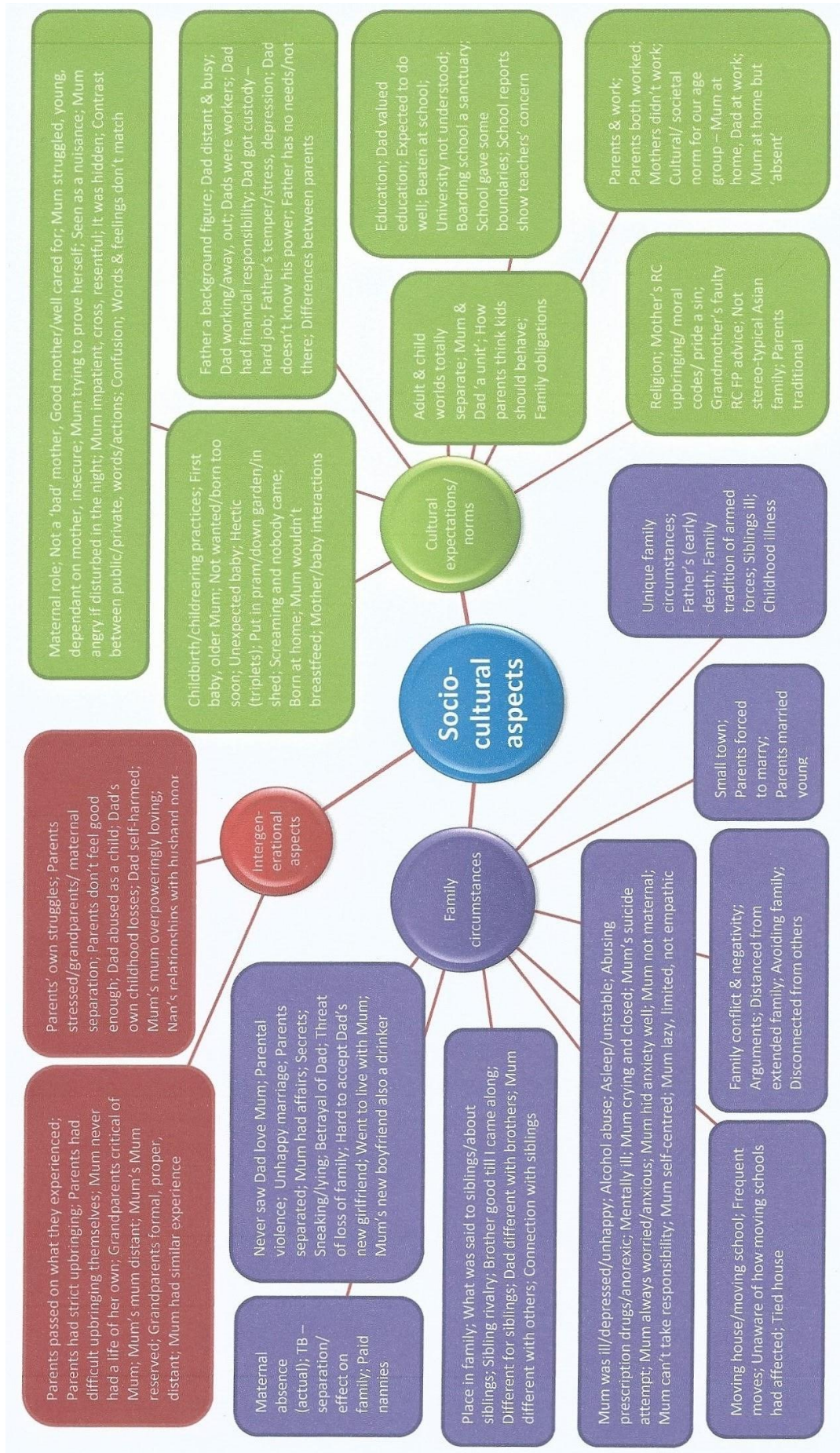
Model of “Unloved” themes and sub-themes:	Page 435
Model of “Lasting impact” themes and sub-themes:	Page 436
Model of “Sociocultural aspects” themes and sub-themes:	Page 437
Model of “Perspectives” themes and sub-themes:	Page 438



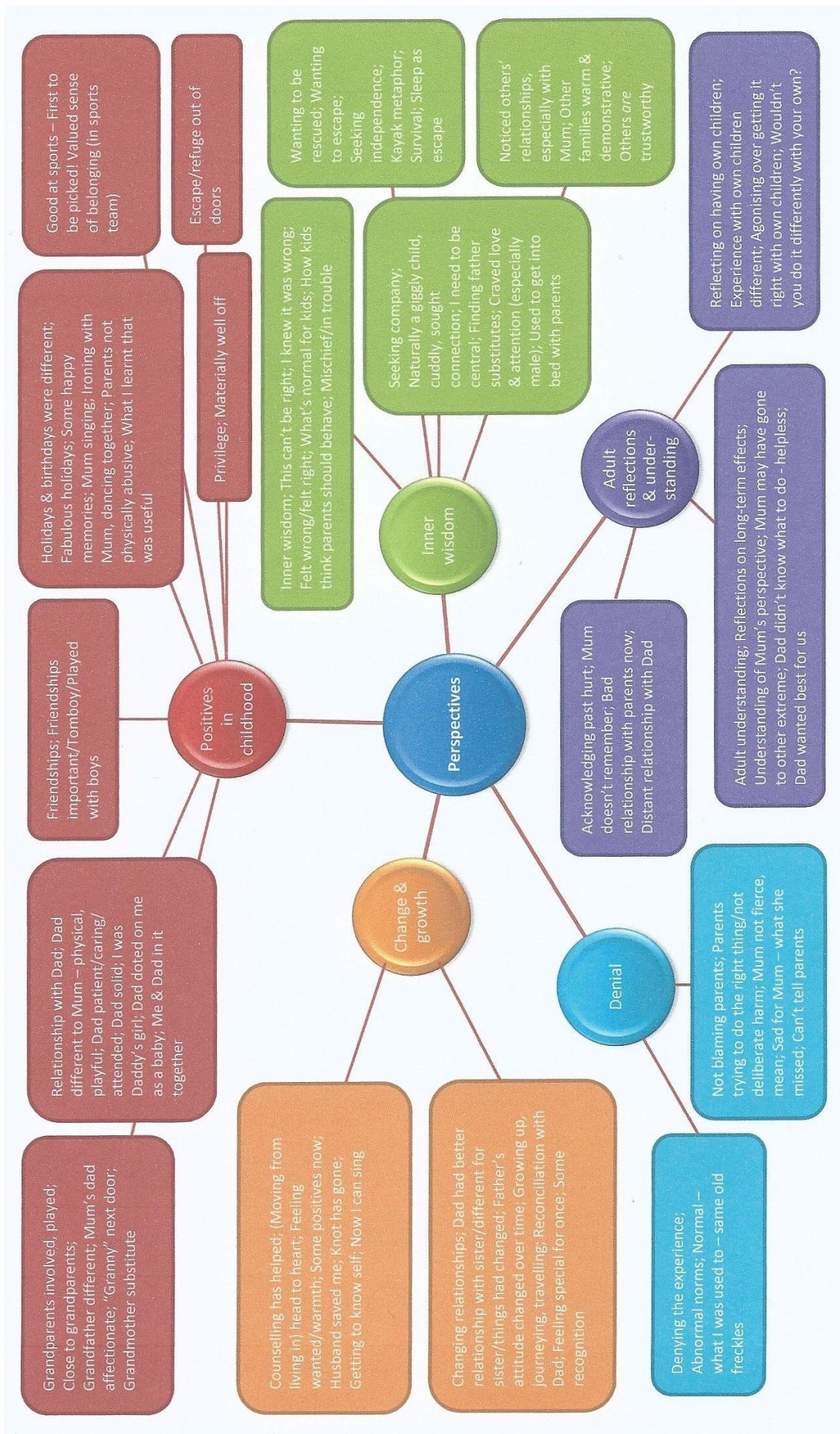














## Appendix C: Models and figures from NVivo analysis phase

Figure 18: Model of themes from Round 2

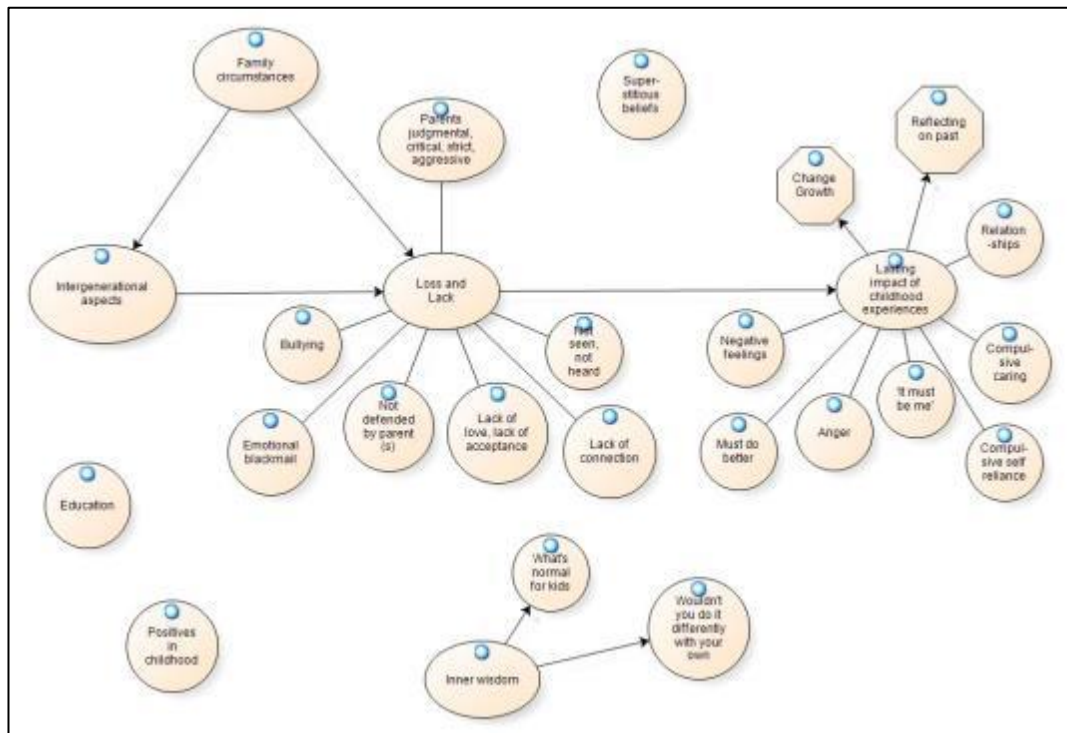


Figure 19: Word cloud of 1,000 most frequently used words in "Intergenerational" nodes, Round 2





## Appendix D: Ethical approval paperwork

### *Letter confirming approval*

Research and Enterprise Services, Keele University, Staffordshire, ST5 5BG, UK  
Telephone: + 44 (0)1782 734466 Fax: + 44 (0)1782 733740



Keele University

#### RESEARCH AND ENTERPRISE SERVICES

4th July 2014

Angela Blanchard  
The Barracks  
School Lane  
Dunston Heath  
Stafford  
ST18 9AG

Dear Angela,

#### **Re: The experiences of childhood emotional neglect**

Thank you for submitting your application for review. I am pleased to inform you that your application has been approved by the Ethics Review Panel.

The Chair would like to advise you that for future ethics applications the guidelines for the 2 page summary should be followed. The Chair also advises that in the invitation it should commence with you introducing your name rather than this being at the end. It should also include your supervisors details.

The following documents have been reviewed and approved by the panel as follows:

Document	Version	Date
Summary of Proposal	3	4th June 2014
Letters of Invitation	3	4th June 2014
Information Sheet	3	4th June 2014
Consent Forms	2	8th May 2014
Interview Topic Guides	1	2nd March 2014

If the fieldwork goes beyond the date stated in your application, you must notify the Ethical Review Panel via the ERP administrator at [uso.erps@keele.ac.uk](mailto:uso.erps@keele.ac.uk) stating ERP1 in the subject line of the e-mail.

If there are any other amendments to your study you must submit an "application to amend study" form to the ERP administrator stating ERP1 in the subject line of the e-mail. This form is available via <http://www.keele.ac.uk/researchsupport/researchethics/>

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me via the ERP administrator on [uso.erps@keele.ac.uk](mailto:uso.erps@keele.ac.uk) stating ERP1 in the subject line of the e-mail.

Yours sincerely

**Dr Jackie Waterfield**  
**Chair – Ethical Review Panel**  
CC RI Manager  
Supervisor

*Letter confirming extension of approval*



Ref: ERP1187

14<sup>th</sup> December 2016

Angela Blanchard  
The Barracks  
School Lane  
Dunston Heath  
Stafford  
ST18 9AG

Dear Angela,

**Re: The experience of childhood emotional neglect**

Thank you for submitting your application to amend study, informing us that more time is required to complete the study and the end date for fieldwork has now been extended to the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017. I am pleased to inform you that your application has been approved by the Ethical Review Panel.

Just to remind you, if the fieldwork goes beyond the **31<sup>st</sup> March 2017**, or there are any other amendments to your study you must submit an “application to amend study” form to the ERP administrator at [research.erps@keele.ac.uk](mailto:research.erps@keele.ac.uk) stating **ERP1** in the subject line of the e-mail. This form is available via <http://www.keele.ac.uk/researchsupport/researchethics/>

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me via the ERP administrator on [research.erps@keele.ac.uk](mailto:research.erps@keele.ac.uk) stating **ERP1** in the subject line of the e-mail.

Yours sincerely

**Dr Jackie Waterfield**  
**Chair – Ethical Review Panel**  
CC RI Manager  
Supervisor

Directorate of Engagement & Partnerships  
T: +44(0)1782 734467  
Keele University, Staffordshire ST5 5BG, UK

# **Invitation to take part in a research project**

## **Study Title: The experience of childhood emotional neglect**

### **About the researcher**

I am a PhD student at Keele.

### **About the research**

The long-term effects of childhood physical neglect and abuse and childhood sexual abuse are widely recognised, yet the effects of childhood *emotional* neglect and abuse are still less well known. The aim of my research project is to explore the experience of childhood emotional neglect, in order to increase our understanding of it.

I am inviting adult volunteers to take part in this study by sharing their own experiences of childhood emotional neglect. If you are interested in getting involved, please contact me at [a.m.blanchard@keele.ac.uk](mailto:a.m.blanchard@keele.ac.uk) and I will send you further information so that you can decide whether you want to take part by sharing your story.

### **About the study**

As well as inviting you to tell me your individual story, I may also invite you to take part in a follow-on group discussion to share your story with others, and I will also ask for your views on how your story should be represented in the written work, and note them.

*Angela Blanchard  
September 2014*



## **Information Sheet for Participants**

Dear.....

You are being invited to consider taking part in the research study, ‘The experience of childhood emotional neglect.’ This project is being undertaken by Angela Blanchard, PhD student, Keele University. Before you decide whether or not you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read this information carefully and discuss it with friends and family members if you wish. If there is anything that is unclear or if you would like more information, please do ask.

### **What is the purpose of this study?**

The long-term effects of childhood physical neglect and abuse and childhood sexual abuse are widely recognised, yet the effects of childhood *emotional* neglect and abuse, described as a ‘damaging relationship’ between parent and child, continue to be less visible. The aim of my research project is to explore the experience of childhood emotional neglect, in order to increase understanding.

Published work on this topic describes the difficulty of accurately defining childhood emotional neglect, which may range from parents ignoring, being psychologically unresponsive or unavailable to their children, to verbal abuse, terrorizing or isolating. Further difficulties include accurate reporting and the fact that emotional abuse and neglect may occur alongside other forms of childhood abuse and neglect. The problem is further complicated by the fact that what one person sees as emotional neglect or abuse, another might see as normal parenting.

In this study I aim to bridge the gap between a subjective, autobiographical account and an objective, third person account by adding your voice to a rigorous academic study.

### **Why have I been chosen?**

You have freely volunteered to take part because you have a personal interest in the subject matter, and I believe that your personal story will make a valuable contribution to this research project.

### **Do I have to take part?**

You are free to decide whether you wish to take part or not. If you decide to take part I will ask you to sign two consent forms, one is for you to keep and the other is for my

records. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time and without giving reasons, up to the point when I submit my thesis (the finished research project) in 2020.

### **What will happen if I take part?**

If you decide to take part, in the first phase I will invite you to meet with me for an informal interview, at a time which is convenient to both of us, and use an audio recorder (not a DVD recorder) to record what we both say. The length of this will partly depend on how much you want to tell me, but it will last no more than 1.5 hours. I will invite you to meet me at Keele University so that we can work in one of the rooms available there. I will transcribe (make a typed version of) our interview, and I will let you see this to check that you agree with this as a true record of our conversation, and to check which parts of it you are happy for me to use.

At a later date, in a second phase of data collection, I may also invite you to join a focus group for a number of participants in this study to meet and discuss their experiences of childhood emotional neglect together (I would anticipate that this group discussion would include the same topics as listed on the schedule for individual interviews). I would personally facilitate this focus group, which would involve no more than 6 people, and would last no more than 2 hours. This group conversation would take place at Keele University and would also be recorded and transcribed in the same way as the individual interview. Talking with others in a group in this way can sometimes help to bring further memories to mind, and lead to new insights. However, agreeing to an individual interview does not mean that you have also to take part in a focus group; your individual contribution will still be valuable.

It is important that you understand that taking part in a focus group would mean that, whilst I would still respect your confidentiality and anonymity, the act of meeting others and speaking in a group means that total confidentiality and anonymity could not any longer be guaranteed, and I would accept your decision not to take part if you had any concerns about this. At the end of the focus group, I would ask all participants to respect each other's confidentiality, but could not guarantee that they would do so. After the focus group I would also check with you individually if there was anything you disclosed during the group discussion which you now wished to withdraw from the study.

### **If I take part, what do I have to do?**

I will invite you to tell me the story of your childhood, and reflect on the ways in which you believe you experienced emotional neglect. Some of the themes that we may explore (see enclosed topic schedule) have been suggested by my own experience and what I have read on the subject, and these include: feelings about love and belonging; trust and innate wisdom; injustice; being seen/invisible; a feeling of having to manage alone or 'compulsive self-reliance' and a 'punitive conscience.' However, your experience may be different – and I will not be judging you, or your experience, or analysing how 'good' or 'bad' it was, or what effect it might have had on you. What I want to do is to build up a picture of what childhood emotional neglect feels like, and your story, told in your own words, will help me to do this.

### **What are the benefits (if any) of taking part?**

Although we will be having an interview for research purposes, rather than for the purpose of helping you, you may nevertheless find that it is helpful for you to reflect on and talk about your childhood experiences. For example, telling your story may enable you to gain new insights and reframe your experience in a helpful way. Furthermore, in contributing to this research project you will be helping others to learn more about the experience of childhood emotional neglect.

### **What are the risks of taking part?**

It is possible that talking about the past may raise distressing or disturbing memories for you; if this happens during the interview, I can stop recording at any point if you wish me to do so. If this is the case, you may choose to withdraw your participation, and if you feel you need emotional support you may want to seek professional help from a counsellor. The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy offers a 'find a therapist' service through the website (see contact details at the end of this form), or you can ask to be referred for psychological support through your local GP.

### **How will information about me be used?**

I will use the data that I collect to build up a word-picture of the experience of childhood emotional neglect; this might be in the form of poetry, a short story, or a play. What you tell me about your own experience will be combined with the experiences of other participants to create as full and detailed a picture of childhood emotional neglect as possible.

### **Who will have access to information about me?**

As the sole researcher, I will be the only person who has direct access to all of the information about you, including your personal and any identifying information. However, I will be required to make secure and suitable arrangements for my datasets (the audio recordings or the transcripts of the interviews, including the focus group, if I hold one) to be available to my PhD supervisors.

### **How will information about me be stored?**

I will follow the appropriate ethical guidelines for researchers as well as the Data Protection Act (1998), so for example, your personal and any identifying information such as your name and address will be stored separately from the research data (your story), and all data will be anonymised and stored securely. I will only store and use your data for the purpose we have agreed and for the period of my PhD (which I expect to complete in 2020). On completion of this research project I will ensure that I dispose of all your personal details and any other identifying information safely, although with your consent, I may keep the research data (the transcripts of our interviews) for use in future research projects. Your name and any identifying details will be protected in any published work resulting from this and any future research. Keele University staff will not have direct access to your personal details, although I will be sharing the process of the research and my findings with my PhD supervisors.

It is important that you are aware, however, that I work within the limits of current legislation around privacy and confidentiality, data protection and human rights so that if I become aware of future criminal activity, abuse either to yourself or to another person (such as child or sexual abuse) or suicidal intentions, I must pass this information to the relevant authorities.

**Who is funding and organising the research?**

I'm self-funded and I am planning and designing the research project myself, supervised by Dr Margaret Robson and Dr Kirsty Budds in the School of Psychology at Keele University.

**What if there is a problem?**

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you may wish to speak to the researcher who will do her best to answer your questions. You should contact Angela Blanchard c/o 01782 733578 (School of Psychology office) or by e-mail, [a.m.blanchard@keele.ac.uk](mailto:a.m.blanchard@keele.ac.uk). Alternatively, if you do not wish to contact me directly you may contact my supervisors, Dr Margaret Robson, who can be contacted through the School of Psychology, telephone 01782 733578, or by e-mail: [m.a.robson@keele.ac.uk](mailto:m.a.robson@keele.ac.uk); or Dr Kirsty Budds, telephone 01782 734265, e-mail: [k.budds@keele.ac.uk](mailto:k.budds@keele.ac.uk).

If you remain unhappy about the research and/or wish to raise a complaint about any aspect of the way that you have been approached or treated during the course of the study please write to Nicola Leighton who is the University's contact for complaints regarding research at the following address:-

Nicola Leighton  
Research Governance Officer  
Research & Enterprise Services  
Dorothy Hodgkin Building  
Keele University  
ST5 5BG  
E-mail: [n.leighton@uso.keele.ac.uk](mailto:n.leighton@uso.keele.ac.uk)  
Tel: 01782 733306

**Contact for further information**

Researcher: Angela Blanchard  
Tel: c/o 01782 733578 (School of Psychology office)  
E-mail: [a.m.blanchard@keele.ac.uk](mailto:a.m.blanchard@keele.ac.uk)

**Where to go if you feel you need further support:**

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP): [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)  
BACP Find a Therapist: [www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk/therapists](http://www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk/therapists)

## *Childhood emotional neglect: Schedule of topics*

### CHILDHOOD EMOTIONAL NEGLECT

Topic schedule

#### SCHEDULE OF TOPICS

##### Opening Question:

*Could you tell me something about your experience of emotional neglect in childhood?*

##### Further question:

*Do you feel this has affected you throughout your life? If so, in what ways?*

Themes that may be explored have been suggested by my own experience and the literature and include:

Love and belonging themes

Trust/wisdom themes

Injustice/balance themes

Being seen/invisible themes

‘Insufficient relatedness,’ (Prugh & Harlow, 1962)

Social withdrawal and limited peer interactions (Hildyard, K L & Wolfe, D A, 2002)

Imperative to manage alone; compulsive self-reliance (Bowlby, 1958)

Well-behaved (Howe, 2005)

Shame (Wright, M O D; Crawford, E & Del Castillo, D, 2009)

Internalized self-stigma (Hill, et al, 2012)

Punitive conscience (Jacobs, 2010)

Internalizing (as opposed to externalizing) problems (Hildyard, K L & Wolfe, D A, 2002)

External (as opposed to) internal locus of evaluation (Rogers, 1990)

Feeling unnoticed (Kiesinger, 2002)/No praise or satisfaction for achievements (Howe, 2005)

Not feeling problems are significant enough for help (Hill, et al, 2012)

Low self-esteem (Mullen, et al, 1996)

Self-sacrifice (Wright, M O D; Crawford, E & Del Castillo, D, 2009)

Compulsive care-giving (Bowlby, 1977)

Not feeling able to show negative emotions; ‘stiff upper lip’ (Bowlby, 1958)

Shouldn’t have feelings (Gerhardt, 2004)

Parents feel uncomfortable with emotions (Howe, 2005)

‘Real self’ not ‘mirrored or facilitated’ by parents (Music, 2009)

Parents ‘not alive to their children’s inner reality’ (Music, 2009)

‘Legitimate narcissistic need to be noticed, understood, taken seriously and respected’ (Miller, 1987)





## CONSENT FORM: PART I (Individual interview)

**Title of Project: The experience of childhood emotional neglect.**

**Name and contact details of Principal Investigator:**

Angela Blanchard

C/o School of Psychology, Keele University, Stoke-on-Trent, ST5

Tel: 01782 733578

E-mail: [a.m.blanchard@keele.ac.uk](mailto:a.m.blanchard@keele.ac.uk)

**Please tick box if you agree with the statement**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 08/05/14 (Version 2) for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, up until submission of the thesis.	
3. I agree to take part in this study.	
4. I understand that data collected about me during this study will be anonymised before it is submitted for publication.	
5. I agree to the interview being audio recorded.	
6. I agree to allow the dataset collected to be used for future research projects.	
7. I agree to being contacted for further interviews.	
8. I agree to being contacted about possible participation in future research projects.	

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

*Consent form II: Focus group*

**CONSENT FORM: PART II  
(Focus group)**



**Title of Project: The experience of childhood emotional neglect.**

**Name and contact details of Principal Investigator:**

Angela Blanchard

C/o School of Psychology, Keele University, Stoke-on-Trent, ST5

Tel: 01782 733578

E-mail: [a.m.blanchard@keele.ac.uk](mailto:a.m.blanchard@keele.ac.uk)

**Please tick box if you agree with the statement**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 08/05/14 (Version 2) for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, up until submission of the thesis.	
3. I agree to take part in this focus group.	
4. I agree to keep the issues discussed within the focus group confidential and in particular, to avoid identifying any of the participants in relation to these issues/individual comments made during the session	
5. I understand that, whilst the principle researcher will continue to maintain confidentiality and anonymity towards myself and all data collected from me, taking part in the focus group means that total anonymity and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.	
6. I understand that data collected about me during this study will be anonymised before it is submitted for publication.	
7. I agree to the focus group being audio recorded	
8. I agree to allow the dataset collected to be used for future research projects	
9. I agree to being contacted about possible participation in future research projects.	

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

## **Appendix E: Analysis of first bracketing interview**

### Emerging themes

1. Difficulty receiving feedback
2. Childhood emotional neglect internalised
3. “Oughteries” and “musturbation”
4. Internal wisdom
5. Shame
6. (Not) good enough
7. Non-acceptance/rejection/outside/not let in/not loved/not wanted/not belonging
8. Moved house/new school
9. Head to heart
10. Lack of direct praise/feedback
11. No emotion
12. Generational/societal?
13. Intergenerational/passed on, experienced by my mother
14. “Invisible me”/not seen, not seen as I am
15. Not worth bothering with/dismissed/downplayed
16. “Good mother,” job well done
17. Maternal relationship – my bias
18. Evaluating
19. Loss
20. Survival
21. Dad different to Mum
22. Parental violence
23. Growing up/my journey/travelling/growing
24. Desire for change – my bias
25. Seeking approval/authority
26. Injustice/misjudged/misunderstood

### Position of codes/themes in transcript

- 1 Difficulty receiving feedback  
L15, L23
- 2 Childhood emotional neglect internalised  
L19, L60, L61, L63, L121-L122, L271, L276, L312, L314, L318, L323, L392,  
L451, L453, L454, L478, L512, L569, L672, L681, L775, L776, L950?
- 3 “Oughteries” and “musturbation”  
L25, L315, L410, L453, L567
- 4 Internal wisdom  
L27, L340, L343, L352?, L383, L387, L388, L391, L480, L638
- 5 Shame  
L38
- 6 (Not) good enough  
L39, L481, L483, L484, L502, L676, L700, L845, L912, L939
- 7 Non-acceptance/rejection/outside/not let in/not loved/unlovable/not wanted/not  
belonging  
L41, L46, L47, L50, L57, L58, L65, L80, L111-L115, L120-L121, L134-L135,  
L158, L160, L162, L164, L168-L173, L177-L178, L185-L186, L216, L218, L254,  
L356, L357, L677, L845
- 8 Moved house/new school  
L56
- 9 Head to heart  
L33, (L70-71), L75, L378, L380, L435
- 10 Lack of direct praise/feedback  
L85, L86, L87, L88, L97, L103-L104, L195-L197
- 11 No emotion  
L126, L305, L313, L321, L393, L394, L406, L407, L411, L439, L441, L442, L444,  
L576, L577, L578, L625
- 12 Generational/societal?  
L127, L136, L153-154, L243?, L408, L409, L410, L432, L447, L573?, L581?,  
L583, L618, L625, L900, L901
- 13 Intergenerational/passed on, experienced by my mother  
L131-L133, L179, L245, L246, L254, L258, L265, L453, L581?, L624, L900,  
L932
- 14 “Invisible me”/not seen, not seen as I am  
L137, L139, L152, L511, L562, L681, L694, L695

- 15 Not worth bothering with/dismissed/downplayed  
L143-L145, L149-L151, L209, L211? (Dad dismissed me, did I therefore dismiss him?) L303, L307, L308, L310, L311, L315, L454, L455, L566, L570, L677
- 16 “Good mother,” job well done  
L181-L183, L184-L185, L186, L194-L195, L197, L198, L246?, L248, L253, L278, L348, L384, L765, L774?, L907, L922, L929, L933
- 17 Maternal relationship—my bias  
L241, L244, L252, L253, L339
- 18 Evaluating  
L268, L846, L910?, L922, L924, L926
- 19 Loss  
L270, L277, L279, L355, L357, L359, L436, L638, L843, L844, L859, L865, L940
- 20 Survival  
L316, L317, L320, L393, L572, L575, L578, L580, L582, L584
- 21 Dad different to Mum  
L401, L402, L406
- 22 Parental violence  
L403, L404
- 23 Growing up/my journey/travelling/growing  
L467, L477, L482, L504, L534, L786, L789, L848, L863, L869, L887, L889
- 24 Desire for change—my bias  
L554, L631, L786?, L791?
- 25 Seeking approval/authority  
L643, L646
- 26 Injustice/misjudged/misunderstood  
L678, L679, L680, L693, L698, L699

Table of major themes and related themes in first bracketing interview

<b>Major theme</b>	<b>Themes</b>
<b>Lack of love</b>	(Non-acceptance/rejection/outside/not let in/not loved/not wanted/not belonging), No emotion, Parental violence, Loss, Moved house/new school
<b>Concept of self</b>	(“Invisible me”/not seen, not seen as I am, Injustice/misjudged/misunderstood, Not worth bothering with/dismissed/downplayed, Lack of direct praise/feedback)
<b>Emotional Neglect Internalised</b>	(Childhood emotional neglect internalised, (Not) good enough, Shame, Evaluating, “Oughteries” and “musturbation”, Seeking approval/authority, Difficulty receiving feedback)
<b>Societal/Cultural Aspects</b>	(Generational/societal?, Intergenerational/passed on, experienced by my mother, Dad different to Mum, Maternal relationship—my bias, “Good mother,” job well done)
<b>Internal Wisdom</b>	(Internal wisdom, Head to heart, Survival, Growing up/my journey/travelling/growing, Desire for change—my bias)

Notes

This represents the first process and layer of analysis, the initial thematic analysis using the Pen & Paper method (page 80). During a subsequent process (the final Slice & Dice approach, page 82) and reflective layers of analysis, I developed these themes further. This included noting phrases or words that I overlooked on a first visit, and noticed only when revisiting the transcript with the knowledge gained from participant interviews.

For example, at line 127, “without any blame,” and again at line 180-181, “without any blame of her, I’m sure she was doing the best she could”, did not strike me as significant when I first recorded, transcribed and analysed this interview; I was so used to taking the blame myself and protecting my mother that I didn’t even notice I was doing it. It was only once I had heard several participants do the same, that I realised it might be noteworthy. Similarly, I incorporated the phrase “now I have more understanding” (line 178) in the theme of “Adult Reflections/Understanding” after noticing how frequently participants used phrases like this.

Thematic analysis thus added rigour to my analysis, drawing my attention to parts of my own experience that I had overlooked, as well as enabling me to find and honour the themes in participant stories that didn't match my own (for example, Kate's experience of her father as a positive influence, page 335).

I continued to re-arrange themes under different major themes as my understanding changed in the light of participants' stories; for example, I had included "Moved house/new school" under the major theme, "Lack of Love" in this initial analysis; later, I placed it under a separate theme of "Education" as part of the "Cultural norms/Expectations" theme, but when I removed the "Education" theme to keep within the word count (see page 312), I moved "Moving house/moving school" to "Family Circumstances". I applied this process to all the interview transcripts; this gradual development of themes, revising what I had done before in the light of new understanding from the participants' experiences, was an important aspect of co-creation for me.

100 prompt, and I know my Mum has dementia, but I think there's still, you know, this  
101 kind of gave a bit of a flavour of what she's always been like; "They've not turned out  
102 too badly," (laughs), and the woman doing the interview could obviously see that this  
103 was, eh, I dunno, talk about damming with faint praise! "Not too bad, alright most of  
104 the time..." (sigh) she couldn't just say, "Yeah, they make me very happy," just...

*Lack of  
direct  
praise*

105 *Yeah. You were smiling there,*

106 *Yeah,*

107 *But I got a sense that that was tough.*

108 We had a laugh about it in the room, the woman doing the interview, lovely lady,  
109 said, sort of laughed herself and looked at me, this incredulous laugh, and she said,  
110 "Who needs enemies?!" you know, (laughs), and of course it was completely over  
111 Mum's head. But you know this was what it was like, this sort of... this inability to  
112 open up, and that's, it feels like there was no openness, there was no—everything  
113 was shut tight so I couldn't be rejected, there was nothing even to get into to be  
114 thrown out of, it was just a total closed sort of, you know, this feeling that I couldn't  
115 get in, I couldn't...

*Outside/not let in*

116 *Can I just ask you about that, staying with your phrase there, and 'open up', and*  
117 *'opening up', it was kind of too closed in, and again I'm asking this because I do think*  
118 *this is relevant to your topic, and it's just, what does that mean for you, if you want to*  
119 *address that? You know, can you say a bit more about opening up, if you want to?*  
120 I couldn't get close—I couldn't get in—she wouldn't let me in, you know, I feel like I  
121 was kept at arm's length—and I think therefore I have learnt—or had learnt—to keep  
122 people's, keep people at arms' length, you know.

*Outside/n  
ot let in*

*Emotional neglect  
internalised*

123 *So opening up her heart...?*

124 *I—that's what it feels—yeah, yeah,*

125 *Is that what you mean?*

*Not showing emotion*

126 *Yeah, yeah. I mean, my parents weren't demonstrative, and I know that's true for a*  
127 *lot of people of that generation, erm, and without, you know, without any blame,*  
128 *because since doing that piece of research I've reflected, I've thought about it, I've*  
129 *talked to my counsellor a lot about it, you know, I've sat with it and thought about it,*  
130 *and yeah, probably, and one of the questions I asked myself in one of my*  
131 *counselling sessions was, what had she endured—what was it that she couldn't*  
132 *open up? And probably a sign that she had suffered some distress of her own, or, or*

*Societal/  
generational*



- 133 hadn't ever been shown how to open up, I don't know, I don't know...but just the  
 134 feeling that—(tut, sigh)—Mum anyway seemed like she was impenetrable, you  
 135 know, nobody could get through, impenetrable—Dad, on the other hand, I think  
 136 probably was, um, the more open person, but he was a man of his generation and  
 137 he was busy and I often felt that he just didn't see me. *Invisible/not seen*  
 138 *He didn't see you.*
- 139 He didn't see me, he just didn't notice me. I was down here, you know, he was up  
 140 here, so he was looking at the big things, the grown up things... *Invisible/not seen*  
 141 *He sounds remote.*
- 142 Yeah, yeah, yeah...and his eye was sort of on his, um, whatever it was he was  
 143 looking at, I don't know, he wouldn't ever engage my sisters and I in serious  
 144 conversation because, I think, he would—he didn't seem to think that it was worth  
 145 doing—that was the sense I got, you know, if we, if we, erm, asked him, if we tried to  
 146 engage him in conversation about something that, you know, as young teens maybe,  
 147 or older children, something that was going on in the news, and you know, "Why  
 148 does this happen? Why does that happen?" "Oh, it's a very complex matter," you  
 149 know, he would sort of dismiss us as if it wasn't worth trying to explain it to us, so it  
 150 was kind of like, you know, I'm the grown up and I'm looking at my busy stuff up  
 151 here, and you're children, you don't know, you know, he never, I don't know, he  
 152 never really seemed to see us as people in our own right, as adults, it was always in  
 153 relation to how we fitted in to his world, and maybe that's, maybe that's not unusual  
 154 in parents, I don't know, I don't think it's inevitable... *Dismissed*  
 155 *So it sounds like, going back to your own words, your own evidence, 'not rejection,*  
 156 *more non-acceptance,' that in different ways, you know, your mother and father*  
 157 *appeared, as you experienced it, to keep you at arm's length.*
- 158 At arm's length, *Outside/not let in*  
 159 *It's just the image that came to mind.*
- 160 Yeah, yeah...yeah... Don't get too close, don't—I, er—I mean, I—whooh—my  
 161 sister and I many years ago came to the conclusion that maybe Mum had had  
 162 postnatal depression, and maybe for her own sanity had had to keep us at arm's  
 163 length, maybe she couldn't she couldn't cope, erm, but it was this feeling of not  
 164 being, not being wanted. *Outside/not let in*  
 165 And I'd almost, almost got over before I started at Keele on  
 165 the MSc course, almost convinced myself that it was just me, it was just my *Not wanted*

166 imagination, when I came across, we were clearing out Mum's house and I came  
 167 across some letters, Dad was away at college when my two older sisters were small  
 168 and one of the things he'd written in a letter to Mum was, "we mustn't have any more  
 169 babies because it upsets you so," so I, it kind of plunged me straight back into that  
 170 feeling that—I was right, I wasn't wanted—and I know, I know parents can change  
 171 because after, after we'd had our second, I said I didn't want any more children and  
 172 then I changed my mind and we had two more and I very much wanted them, but it  
 173 just kind of confirmed for me the feeling that I wasn't, I wasn't wanted, so when I,  
 174 when I arrived, I was, I felt (sigh) somehow...I thought maybe I wasn't...I don't know,  
 175 it's really hard to know because as a child you just get on with what you're doing, but  
 176 there was just this feeling that I just always had, this feeling that, I think, that, erm,  
 177 that I wasn't loved, that I wasn't wanted, and I used to think that was because I was  
 178 unlovable, and now I have more understanding, that perhaps it wasn't that I was  
 179 unlovable, it was more that Mum wasn't in a position to love me, she couldn't do it,  
 180 but it still left me with this, with this feeling, so that I, without any blame of her, I'm  
 181 sure she was doing the best she could, and she was a good mother in many ways,  
 182 she did the job well, but I think that's how she's always seen it as well, 'job well  
 183 done', you know, and, uh, one of the, one of the poems I wrote for my MSc was 'The  
 184 Well-done Soufflé', this phrase that she had, you know, of "You've all turned out very  
 185 well," like, (tut), she did a good job, not that I'm a lovely person, not that she loved  
 186 me, but she's satisfied with her handiwork. *Good mother/  
job well done*  
 187 *Yeah, it almost sounds like a disconnection.*  
 188 Yeah, yeah.  
 189 *You know, here is the product,*  
 190 Yeah,  
 191 *And I'm sorry for using this word but I'm trying to capture that something,*  
 192 Yeah, yeah,  
 193 *"Here's the product, and didn't I do well?"*  
 194 Yeah, that's the feeling, that's the feeling that I got—when she first said that, "I'm  
 195 very pleased with how you all turned out," at first I thought, you know, "Wow! Direct  
 196 praise at last!" Then later I thought, oh, no: the words she used, that's not direct  
 197 praise of me, that's self-congratulation, "I'm pleased with", you know, "how you've all  
 198 turned out, I did a good job", erm... *Good mother/  
job well done*

*Not  
wanted**Not loved/  
not wanted/  
unlovable**Intergenerational/  
passed on**Good mother/  
job well done**Good mother/  
job well done**Not loved/  
unlovable**Good mother/  
job well done**Lack of  
direct  
praise*



