

# Estrangement Between Siblings in Adulthood: A Qualitative Exploration

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## Abstract

Relationships between siblings have been described as the longest lasting an individual can have, yet siblings both can and do become estranged from one another in adulthood. An online survey was disseminated to individuals who had sought support from the charity Stand Alone, which supports individuals who are experiencing family estrangement. Individuals estranged from one full genetic sister and/or brother were asked to describe the relationship in their own words. Open-text responses were thematically analysed from 291 respondents. Family systems were described as being characterised by estrangements, alliances and conflicts; there was variation in the participant's preferences regarding reconciliation; and most respondents focused on describing their sibling's challenging or disappointing characteristics and behaviour. The fact that siblings both can and do become estranged challenges commonly held assumptions about family relationships, confirming that they are not necessarily or always life-long, significant or supportive.

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Sibling relationships are often described as being the longest lasting of people's lives (Cicerelli, 1995). Although scholarship on siblings is flourishing (Williams, Riggs, & Kaminski, 2016), it has lagged behind that on other family relationships and there has been less focus on the quality of relationships in adulthood (Whiteman, McHale, & Soli, 2011). Most research on siblings describes these relationships as both enduring and, for the majority, supportive. However, there has been some acknowledgement that these relationships 'may be among the most damaging of relationships as well' (Hardy, 2001, p. 255), and recognition that the termination of a sibling relationship is in contrast with expectations of siblings' ties (Allan, 1977).

Research on estrangement, which is a term broadly understood to refer to family members who have negative, distant or inactive relationships in terms of communication, contact and relationship quality (Blake, 2017), has largely focused on the parent-child relationship. To the author's knowledge, no studies have yet focused specifically on exploring or examining the nature of estranged relationships between siblings in adulthood. To address this gap, this study explored the nature and quality of estrangement between adult siblings. Specifically, this study explored how individuals who are experiencing estrangement describe this relationship with their sibling, or lack thereof, in their own words.

**Siblings Relationships in Adulthood**

Sibling relationships are varied: whereas some siblings might share common biological or genetic origins (full siblings and half-siblings), others might be defined by law (e.g. adoptive siblings and step-siblings) (Cicerelli, 1995), with most of the literature having focused on the former (Steinbach & Hank, 2018).

In adulthood, most siblings maintain contact with one another (Allan, 1977; Spitze & Trent, 2006). Sibling relationships vary in levels of warmth and closeness (e.g. intimacy, prosocial behaviour, companionship, affection, similarity, admiration of the sibling and admiration by the sibling) and levels of conflict (e.g. quarrelling, antagonism and competition) (Derkman, Scholte, Van Der Veld, & Engels, 2010; Williams et al., 2016). The existence of both positive and negative emotions alongside one another has long been recognised as an important characteristic of sibling relationships (Campione-Barr & Killoren, 2019).

Negative life events, such as physical illness, psychological problems, addiction, problems with the law, being a victim of abuse or financial problems, can contribute to relationships with siblings becoming less active and supportive, and more strained (Voorpostel, 2012). The following negative experiences in particular have been identified as being detrimental for the sibling bond over the life course: (1) child maltreatment and sibling abuse; (2) parental differential treatment and (3) disputes over caregiving.

## Child Maltreatment and Sibling Abuse

Little research has focused on the ways in which child maltreatment – the physical, psychological, sexual abuse and neglect of one or more children by one or more parents – affects the sibling relationship (Katz & Hamama, 2018). Siblings can be involved in abuse in different ways, for example, one child might be scapegoated for abuse/neglect whilst their sibling is not; a child might be forced to engage in the perpetration or be a witness to the abuse/neglect of their sibling; or they might be their protector or rescuer whilst being simultaneously abused.

Likewise, relatively little research has focused on abuse between siblings (Morrill-Richards & Leierer, 2010), although this has been described as be the most common kind of intra-family abuse (Kiselica & Morrill-Richards, 2007). Some researchers postulate that his lack of attention could be due to the fact that violence and aggression between siblings is thought to be a ‘normal’ characteristic of family life (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 2005)

Whereas conflict between siblings usually is thought to consist of mutual disagreements over resources in the family, sibling maltreatment has been described as occurring when one sibling taking on the role of aggressor towards another with categories of abuse being psychological, physical, and sexual (Kiselica & Morrill-Richards, 2007; Morrill-Richards & Leierer, 2010). Sibling abuse is understood to occur when there is an intent to harm and when there have been attempts to intimidate or control a sibling through severe, intrusive, harmful, painful or physically overwhelming acts, causing the victim to experience extreme fear and anxiety (Meyers, 2017).

Risk factors for sibling abuse include: parental unavailability, a lack of parental supervision, parent–child attachment difficulties, poor or ineffective parenting, low level of paternal involvement and acceptance, differential treatment of siblings; high levels of conflict in spousal and parent–child subsystems; high levels or stress and ineffective coping strategies; and inappropriate expectations placed on older siblings to provide significant sibling care (Caffaro, 2014). Individual risk factors include a history of victimisation, a lack of impulse control, emotional immaturity, low empathy,

sadistic or cruel tendencies, substance use and dissociative reactions to trauma.

Although the prevalence of estrangement between siblings in adulthood has not been a direct focus of study, one qualitative study of 72 adult survivors of sibling incest or assault alluded to estrangement, with the authors reporting that 34% of participants did not have contact with their abusive sibling in adulthood (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 2005).

### *Parental Differential Treatment*

Parental favouritism or parental differential treatment (PDT) has been found to be common across the life span (Hartnett, Fingerman, & Birditt, 2018); Suito, Gilligan, Peng, Jung, & Pillemer, 2017) with mothers being found to favour the same child across time (Suito, Gilligan, Peng, Con, Rurka, & Pillemer, 2016). Parents have been found to differentiate amongst their children in terms of warmth, emotional closeness and the provision of emotional as well as financial and instrumental support. Parents recognise differences between their children, in behaviour, personality, and needs and cite these differences as motivation for treating their offspring differently (Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009).

Although no studies have examined the relationship between PDT and estrangement, parental preference of one sibling over another is linked to poorer sibling relationships from early childhood through adolescence (Richmond, Stocker, & Rienks, 2005; Shanahan, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2008). Likewise, in adulthood, sibling relationship quality diminishes with increased parental favouritism (Gilligan, Suito, Kim, & Pillemer, 2013; Jensen, Whiteman, Fingerman, & Birditt, 2013) and is PDT is associated with reduced psychological well-being (Jensen, Nielson, & Yorgason, 2019; Pillimer, Suito, & Henderson, 2010; Suito et al., 2017). It is not just current perceptions of differential treatment that affects psychological well-being and the quality of the sibling relationship in adulthood, but brothers and sisters' recollections of differential treatment in childhood (Peng, Suito, & Gilligan, 2018; Suito et al., 2009).

Although most research has explored PDT in European American families, recent research emphasises that it is important to consider how PDT can have different meanings and outcomes depending on cultural understandings and assumptions about family support, loyalty and interdependence among family members (i.e. familism) within different cultural contexts (Con, Suito, Rurka, & Gilligan, 2019; Solmeyer & McHale, 2017).

### *Conflicts Over Caregiving*

As parents' age, the sharing of caregiving responsibilities can impact the quality of sibling relationships. Siblings might have to be in contact more

frequently when it comes to determining who should provide care to an elderly parent and to coordinate the provision of care (Connidis & Kemp, 2008). Conflict between siblings both can and does arise during this process which can strain the sibling relationship (Lashewicz & Keating, 2009; Ngangana, Davis, Burns, McGee, & Montgomery, 2016; Strawbridge & Wallhagen, 1991).

Siblings who provide care for a mother experiencing ill health and who perceive their mothers as having a preferred child to provide care have been found to experience tension in the sibling relationship (Suitor, Gilligan, & Pillemer, 2013). When there is an inequity in the sharing of caring responsibility, those who are primary caregivers often report feelings of distress, which can increase if efforts to establish equity fail (Ingersoll-dayton, Neal, Ha, & Hammer, 2003). One study found that some sibling conflicts became 'so heated that relationships were severed or legal action taken' (Strawbridge & Wallhagen, 1991, p. 775).

## *The Present Study*

Although estrangement between siblings has been alluded to in these different fields of research, it has not, in and of itself, been a topic of focus. In order to address this gap in the literature, this study addressed the following exploratory question:

How do those who identify as being estranged from a brother or sister experience this relationship?

## **Method**

### *Measures*

An online survey was created to explore the estrangement experiences of those in the [masked for review] community, a charity based in the [blinded for review] which provides support to individuals who are estranged from their family or key family member. The generalisability of the study findings are therefore limited: whilst the findings will be reflective of those who identify as estranged and seek support, we cannot know whether and how they are relevant or applicable to those who do not identify as estranged or do not seek support. Recruiting participants through a support organisation may have contributed to us reaching those who have more severe and distressing experiences of family estrangement, as well as those individuals who had a greater need for support compared to those who do not join support organisations. The limitations of the sampling approach will be addressed in the limitations section of the discussion.

The survey was disseminated via email to 1629 members of the [blinded for rev] community in January 2015, inviting them to participate in an online study on family estrangement. The email sent to members of the [blinded for review] community was brief, confirming that the study was developed by the first author in collaboration with the charity [blinded for review] in order to further understand family estrangement, given that little academic research on estrangement was available at the time. The survey was available to complete online for 4 months from January to April 2015 and one follow-up email with another invitation to participate was sent during that time.

The survey was devised by the first and second authors. It comprised multiple choice and open-ended items. Questions were developed by reviewing existing literature on family estrangement whilst drawing upon the practical experience of the second author. The survey was divided into four main sections: (1) demographic information; (2) estrangement experiences (whom respondents were estranged from, etc.); (3) respondents' experiences of being estranged (e.g. the times of year which had been challenging for respondents) and (4) standardised questionnaires about general well-being (e.g. loneliness). All questions in the survey were optional. To address the research question, data from the second section of the survey, exploring respondents' experiences of estrangement from a family member, was utilised. Specifically, data were analysed from respondents who answered the following three questions, which were first asked about sisters and secondly about brothers:

- (1) Are you currently estranged from or experiencing relationship breakdown with your sister/s, brother/s? (yes one sister/brother, yes two or more sisters/brothers, no)
- (2) Please confirm your relationship to your sister (full genetic sibling, half, adoptive, step, other)
- (3) Please describe your relationship (or lack of a relationship) with your sister in your own words.

Data were analysed if the following three questions were answered as follows: (1) yes – one sister/brother (2) full genetic sibling; and, (3) a written response was provided.

### ***Participants***

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Cambridge Psychology Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. All respondents had sought membership of the Stand Alone community and voluntarily responded to the call for research. The operationalisation of estrangement is therefore identity-based (Blake,

2017), as participants responded to an advertisement that appealed to an aspect of their identity. There were no exclusion criteria; other than that participants had to be aged 18 or over.

A total of 807 respondents completed the survey, giving a response rate of 50%. No demographic data is available for the non-responders to the survey; therefore, the demographic characteristics of responders and non-responders cannot be compared. In the present study, data were analysed from 291 respondents: 169 respondents gave descriptions of their estrangement from a brother and 163 gave descriptions of their estrangement from a sister. Of these respondents, 41 were estranged relationship from one sister and one brother.

The 291 respondents lived in 19 different countries, with the majority living in the United Kingdom (49.5%), the United States (30.2%) and Canada (8.9%). Their ages ranged from 19 to 70 ( $M = 27.83$ ,  $SD 11.29$ ). The majority were White (91.8%), with the remaining respondents identifying as Asian (4.4%), Mixed (2.1%), 'Other' (1.4%, 3 Hispanic, 1 unspecified) or Black (.3%). Most were women (88%), 9.3% men, 1.4% trans and .7% 'other' (1 genderqueer, 1 unspecified). Most respondents were heterosexual (85.6%), 7.2% bisexual, 3.8% lesbian, 1.4% gay, 1.7% other (2 asexual, 1 bi-curious, 1 demisexual and 1 panromantic). Not all percentages add to 100 as demographic questions were not compulsory.

## Analysis

In total, 34,232 words of text were analysed (17,657 words open-text responses estrangement from a brother, 16,575 from a sister). The qualitative data were analysed using Atlas Ti and the analysis was guided by the principles of qualitative description, which aims to report participant's experiences in as close a way as possible to their own interpretation (Sandelowski, 2000, 2001). The data were analysed in accordance with the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This paper presents a rich description of the entire data set, to give a sense of the predominant or important themes. Phase 1 involved repeated reading of the data and in phase 2, the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data was coded. In phase 3, the different codes were sorted into potential themes and phase 4 involved the refinement of those themes. In phase, 5 the themes were defined and named, and in phase 6, the themes were considered in relation to the research question and an argument was formulated.

The data were coded by the first author (blinded for review) and discrepancies, questions and queries were discussed by the research team throughout the coding process until a consensus was reached. To ensure the validity of the results, peer debriefing and a systematic audit trail were conducted (Flick, 2014). The former involved a family researcher experienced

in qualitative methods becoming familiarised with data and discussing the themes that had been identified. The latter involved an experienced family researcher reviewing and retracing all of the relevant steps in the research process, from the raw data, to data reduction, to the summary or synthesis of themes and interpretations.

### *Findings*

Three following themes were identified: (1) The family system: in describing their estrangement from a sibling, most respondents gave descriptions of their wider families; (2) The sibling relationship level: there was variation in terms of how respondents felt about their relationship with the sibling in the present and the past and (3) The individual level: most respondents focused on their siblings' negative behaviours and characteristics. These themes are described in more detail below.

### **The Family System Level: Estrangements, Favouritism, Abuse and Disputes**

When asked to describe their relationship with their sibling, most respondents gave detailed descriptions of their wider family systems. Estrangements between respondents and their parents were common, with most describing their sibling as having sided with their parent or having chosen to maintain the parent–child relationship over and above the sibling relationship. Some respondents described their estranged parent as being in control of their sibling through manipulation, brainwashing or blackmail:

“We were very close, but again once my mother decided I was to be cut from all family contact, he would never wish to upset my mother who would in turn make anyone who made contact with me pay a heavy price of emotional blackmail” (White male, late 40s, UK).

Some described their sibling as facing similar issues or difficulties in their relationships with their parents to themselves but felt that their sibling did not address these issues as they were reliant on their parent for childcare, financial support, or simply wanted to maintain contact with them.

For some, their relationship with their sibling relationship slowly faded out over time, unable to survive the impact of the respondent's estrangement from a parent. However, for others, the sibling relationship had a sudden of definite ending point, for example, a sibling giving an ultimatum, stating that any future contact or relationship would be contingent on the ending of a parent–child estrangement:



“My sister stopped contact with me when I stopped contact with my father. She didn’t agree with me cutting contact with my father, and she said she no longer wanted anything to do with me. She will only have contact if I speak with my father again” (White female, early 40s, UK).

For some, parent–child and sibling estrangements had a ripple effect on the family, not just affecting their relationship with their sibling but with their nieces and nephews. Some questioned whether their nieces and nephews knew they existed, whereas others described these relationships as ending abruptly or fading out, which was sometimes initiated by the respondent, with some wanting to protect their nieces and nephews and worrying that they might become embroiled in the estrangement. However, for others, the estrangement was initiated by their niece or nephew, the direction of estrangement was not articulated, or was felt to be the responsibility of their estranged sibling:

“I have not seen my nephew and niece; he has not seen my daughters, my mother has been denied a relationship with her grandchildren, her grandchildren have not experienced a relationship with their grandmother, with their cousins and so it goes on. He has dropped a large stone into the pond and the ripples are massive – there are so many denied relationships” (White female, late 40s, UK).

Parental favouritism was also common in respondent’s accounts. For some, favouritism was seen to have started in adulthood, whereas for others, favouritism had been a consistent theme since childhood: *‘Relationship destroyed by parents. We were played off each other since we were tiny’* (White female, early 40s, UK). Parental favouritism was experienced in different ways. Some felt left out when their sibling and parent spent time together, whereas others felt ‘ganged up on’ when in the company of their sibling and parent/s. Some recognised that their parent’s differential treatment had had a negative impact on their sibling as well as themselves, and for some, that their parent’s differential treatment was related to beliefs about what it is that men and women, and sons and daughters should do:

“The way their raised us was to believe that men go to college, get a good job to support their wife and children. The girls are less than that; they should get married young, get a menial job clean the house, raise the children and cater to the husband. They listened to my brother, they gave him a voice, allowed him to have an opinion while I did not” (White female, late 50s, US).

Respondents also described family systems in which there was abuse. Some described sexual abuse being perpetrated by a father, or grandparent,

whereas others described their parents as having been physically and emotionally abusive in childhood. Others spoke of abuse more generally, often describing parents as having an addiction or experiencing mental health problems or trauma:

“I know, as the oldest sibling, she’s seen and knows so much about the troubles in our family. Our father’s alcoholism affected the family and as a result we’re estranged and have been on and off, all of our lives...The truth is I’m deeply traumatized by our family history. We are all traumatized. She’s angry and rightfully so. We all have anger issues and are unable to speak without cutting each other off” (Hispanic female, late 50s, US).

Others described how their disclosures of childhood abuse were met with accusations that they were lying or exaggerating, disbelief or disengagement from their siblings. Others described their sibling as living in denial, wanting for everyone to get along and to bury any reminders of a difficult past. Some respondents described not believing their sibling’s accusations of abuse: *‘My brother feels that he was emotionally abused from the age of 14 until now by my father. I don’t believe this to be true’* (White female, late 20s, UK).

Disputes were also common in the wider family. Following the death of a parent, some siblings had battled over inheritance: *‘...she challenged my inheritance on the basis I worked hard and earned more so didn’t need mine’* (White female, late 30s, UK). Sometimes these disputes were informal and other times they involved solicitors. Other disputes stemmed from the task of caring for an elderly parent/s, involving disagreements over parents’ health status and capacity. These disagreements were commonly related to the distribution of caring responsibilities for ageing parents, with one sibling unfairly being seen as ‘taking charge’, or a sibling being accused of not ‘pulling their weight’:

“The final straw was her refusal to assist helping with the care of our mother when she was unable to live and care for herself independently, her exact words were: it’s not my responsibility” (White female, early 50s, USA).

## **The Relationship Level: No Two Sibling Relationships the Same**

There was a great deal of variation in the nature and quality of respondents’ estranged relationships with their siblings. Some described their relationship as being one of ‘hate’ or that the relationship was ‘toxic’, explaining that they were in better psychological and physical health if they did not engage in an active relationship with their sibling: *‘I have had to draw a line for my own mental health’* (White female, early 40s, UK). Others described the

relationship as ‘complicated’ or ‘stressful’, whereas others described their relationship as being distant, with some describing their sibling as being like a stranger: *‘I don’t really know my brother’* (White female, late 30s, UK).

Some respondents felt that they did not share the same values or political beliefs as their sibling, whereas others described a disconnection in terms of their priorities and lives in general (e.g. in terms of marital status, parenting status, attitudes to work and religion). This was often described as a ‘clash’, with some distinguishing between loving their sibling but not liking them: *‘I love my sister, who is a great person in lots of ways, but I don’t like her very much’* (White female, late 40s, UK). Some identified their disconnection as resulting from a variety of factors, such as a large age gap, a sibling having a physical or mental health problem or disability, a sibling having acted as their primary caregiver when they were children or their sibling as having left home at a young age.

Whereas some described their relationship with their sibling as having been positive in the past, having once felt very close to their sibling, others described the relationship as having always been tense and strained, involving conflict and bullying. Others described a relationship with their sibling that had been consistently distant, having never felt close:

“Even as children we never got along. It wasn’t an aggressive situation, we just had absolutely nothing in common. Growing up we didn’t share a sisterhood. There was no gossiping or sharing makeup. She was a stranger to me and there was no shared interest to bond over” (White female, early 40s, UK).

In terms of the direction of the estrangement, most described their sibling as having cut contact with them, as their sibling had not responded to their phone calls, emails, letters, text messages, or had blocked their calls or access to their social media accounts. Some described how their sibling ended the relationship over a phone call or during a heated argument, whereas others described waiting for their sibling to initiate contact and finding that this did not happen. For those who initiated the estrangement themselves, this was often described as a decision that had been building for a long time: *‘I cut ties. It was a 10-year decision in the making’* (White female, Late 50s, Canada). Others described how they and their sibling both took steps towards estrangement, such as ceasing to send cards to one another: *‘The strange thing is that there has been no argument, no falling out – the lack of contact just happened’* (White female, late 40s, UK).

The level of contact that respondents had with their estranged sibling varied. Some described having no contact whatsoever with their estranged sibling. This severing of all ties was sometimes enforced legally, involving letters from solicitors, restraining orders, reports of behaviour to the police or social services. Others threw away photographs and only knew where their

sibling lived if they specifically searched for this information on the internet. Some continued to have some contact with their estranged sibling, with one respondent describing this as 'semi contact', involving sending or receiving a text or a greeting card once or twice a year and occasionally gifts at birthday or holidays, or attending events where they know their sibling might be present, such as funerals, or birthday parties.

As for how respondents felt about their estranged relationship with a sibling, some felt sad, hurt, frustrated, exhausted or devastated '*...this is the most painful, bewildering and grief-stricken experience of my life. I have been through divorce and loss of a parent but this is worse than both of these*' (White female, early 50s, UK). Others described having reached a level of acceptance and contentment with the fact that there would be no relationship with their sibling in the future. For some, this acceptance involved feelings such as sadness or disappointment: '*I just find it very sad and it has made me depressed, but I have now come to an acceptance of this is how it is and it will not change*' (White female, early 40s, UK). Others described missing their sibling and loving them: '*I love my estranged brother, but he is not capable of being trustworthy*' (White female, late 60s, USA).

## **The Individual Level: The Estranged Brother/Sister's Character and Behaviour**

Sisters and brothers from whom the respondents were estranged were described as having challenging character traits and displaying behaviour that was inappropriate and harmful. The most common word that respondents used to describe their sibling's behaviour towards them was abusive. Sometimes abuse was identified as having been emotional, physical, verbal or sexual in nature, with some experiencing a combination of different kinds of abuse, whereas other descriptions of abuse were less specific. Some described their estranged sibling as having been physically and verbally violent, aggressive, hostile or argumentative with them and with others more broadly:

"She made family events very difficult as she would start fights and not let anyone avoid arguments – sometimes shoving people, hitting people, and standing very close staring into people's eyes with a blank face" (White female, late 40s, USA).

Some described their estranged sibling as being jealous of them and/or competitive, whereas others described their estranged sibling as being untrustworthy and as having betrayed them or stolen from them or a family member. For those estranged from a sister, this disloyalty was often related to romantic relationships, marriages and divorces: '*my sister supported by ex-husband after my divorce*' (White female, late 50s, UK). As for estrangements

from brothers, a number of respondents described their brothers as being controlled by or manipulated by their wives, or described the brother's wife as coming in-between the sibling relationship or the family as a whole:

"My brother has treated me with a lack of respect, in a second-class sort of way, ever since being with his wife. She is quite manipulative. My brother has changed from the kind person he was to a stressed, angry man" (White female, late 40s, UK).

Siblings were also described as being unaccountable for their actions, rarely, if ever, admitting that they had done something wrong and/or taking responsibility for their actions. Other negative qualities included a sibling being critical, bullying, controlling, manipulative, attention seeking, secretive, patronising, grandiose and a trouble maker: *'she has the ability to press buttons in people and loves to revel in mayhem she has caused'* (White female, late 60s, UK). Those estranged from brothers sometimes described them as being distant and disinterested in their lives: *'My brother is cold and distant and not interested in cultivating or maintaining a close relationship with me'* (White female, early 40s, Australia).

Some described their sibling as having a mental health problem or addiction which they considered to be at the root of their sibling's negative behaviours and characteristics, the most commonly cited of which was narcissism. Others identified trauma in their sibling's lives, such as a miscarriage, living in a cult, or fighting in military combat as underlying and driving their sibling's negative behaviour: *'My brother's continued violence and drug abuse resulted in my refusal to continue any kind of relationship'* (White female, early 40s, Canada).

Finally, a few respondents reflected on their own behaviours and characteristics when describing their relationship with their sibling and how their own mental health problems and childhood history had impacted the relationship:

*"To my shame, I bullied her relentlessly when I was a child, because of the clear favouritism shown to her...I reflected the emotional/ physical violence I suffered back on to her"* (White woman, late 40s, UK).

## Discussion

As full genetic siblings typically share genes, social class, historical background and a network of interlocking family relationships (White, 2001), they are often assumed to be the longest lasting relationships of people's lives. However, siblings both can and do become estranged, and their relationships

become characterised by distance or inactivity in terms of contact, communication and relationship quality.

In describing their relationship, or lack of a relationship, with their estranged siblings, most respondents gave descriptions of their wider families, which were characterised by estrangements, favouritism, abuse and disputes. This finding is in line with a family systems approach to understanding family relationships (Cox & Paley, 1997), which assumes that the relationships between mothers, fathers, and their children shape one another (de Bel, Kalmijn, & van Duijn, 2019; Hank & Steinbach, 2018). These findings are also supportive of the broader literature on kinship, in which parents have been described as constituting an individual's 'inner circle' of support and siblings a secondary tier of support, with the quality of the support in the second tier being dependent on the quality of the inner circle (Voorpostel & Blieszner, 2008; White, 2001). As summarised in a recent quantitative investigation of the quality of sibling relationships following the death of a parent/s: 'sibling ties can be understood better when they are studied in the context of the larger family network' (Kalmijn & Leopold, 2019).

Given the inter-relatedness of relationships between parents, children and siblings it is perhaps unsurprising that respondents who were estranged from a sibling described their wider families as being characterised by estrangements and alliances. That estrangement from a parent can lead to subsequent estrangement from a sibling is just one example of the 'ripple effect' that estrangement can have on people's lives and relationships (Agllias, 2013).

That the wider families that respondents described were characterised by parental favouritism supports the substantial literature on the negative effect that parental differential treatment can have on sibling relationships across the life span. Whereas some described favouritism as occurring in the present, many respondents identified their estrangement as having roots in the past, describing their parents as having pitted them against one another or favouring one child blatantly or covertly. Similarly, emotional, physical and sexual abuse were common in the family systems of a number of those who were estranged from a sibling, supporting the growing literature which indicates that child maltreatment and sibling abuse can have a long-lasting negative impact on the quality of sibling relationships over time.

As for the sibling relationship itself, estrangement was experienced in different ways. For example, some respondents described estrangement from their sibling as being painful, whereas for others, it had little or no ongoing emotional impact; likewise, whereas some hoped for reconciliation in the future, others did not. Relationships with siblings had different trajectories; whereas some relationships were described as having being strong and supportive in childhood and then weakening in adulthood, others described their relationship with their sibling as having always been distant or negative. Experiencing a relationship with a sibling as having been strong and

supportive in childhood and adolescence did not therefore appear to inoculate these relationships from later estrangement.

In the present study, estrangements from brothers were more often attributed to a brother's choice of romantic partner or spouse, whereas estrangements from sisters were attributed to jealousy or betrayal regarding romantic partners. That a disliked spouse can have a negative impact on sibling relationship has received some attention (Von Volkom, 2006) but is certainly worthy of further study. For example, one study of married men's connections with their social networks found that their family relationships operated primarily through their wives (Akiyama, Elliott, & Antonucci, 1996).

This sample comprised individuals regardless of whether they initiated estrangement, which has been a criterion for estrangement in some qualitative studies on estrangement between parents and adult children (e.g. Agllias, 2018; Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2017). For the respondents in the current study, estrangement from a sibling was described by some as fading out, with no clear direction of intent. It is possible that an individual's experience of estrangement will differ according to the direction of estrangement and this element of choice or intention is likewise worthy of future research as the field of research on family estrangement continues to grow.

Whilst many of the respondents in this study were estranged from a sibling due to a negative, conflictual relationship and had experienced their relationship deteriorating, a minority reported never having had a close relationship with their sibling and having always experienced their relationship with their sibling as having been distant. This suggests that estrangement between siblings is not necessarily or always about conflict or negativity, which will be an important consideration for those conducting research on this topic in the future in terms of how estrangement between siblings is both defined and operationalised. Sibling relationships are often described as being more egalitarian and voluntary compared to the parent-child relationship (Cicerelli, 1995), and therefore, it is possible that estrangement between siblings encompasses feelings of disconnection more broadly, rather than conflict and negativity specifically. Transparency in these aspects of research design continues to be important as the field progresses (Blake, 2017).

This study contributes to the estrangement literature more broadly in terms of definition and operationalisation. This sample comprised individuals regardless of the frequency of contact that they had with their estranged family member, which has been a criteria in some quantitative studies of estrangement (e.g. Conti, 2016; Kim, 2006). In the present study, some respondents had no contact and others had intermittent contact, suggesting that those who experience estrangement and seek support are not simply those who have not had contact with a family member for a set amount of time, but rather, that the definition and experience of family estrangement is more complex.

Future avenues that might be fruitful would be focusing on specific routes to estrangement in greater detail, for example, how sibling abuse in childhood led to the estrangement between siblings in adulthood. Future research might also benefit from narrowing down on specific points of tension in the life cycle, such as exploring in further depth the experiences of those who are estranged from a sibling due to disputes over inheritance.

### *Limitations*

The respondents in this study identified as being estranged from a family member and had sought support; therefore, the study findings therefore cannot necessarily be generalised to those who do not identify as estranged or have not sought support. The respondents in the present study were also estranged from one genetic sister or brother, so the findings cannot therefore necessarily be generalised to step, half and adoptive siblings, or speak to those who are estranged from two or more sisters and/or two or more brothers. In the present study, the decision to focus on this population was driven by simplicity, given that it is the first exploratory study of this kind. It is possible, if not likely, that the experience of being estranged from two or more siblings differs to the experience of being estranged from one. For example, the factors that contribute to estrangement might differ for each sibling and the quality of the relationship between siblings might also differ.

Another notable limitation of the study is that most respondents (89%) lived in the United States, United Kingdom and Canada, and most identified as White. Respondents might therefore be more likely to live in families where there are certain assumptions about family relationships, for example, that a parents' inheritance will be split equally amongst children rather than going to a sibling of a certain gender and age, which might play a role in shaping the relationship between siblings (Bras and Van Tilburg, 2007). More focused studies that examine and explore family estrangement within specific cultural contexts are therefore much needed in order for the field of family estrangement to be of relevance and applicability to those who do not live within, and whose values might not be reflected within, European American families. Also, like much existing research on family estrangement, the sample comprised mostly women, and therefore, future studies should endeavour to examine and explore the estrangement experiences of men who are experiencing estrangement from a family member.

### *Implications*

The prevalence of child maltreatment and early adverse experiences in respondent's narratives (e.g. a parent or a sibling being addicted to alcohol, drugs or having a mental health problem) suggests that a trauma-informed



approach to care might be particularly helpful for those providing support to individuals experiencing family estrangement (Oral et al., 2016).

The study findings confirm those of family research which have studied the quality of sibling relationships in adulthood more broadly (Jensen, Nielson, & Yorgason, 2019); specifically, they confirm that whilst it is true that two full genetic siblings might know one another over the decades of their lives, it is not necessarily true that these relationships will be active, significant or supportive in people's lives. Rather, a brother or a sister might be a source of stress, disappointment and violence from whom disconnection and distance is desirable or inevitable, or rather that estrangement is simply the way that things are, rather than the way that they could be or should be.

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