

Estranged students in UK higher education: insights from two qualitative research studies

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Introduction

The term ‘estrangement’ is used to describe the loss of a relationship between family members and it can occur for several reasons including neglect, physical and emotional abuse and differing beliefs and values, and may also result from divorce, forced marriage and family rejection (Office for Fair Access, 2017). It is estimated that family estrangement affects at least one in five families in the UK (Stand Alone, 2014) and this includes higher education (HE) students – based on student finance data, it is estimated that there were approximately 8000 estranged students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2017/18 (Stand Alone, 2019). Estranged students are aged between 18 and 24, studying at university without the support and approval of a family network (Stand Alone, 2018). The situation of estranged students in UK HE has been highlighted in recent years by the charity Stand Alone which supports people estranged from their family or children. Their research suggests that most estranged students remove themselves from a family situation without professional intervention (Bland, 2016). This chapter explores the experiences of estranged students in HE based on two institutionally funded, qualitative research studies. Building upon the first study which centred on estranged students’ use of photo-elicitation to detail their experiences at one university in the East Midlands of England (Spacey, 2020), the second study aimed to explore the university experiences of students who identified as estranged across the UK in more detail, by asking them to complete a ‘Directive’ – a set of questions to which they could respond freely online.

Context

Estrangement has not been widely researched in the UK but there is a relatively recent, growing body of qualitative research into the experiences of estranged students, particularly in Scotland (Taylor and Costa, 2019) and in England (Key, 2019). An estranged student is an individual who is no longer in communication with their parent(s) or other key family members, which may occur through disownment, distancing or choice (Blake, 2017). Estrangement does not fit easily into a perfect definition since individuals may move in and out of estrangement and, while it is usually characterised by lack of contact, this can range from the sending and receipt of cards, text messages and emails to no contact at all (Blake, 2017). Estrangement is complex but for individuals wishing to study at university or college, to access full financial support they must fulfil the definition of estrangement stipulated by the relevant funding body so that their application for a maintenance loan is assessed without taking into account the income of their parents whose financial capacity to support them would ordinarily be considered.

Estranged students are considered by the regulator for HE in England, the Office for Students (OfS, 2019), as a group ‘that experience disadvantage’ and HE providers are encouraged to think about the types of support they provide in relation to estranged students’ access, success and participation in HE in their Access and Participation Plans (APPs). Similarly, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC, 2019: 8) recognises estranged students as a cohort within its ‘at risk groups’ and higher education institutions (HEIs) in Scotland must ‘provide a brief update on current activities’ to support them in their Outcome Agreements. Estrangement, it seems, is now recognised across the HE and further education (FE) sectors in ‘policies and guidelines for widening participation teams and funding bodies’ (Taylor and Costa, 2019: 4). Some HEIs have a long history of support for estranged students, such as Liverpool John Moores University in the North West of England, which has offered support since 2008 (Condell, 2019), but at many HEIs, this is more recent and appears to be in response to the advocacy work of Stand Alone. In championing the Stand Alone Pledge to which they can commit, to publicly demonstrate their support for estranged students, HE and FE institutions have highlighted three key obstacles that affect

the university experience of estranged students that can be eased through institutional support – lack of finance, accommodation struggles (Bland, 2018) and mental health problems (Stand Alone, 2018). At the time of writing, almost half of all UK HEIs had signed the Stand Alone Pledge. However, despite their campaigning work, there are still many in the sector that ‘lack a deep understanding of the day-to-day struggles of estranged students’ (Taylor and Costa, 2019: 44).

Research with estranged students frequently draws on a Bourdieusian framework (Taylor and Costa, 2019; Key, 2019) which has helped illustrate, in its use of types of capital, that in the absence of familial support, which might be emotional, financial, psychological, spiritual or practical (Bland and Stevenson, 2018), in a society where the family is a privileged institution and which shapes assumptions about what students do, for example, in university vacations (Key, 2019), estranged students are striving for access not only to cultural capital but also to economic and social capital in order to succeed at university (Taylor and Costa, 2019). However, in spite of this recent growth in research on the experiences of estranged students, Stand Alone suggests that one of the biggest barriers estranged students face is a lack of understanding around family estrangement such that it is regarded as taboo (Bland and Shaw, 2015) and breaking down the stigma around estrangement for university students provided the impetus for the studies discussed here.

Methodology

Research design

The two studies detailed here were both small scale, qualitative studies funded by Lincoln Higher Education Research Awards from the Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute (LHERI). The researchers were guided by the interpretivist research paradigm based on the view that social reality is shaped by human experiences and contexts. This philosophy, along with a review of the literature which helped demonstrate the need for the research, informed the choice of a qualitative methodology to better understand the experiences of estranged students at university – biographical research which included the reconstruction of life histories

through life writing (study 2) and taking photographs (study 1) to explore the ‘how’ and the ‘why’.

Study 1, conducted in 2017/18, aimed to raise awareness of the existence of and issues facing estranged students with a study at the University of Lincoln (UoL). This qualitative research study adopted a participatory approach which involved the students throughout. It used the visual method of photo-elicitation – the taking of photographs and subsequent usage of them as the basis for focus group interviews with the participants. Photo-elicitation is considered a valuable approach in engaging vulnerable groups in research since it provides an opportunity for participants to document their reality (Vigurs and Kara, 2017).

The students were asked to take a series of images over the Easter university vacation which represented their student experience. This period in the university calendar is significant since it is presumed that most students will return home and stay with their families during the holidays. Arguably many aspects of university life seem to take facets of family relationships for granted such as having a family home to go back to (Bland, 2018). After the holiday, the students attended focus groups where the images they had provided were shared with the other attendees to stimulate discussion and these were audio-recorded with their consent. Research questions explored support, belonging and home, three anxieties highlighted in the quantitative research from Stand Alone (Bland and Shaw, 2015). The focus group transcriptions were analysed thematically using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo.

Study 2, conducted in 2018/19, aimed to address a key finding which emerged from Study 1, the sector’s gap in understanding of this under-represented group, by using a biographical research method – life history – to generate qualitative data from estranged students. A ‘Directive’ was created, a set of questions with prompts – in the style of the Mass Observation Project at the Mass Observation Archive in Sussex, England (Stuart, 2012), in order to gather autobiographies of estranged students from a range of universities. Life history is a useful biographical method in social research, with a strong tradition in the study of education (Merrill

Estranged students in UK higher education: insights from two qualitative research studies and West, 2009). Participants were asked to write freely about their experiences in response to a set of prompts, offering them an opportunity to share their unique accounts without the potential discomfort which can arise from being interviewed in person. This is especially important for estranged students who fear that they may be judged by others. Completed directive responses were analysed with NVivo to permit thematic analysis.

Participant recruitment

Recruiting students to Study 1 proved rather more complex than had been anticipated in the proposal. It was estimated that there were approximately 70 estranged students at the UoL in 2015 (Stand Alone, 2017) but in late 2017 there was no institution-wide system of recording students' estranged status. After lengthy deliberation about the most appropriate and ethical way to recruit participants, an email was sent out to all undergraduate students in early 2018. Eight students who met the eligibility requirements of the study responded to the email and one-to-one meetings were held to provide information about the study and instructions for participation, and to talk through issues of consent. Individual meetings were crucial at this stage of the study since most of the participants had not disclosed their status to other students and were apprehensive about coming along to the focus groups because they might meet someone they knew.

The call to participate in Study 2 was promoted on the social media application Twitter by the first author and relied on retweets from their followers. Plans for this study had included creating a Word or similar document for students to complete but this would entail prospective participants having to email the researcher directly for the document, potentially compromising their anonymity. The questions were therefore hosted in Qualtrics, an institutionally supported online survey platform. In order to receive a £20 e-voucher participants did have to provide their email address. While the study had aimed for 20 participants, following cleansing of the data 17 UK students had responded to the Directive in full.

Financial incentives were incredibly important to both the studies. Financial pressure is one of the key issues affecting estranged students and some form of compensation to recognise the time they had given to

the studies, which might have otherwise been spent in paid employment, was imperative; the bulk of both studies offered financial incentives in the form of e-vouchers. Both studies received favourable opinions from the institutional ethics system. Recognising that participants may experience distress or discomfort as a result of taking part in the studies and in the knowledge that estranged students often come from complex and stressful family backgrounds (Bland and Shaw, 2015), participants in Study 2 were signposted to the online information provided by Stand Alone and could contact the researcher directly for information, whilst in Study 1, the participant information sheet included details of relevant institutional services including Student Support and Student Wellbeing.

Findings and discussion

Demographic data were not collected in Study 1. This was not an oversight but a deliberate choice to ensure that participants could not be identified. The group consisted of eight undergraduate students at the UoL. In Study 2, 17 students completed the Directive's questions online. Since Study 2 participants were from across the UK, demographic data were collected. Participants were predominantly female (n=14), over the age of 21 (n=11) and White (n=12), had a disability (n=10) and were attending a Russell Group institution (one of a self-selecting group of 24 elite UK universities) (n=8). Participants in Study 2 included both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Understanding estrangement

In Study 1, participants felt that familial estrangement was not widely understood, and this shaped the reactions of other people who would suggest family reconciliation, for example, when they disclosed their situation. Some of the students had told their flatmates about their situation but subsequently regretted the disclosure:

I'd say like my flatmates and like, the friends that I went visiting didn't really help very much because they don't really understand the situation that you're in, that you can't go back to your family

and so they will like question you about it and just bring everything up. (Student 7, Study 1)

Participants in Study 1 often found that other people assumed they had been disowned by a parent and, while this appeared to be the case for at least two of the participants, it emerged during the focus groups that most of the participants had chosen to distance themselves from a toxic family member or situation:

I think as well because we're young people immediately kind of look at it like, on the surface, you're like a brat running away... like attention seeking, like you haven't got your own way, that sort of thing, when it's actually, like something serious has happened. (Student 4, Study 1)

In Study 2, participants could write freely about the circumstances of their estrangement, if they wished. It emerged that almost half of the participants became estranged once they were enrolled at university (n=8) whilst six became estranged once they left school and before they started university. The reasons for estrangement primarily involved the participant choosing to distance themselves by, in some cases, leaving home, often because of parental abuse or neglect, whilst far fewer of the participants had been disowned by their parents due to their child choosing to attend university or because of their sexuality:

My main memories are of arguments, silences and indirect communication. It was a cold house, both literally and metaphorically.... I became estranged from my parents during my final year of my undergraduate course. (Student 13, Study 2)

Estrangement was hard to disclose to others, and sometimes participants felt misunderstood or pitied:

I found the small-town mentality very difficult to deal with estrangement as many of my friends and remaining family were put off by my experiences and felt I must've done something wrong to deserve this. They seemed to think my relationship with my parents

was easily fixed by a simple apology which obviously wasn't the case. (Student 5, Study 2)

I was still very secretive about my family circumstances. When friends asked me whether I was going home at Easter, I said 'yes' and talked about when, but didn't tell them I meant [name of boyfriend's] house. (Student 12, Study 2)

University experiences of significance

Both studies endeavoured to understand how estrangement impacts upon students' experience of HE. Study 1 specifically focused on how it affected the students during university holidays (Spacey, 2020) whilst Study 2 examined the student experience more broadly. These experiences, specifically periods of strain and stress, were invariably related to a lack of available finance. Indeed, in both studies, finance – the lack of it, the worry about it and the need to accrue it – impacted and shaped many experiences of significance especially in relation to securing accommodation and living with other students, academic engagement and taking part in extracurricular activities, and progression to a graduate job or further study. Moreover, the significant experiences identified in the student lifecycle such as the transition to university (including moving into student accommodation) were influenced by estranged students' perceptions of how others might, and did, react to disclosure of their estrangement. All these experiences impacted the wellbeing of the students.

Finance

Some students had issues accessing student maintenance loans – having to prove they were 'irreconcilably estranged' from their parent(s) for at least 12 months (Student Finance England, 2019) to the Student Loans Company, the company in the UK that provides student loans, could be very upsetting. Access was also complicated by the reality of estrangement, which is not linear and straightforward – it is complex and can shift and change as family members try to get in contact or make amends. Student 6 (Study 1) explained that when it came to accessing student finance:

They needed confirmation from my mother that I was estranged from her and I just thought, 'how do you want me to get that when I haven't spoken to her in four years?'

The student finance system is built on a premise of parental, financial support and if there are gaps or delays with money coming in, it is assumed that parents will help. A recent survey of students discovered that the majority (71 per cent) turn to parents for emergency money and of the 73 per cent of students who receive money from their parents, on average, this is £134.25 per month (Save the Student, 2019):

Money and accommodation are very difficult to deal with and the general attitude towards students is that we all come from good families which can be upsetting when you have to explain that you're not. (Student 14, Study 2)

My loan does not cover it all, so I also work a full-time job, which [h]as proven to be difficult. Nobody from the tutors knows I am estranged, so nothing has been done and I prefer it that way. (Student 7, Study 2)

Estranged students are therefore vulnerable and reliant on employment and sometimes on borrowing money from any source they can. There was also fear expressed that they lacked a safety net if their time at university did not go well and they decided to withdraw:

Obviously with the people that are not estranged...if things don't work out they can just go back and live with their parents and have like, a place to stay at least whereas like if things don't go well with us, we'd have to like either get a full-time job somewhere that we don't want to and pay rent at a place we don't want to stay at. (Student 7, Study 1)

Estranged students are, like the majority of university students in the UK, working part time whilst they study (Save the Student, 2019) which may mean that they have less free time to take advantage of the extra-curricular opportunities on offer in HE to enhance their student experience. The

unrelenting pressure to manage their finances could affect their focus on their studies:

It would also be nice to have the option not to work and be able to focus on our studies, a choice most estranged students don't get. (Student 9, Study 2)

Accommodation

Experiences of accommodation in Study 2 varied greatly depending on the university the student attended. At some universities, accommodation is available 52 weeks a year, but not at all universities. Some students worried about being made homeless because of the lack of availability:

The collegiate system means that the support varies hugely across the colleges; my undergraduate college kicked me out over the holidays and made me leave without checking whether I had anywhere to go. (Student 12, Study 2)

The cost of accommodation over the long summer vacation was of concern for most of the participants in both studies whilst for those wanting to move into private rented accommodation, there was the issue of guarantors, who are usually parents:

The issue with the guarantors for flats is terrifying and frustrating. I am currently in the process of paying three months' rent up front as I cannot provide a guarantor. (Student 5, Study 2)

I'm always worried about money.... I'd been taught never to let outsiders know of things that happened within the family so I was too worried and unable to explain adequately why I needed to not go home and gave rather lame reasons that did not get close to explaining why I was desperate to stay in college. (Student 15, Study 2)

A small number of institutions work in partnership with the Unite Foundation which awards scholarships to support estranged students

and care leavers at partner universities with their rent and bills, as this participant at a university in the North West of England described:

The scholarship is wonderful...alleviates a massive amount of stress and anxiety surrounding finances whilst studying. It enables me to have a place to live whilst at uni, without worrying about moving out during certain times of the year. The contract runs over the full three years, so it means I don't need to worry about finding a place to stay over summer, Christmas, etc. when most other students move home. (Student 10, Study 2)

Despite the cost and availability of accommodation at some institutions, attending university and moving into a flat or house also presented some of the participants in the studies with an opportunity to live in a space that was their own. Moreover, most of the participants in Study 2 became estranged once they started at university. Becoming a university student and moving away provided estranged students with the opportunities of sanctuary, freedom and choice:

As for accommodation, I've almost always gone for the cheapest option and even though some places have been a mess, cold and occasionally mouldy, it has always seemed like luxury compared to my parents' house. (Student 1, Study 2)

I became estranged after I came to university; university was the first real home for me because people actually treated me well here...despite my feeling very guilty about estranging my parents. (Student 15, Study 2)

There is currently a dearth of data within the sector on the educational and employment outcomes of estranged students, primarily because they have been collected inconsistently and on an ad-hoc basis across HEIs. However, what became clear in both these studies was that estranged students are vulnerable in the absence of a 'corporate parent', something care leavers, for example, can benefit from. Estranged students contemplated taking any job they could once they completed their final exams, rather than

pursuing the much-prized dream graduate job they had hoped for. The fear of homelessness at the end of their degree was ever present:

I hope to find a job in counselling immediately and get started in full-time work as soon as possible. (Student 2, Study 2)

Actually, it's a really worrying thought for me. It is one thing that I do get concerned about quite a lot because it's about where to stay after university and also money. They are my main concerns and it's something that I am very worried about because I'm currently in my second year so it's thinking about what will happen this time next year. (Student 8, Study 1)

Wellbeing

The research that has been undertaken with estranged students has emphasised that estranged students are more likely to experience poor mental health whilst at university. This may be related to the estrangement itself or the subsequent isolation and lack of support whilst studying (Bland and Shaw, 2015). That support might be financial – plugging the money gap when things get tough, practical – helping move belongings into university accommodation, or emotional – someone to share the highs and lows of the student experience with (Bland and Stevenson, 2018). Participants in both studies articulated how estrangement had impacted their wellbeing in relation not only to the process of the actual estrangement but also to their student experience:

It can be very isolating as an estranged student as I don't really have anyone to be proud of my achievements other than myself. When my friends get good grades, they phone their parents; however, I can't really do that. (Student 5, Study 2)

For many of the participants, this appeared to be a result of the emotional isolation and distancing that they felt as an estranged adult in society as well as the physical isolation experienced, for example, during university holidays. Christmas, for instance, could be a difficult time to navigate for estranged students since it is synonymous with family. Known as a 'trigger

date', along with other significant dates and events such as birthdays, and Mother's and Father's Day, Christmas can reactivate a grief response (Agllias, 2017). Students in both studies referred to trigger dates and how they impacted their mental health:

I find that certain things can trigger reactions more than others... I often struggle with loneliness, and Christmas time is certainly the most difficult. I have lovely friends whose parents always allow me to spend Christmas with them, but I find it is a time all about family. (Student 10, Study 2)

All of my housemates wanted to decorate for Christmas and I just thought, I've always hated Christmas, it's the worst time of year for me, I hate it...and it's like you don't understand, like birthdays. Birthdays are a big one as well. (Student 6, Study 2)

Study 1 highlighted that at this city-campus university, most of the home students visited their families during the Easter vacation and that estranged students who lived in university accommodation on campus or in private accommodation off campus felt isolated:

The worst thing to do is know that you've got to go [to] the library by yourself for two weeks so that's why I made an effort to get away. (Student 2, Study 1)

Many of the participants had accessed university counselling during their time at university which they found beneficial. Several of them also paid for private counselling despite the financial duress they were under as the continuation of the counselling was so vital to their wellbeing, and they found the number of appointments offered through their institution was insufficient:

I was diagnosed with depression and anxiety in my first year, and with varied medication and fluctuations it hasn't really gone away.... I'm starting to see a long-term private counsellor soon: I've figured it's worth spending some of my money on making sure I don't collapse.... The counselling provision is patchy, and four

sessions a year total is not enough for students with difficult family backgrounds that may affect their studies (hence why I've had to seek private counselling). (Student 12, Study 2)

I mean private costs so much more but it's worth it for your own sanity. (Student 4, Study 1)

Differences, strengths and supports

Although this chapter has explored in some detail some of the stresses and strains which arguably many students face in today's HE environment to some extent, both studies appear to confirm that they are exacerbated for estranged students who are dealing with the challenges of university life and study whilst processing or recovering from complex, hurtful and damaging family relationships. These challenges are not alleviated once they complete their studies but are in fact amplified by the lack of financial and other support once they graduate and leave university, which for many has become their home. The OfS has made it clear that universities must consider how they support students from under-represented groups not only to access and do well whilst they study but also in life after university, whether that be employment or further study. Arguably HEIs have a responsibility to consider how they can support estranged students to transition successfully into the post-degree world.

Both studies, especially the more detailed life histories which were recorded in Study 2, help illustrate how very different some estranged students' experiences are, in terms not only of the reasons for estrangement and its impact but also the support they have received since it took place. The students in Study 1, for example, emphasised the importance and significance of the friends they made whilst at university who in some ways became their new family. Similarly, some of the participants in Study 2 attended universities which were proactive in their support of estranged students. These HEIs had signed up to the Stand Alone Pledge and were effectively communicating the range of support available both pre-arrival and during the programme.

Conclusions and recommendations

Several examples of good practice in supporting estranged students were detailed in Study 2 and suggested by students in both studies. Looking forward, UCAS (2020), the organisation responsible for managing applications to HE courses in the UK, is rolling out its ‘emerging cohorts’ project. The project scope includes estranged students, and there will be a question in the UCAS application to help HEIs identify estranged students. This will go a long way in helping universities better identify and support estranged students pre and post-arrival. However, there is still the issue of how best to support students who become estranged whilst they are at university and this support may be reliant on academic and professional staff being aware of where to signpost students if they disclose a change in family circumstances. As the body of research in this field continues to grow and there is a greater awareness of estrangement, it is hoped that there will be more provision tailored to estranged students’ needs and more opportunities to disclose their status prior to visiting universities on open days.

For institutions that have not already signed up, the Stand Alone Pledge is the recommended first point of call since, in committing to it, institutions are required to research the realities of their own estranged students and consider what they want and need as well as thinking about the best ways they can be supported.

Most HEIs provide financial support to under-represented students in the form of bursaries and scholarships and a bursary for estranged students is a practical form of support which can be funded through APP budgets in England and Wales, for example. Participants in Study 2 also suggested universities could help with food and accommodation costs. Moreover, publicising the existence of financial support can be one way in which HEIs, working with Students’ Unions, can help tackle the stigma that estranged students face. Taking part in the annual Stand Alone Twitter campaign in November is one way in which universities can show their support for estranged students whilst helping to promote awareness amongst the staff and student body. Sadly, there were examples in Study 2 of students discovering that hardship funds and bursaries existed once

they had completed their studies. Finally, awareness of issues like loneliness amongst students over holidays and at Christmas is key, and the provision of activities on campus, or signposting to events in the local community, offers practical support for estranged students who remain at university during vacations.

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