"Another part of the messy story of a child of divorce": Narrating growth through educational journeys after parental separation.

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Acknowledgements

Summary of Thesis Presentation

This thesis is divided into three parts: a major literature review (Part One), an empirical research paper (Part Two), and a critical appraisal (Part Three).

Part One Major Literature Review: This section is divided into two parts; Part One A offers a narrative review that provides a definition of key terms, the background context on marriage and divorce, along with the associated outcomes, risk factors, and protective factors for children and young people who have experienced parental separation. Part One B adopts a systematic approach to reviewing the literature on psychological growth in individuals following parental separation.

Part Two Major Empirical Paper: This section is divided into four parts. Part One, the introduction, aims to provide a brief overview of the existing literature. Part Two presents a description of the methodology used in the current research, Part Three details the findings and finally, Part Four presents a discussion.

Part Three Critical Appraisal: This section comprises a reflective account of the research process and the researcher's professional development. It is presented in two parts. Part Three A provides an analysis of the research process, a critical account of the development of the research practitioner, including professional interests in the topic area. Part Three B discusses the study's contribution to knowledge, implication for Educational Psychologists and plans for dissemination.

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Abbreviations

ACEs – Adverse Childhood Experiences

BPS - British Psychological Society

CYP - Children and Young People

DEdPsy - Doctorate in Educational Psychology

DSAP – Divorce Stress Adjustment Perspective

DVFM – Divorce Fluidity Variation Model

ELSA – Emotional Literacy Support Assistant

EP(s) - Educational Psychologist(s)

EPP – Educational Psychology Practice

EPS(s) -Educational Psychology Service(s)

IPA - Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

NA – Narrative Analysis

ONS – Office for National Statistics

PTG – Posttraumatic Growth

SDT – Self-Determination Theory

TEP(s) - Trainee Educational Psychologist(s)

UK - United Kingdom

Part One: Major Literature Review

Word count: 9324

Introduction

1.1 Overview of the Literature Review

The aim of this literature review is to explore the literature relating to the impact of parental separation on children and young people (CYP). The literature review will be composed of two parts.

Part A provides a narrative literature review, which aims to offer theoretical and contextual information highlighting the importance of the topic area and the purpose of the study. Narrative reviews aim to synthesise findings from a range of sources in order to provide an account of the relevant history, theories and research related to a topic (Siddaway et al., 2019). This part will outline the historical context of divorce, provide current data on family composition in the United Kingdom (UK), explore outcomes for children of parental separation, and explore relevant psychological concepts to better understand CYP's experiences.

Part B presents a systematic approach to reviewing the literature relating specifically to the psychological growth of individuals who have experienced parental separation. The following question is posed for the literature review, "What does the literature say about the psychological growth of individuals who have experienced parental separation?". A critical review of the literature will be given, followed by details of the questions that remained that led to the current research.

1.2 Lens of the Researcher

This study is located within Big Q Qualitative research (Kidder & Fine, 1987), embracing the interpretive and subjective nature of human experience. The researcher approaches both the literature review and empirical study from a positive psychology and strengths-based perspective, seeking to explore not only challenges but also possibilities for growth, resilience, and meaning-making. The researcher aligns with the views of Braun et al. (2022), who note that qualitative research is a process of both "telling a story" and "making an argument" (p.434). Throughout, the research process is viewed as a conversation-starter, expanding the focus beyond deficit-based accounts. This aligns with Braun et al. (2022), who advocate that qualitative research should not only analyse but also actively construct meaningful interpretations of experience.

1.3 Definition of Terms

For clarity and ease of understanding, this section provides definitions of key terms that are used throughout the research.

Parental Separation. Parental separation refers to the dissolution of a cohabiting or marital relationship between parents, resulting in at least one parent no longer residing with their children. This separation can be formal, such as through legal divorce or separation agreements, or informal, involving parents living apart without legal proceedings (Karhina et al., 2023).

Divorce. Divorce is the legal dissolution of a marriage by a court or other competent body (Oxford University Press, 2025). It involves formal legal processes and has specific legal implications regarding the rights and responsibilities of the individuals involved.

Nuclear Family. Traditionally in the UK, the 'nuclear family' has consisted of a married couple and their children (He, 2005). The **lone parent family** is also acknowledged as a variant of the nuclear family, with most one-parent families being divorced-parent families (Georgas, 2004).

Stepfamily. A stepfamily is any family that includes at least one stepparent or stepsibling. In households with five or fewer people, a family is considered a stepfamily if it includes a parent living with their child or children and a partner (such as a spouse, civil partner, or cohabiting partner) who is not the biological parent of the child (Browning & Roth, 2016).

Blended Family. A blended family is described as a stepfamily which contains a couple and at least two children. At least one child in the family must have a parental relationship with both members of the couple, and the other child or children must have a stepparent relationship with one member of the couple (Papernow, 2019).

Extended Family. An extended family in the UK refers to a multigenerational group of individuals related by blood, marriage, or cohabitation (Harris & White, 2018). Typically, this includes parents, children, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and sometimes more distant relatives, all of whom recognise their kinship and often maintain close familial bonds.

It should be noted that when discussing the research findings, the term 'parental separation' is used when referring to separation and divorce. The term 'divorce' will be used when it is specifically referred to in the literature. Using 'parental separation' when referring

to separation and divorce allows for a broader understanding of family dynamics, encapsulating both legal and non-legal separations (Amato, 2010).

1.4 Researcher Positionality

Bourke (2014) emphasises that researchers are key instruments in the research process and stated that the researcher's personal characteristics and background may influence the direction and outcome of the study. Clarke (2025) denotes that the researcher plays an active role in the research process, and through the generative and creative process, they *will* influence the data. Therefore, it is important to understand who the researcher is and consider how they may impact the research process. For the current study, the researcher identifies as an insider researcher as they are conducting the research with populations of which they are also a member: an adult child of parental divorce (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Although Part Three of this thesis will explore this in more depth, it is important to recognise at this stage the interpretive nature of the research process and the role of the researcher as an active meaning-maker (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The researcher engaged in ongoing reflexivity to ensure that familiarity does not lead to assumptions or uncritical interpretations, therefore rather than attempting to eliminate subjectivity, the aim here is to engage with it transparently. To support reflexivity in synthesising existing knowledge and the trustworthiness and credibility of the literature review, a blended narrative and systematic approach has been adopted (Gough et al., 2017; Suri, 2011).

2. Part A: Setting the Scene

This narrative review is informed by a diverse range of sources including peer-reviewed research, grey literature, government and third-sector policy documents, and key academic texts. This approach was used to build understanding, establish theoretical foundations, and inform real-world applications relevant to the outcomes for children who have experienced parental separation (Greenhalgh & Peacock, 2005). Literature was identified through searches of academic databases, such as PsycINFO and Google Scholar, using a combination of keywords including 'parental separation', 'divorce', 'protective factors' and 'risk factors.' Additional sources were identified through citation searches and professional knowledge of key texts in the field.

The section below provides an outline of the historical context of marriage and divorce in the UK and the current statistics describing family composition in the UK. Many aspects of

family policy, especially in historical contexts, have been shaped at the UK level. Therefore, a UK wide historical context is more representative of the systemic influences that have shaped family structures over time.

2.1 The Historical Context of Marriage and Divorce in the UK

Marriage has long been a fundamental structure of society in the UK, evolving significantly over centuries (Stone, 1990). Historically, marriage was not only a personal and familial commitment but also a socio-economic contract that often involved the exchange of property, status, and alliances which was heavily influenced by religious, cultural, and legal norms (Trumbach, 1984). Since the nineteenth century, British society considered marriage a key element of social institutions which provided the stable foundation in which to raise responsible citizens (Miller, 2021). Children who were raised outside of this traditional institution were often referred as being raised in a "broken home" and were often stigmatised and associated with "juvenile delinquency" (Shaw & McKay, 1932, p. 514). At this time, divorce was rare and viewed negatively in society, and children from divorced families were often blamed for various social issues (Cheal, 1991).

Cultural attitudes toward divorce have evolved significantly since the eighteenth century when the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 first granted divorce through the courts (Kha, 2020; Stone, 1990). Since then, the literature presents a tumultuous landscape of opposing perspectives, particularly where children of divorce are concerned (Amato, 2000, 2010; Harvey & Fine, 2011; Wallerstein et al., 2001). The UK experienced significant social changes during and after the First World War, leading to the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1923 (Kha, 2020). This act provided women equal terms for the first time, allowing either spouse to petition for divorce based on adultery (Kha, 2020). Then, in 1937, another Matrimonial Causes Act expanded the grounds for divorce to include cruelty, desertion, and incurable insanity, alongside adultery. Additionally, Parliament introduced a bar on divorcing within the first three years of marriage (Cretney, 2003; Kha, 2020).

The Second World War brought about another period of significant social change, marking the start of the modern era (Marwick, 2003). The war and its aftermath saw an unprecedented rise in marriage breakdowns across society, leading both the church and the government to grow increasingly concerned that the existing divorce laws were outdated (Cretney, 2003). This led to The Divorce Reform Act of 1969 which aimed to modernise the

existing laws, allowing people to obtain a divorce by demonstrating the breakdown of their marriage. This act was consolidated in the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1973, which still governs divorce law today. The easing of the legal restrictions to divorce meant that there was a rapid increase in the number of families separating (Cretney, 2003). This led to the number of children under the age of sixteen mentioned in divorce petitions increasing from 51,310 in 1969 to 120,000 in 1975, and further to 138,706 in 1981 (Miller, 2021). It can be suggested that with this rapid increase in divorce, the stigmatising view of the 'broken home' was untenable. This shift in society meant that children from divorced families were no longer viewed as "delinquents", who were responsible for societal issues, instead changing perceptions meant that they were increasingly seen as "emotionally vulnerable" (Miller, 2021, p.169). Furthermore, since the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, which legalised same-sex marriage and provides for the conversion of civil partnerships into marriages, research indicates growing awareness of diverse family structures in today's society (Eekelaar & George, 2014).

2.2 Family Composition

In 2023, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that there were 19.5 million families living in the UK. Of these, 42% had one or more dependent children, equating to approximately 8.2 million families with dependent children (Office for National Statistics, 2023b). While the exact number of dependent children is not specified in this bulletin, previous data reported that there were 12.6 million dependent children living in households in 2021 (Office for National Statistics, 2023a).

Marriage rates have been gradually decreasing in England and Wales since 1990 (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2024a), with the proportion of families cohabiting increasing from 14.2% in 2011 to 16.2% in 2021 (Office for National Statistics, 2023b). The latest release of annual statistics from the UK Government on separated families in Great Britain estimates that for the financial year ending 2023, there were approximately 2.4 million separated families, including 3.8 million children in those separated families (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2024b). The number of lone parent families has also increased to 3.2 million in 2023, with this family composition accounting for 16% of all family types (Office for National Statistics, 2023b). This bulletin reported that lone fathers accounted for 15% (477,000) of lone-parent families, while lone mothers made up the remaining 85%.

Figure 1

The Type of Families in Which Children Live in the UK (ONS, 2023)
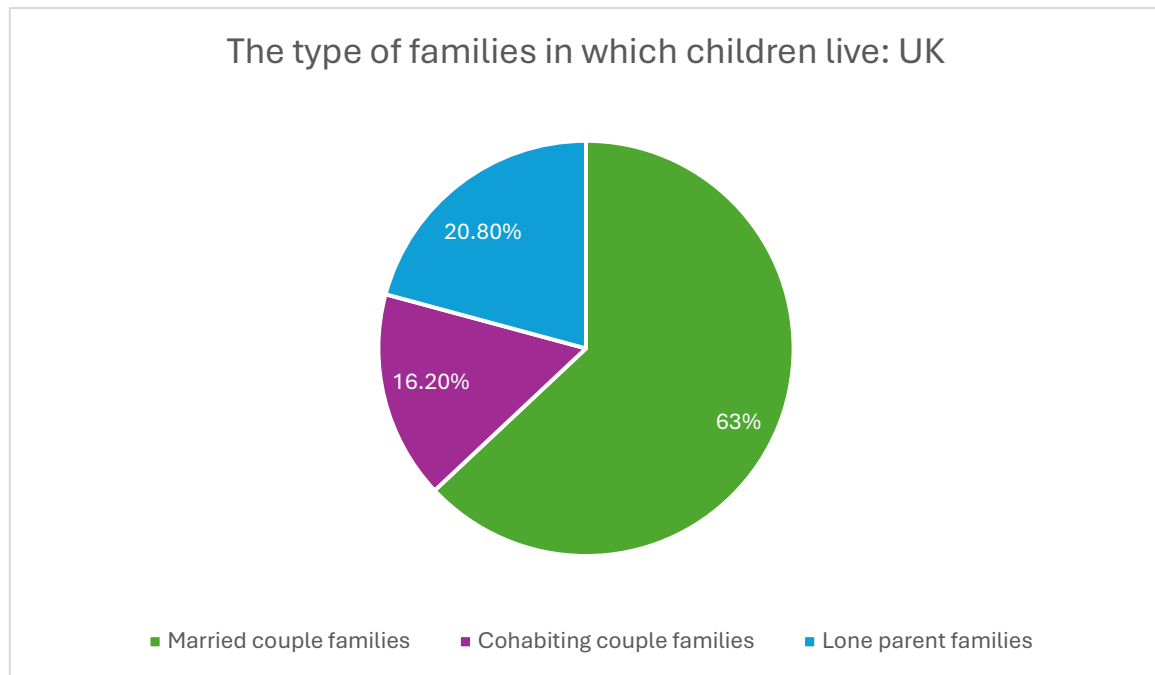
Legislative changes resulting from the Children and Families Act 2014 mean that married couples seeking a divorce are no longer required to disclose details about their children, therefore statistics relating to the number of children experiencing parental divorce has not been collated since 2015. As family composition is dynamic and can change over the course of childhood, The Family Review (Children's Commissioner, 2022) explains that understanding the 'modern family' in recent decades is challenging. This is due to the evolving nature of family life, alongside the increase in co-habitation, blended families, and children living across more than one household. The review noted that "government data as currently collected has not kept pace with these changes, and what it tells us does not capture the dynamic and evolving nature of modern family life" (Children's Commissioner, 2022, p.7).

2.3 Outcomes for Children of Separated Parents

The relationship between parental separation and CYP's outcomes has been widely studied. This section aims to present some of the literature on the outcomes for CYP who have experienced parental separation, as well as relevant theoretical frameworks in which to frame and understand these outcomes.

2.3.1 Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Parental separation is a significant and stressful event in a child's life, and it is recognised as an adversity within the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) framework (Felitti et al., 1998). ACEs are described as "highly stressful, and potentially traumatic, events or situations that occur during childhood and/or adolescence. They can be a single event, or prolonged threats to, and breaches of, the young person's safety, security, trust or bodily integrity" (Young Minds, n.d.). The original ACEs framework identified 10 key types of childhood adversity, which can be categorised into three broad domains: abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, with parental separation being categorised under 'household dysfunction'. The framework suggests that children who experience parental separation are at an increased risk for a range of negative outcomes. However, the impact of parental separation can differ depending on a variety of factors which will be discussed later in this section (Amato, 2000; Demo & Fine, 2010).

The ACEs framework is a cumulative framework which suggests that the greater the number of ACEs a child is exposed to, including parental divorce, the higher the likelihood of experiencing poor health outcomes later in life. The framework has also been expanded beyond its original 10 categories to include other adversities such as bullying, racism, poverty, and exposure to community violence (Bethell et al., 2014).

2.3.2 Educational Outcomes

Research consistently shows that parental separation is associated with negative educational outcomes for children, though not necessarily to the same extent for all children. These outcomes include lower academic achievement, increased probability of school dropout, and reduced likelihood of engaging in tertiary education (Bernardi & Boertien, 2016; Corrás Vázquez et al., 2017; Seijo et al., 2016).

Some research has shown that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to experience more negative effects on their academic outcomes following parental separation compared to children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Morris et al., 2018; Schulz, 2022). However, with a pattern of heterogeneity in effects being observed within the literature, Bernardi and Boertien (2016) explored three potential explanations for the differences in the effects of parental separation on children's academic outcomes. They measured changes in family relationships, changes in income, and selection effects (i.e., unobserved characteristics

of families that might influence both the likelihood of parental separation and children's educational outcomes) and found that changes in family income primarily account for the variation in outcomes. The authors found that children with more educated parents experience larger income declines after separation, and these declines have a disproportionately negative impact on their educational attainment. Conversely, they stated that family relationships and selection effects were not significant contributors.

Gender differences in how parental separation impacts academic achievement can also be observed within the literature. For example, Kaye (1989) explored the impact of divorce on children's academic performance and found that in the long term, boys achievement test scores were more adversely impacted in comparison to girls, suggesting that girls may be more likely to show academic resilience post-separation. However, another study conducted by Sun and Li (2009) found that daughters in unstable post-divorce families (those experiencing additional family transitions during late adolescence) appear to make less academic progress over time compared to sons in similar situations. These studies draw attention to the complexities in understanding the impact of parental separation on educational outcomes, however it highlights the importance of considering the stability of the family environment post-separation, as well as the impact of separation over time.

2.3.3 Emotional and Behavioural Outcomes

Research has shown that experiencing parental separation can have significant long-term effects on CYP's mental health and well-being, though similarly to academic outcomes, the impacts vary across each individual and their circumstances. CYP who experience parental separation have been shown to experience higher rates of anxiety and depression and difficulties with substance misuse (Cartwright, 2006; D'Onofrio & Emery, 2019; Seijo et al., 2016).

Initiated in 1971, the seminal study by Wallerstein et al. (2001) followed 131 children from divorced families in the United States over three decades. Wallerstein's findings suggested that in the short-term, children experience immediate psychological and emotional distress, often experiencing feelings of abandonment, anxiety, anger, sadness, and confusion and in the long-term, as adults, they were likely to experience difficulty forming and maintaining emotional, trusting relationships. Wallerstein (2001) described this as a "sleeper effect" (p. 282) whereby the effects of divorce present later in life. She concluded that there were no instances in which

children could benefit from their parents' divorce, rather the continued stress would lead to long-term psychological difficulties. Wallerstein's assertion that divorce negatively affects all children has been widely regarded as controversial (Amato, 2003; Hetherington, 2002). Although Wallerstein's work remains a key reference in discussions around the impact of parental separation, her work has been subject to debate and criticism. Amato (2003) highlighted the methodological limitations to Wallerstein's work and provided an alternative perspective. He argued that Wallerstein's study lacked a control group of children from "intact families" (p.338), making it difficult to determine whether the negative outcomes are uniquely tied to divorce, or whether they are reflective of other factors such as parental conflict or financial pressure. Amato (2003) presented an opposing opinion, suggesting Wallerstein's findings may have been overgeneralised and that not all children of divorce experience poor outcomes. Amato noted that the research landscape in this area is variable, and that children can often adapt well and can even show resilience. Furthermore, he argued that there are several risk and protective factors that can either exacerbate or mitigate the negative outcomes for children who have experienced parental separation. These factors will now be considered in more depth.

2.4 Risk and Protective Factors

Much of the research on the outcomes for CYP who have experienced parental separation is quantitative in nature. While some studies have drawn conflicting conclusions, others have highlighted only small differences between children of divorced parents and those of married parents (Amato, 2000). Demo and Fine (2010) argue that the predominance of quantitative research in this area can often overlook the significant variability in individual experiences and outcomes. Examining these differences within the context of risk and protective factors can provide a richer understanding of the outcomes for CYP who have experienced parental separation.

2.4.1 Risk Factors

Risk factors are characteristics, conditions, or variables that increase the possibility of negative outcomes in an individual's learning, behaviour, or overall development (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010). These factors can arise from different domains, including individual, familial, social, or environmental contexts. The following section will explore the risk factors identified in the literature that may influence how CYP adjust to their parents' separation.

Family-related risk factors such as interparental conflict and parental mental health difficulties have been found to negatively impact children's wellbeing post-separation (Leon, 2003; Nunes-Costa et al., 2009). These factors can also contribute to further challenges such as inconsistent parenting styles and poor co-parenting relationships (Nunes-Costa et al., 2009). Other familial risk factors include socioeconomic changes, lack of social support and a change in contact with parents (Morrison & Cherlin, 1995), particularly fathers (Hallman et al., 2007).

Risk factors at the child level include the age of the child. Research has shown that children whose parents' divorce before the age of six may be particularly at risk for developmental disruptions and maladaptive behaviours (Rogers, 2004). Gender differences have also been observed in response to parental separation, for example, some research has found that boys may experience more challenges behaviourally (Morrison & Cherlin, 1995). Children may also experience feeling responsible for their parents' divorce, with younger children more likely to experience a fear of abandonment from their parents (Leon, 2003). Socially, some research has shown that children of parental separation may have more substance-using friends and are therefore more likely to engage in substance misuse (Neher & Short, 1998). Furthermore, they are less likely to have the internal coping skills to manage stress and regulate their emotions (Neher & Short, 1998).

2.4.2 Protective Factors

Protective factors are defined as resources or attributes that reduce the likelihood of negative outcomes by mitigating the effects of risk factors and fostering resilience and wellbeing in the face of adversity and challenging experiences (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010). Protective factors can be internal (e.g., personal strengths) or external (e.g., supportive environments, societal, familial) (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010). The following section will explore how protective factors in this context may influence how CYP adjust to their parents' separation.

Research conducted by Brownlee (2007) found that fostering a positive family environment can support children to cope with the experience of parental separation. Particularly when the family maintain a sense of cohesion, minimise conflict and create an open, accepting environment where children are able to express their feelings about divorce. Furthermore, friendships were found to be a key source of social support for children, they noted that children would often spend time at their friend's family homes as they provided an

escape from family stresses. Finally, they found that adults outside of the family system can also mitigate the negative impacts of parental separation, notably teachers and school staff.

Siblings have also been found to be a key protective factor for children experiencing divorce for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, siblings can provide a sense of shared experiences and continuity during the transitions that take place post parental separation, these shared experiences were found to offer reassurance and promote resilience (Jacobs & Sillars, 2012). The shared experience can also lead to siblings developing a closer relationship as they both navigate the challenges of their parents' separation (Abbey & Dallos, 2004). In cases where parental support was absent, siblings were able to rely on each other for emotional support, providing an additional layer of emotional stability (Abbey & Dallos, 2004; Jacobs & Sillars, 2012). However, whilst research has shown that sibling support significantly improved resilience and helped children navigate the challenges of divorce and separation, it's important to note that this support did not necessarily mitigate negative feelings about the divorce itself (Jacobs & Sillars, 2012).

Parenting styles can play an important role in fostering children's resilience during parental separation. Parents who foster open communication, offer emotional support, and practice positive parenting, such as setting consistent and clear boundaries, can significantly help their children (Brownlee, 2007). Additionally, maintaining positive relationships with both parents is essential for the child's well-being (Brownlee, 2007; Kleinsorge & Covitz, 2012).

Contrary to traditional beliefs, Smith et al. (2003) argue that involving children in the decision-making process (e.g., around living and contact arrangements), can enable children to experience a sense of autonomy and control throughout the transition of parental separation. The authors found that children who were consulted about their arrangements post parental separation appreciated being able to have input and felt more positive following the separation.

2.5 Relevance to Educational Psychology Practice (EPP)

As discussed in Section 2.2, parental separation affects a large proportion of CYP. Historically, the dominant narrative in the literature largely frames this experience as a negative one, often linking it to emotional distress, adjustment difficulties, and long-term adverse outcomes for CYP (Wallerstein et al., 2001). However, other perspectives have considered the influence of risk and protective factors on adjustment over time (Amato, 2000, 2003; Demo & Fine, 2010).

Cameron (2006) states that EPs approach "human problems with specific and well-established psychological perspectives in mind. In psychology, it is generally accepted that human behaviour is most usefully viewed from an eco-systemic perspective which emphasises the complex, interdependent and recurring nature of the links between a variety of contextual, personal, and interpersonal variables". (p.293). Therefore, EPs can take a wide, dynamic and connected view of a child's world, offering a psychological perspective in which CYP navigating parental separation can be understood.

Furthermore, EPs are well positioned to facilitate the work of education settings in supporting CYP adjust to family transitions. As outlined in the Currie report, EPs work holistically and collaboratively in a variety of ways through research, training, consultation, and assessment (Currie, 2002) and at a variety of levels; individual, group and systemic (Fallon et al., 2010). The implications for EPP will be discussed further in Part Two and Part Three of this study.

2.6 Adjustment Frameworks

EPs and other professionals working with CYP and their families may find it helpful to consider the following conceptual frameworks to understand how CYP, and adults, adjust post-separation. The author presents two useful frameworks, the Divorce-Stress-Adjustment Perspective (DSAP) and the Divorce Variation and Fluidity Model (DVFM). Whilst both frameworks acknowledge separation as a process and provide a perspective on the factors which impact an individual's adjustment to divorce. The DSAP focusses on individual factors, whilst the DVFM encapsulates this within an ecological perspective.

2.6.1 Divorce-Stress-Adjustment Perspective (DSAP) (Amato, 2000)

The divorce-stress-adjustment perspective (DSAP) conceptualises marital dissolution not as an isolated event but as a process that begins while the couple lives together and ends long after the legal divorce is concluded (Amato, 2000). Amato (2000) developed this perspective (outlined below in Figure 2) based upon various stress response frameworks (see Amato (2000) for a comprehensive outline of these frameworks), and the divorce literature across the 1990's. As this model views divorce as a continuous process, it suggests both adults and children require ongoing adjustment over time. The model acknowledges that each person's experience of divorce is unique and that factors such as personality, resilience, and external support systems play a crucial role in how individuals cope with the stress of divorce. The

perspective presents multiple stressors associated with divorce, such as marital conflict, socioeconomic challenges, and changes in parenting roles (known as: *mediators - risk factors*). The framework emphasises that individuals' adjustment to divorce is influenced by various factors, including personal resources, social support, and coping strategies (*moderators - protective factors*). Amato (2000) also suggests that CYP's adjustment can vary based on age, temperament, and the level of parental conflict they are exposed to, and that stressors may lead to CYP experiencing emotional, behavioural, and academic challenges. For example, Amato (2000) provides an example of two children experiencing the divorce, where an older child might experience a high level of pre-divorce stress, therefore the separation of their parents may come as a relief. However, the younger child may find this experience highly anxiety provoking. Amato (2000) suggests that 'successful adjustment' can present itself as adapting to new family dynamics and maintaining well-being.

Figure 2

The Divorce-Stress-Adjustment Perspective (DSAP) (Amato, 2000)
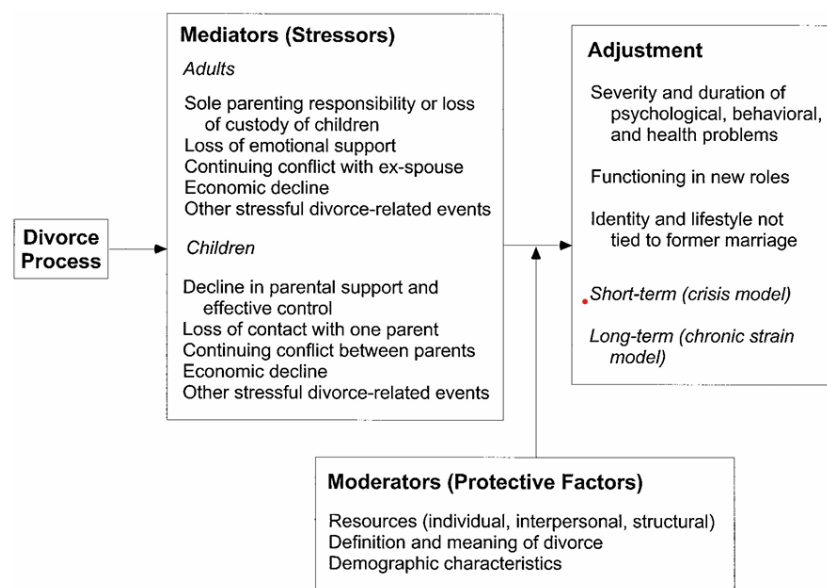
2.6.2 Divorce Variation and Fluidity Model (Demo & Fine, 2010)

The Divorce Variation and Fluidity Model (DVFM) is an integrative theoretical framework developed by Demo and Fine (2010) to understand how individuals and families adjust to divorce. Encapsulating and building on the DASP, the DVFM also applies and incorporates ideas from five other theoretical perspectives: the life-course perspective, family

ecology, risk and resilience, account making, and feminist theory. The model (see Figure 3 below) presents the key processes influencing adult and child adjustment to divorce and emphasises the significant variability in how family members experience and adjust to divorce. Demo and Fine (2010) note that the model is designed to be explorative rather than exhaustive, and its purpose is to demonstrate the dynamic nature of the divorce process and the complex set of marital, family, socioeconomic, and extrafamilial factors that affect how CYP and adults experience and respond to divorce.

The model begins on the far left, acknowledging the 'predisruption' that takes place, meaning the conditions and dynamics within the family before the divorce. This explores the factors that may have contributed to the decision to divorce, and the stressors and conflicts that led to families taking different paths. This element of the model also considers the divorce process and the emotional and logistical challenges that accompany this. Finally, this component highlights the uniqueness and variability each individual experiences throughout the divorce process. The model brings attention to various risk factors (e.g., pre-divorce marital conflict, economic decline) that increase the likelihood of negative outcomes, as well as protective factors (e.g., coping skills, social support) that can help mitigate the impact of divorce. The model also brings attention to the various transitions families go through post-divorce, such as remarriage or cohabitation, and the fluid nature of family structures which may change multiple times over the course of a family's life (Demo & Fine, 2010).

The 'postdisruption' element of the model considers how both adults and children adjust to life after divorce. A strength of the model is that it acknowledges that whilst 'averages' of outcomes provide a general overview, it does not acknowledge the diversity and complexity of individual experiences. Furthermore, it outlines the variability of life post-separation in terms of family structure (e.g., lone parent families, blended families and extended families), socioeconomic status and individual differences (e.g., coping skills and support systems). Finally, this element again highlights fluidity, explaining that relationships are not static, and a family may experience several transitions over time, meaning CYP and adults will need to continue to adjust to changes as they grow. The DVFM takes an ecological perspective (influenced by Bronfenbrenner (1979)), acknowledging five interrelated contexts that influence adjustment to divorce: race, gender, legal context, economic conditions, and cultural values (Demo & Fine, 2010).

Figure 3

Divorce Variation and Fluidity Model (Demo & Fine, 2010)
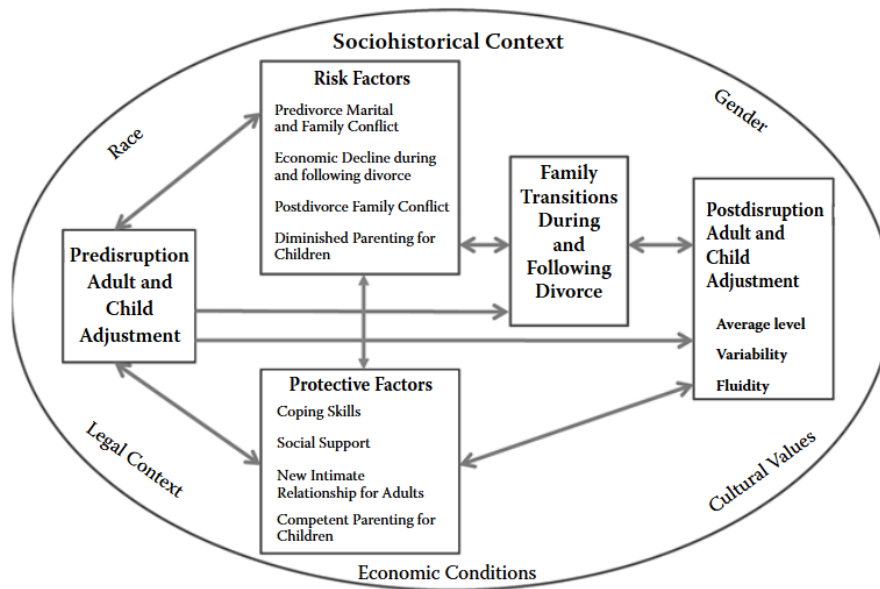
2.7 Summary

This section of the literature review has outlined the historical context of marriage and divorce, provided an overview of current family compositions in the UK, and explored the risk and protective factors associated with parental separation. It has also highlighted the relevance of the topic area for EPP and introduced useful frameworks for understanding and supporting adjustment. As discussed, understanding the outcomes for CYP who have experienced parental separation is complex and requires a nuanced approach that considers societal context, risk and protective factors and an awareness of the cumulative impact over time. Risk factors such as interparental conflict, parental mental health issues, and socioeconomic changes can negatively impact CYP's adjustment to parental separation. However, protective factors like a positive family environment, strong support systems, and maintaining consistency can foster resilience and positive adjustment. By considering these factors, we can more effectively support CYP to adapt and even thrive, despite the challenges associated with parental separation (Amato, 2010; Harvey & Fine, 2011).

2.8 Psychological Growth

The findings presented in the literature examining CYP's experiences and outcomes following parental separation offers a mix of conclusions and diverse viewpoints (Amato,

2003; Wallerstein et al., 2001). It has shown that the same disruptive event can have profound negative consequences for some, while having a perceived minor impact for others (Amato, 2010). Furthermore, some findings have begun to suggest that experiencing parental separation can be a positive turning point (Amato, 2010). Although it is important to understand these negative outcomes in order to mitigate them, it is equally important to understand the strengths that a CYP may develop from these experiences.

The shift toward exploring positive outcomes is still relatively new within psychology, and its integration into educational contexts is in the early stage (White & Waters, 2015). EPs and educational professionals are uniquely positioned to support CYP through complex family transitions and recognise their potential for growth (Noble et al., 2016). Therefore, the following section aims to provide an overview of the psychological growth, namely the concept of Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) offering a lens through which to explore the current literature.

Psychological growth can be described as the overall development and enhancement of an individual's psychological well-being, skills, and resilience over time (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Ryan and Deci (2000) suggest that humans have an innate inclination toward growth, activity, and integration. Psychological growth is often a gradual process, and it can arise from a variety of both positive and negative life experiences, including major life events, adjusting to new roles and mastering challenges (Wethington, 2003).

Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). PTG is defined as the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This concept represents a transformative process that individuals may experience following traumatic events or severe adversities. PTG can be observed in a person's life through five domains: a general increase in appreciation for life, more meaningful interpersonal relationships, an increased sense of personal strength, changed priorities, and a richer existential and spiritual life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Individuals may recognise and embrace new possibilities in their lives, form stronger connections with loved ones and others who have faced similar challenges, develop a sense of inner strength by realising they have overcome significant adversity, experience a deeper appreciation for life and a shift in priorities, and experience changes in their spiritual beliefs or a new sense of spirituality (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

PTG is not considered a static outcome but rather an ongoing process that interacts with the development of life wisdom and the individual's life narrative (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This suggests that the positive changes an individual experiences through PTG can continue to develop and influence a person's life long after the initial traumatic event. It's important to note that PTG is different from resilience. While resilience is the ability to bounce back from adversity, PTG involves a transformation that leads to a new way of understanding oneself, others, and the world. It is important to note that the experience of parental separation is not necessarily a traumatic event in itself, but rather the cumulative effect of ongoing stressors.

3. Part B: Systematic Review

3.1 Overview

The purpose of this literature review was to explore and critically review the literature available in relation to the psychological growth of CYP who have experienced parental separation. It aims to present an alternative perspective to the current narrative on the outcomes of CYP who have experienced parental separation. A systematic approach was adopted to support the trustworthiness, transparency and applicability of the literature review using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidance to scaffold this (Page et al., 2021) (see Appendix A).

3.2 Search Strategy and Terms

A systematic approach to the review was engaged to appraise the literature relating to the psychological growth of CYP who have experienced parental separation. Several databases were accessed based on their relevance to educational psychology, education, and parental separation and divorce. These consisted of PsycInfo® and Social Policy and Practice via OVID, SCOPUS, and citation searching and snowballing via Google Scholar.

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The researcher reviewed titles and abstracts, and articles were excluded if:

- They focussed on exploring the experiences of individuals that had experienced domestic abuse.
- They were published before 2004.

- They focussed on protective factors that might mitigate the effects of parental separation.

- They focussed on fostering resilience at the time of separation.

- They were grey literature or an opinion piece.

As noted, a temporal boundary was applied to include only studies published from 2004 onward. This decision was informed by both theoretical and contextual developments relevant to the topic. Tedeschi and Calhoun's work on PTG gained increased recognition around this time, shaping the conceptualisation of psychological growth following adversity. In addition, UK policy changes, such as the Children Act 2004, although not directly governing divorce or separation, support the welfare framework in which decisions about children in those situations are made. This Act shifted how children's welfare and family dynamics are understood and addressed in both research and practice. Further rationale for the exclusion criteria can be found in Appendix B.

It is important to note that international research was included despite the current research being conducted in the UK. This is because there is more published research relating to psychological growth following parental separation in other countries and excluding this work would have prevented the opportunity to present some interesting findings and perspectives. Moyer et al. (2010) concluded that the standard of quality between dissertations and published work is minimal, therefore they merit inclusion in comprehensive literature reviews. Therefore, unpublished work such as doctoral thesis and dissertations were included, subject to critical appraisal (see Appendix C), to account for publication bias.

Acknowledging the nuances of this topic, some of the included works discuss both positive and negative outcomes for individuals who experienced parental separation. However, only the findings relating to growth will be discussed in depth as part of this systematic style review. This is because the author is adopting the lens of positive psychology and psychological growth, the author discusses this further in Part Three of the current study. For a full overview of each of the included studies, please see Appendix D.

An initial search was carried out in September 2024, and again in December 2024. Equivalent words relating to each of these subject headings were combined using Boolean operators, for example, "OR" was used to widen the search, "AND" was used to combine

search terms and to ensure the results were specific to the review question. A list of all search terms used can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Search terms used for systematic approach to literature review

	Keyword 1 *Population*	**Keyword 2** *Interest*	**Keyword 3** *Context*
OR	Child*	Resilience	Divorce
	Young Person	Growth	Parental Separation
	Youth*	Posttraumatic Growth	Breakdown of Marriage
	Teen*	Psychological Growth	Marriage Dissolution
	Adolescen*	Coping	
	Adult Child* of Divorce	Strength	
	AND		

3.4 Quality Appraisal

The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) was used as an aid to evaluate the quality of the qualitative research included in this review (an example of its use and a table containing checklist responses are provided in Appendix C). The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) was used to critically appraised the quantitative research included in this review (MMAT tables can be found in Appendix C). As this thesis adopts a Big Q qualitative paradigm, these tools were applied flexibly and reflexively to demonstrate the authors skills as a researcher, and to enhance the transparency of the review process.

Overall, the literature reviewed displayed strong thematic relevance and rich qualitative insights into the experiences of individuals following parental separation. A key strength was the use of diverse methodologies, which allowed many studies to present in-depth accounts grounded in relevant psychological frameworks. However, several studies relied on small, homogenous samples, often university students or exclusively female participants, which may reduce the transferability of findings across broader populations and cultural contexts. However, it is important to note that many of the studies, particularly qualitative ones, did not seek generalisability but rather depth and contextual understanding. One study (Matters, 2007) was excluded following the CASP appraisal, as ethical issues were not adequately addressed and key data appeared to be missing from the paper. A full overview of each study can be found in Appendix D.

3.5 Structure

The 12 included studies were subject to a thematic synthesis, whereby four key themes have been identified to organise the literature review (Braun & Clarke, 2013). These key themes were identified through multiple readings of the included papers, and the themes are offered as subheadings to support the readers' navigation through the literature review. The literature review question aims to answer the following:

"What does the literature say about the psychological growth of individuals who have experienced parental separation?"

3.6 Psychological Growth Following Parental Separation

3.6.1 Personal Strength

Research shows that experiences of parental separation can lead to perceived developments in personal strengths (Ängarne-Lindberg et al., 2009; Bahonar et al., 2024; Cartwright & McDowell, 2008; Eldar-Avidan et al., 2009; Hartman et al., 2016; Konstam, 2009; Ramadhan et al., 2024; Sever et al., 2007; Thomas & Woodside, 2011; Welsh, 2018). Sever et al. (2007) explored the long-term positive outcomes of parental divorce among Israeli young adults and found that the majority of participants reported successful coping with their parents' divorce. Interestingly, they identified that female participants reported higher involvement in their parents' divorce and more intense emotional responses. They also reported more positive long-term outcomes in all three domains: empowerment, empathy, and relationship-savvy.

Cartwright and McDowell (2008) explored the narratives of seven women who had experienced parental divorce, their study highlighted the diverse ways in which individuals make sense of parental divorce. Whilst many of the participants described emotional distress, they also reflected on their resilience and ability to cope with adversity. Participants described how they were able to manage complex emotions and navigate challenging family dynamics and the experience of parental divorce had required them to mature emotionally, supporting the gender differences identified by Sever et al. (2007). The authors also identified themes of self-determination and competency as participants also felt that they were able to better cope with stress and uncertainty, and that they had emerged stronger and more capable.

Ängarne-Lindberg et al. (2009) supported the findings of Cartwright and McDowell (2008) as they noted that the themes constructed from the data highlight how, despite the initial challenges, many individuals were able to find positive aspects and personal growth opportunities from their experiences with parental divorce. They also found that the experience of parental divorce often led to greater independence and self-reliance as they were commonly required to become more self-sufficient and responsible as children. Similarly to Cartwright and McDowell (2008), individuals described the development of strong communication skills, again developed due to the experience of navigating family dynamics, as well as mediating between their parents. They also felt that they learnt to express their feelings clearly and negotiate conflicts effectively.

Eldar-Avidan et al. (2009) conceptualises three profiles of adult children of divorce: resilience, survival, and vulnerability. Nine of the 22 participants fell into the resilient category, these individuals interpreted the divorce as a meaningful and empowering transition, valuing its benefits and their parents' contribution to their development. They talked about themes of independence, empowerment and maturity as well as the ability to emotionally manage and cope with future challenges. Eight out of 22 participants were categorised as survivors. These individuals perceived divorce as a complex event requiring significant adjustment, reflecting on both gains and significant losses resulting from the divorce. Finally, five of the 22 participants were categorised within the vulnerability profile. These were the participants who experienced the most negative long-term effects from parental divorce. They were found to struggle with relationships, lack sufficient support systems, and have a more pessimistic outlook on life compared to the other profiles identified in the study. This study highlights the heterogeneity of experiences and outcomes of children who experience parental separation.

A doctoral thesis completed by Welsh (2018) used a cross-sectional, quasi-experimental design with self-report measures to examine the associations among perceptions of pre-divorce parental conflict, perceived gains of parental divorce, PTG, and current relationship quality with parents. Although the study did not find a significant difference in PTG between participants from divorced families and those from married families, the findings indicated that individuals from the divorced families experienced existential gains which included aspects like self-esteem, control over life, and purpose in life. These findings contribute to the concept of PTG, suggesting that developing a stronger sense of self and purpose can help individuals grow positively after experiencing trauma.

Thomas and Woodside (2011) aimed to explore the experiences of resilience following parental divorce for university freshmen, and to understand how the three needs of self-determination theory contributed to their resilience. The study found that participants demonstrated growth in competence through multiple dimensions. For example, some participants reflected that their experiences of parental divorce changed their self-concept as they described themselves as more resilient and capable of overcoming adversity. Additionally, the study found that some of the participants engaged in activities where they could excel, which improved their self-efficacy. Taking on caregiving roles further demonstrated their growing sense of competence and suggested a potential shift in power dynamics within their relationships. As is a common theme within the literature, participants initially struggled with autonomy during the divorce. However, they developed greater independence and ability to alter their environment over time (e.g., being able to choose where to live and who to interact with). Autonomy was evident in the participants ability to choose their perspective on the divorce, develop maturity, and developing coping strategies.

Building on the themes of self-determination and competency, Hartman et al. (2016) conducted a narrative inquiry to explore the process of parental divorce or separation from the perspective of adolescents and young adults, with a focus on how it affects their daily occupations and engagement in meaningful activities. The findings highlighted many aspects of personal growth such as increased independence and self-sufficiency, increased responsibility, and self-compassion. Many of the participants reported that they had taken on new responsibilities such as contributing to household bills, cooking and caring for family members which fostered independence and self-sufficiency. Supporting the findings of Ängarne-Lindberg et al. (2009), participants also reported providing emotional support and mediation which facilitated their parents' separation and supported the family transition.

Bahonar et al. (2024) explored the dimensions of PTG resulting from parental divorce among young Iranian women and identified themes of independence and self-management. Participants described seeking financial independence, taking initiative and adapting to new roles within the household. Furthermore, many of the participants made progress in education and occupation after their parents' divorce, achieving self-fulfilment and academic growth. The authors noted that education appeared to be used as a coping mechanism and a means to improve their social image and gain financial independence. The authors concluded that if young women are mature and mentally prepared, they can cope with their parents' divorce and

grow in the domains of PTG, however it is important to note that in Iranian society, culture, ethnicity, and religion play important roles in growth after divorce.

3.6.2 Relationships

Relationships appeared to be a key theme throughout the literature. Relationships are a core component when considering psychological growth as it highlights positive changes in how individuals connect with others after trauma. Individuals often report meaningful relationships, form new connections, and may let go of harmful ones, fostering personal growth and resilience in their interpersonal lives (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

Sever et al. (2007) aimed to explore the possible positive outcomes of parental divorce among young Israeli adults. One of the key constructed outcomes was defined as "relationship-savvy" (p.22), this showed that participants demonstrated an understanding of the complexity of intimate relationships, with a realistic expectation of the relationship. They also reflected on the importance of commitment to making their own relationships work, using openness and dialogue to resolve conflict. The authors concluded that the experience of parental divorce, when processed positively, can contribute to more mature and realistic approaches to relationships in the next generation. These findings mirror that of Konstam (2009), who found that participants appreciated the necessity for persistence and perseverance in relationships.

The 'resilient' participants categorised by Eldar-Avidan et al. (2009) demonstrated a clearer understanding of what constitutes a healthy relationship. The authors noted that this group often used their parents' failed marriage as a counterexample, this appeared to motivate them to aspire for better relationships in their own lives. The authors suggested that the increased awareness led to a more cautious and mindful approach to forming intimate relationships. Ängarne-Lindberg et al. (2009) also found that individuals who had experienced parental divorce often developed a changed perspective on relationships. They suggested that experiencing parental divorce provided participants with valuable insights into relationships and marriage. They noted that the participants were more likely to be thoughtful and deliberate in their own relationships, with the aim of avoiding the challenges that they observed in their parents' marriage. Furthermore, Ängarne-Lindberg et al. (2009) found that some of the participants had developed a stronger sense of empathy and understanding towards others who had faced similar experiences which led to individuals having a stronger desire to support others.

Developing a closer relationship with siblings and custodial parents also appeared to be a key theme within the literature. Eldar-Avidan et al. (2009) noted that for some of the participants, particularly those in the resilient group, experiencing parental divorce led to stronger and more meaningful relationships with the custodial parent. Siblings were also likely to become a significant source of support and understanding. Thomas and Woodside (2011) also found that many of the participants reported that they had developed stronger bonds with their mothers and siblings. Both Bahonar et al. (2024) and Ramadhan et al. (2024) found that individuals who experienced parental divorce reported a stronger sense of connectedness with family members, including those from their extended family. This supports Thomas and Woodside (2011) who highlighted participants often adapted to redefined family units, which included seeking support from extended family members.

The development of supportive social networks was also evident within the literature. Bahonar et al. (2024) suggested that whilst some participants set boundaries in relationships to avoid being hurt, most developed more compassion towards others and attempted to connect and feel a sense of belonging. Thomas and Woodside (2011) also found that developing connections with friends and community members was important for adjustment and growth. Finally, Ramadhan et al. (2024) observed positive changes in participants' interpersonal relationships, including strengthened friendships and increased confidence in building connections. Participants demonstrated greater initiative in social interactions and showed an enhanced openness to forming relationships with new individuals. However, the findings highlighted the centrality of family in Israeli society, which may not be reflected amongst other cultures.

3.6.3 Finding Meaning

Much of the literature presented incidences of individuals finding significance in life as a result of experiencing parental separation (Bahonar et al., 2024; Cartwright & Mc Dowell, 2008; Konstam, 2009; Ramadhan et al., 2024; Thomas & Woodside, 2011). These themes often involved the development of new perspectives, developing a sense of purpose, values, reevaluating priorities and existential reflection.

Cartwright and McDowell (2008) found that the process of making sense of their parents' separation meant that participants were likely to engage in self-reflection. They noted that participants often re-evaluated their values, beliefs, and goals, which led to a deeper

understanding of themselves. Konstam (2009) supports these findings as he presented two case examples from emerging adults of divorce which demonstrated a renewed philosophical perspective. Konstam (2009) suggested that adversity offers opportunity for the development of self as both individuals actively engaged with "what is" and "what will be". Bahonar et al. (2024) suggested that individuals who experience parental divorce were more likely to find new definitions of what a successful marriage looks like, this helped to develop hope and motivation for their own relationships in the future. Similarly, Thomas and Woodside (2011) found that participants demonstrated personal growth by reframing their parents' divorce and positively redefining the situation. They suggested that this ability to attach new meaning to the crisis and reframe it as an opportunity for growth was identified as a key resilience factor.

Ramadhan et al. (2024) found that participants often developed a greater appreciation in several aspects of life. Participants spoke of valuing their time more, the support of their friends, and other people's opinions. They found that individuals were more likely to look at challenges from different perspectives, adopting a more positive world view. Participants also presented with a newfound purpose, prioritising their own education and career development, often working whilst studying in order to support the family financially.

3.6.4 Spiritual Growth

Many of the studies highlighted that individuals experience changes in their spirituality, faith, or sense of connection to something greater than themselves following the experience of parental separation (Bahonar et al., 2024; Hartman et al., 2016; Milam & Schmidt, 2018; Ramadhan et al., 2024). This theme reflects the deep existential and transformative impact the experience of parental separation can have on one's beliefs and spiritual practices.

Milam and Schmidt (2018) aimed to examine factors contributing to PTG in young adults who experienced parental divorce, specifically looking at the relationship between perceived social support, social support coping, intrinsic religiousness, and positive and negative religious coping with PTG. They found that positive religious coping was found to be a significant predictor of PTG, with many participants reporting that their religious faith, practice, or community provided them with a sense of stability, hope, and strength during their parents' divorce. Furthermore, they found that prayer and believing in God's plan were often highlighted as factors that helped participants grow and heal after their parents' divorce. Some participants described experiencing anger at God or loss of faith as a result of their parents'

divorce, as the experience of parental divorce may have challenged their view of God, leading to negative religious coping initially. However, the authors suggest that growth may occur when individuals work through questioning religious ideas and build a new, deeper understanding that incorporates both the reality of the experience and a more nuanced view of their religion or spirituality. Bahonar et al. (2024) also highlighted spiritual growth as they found that some of the participants relied on God to help manage their parents' divorce. The spiritual strategies included participating in religious ceremonies, thanksgiving, and repentance. The authors suggested that these practices strengthened participants spiritual beliefs.

Building on this literature, Ramadhan et al. (2024) found that all participants experienced changes in their spiritual beliefs after experiencing parental divorce. Participants were more likely to rely on God more in various life challenges, holding more confidence in God's plan for their future. Other indications of spiritual growth highlighted by the authors included feeling calmer after worship, engaging in practicing gratitude for their current situation, more patience in accepting destiny and increased frequency of sunnah worship. It is important to understand the religious context in which this study take place, as the participants in this study were practicing Islam, the same spiritual growth may not be observed across other religions.

The experience of parental separation may also lead to the development of new spiritual identities. Hartman et al. (2016) found that some participants engaged in new occupations that facilitated personal growth and identity development. For example, one participant explored Zen Buddhism, which provided a more peaceful state of mind and a calmer way of managing difficult emotions. Another participant used poetry, song, and visual art to support herself to work through difficult emotions that arose from her parents' separation, allowing her to free herself to enjoy both previous and new occupations.

3.7 Summary

The reviewed literature indicates that while parental separation can be a source of significant emotional distress, it can also initiate the development of psychological growth. Numerous studies report that individuals often emerge from such experiences with many perceived personal strengths, including resilience, independence, emotional maturity, and self-efficacy. These strengths are fostered through navigating complex family dynamics, taking on new responsibilities, and developing effective coping mechanisms. The literature also

highlights the development of interpersonal relationships following parental divorce, where individuals become more relationship-savvy, develop stronger bonds with siblings, parents, and extended families, and exhibit increased empathy and selectivity in social connections. Furthermore, many participants experience a shift in worldview, re-evaluating their priorities and finding new meaning in life through reflection, reframing adversity, and engaging in purposeful occupations. Many studies also describe spiritual growth, with enhanced faith or exploration of new spiritual identities serving as key sources of resilience. Importantly, these outcomes are mediated by cultural, religious, and societal contexts, indicating the need for nuanced understanding in both research and practice.

4. Rationale for the Current Research

Parental separation is not a discrete or homogenous experience, however the voices of those who have lived through it remain underrepresented (Harvey & Fine, 2011), particularly as the existing body of research is largely quantitative in nature. The heterogeneity of experience, as highlighted in the literature, suggests that outcomes vary widely depending on individual circumstances, emotional resources, and contextual factors (Amato, 2000; Demo & Fine, 2010). Therefore, a narrative approach to the empirical study will highlight the complexities of these experiences, offering rich, in-depth insights that can inform the work of EPs and other professionals.

Although some studies touch on the idea of growth in educational domains following parental separation (Bahonar et al., 2024), a paradox remains: children of separated parents are statistically less likely to access tertiary education (Bernardi & Boertien, 2016). Therefore, exploring how individuals who have experienced parental separation reflect on their school years, and how these experiences may have contributed to their development, is important for informing EPP.

Finally, much of the literature exploring psychological growth in the context of parental separation originates from outside the UK. Cultural, religious, and societal differences can shape how separation is experienced and understood (Bahonar et al., 2024; Ramadhan et al., 2024; Sever et al., 2007), highlighting the importance of exploring this topic within the UK context. Doing so would help build a more culturally relevant evidence base for EPs and educational professionals working with CYP who are navigating family transitions in the UK.

This research aims to offer a rich, contextualised exploration of the lived experiences of adult children of parental separation, with particular attention to their psychological and educational development. It is important to acknowledge, however, that this study does not seek to diminish the adversity often associated with parental separation. Rather, through a narrative methodology, it aims to challenge dominant deficit-based accounts by drawing out stories of growth and resilience. In doing so, the study aims to offer meaningful insights for professionals supporting CYP who are navigating similar transitions.

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Part Two: Major Empirical Paper

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Abstract

Aims: The aim of the empirical study is to explore how adults who experienced parental separation in childhood narrate their journey and experiences of education. Using a narrative inquiry approach, the research aimed to provide in-depth accounts of individuals' experiences and contribute to the existing literature on parental separation.

Method: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four adult children of divorce. The transcripts were analysed using Lieblich's holistic-content analysis.

Analysis: The study identified four overarching themes: relationships, harnessing strengths and accomplishment, autonomy and agency, and loss and the reworking of identity. Individual narrative themes were also constructed for each participant. The research adopted a positive psychology and strengths-based perspective, seeking to explore possibilities for growth, resilience, and meaning-making.

Conclusions: The study highlights the complex and diverse ways individuals navigate educational experiences following parental separation. The findings emphasise the importance of supportive relationships, personal strengths, and autonomy in shaping outcomes. The study contributes to educational psychology practice (EPP) by offering an alternative narrative to deficit-based accounts, presenting rich, contextualised explorations of participants' psychological and educational development. Implications for EPP include the value of narrative techniques, promoting relational approaches, and drawing on positive psychology to support resilience and growth in children and young people experiencing parental separation.

Keywords: parental separation, divorce, psychological growth, resilience, education

Introduction

Marriage rates have been gradually decreasing in England and Wales since 1990 (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2024a). Meanwhile, the proportion of families cohabiting has increased from 14.2% in 2011 to 16.2% in 2021 (Office for National Statistics, 2023b). According to the latest release of annual statistics from the UK Government on separated families in Great Britain, it is estimated that for the financial year ending 2023, there are approximately 2.4 million separated families, including 3.8 million children (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2024b).

There is a wealth of literature surrounding children and young people (CYP) who experience parental separation and divorce, much of which presents contrasting opinions and findings (Amato, 2003; Wallerstein et al., 2000). This indicates that CYP who experience parental separation are not a homogenous group, as their experiences and outcomes vary (Amato, 2010). A large proportion of the research indicates that there is an association between children who have experienced parental separation and an increased risk of negative social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural outcomes (D'Onofrio & Emery, 2019; Seijo et al., 2016). Evidence has also suggested that CYP who experience parental separation do not achieve as well academically and are less likely to go on to further education (Bernardi & Boertien, 2016; Corrás et al., 2017; Morris et al., 2016; Schulz, 2022). However, a growing body of evidence suggests that CYP may not only adapt as well as their peers from nuclear families but may also experience psychological growth as a result of their experiences (Amato, 2010; Ängarne-Lindberg et al., 2009; Bahonar et al., 2024; Ramadhan et al., 2024; Thomas & Woodside, 2011).

It is the role of educational psychologists (EP) to explore and understand individual or family narratives, as opposed to generalise between them (Hobbs et al., 2012). The unique role of the EP allows them to take a holistic view of the child's needs, considering the different systems that impact the individual, and to provide an alternative lens in which to view them (MacKay, 2006). Therefore, the current study presents four in-depth narrative accounts from individuals who experienced parental separation and their journey through education.

1.1 Research Aim

There is limited representation of the lived experience of individuals who have experienced parental separation within the literature (Harvey & Fine, 2011; Kay-Flowers,

2019). Although these narratives are nuanced and complex, this study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how individuals who experienced parental separation navigated their educational journey. By doing so, the research aims to contribute to and expand upon the existing body of literature that examines this subjective experience.

1.2 Research Question

Since this research is exploratory in nature, no preconceived assumptions or hypotheses will be tested (Butler et al., 2016). Instead, the study is guided by an open research question, developed from a stance of curiosity. The research question is as follows:

In what ways do adults who experienced parental separation in childhood narrate their journey and experiences of education?

1.3 Research Paradigms

A research paradigm refers to the overarching worldview or system of beliefs that shapes a researcher's approach to their research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1996). It considers the researcher's epistemology, ontology, axiology, and methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The following section provides an explanation of the researcher's epistemology, ontology and axiology.

Relativism, as an ontological position, presents reality as entirely dependent on human interpretation and knowledge (Baghramian & Coliva, 2019). This paradigm moves away from 'true' and 'false' and acknowledges that there are multiple realities (Crotty, 1998). This position appreciates that each participant's account of their experiences of parental separation and journey through education is shaped by their unique circumstances, relationships, and interpretations. Adopting a relativist ontology understands that no individual experience is the same and therefore avoids imposing a singular narrative or universal truth.

Social constructionism, as an epistemology position acknowledges that "knowledge is sustained by social processes" (Burr, 2015, p. 4). It argues that what we understand about the world is co-constructed in our daily interactions with others, not as a separate existence (Robson & McCartan, 2011). Social constructionism allows for the exploration of how individuals make sense of their educational journeys through the lenses of their personal narratives, cultural influences, and societal expectations. Social constructionism acknowledges that reality is not a single, fixed entity but rather multiple and context dependent. Therefore,

the use of a narrative approach, with its focus on the social construction of the story, means that uncovering the 'truth' is no longer the object of analysis, shifting the focus from the 'what' to the 'how'. These epistemological and ontological positions align with the heterogeneity of separation and divorce and thus accepts that the narratives constructed in this research will be derived through the participants lived experience of parental separation and the story of their journey into further education. Together, social constructionism and relativism allow for research grounded in a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between personal experience, social context, and educational journeys.

The axiology of a researcher is defined as their perspective, values and purpose of their research endeavours (Biesta, 2015). Reflecting on her values in the research context, the researcher considered the impact of her beliefs as an insider researcher, and values of a trainee educational psychologist with a lens of positive psychology. The researcher acknowledges the potential influence of her own beliefs, views, and values on data interpretation, this will be discussed further in Part Three of this doctoral thesis.

2. Methodology

2.1 Ethical Considerations

The Cardiff University School of Psychology Ethics Committee granted full ethical approval for this research study in June 2024. The researcher referred to the British Psychological Society (BPS) guidelines on conducting research (Oates et al., 2021) to ensure that the research was conducted ethically. Participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form prior to taking part in the study and received a debrief form afterward (see Appendix E-G). Although participants were not explicitly asked to discuss the event of their parents' separation, there was a potential for upsetting themes to emerge during the interview. Therefore, participants were also signposted to mental health support websites (see Appendix H). Pseudonyms were chosen by the participants, and some identifying personal information was redacted during the transcription phase of the study to protect the anonymity of the participants.

2.2 Participants

Braun and Clarke (2013) state that qualitative research uses small samples of participants to achieve a depth of enquiry. This study focuses on exploring individuals' in-depth

accounts of their educational journey following their parents' separation. It aligns with the size and scope of the current study and is not intended to produce generalisable findings but rather to provide a nuanced understanding of these personal experiences (Riessman, 2008). Therefore, through discussions in supervision, it was decided that four participants would be sought for recruitment.

2.2.1 Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria define the parameters for selecting participants who are eligible to take part in this research (see Table 2). A rationale for these parameters is provided for each inclusion criteria.

Table 2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants with rationale.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Rationale
Adults aged 18 – 50 years.	Individuals younger than 18 and older than 50.	To ensure that participants have experienced enough of a 'journey' through different stages of education. It's likely participants will have more memory of their experiences of education. The age range up to 50 was chosen to reflect the changes in marriage and divorce legislation.
Parents separated whilst the individual was attending primary school.	Individuals whose parents separated before they were 5 years old. Individuals whose parents separated in secondary school.	This was chosen so individuals were likely to retain some memories of the event and be able to reflect on their educational journeys.
Parents identify as being no longer in a relationship. Formal divorce not a requirement.	Parents identify as currently being in a relationship.	To identify individuals whose parents are currently separated and not limit to only those who have formally divorced.
Participants parents may have experienced ongoing conflict before and after separation.	Individuals who experienced domestic violence.	To avoid any further emotional distress.
Individuals who are not seeking any support services related to parental separation.	Individuals who are seeking any support services related to parental separation.	To avoid any further emotional distress.

2.2.2 Recruitment

In qualitative research, samples are chosen with the purpose of gaining insight into the central phenomenon. Purposive sampling is selecting participants who have knowledge and experience on the issue of interest of the researcher (Oppong, 2013). Therefore, the participants in this study were intentionally selected based on specific characteristics, knowledge, or experiences to provide rich, in-depth narrative accounts that provide meaningful insights into the research question, rather than aiming for generalisability. For recruitment, the researcher shared posters in local community areas and local online communities. The poster invited interested individuals who met the criteria to contact the researcher via email. The researcher then communicated with prospective participants over email, sharing further information. If the prospective participant was happy to proceed with the study, the researcher arranged to meet with the participant to read through the information sheet together and sign the consent form (Appendices E-H).

2.3 Data Collection

The researcher conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews in September and October 2024. During the interview, participants were provided with A3 paper and a pen with the option to draw a timeline as a memory aid if required, participants were made aware that this would not be included in the data analysis. One participant decided to do so.

Kvale (2009) suggests that in a narrative interview, the researcher starts the interview with a question about a particular episode, period, theme, or life story. This is different to most other qualitative methods which present a question-and-answer format, as this is not considered to be narrative talk (Riessman, 1993). The interview began with one overarching question that was constructed to be broad, enabling participants to elaborate on their unique experiences, giving them greater control over how the story is told. The researcher then invited the participants to share their narrative based on the following question:

"I am interested in the narratives of individuals whose parents separated whilst they were in primary school, can you tell me the story that has led you to this point in your education?"

Interviews play an important role in narrative research because the story unfolds through the collaborative dialogue between the researcher and the participant (Muylaert et al.,

2014). Riessman (1993) recommends narrative researchers to develop broad and non-leading questions and prompts to encourage storytelling. She notes that the goal in narrative interviewing is to "generate detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements" (Riessman, 2008, p.23). Therefore, the researcher maintained an active listening role throughout the interview (Lieblich, 1998). If participants became stuck during their story telling, they were prompted with statements such as "can you tell me more about that?" and "what was that experience like for you?". At the end of the interview, the researcher asked participants how they were feeling to check on their wellbeing. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed upon completion. The interviews ranged between 47 and 59 minutes, depending on the participants telling of their story.

2.4 Data Analysis

2.4.1 Narrative Analysis (NA)

Although the terms 'narrative' and 'story' have slightly different meanings, they are commonly used interchangeably (Riessman, 2008). Although there are no simple or clear definitions of a narrative, Reissman (2008) describes a story as the raw material, while a narrative is the constructed form in which those stories are shared or interpreted. Reissman (2008) emphasises that narratives involve meaning making, where the storyteller gives structure to the story, deciding what is emphasised, how events are framed, and what significance is attached to them. Despite these differences, the use of these terms is not intended to suggest that people create fictional accounts of their lives. Instead, it aims to highlight three interrelated aspects: the social construction of accounts, the functions served by stories or narratives, and the narrative-like qualities often found in personal life accounts (Nasheeda et al., 2019). Simply, narrative inquiry (a method of studying people's stories) allows us to understand how individuals experience changes in their lives and how these changes influence their everyday experiences.

There is no single procedure that can be claimed as "best" for analysing narratives (Beal, 2013; Riessman, 1993; Riessman, 2008). Therefore, how stories are told and retold within NA may include a set of strategies that can be employed depending on how the researcher chooses to represent the gathered data (Nasheeda et al., 2019). In accordance with literature on divorce and parental separation, which indicates that these experiences are complex and diverse, a holistic approach to data analysis was chosen. This approach involved keeping each participant's data intact, rather than identifying commonalities or themes across

the raw data. Other approaches to analysing the data were considered (see Appendix I and Part Three for further discussion).

2.4.2 Holistic-Content Analysis (Lieblich, 1998)

The current study draws on Leiblich's model to NA. A key element of their perspective on NA is that it requires dialogical listening to three voices, "the voice of the narrator, as represented by the tape or the text; the theoretical framework, which provides the concepts and tools for interpretation; and a reflexive monitoring of the act of reading and interpretation" (Lieblich, 1998, p. 10).

To aid narrative researchers, Lieblich offers a model for the classification and organisation of types of NA. They suggest that when looking at the different possibilities for reading, analysing and interpreting narrative materials, two dimensions occur; *'holistic versus categorical'* and *'content versus form'* (Figure 4). In holistic approaches, an individual's story is viewed as a whole, looking at the 'what, why and who' and the parts within it are interpreted in relation to other parts of the story (Lieblich, 1998). With categorical approaches, themes or categories are identified across the data from multiple research participants (Lieblich, 1998). On the content/form dimension of the framework, researchers may focus on what happened in the story, why it occurred and the role of other people (content) or on how the story is sequenced and structured (form) (Lieblich, 1998). The model offers four possible approaches to the analysis of narrative data: *holistic-content; holistic-form; categorical-content* and *categorical-form.* Lieblich (1998) suggests that NA need not fit neatly into one of the four dimensions of their schema. Additionally, Holloway and Freshwater (2009) and Reissman (2008) encourage the creative use of analytic techniques in order to understand narratives from different perspectives.

Figure 4

The Four Models of Reading a Narrative (Lieblich, 1998)

HOLISTIC-CONTENT	HOLISTIC-FORM
CATEGORICAL-CONTENT	CATEGORICAL-FORM

For the current study, a *holistic-content* analysis was chosen to explore how adults who experienced parental separation in childhood narrate their journey and experiences of education. Holistic content approaches maintain the whole story of the individual and focus on the content that is presented, therefore meaningful individual parts of the narrative are understood within context, in order to maintain contact with the overall feel of the narrative. Major themes, patterns, and trajectories are examined, and the whole narrative is used in terms of pulling out themes, foci, and associations.

2.4.3 Constructing the Narrative

The transcription of interviews is an integral part of narrative research. The decision of what to include, and how to structure and present the transcribed text, "have serious implications for how a reader will understand the narrative" (Riessman, 1993, p. 12). Aligned with the social constructionist epistemological position of the researcher, the interactional context between participant and researcher was presented within the transcripts. This allowed the transcript to reveal how "personal narrative is social at many levels" (Reissman, 2008, p.31). The initial review of the transcripts was approached with an open and empathetic mindset, allowing the narratives to unfold and speak for themselves.

The author thoroughly engaged with the data by repeatedly reviewing the interview transcripts and audio recordings, allowing for the identification of subtle nuances and deeper meanings in the interactions with the participants. To aid researchers in reading content in a holistic manner, Lieblich (1998) offers a guide to scaffold analysis (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 *The Process of Reading Content in a Holistic Manner (Lieblich, 1998)*

1. Read the material several times until a pattern emerges. This will likely be a central issue of the entire story. Allow the text to "speak" to you. The significance of certain aspects of the story will depend on the entire story and its context.
2. Put initial and global impressions of the case into writing. Note exceptions, unusual features, contradictions, or unfinished descriptions. Any disturbances in the participant or issues of disharmony in the story can be quite instructive. Take note of what the participant said about harmony/disharmony, congruence/incongruence, etc.
3. Choose specific themes or topics to focus on as the story develops. Pay attention to how much focus is given to each theme, any repetition, and the level of detail shared. Also, consider cultural influences and how they affect the way the story is told and understood.
4. Change the font colour of text. Read separately and repeatedly for each.
5. Keep track of results by following each theme throughout the story; note any thoughts or conclusions. Be aware of the initial and final appearance of a theme in the text, transitions between themes, contexts for each theme. Be mindful of contradictions to theme, in terms of content, mood, or evaluation by the teller (p. 62-63).

Lieblich (1998) notes that this approach is non-linear, allowing researchers to revisit and move between stages as necessary. The global impressions and individual narrative themes will be presented in the findings section. In keeping with the collaborative and reflexive nature of NA, participants were invited to read their reconstructed narrative to ensure that the authors interpretation reflected their intended meaning and remained authentic to their lived experience. An example of this is discussed further in Part Three.

Finally, the author read across the narratives looking for meaningful overlap in terms of thematic content of the narrative. Reissman (2008) denotes that the researcher "does not find narratives but instead participates in their creation" (p.21), she adds "prior theory serves as a resource for interpretation of spoken and written narratives" (p. 73). Aligning with the researcher's positionality, careful attention was given to themes of psychological growth, education, and the presence of risk and protective factors associated with parental separation. This is discussed further in section four.

3. Findings

The following section presents the study's findings at the individual narrative level. This includes the global impressions (Table 3), reconstructed narratives and the constructed themes for each participant.

Global Impressions

Table 3: The global impressions of each narrative

Participant	Main Theme of Narrative
Morgan	Emotions of self and others
Marsha	Drive and perseverance
Arthur	Autonomy and appreciation for life
Lily	Independence and following own path

3.1 Reconstructed Narratives and Themes

To enhance readability and support narrative flow, direct quotations from participants interview transcripts are italicised throughout the findings and discussion section.

3.1.1 Morgan

Morgan's story is marked by her often holding back her own emotions whilst she supports the emotions of others. Morgan's parents separated when she was in Year 5, she recalls feeling *really confused why everyone was acting strange*. She remembers her best friend, Jamie, being present whilst her Mum told her that her parents were separating. This news was deeply upsetting as Morgan remembers that she *didn't react very well,* and she *tried to run away*. Morgan then experienced another significant life event within the same week as her grandad had died. Feeling extremely overwhelmed, Morgan began experiencing disrupted sleep due to *a lot of nightmares.*

Morgan's story then turns to her secondary education, where she attended a different school to Jamie. Jamie is a key source of support throughout her story, Morgan laughed that they were *very much in each other's pockets*, and others likely thought they were a *bit codependent*. Amidst the *chaos* in her family, Morgan found solace with her best friend Jamie's family, whom she described as a *second family* and a *safe space*.

Secondary school was initially very difficult for Morgan as she was bullied by her peers. This coincided with a complex relationship between her and her dad, often tense due to his frequently changing partners, she recalled *"he'd cancel on us quite a lot because he'd have this new girlfriend and like, we ended up not seeing him that often"*. Morgan's mum and sister were also having difficulty adjusting to the change, meaning Morgan *had to grow up quite a lot faster* as she needed to be emotionally strong to *mediate between the two of them.*

In Year 9, Morgan began to *distance* herself from her family to spend more time with her friends. Exploring her identity, she began to change her appearance and truant from school with her male friends. Morgan reflected that due to the inconsistent relationship with her dad, followed by the death of her grandad, she was *"craving that male attention"*. With these peers, Morgan became *heavily involved in the church community*, feeling that it gave her *something to believe in* and *hope for*. She reflects that it was *something to ground her,* and it was a *safe* and *consistent* base amongst the disruption of her family.

Sadly, Morgan's grandmother died shortly after she received her GCSE results. Sixth Form was particularly challenging for Morgan, as she struggled with mental health issues attributed to

grief and the change in the learning environment. Her mum, friends and the teachers in the English department were key sources of support during this time.

Despite a difficult romantic relationship during her university years, Morgan found university *a lot more manageable*. Morgan experienced the loss of her stepmum during her third year, which was especially tough, as she explained that this was the only one of her dad's partners that she'd *let herself get attached to*. This also led to a further loss of her stepmum's family.

Post-university, Morgan pursued a PGCE and doctoral training, developing a more detached relationship with her dad as she focused on her own growth and education, reflecting that *"letting go really helped"*. Throughout her story, Morgan demonstrates resilience and emotional stability, finding support through friends and her partner, and reflecting on her experiences with a sense of personal growth and understanding.

Narrative Themes

Social Support and Friendships. A major theme in Morgan's story is the role of social support and friendships. Morgan introduced her best friend, Jamie, right at the beginning of her story and she remains a main character throughout. Morgan experienced bullying from her peers at the beginning of secondary school which ceased once Jamie transitioned to the same school later in the year, she reflected "*like as soon as Jamie came, I was fine again then*". The relief Morgan experienced having her best friend in school is felt throughout her narrative, with Morgan describing her as her *comfort blanket*.

Whilst navigating the challenges of her current family dynamics, alongside experiencing another significant bereavement at Sixth Form, Morgan was struggling with her mental health. During this time, Jamie and two other close friends were an important source of support as they alerted the adults in her life to her out of character behaviour which led to the support she needed, she reflects *"my friends really did look out for me and in that period"*.

When it was time to decide which university to attend, Morgan's social values were more of a focus than the academic course, she expressed *"I wanted somewhere where there was good night life, and I'd make friends"*. Throughout adolescence and into adulthood, it appears Morgan felt more comfortable showing affection and her own emotions to her friends,

more so than her family, she reflected *"as I got older, probably year nine, that turning point, I got way more social, way more like affectionate… With my friends, not with my family."*

The comfort and support Morgan experiences from her friends contrasts with that seen within her family unit, where she often had to suppress her own emotions in order to support others. In particular, her friendship with Jamie provided a space in which she could be emotionally vulnerable and receive care and support, rather than provide it.

Morgan The Mediator. Another theme throughout Morgan's story is the challenge of navigating family dynamics. Morgan was often required to manage the inconsistent presence of her dad, and his changing relationships, alongside mediating between her immediate family members. Morgan's younger sister *took it a lot harder* than she did, and Morgan felt that she blamed her mum for the separation as *she didn't understand the situation*. This led Morgan to often withhold her own emotional responses in order to hold space and manage the emotions of others. Demonstrating a high level of emotional maturity, she remembered she was often *"trying to be strong emotionally and also trying to mediate between the two of them"*. In doing so, Morgan continually manages the tumultuous relationships within her family, often at the expense of acknowledging or processing her own feelings. This a pattern that emerges repeatedly in her narrative.

Though Morgan's mum tried to keep the post-separation conflict from the children, Morgan's dad would often blame Morgan's mum for the separation and use *guilt tactics* so the children would spend time with him. Furthermore, Morgan experienced multiple family transitions as her dad often had new relationships in which he introduced Morgan and her sister. She remembers *"when he was with a long-term partner and she had two kids and they'd moved into our room, so we didn't- we couldn't stay there anymore and we we're seeing him, but for like a couple of hours rather than a more extended visit, so I think I just like was kind of trying to escape that. Because I was finding that frustrating."* This appeared to take its toll on Morgan as she began to distance herself from her family, spending more time with her peers.

Later on in her story, Morgan's dad remarried and for the first time in her narrative, Morgan refers to her dad's new partner as her step-mum. Sadly, Morgan's step-mum died during her third year of university, Morgan remembers spending a lot of time visiting the hospital and supporting her stepsiblings with childcare. Again, Morgan mentions having to manage her own emotions in order to support others, she expressed *"But like when there's so*

much raw emotion around you, you sort of have to- you find yourself being a bit stone like because you can't then, you feel like you can't- there's no space for yours, because you've gotta, like, make sure that they're all OK".

The progression of Morgan's relationship with her dad is a fluid theme throughout her story. At the beginning of the story, Morgan talks about feelings of frustration, however towards the end of her narrative, particularly after the loss of her stepmum, she has set relational boundaries and come to a point of resolution holding a new perspective, she expressed *"I don't feel that need to please him anymore because I don't necessarily seek his approval because I don't necessarily think what he does is the right thing".*

Adolescence and Identity. In Year 9, the point of which Morgan began distancing herself from her family to spend time with her peers, Morgan remembers getting involved with the *music crowd*. Morgan changed her appearance and behaviour and her narrative changes from being a self-proclaimed *nerd*, to someone who is disengaged in education, she reflected, *"I was like, giving a bit of attitude. I was like, not really trying. I was bunking off lessons to go and listen to music in the woods like, I just, completely changed."*

The change was stark enough that Morgan's favourite teacher from Year 7, her Head of Year at school, had raised concerns to her mum. Morgan laughed, *"I just felt more like they didn't understand, like the classic teenage, they don't understand me, they don't know what it's like (laughs), even though they obviously do".* Reflecting back as an adult, Morgan tries to make sense of this *"I think it was, the fact that, I didn't have many male influences in my life anymore because my granddad had died and my- and my dad was gone and not really interacting with me. And I think this group was mixed and it was the first time I'd had guy friends, and I think I was like craving that".*

Around the same time, Morgan also became heavily involved in the church community. Morgan reflects on feeling *lost* at this time, and the church became a *safe* and *consistent base*, which gave her *something to believe in* and *something to hope for*. Morgan then reflected on how her perspective changed at university, and although the church no longer aligned with her morals and ethics, she still valued the religion for a while longer, she said *"I didn't necessarily go away from the religion, but I went away from attending church. Yeah. I think it was later on that I sort of lost touch with the religion."*

3.1.2 Marsha

Marsha's story is one of resilience and determination. Her parents separated when she was around seven, which she sees in part as linked to her dad's schizophrenia. Marsha reflects that her parents' separation was not a one-off event, rather an ongoing process. She felt as though the relationship was *done and dusted* when she moved with her mum and siblings to a new town when she was in Year 5. Marsha has distinct memories of not wanting to move, but also not understanding why they were moving, which was a challenging adjustment. Marsha and her twin brother found primary school difficult as they had joined late in the year. However, despite these difficulties, Marsha excelled academically, earning a scholarship to a private school where she thrived. Her dad's illness and sometimes erratic behaviour were recurring challenges, but her mum and nan encouraged maintaining some contact with him.

Marsha decided to pursue a career in medicine after a career quiz suggested it, despite initially considering IT. Learning gave Marsha something to focus on as she *found it enjoyable* and *liked being smart*. Marsha describes an internal drive to succeed in her education *"my mum was single for the majority of my upbringing. I was like, I wanna get a good job, I wanna earn good money and maybe it's coming from that like working class background"*. Marsha strived for independence and took a gap year before university to work and save money. The transition to university was tough for Marsha, especially the shift to self-guided learning and living with students from other disciplines who didn't have the same academic pressures as she did. Marsha persevered through university, reflecting *"I want to be able to prove to myself that I don't need the support, I can do things to myself"*. Marsha also worked a part-time job during her degree, she says *"looking back I was like, how did I do it? I think you just deal with it"*. Marsha attributes her strength to perceiving her mum as a *strong person* and to having a sibling to talk to who *grew up with the same upbringing*.

During her foundation years as a doctor, Marsha's dad died suddenly, which was a difficult period for her. This was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Pragmatically, Marsha reflects that *working constantly*, she *didn't have the time to dwell on it*. Throughout her journey, Marsha reflects on her drive and resilience, attributing much of it to her determination to succeed. Her narrative highlights her ability to overcome significant personal and academic challenges, maintaining a strong sense of purpose and drive to make a positive impact through her career in medicine.

Narrative Themes

Relationship with Dad and His Death. The effect of her dad's mental health and eventual death are key points at the beginning and end of Marsha's story. Her dad's health needs pre-separation appears to be a catalyst in her parents' eventual separation *"It was more my dad got diagnosed with schizophrenia. So I think my mum tried to make it work. It wasn't quite his fault, but it, you know, my mum had four kids to raise, and he was acutely psychotic"*. Though Marsha feels as though she *wasn't affected by it* as a child, she holds clear memories of her dad behaving erratically, she said *"even growing up, he was never stable."* going on to share the memory *"my dad would turn up to school with big teddy bears from me or my brother with a big full beard, obviously because he was acutely psychotic and tried to take us away from school."*.

Following the separation, Marsha relocated with her mum and siblings to another town. Though there was some distance between her and her dad, her mum continued to encourage Marsha and her brother to maintain contact with him. Throughout her story, Marsha engages in reflective processing, making sense of her early experiences and her memories of her dad's inconsistent presence in her life, she reflected *"like our interactions and obviously knowing now, oh, it's all because of his schizophrenia, it wasn't because he didn't like love, us or anything like that. It's just that was his way of showing it. But as a kid we just like, he was a bit of shit Dad, to be honest, but. Yeah, but I'm glad that we saw him"*.

Towards the end of Marsha's story, she revisited an earlier point in the timeline, her second year of training as a foundation doctor, feeling it was important for the context of the interview to share that her dad had suddenly passed away. Marsha demonstrated a sense-making process regarding the circumstances of her dad's death, adopting a reflective and understanding perspective. She recalled *"I mean, he was unwell with his schizophrenia, and he was very like- he hated hospitals, hated doctors. And I understand why (nervous laugh), because he probably had a really bad experience with them. And so he just wouldn't go to the doctors. So when we saw him like, he looked poorly, like when we saw him the day before him, And my nan was like, "no, we're gonna go to the GP tomorrow". and he's like "no, I'm not going" so you know, it's horrible to so say, but it was kind of like, his own fault, in a weird way."*

The COVID-19 pandemic coincided with Marsha's dad's death, Marsha displays resilience in coping with emotionally challenging experiences as *"that's when everyone went into lockdown and COVID happened, straight out with COVID shit, and so I was working 70-hour weeks and just got on with it... like I still mourned him don't get me wrong. Working constantly, I just didn't have time to dwell on it, really"*. Marsha concluded her story by reflecting on how she manages the emotional toll of working in medicine, she laughed *"to work in medicine, you have to have a bit of a dark humour, but I think I think it's a way of processing trauma to be honest"*.

Academic and Career Progression from Working-Class Roots. Despite a difficult transition to a new primary school in Year 5, Marsha excelled academically, earning a scholarship to an all-girls private school for her secondary education. She expressed *"I was a bit of a nerd growing up and I loved reading. And I loved school. I loved homework. I loved all that nonsense. So (private school) was a great environment for me and I will, I would say, unapologetically that I love school"*.

Marsha presents with high self-efficacy, having pursued a career in medicine after a career quiz at school suggested this path, she laughed, *"yes, I could be a doctor. And so, then I was like, yeah, OK, I'll give it a go. And if I don't do it, then I can fall back on IT and here I am"*. Marsha demonstrated drive and motivation towards this goal throughout her story, this was largely shaped by her working-class background, she reflected *"it's not like I have anyone in my family who went to uni, no one else in my family went to uni, and only I went to uni"*.

Before attending university, Marsha made the decision to defer for a year in order to work and save money to support herself throughout her studies. Marsha next began university, and despite finding education and learning relatively easy until this point, Martha remembered finding the first year of university challenging due to the self-directed model of teaching. Marsha demonstrated responsibility and a drive to persevere, she remembered thinking *"I can't quit uni because I've taken out a student loan and I'm going to be in so much debt if I leave, was one of them"*. Marsha persevered and developed the skills required to continue with her degree, she said *"by the end of the five-year course you learn, you learn to do that"*.

The theme of class resurfaces as Marsha continues to reflect on her first year of university, she shared *"I did find it quite difficult to, what's the word, to connect with people on the medical course, because I think it's just the nature of, like, the kind of that kind of course*

that it is, you know, it it does bring people from… not saying wealthier backgrounds, but it does, it does sort of entice that sort of cohort like the private school people". Marsha demonstrates a level of self-awareness as she tries to make sense of this, she reflected *"I'm not sure if like that was my that was the flaw on my part judging people going into the course or whether I was like, nah I just don't wanna be friends with medics. I don't really know".*

Marsha demonstrates resilience and personal strength as she talks about the demands of medical training, hospital placements and working additional jobs on the weekend, she expressed *"you just deal with it and then reflect on it later, like, hey, that was really busy and really traumatic, like, oh, my God".* Appreciating the adversity she had experienced until this point showing in her education, Marsha showed a strong understanding of self, saying *"it's just who I am"*, she also described the influence of her mum *"I've always seen as her as, like quite as a strong person. So maybe like that's a bit of I've seen her be, like, really strong when she's faced these problems. I've learned it from her maybe".*

Support From Friends and Family. During the initial stages of her dad's illness, prior to relocating, Marsha's memories are vague. However, she remembers spending most of her time out of the house, either playing football on the field with her brothers, or at her friend's houses. Marsha makes sense of this retrospectively, *"Looking back, in hindsight, actually having to think about it, I was like ohh, is that cause the grownups in my life were trying to distract me, trying to keep us occupied".*

Marsha's twin brother is an important figure in her life, she describes their close relationship, *"I think because we're the same age as well because we've had similar experiences in a way, like moving school, like apart from our, you know, secondary school experiences, like we have pretty much grown up with the with the same upbringing. So yeah, I think that makes us closer and maybe going through what we went through with Dad maybe like that you know".* During difficult times, Marsha reflects that it helped having her brother to speak to, as she often felt unable to speak to her mum or older brothers.

During secondary school, Marsha found friendship with peers from a similar background, she reflected *"we've all come from sort of similar places. But I I don't- I don't know how that came to be. I just felt like we're all sat together on one day and then we became friends, and maybe we stayed friends because of that, you know, connection, I guess".* This

indicates that Marsha felt a sense of belonging amongst these peers, particularly as she had often felt she could not relate as much to her peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

3.1.3 Lily

Lily's story begins with her parents' separation when she was around eight years old, though she reflects *"it was very turbulent for probably the whole of my life"*. Lily reflects on the stigma of parental separation and how challenging it was attending a Catholic primary school despite not being Catholic, often feeling that her family were *frowned upon*. Both parents struggled with their mental health, and Lily recalls a significantly difficult memory of coming home to find her mum had attempted to die by suicide when Lily was eight and a half years old. Lily sighed *"I don't even think the school knew"* but remembers that one teacher at school was more supportive than the others as she *probably felt* Lily was *"...a little bit broken, but we don't know why"*.

The early years of secondary school were challenging for Lily due to *chronic* bullying and health issues. However, Lily found sanctuary in sports, particularly swimming and gymnastics, which became a significant part of her life. Lily's dad was a key source of support throughout her education, describing him as *"the voice of reason"*. Lily acknowledges her *natural talents* at swimming, and her involvement in sports eventually led to a career in sports coaching. She reflects *"it gave me… the belief that I could achieve something"*.

Due to tension at home between Lily and her stepdad, she moved in with her dad for a short period of time before moving to shared housing. Here she grew up quickly as she would care for herself as well as her dad, who as an alcoholic, she would *"worry about him and the states that he got in"*. Having the skills to live independently, Lily remembers *"I wasn't scared either about bills, living in a house, fending for myself, it felt natural"*. Lily deferred university to gain life experience and work abroad, remembering *"I know I'm not ready for this. I wanna go and explore the world and see what it's got to offer me"*.

Later in life, Lily decided to pursue a psychology degree through the Open University. This decision was driven by a desire for personal growth and a career change, she reflects *"your career should mean something to you… and I was ready for a change"*. Throughout her story, Lily's relationships with family members evolved. She continues to have a close bond with her sister, who acted as her *protector*, and a complex relationship with her mum and stepdad. Lily

continues to work through these difficult experiences, feelings and relationships as an adult, recognising that her *support network has helped*. Lily's experiences have given her the perspective of the importance of reducing stigma and understanding children's home lives and providing early support.

Narrative Themes

Stigma, Parental Separation and Mental Health. Lily's story of her primary education was shaped by themes of perceived stigma towards her family due to her parents' separation and later mental health difficulties. Prior to attending her primary school, Lily recalled her dad *fighting* to get her older sister into the school as the family weren't Catholic. Lily appeared to feel neglected by school as her family didn't fit that of the traditional view of family dynamics, she felt as though teachers were aware that she was struggling but never explored it further than that. Lily attributes her poorer than expected test scores to this experience.

Both of Lily's parents experienced difficulties with their mental health, which had led to both parents at different times attempting to die by suicide. The stigma attached to this left these wounds unresolved between family members. Lily tries to make sense of these experiences as an adult, *"in terms of the stigma about it, it was never really brought up about why and what had happened. It's only now being spoken about"*. While the family may not have objectively faced stigma, they experienced a perceived sense of it, shaped by societal attitudes and pressures of the time. Lily wondered whether her parents wanted to keep things *normal* or *"maybe my parents just wanted to hide it because they felt fragile about the situation and didn't want Tom, Dick and Harry knowing everything about our family"*. Retrospectively, Lily acknowledged *"I think this is 90s, early 90s and I think if you look back on it on a lot of things, life could have been a bit better for a lot of people, but at least we're learning now"*.

Solace in Sports. Success in sports served as a key protective factor throughout Lily's adolescence and into adulthood. She expressed that engaging in sports wasn't an *uphill battle* like her education was. Lily's *natural talent* was recognised by the adults around her, which motivated her to pursue a career in this direction, she reflected *"they trusted me and invested in me and saw that I was eager"*. Alongside sports being a personal strength of Lily, it also served as a safe space, offering her refuge from her challenges at home, and in school, she shared *"swimming, I'm a water baby. Like that is my calm safe zone"*. Lily began volunteering

at the leisure centre, delivering fun sports sessions for children. She remarked that this led to a nearly 20-year career in sports coaching, interestingly, Lily quipped that her success in this area was *potluck*.

Independence. Themes of independence and autonomy start developing when Lily described her experiences of secondary school. Amongst her poor health and experiencing bullying, Lily's dad as her *voice of reason* told her *"You get put into this school with people, when you finish school, you can go and choose who you want to be friends with"* which *"kind of just… kept me going"*. A change is evident when Lily returned to school in Year 12, she said *"we kind of all come back as, like, mini adults, like, OK, this is the next steps of life, I suppose we gotta grow up a little bit"*. However, Lily then describes a period of going *off the rails*, this appears to stem from Lily feeling like a stranger in her own home as she had a tumultuous relationship with her stepdad, she described, *"it kind of just felt… I was the lodger in the house of her new family, and I was just there and not very much welcomed"*. Once Lily was able to drive and got her own car, she was *gone*.

After moving out from her mum and stepdads' home, Lily spent some time living with her dad. Although often a key source of support and encouragement, Lily's dad struggled with alcoholism which meant he was not home as much of the time as Lily's mum was. Lily doesn't describe this as a wholly negative experience, but reflecting pragmatically, Lily cared for herself as well as her dad, she said, *"Not in a I don't care kind of way, he trusted me. Like he did bring me up very streetwise"*.

Lily applied for university but deferred a year to be able to *explore the world*, she laughed that this gap year ultimately turned into 13 years. Lily's experiences of living independently provided her the confidence and skills to manage living independently with friends in shared housing and spend time working abroad. Lily reflected that during conversations with her mum, she can struggle to understand why Lily and her sister made the decision to leave home early, Lily stated, *"we just wanted to go. We wanted to live. We wanted to be adults"*.

3.1.4 Arthur

Arthur's early years were marked by his mum's cancer diagnosis and treatment, which Arthur wondered may have led to his parents' separation when he was five years old. Following the

separation, Arthur, his mum, and younger sister moved to a new town, meaning there was a two- and half-hour drive between his parents. Arthur remembers having *fairly immediate negative behaviour in school that year,* which he reflects was due to *wanting attention* and adjusting to being *transplanted into a completely new environment, not knowing anyone.* Following this initial adjustment period, Arthur soon excelled academically. Arthur's mum remarried when he was around nine years old.

Arthur's dad passed away suddenly during Year 6, deeply impacting Arthur despite their limited contact. This experience drove Arthur's determination to succeed and honour his dad's memory, he reflected *"aspiring to do things and pushing myself in certain areas to try and make sure that if he were still around that he would, you know, have thought well of what I was doing".* Arthur thrived academically in secondary school, supported by a nurturing family, including his stepdad who played a crucial role. The family later relocated abroad due to his stepdad's job, which Arthur remembers *"I was quite put out"* about it. Arthur's mum explained that the move was necessary for her marriage and for the future of the family. This transition ultimately had a positive impact on the trajectory of Arthur's education and career development.

When his family returned to the UK, Arthur embraced independence and stayed in the new country for university, pursuing a career in architecture. He emphasises new relationships, reflecting *"I was really heavily involved in the social activities and the faculty and had kind of made that my proxy family setting, I guess, home".* Arthur continued to exercise autonomy in his choices, choosing to complete a master's degree in Europe, leading to another significant relocation. Reflecting on his past experiences he says *"Yeah, I've done this before… I built it up in my mind. It was gonna be fucking awful. I was gonna hate it. I really enjoyed it. I should probably just give it a go"* and although this experience didn't go as he'd hoped, Arthur built a *tight click* with the other students. Arthur's professional journey has been marked by continuous learning and meaningful contributions to their field, he reflects a commitment to making a difference noting he is *"hopefully meaningfully contributing to something rather than chasing a paycheck".*

Although the COVID-19 pandemic brought additional challenges which influenced Arthur's living arrangements and work dynamics, he maintained a positive outlook on life and an appreciation for the nature around him. Throughout his story, Arthur emphasises the validation

he felt from achieving academically and the importance of family support, personal resilience, and the structured environment of education in shaping their growth and achievements.

Narrative Themes

New Environments and the Distance Between. Themes of transition, relocation and travel are heavily present throughout Arthur's story. His story begins with his parents' separation, which soon led to a relocation with his mum and sister, over two hours away from his dad. Arthur explained, *"we'd only really… go and see my dad and stay with him for maybe a week, maybe a fortnight at a time if it was during the summer holidays, but that it would be four or five times a year that we'd actually go and spend time with him and the rest of the time we <u>might</u> have a conversation on the phone"*. Arthur referred to this as his *other life,* and despite a short, unsettled period at school, Arthur soon settled into his new home.

Sadly, at the end of Arthur's primary school journey, his dad died fairly suddenly. Arthur acknowledged the effect of distance between both parents at this time, he expressed *"another part of the messy story of a child of divorce and you know you see someone four or five times a year, and then you get shaken awake and taken in the car to find out that they're- you're not gonna go and see them anymore"*. Reflecting as an adult, Arthur was able to take another perspective in that *"The flip side being, of course it affected our daily life much less than it would have. If we'd been in that- even if my parents had divorced and we'd still been living in the same post code, town, school, catchment area- because then he would have been a daily or maybe not daily, but a more common part of our lives through that early development period and his loss would have been that much more acute"*.

Arthur was required to adjust to another change to the family dynamic when his mum remarried when he was *about nine*. He recalls that his stepdad was away a lot of the time travelling abroad for his job, and this eventually took a toll on his parents' marriage. Therefore, after his GCSE's, the family relocated abroad. Arthur remembers not wanting to relocate again and leave his friends and life behind. However, Arthur's mum supported him to understand *"why this was a, maybe even beyond positive, a necessary move for us as a family and for them as a couple"*.

Arthur's family returned to the UK after two years, however Arthur stayed to go on to attend university. He acknowledged how the *support* and *generosity* of his mum enabled him

to do so, he affirmed *"I have roots down and I'm feeling like I'm part of a community that I can connect with rather than being thrown back into being disconnected and not knowing people"*. Due to Arthur's repeated experiences of change, his sense of confidence in taking risks and managing change grows throughout his story. This shows as Arthur begins to talk about continuing his education and choosing a master's course, he mused *"Kind of learning that certain risks are less severe in their consequences and likely to be- to have good outcomes. Or at least be able to be spun positively and enjoyed even if you don't, end up going through with it completely"*. Arthur took the *risk* and moved to Europe to begin his masters. However, the distance between family ultimately led to Arthur completing his master's thesis project in the UK to be nearer to family.

Autonomy. Autonomy is a theme which develops throughout Arthur's story. Up until his college education, Arthur was not involved in much of the decision making around the family life and he felt as though he *"didn't have any certainty about when or where we were going to be anywhere"* prior to the family's relocation abroad, indicating that he had been experiencing a high external locus of control. However, a shift in the narrative is observed when Arthur makes the decision to not return to the UK and to complete his university education abroad. This indicates that Arthur had begun to feel a sense of agency and autonomy. Interestingly, Arthur initially refers to this as a *selfish* decision and he felt as though he needed a *justifiable reason* to stay. Arthur recognised this shift as he reflected *"I think it was just all those past experiences of being moved somewhere without any agency"*.

Arthur shows a development in his internal locus of control when it comes to deciding when to return to the UK, he explained *"it was just the joy to come back to the UK at that point having, having had that agency to say no, I want to experience this bit in (city) and make my mind up about what I do afterwards and got to that point and thought yeah, OK well, I'm ready to come home"*. This continues to develop through to the end of Arthur's story where he focusses on his career development. Arthur displayed high self-efficacy and a strong understanding of self when it came to making decisions for his future, he expressed *"I wanted my career to go in a certain way and I didn't see there being much space for that in (city), so it wasn't for lack of jobs necessarily or lack of opportunities, but maybe not the opportunities that interested me or excited my passions"*.

Learning and Development. Early on in Arthur's story, he reflects on his experiences of school, he shared *"I must admit I've had a fairly easy academic ride. I have always enjoyed*

school. I've always found it to be, quite easy, though education generally". Arthur felt a sense of self-affirmation and competence in learning, he *"enjoyed being successful in learning and feeling again, some level of self-assertion… through that and being able to measure success quantitatively"*. He reflected that rather than continuing to respond to his parents' separation in *brattish* ways, he was able to feel confident amongst his peers in a more *socially acceptable way*.

Arthur reflected how the death of his dad also motivated him to continue in his educational endeavours; *"aspiring to do things and pushing myself in certain areas to try and make sure that if he were still around that he would, you know, have thought well of what I was doing"*. Throughout secondary school and university, Arthur *flourished* as he felt comfortable in the environment, socially and with the learning.

Arthur has had a successful career in Architecture. However, he reflected that he would like to continue his education and complete a PhD, as he would like to continue experiencing a sense of *self-assurance*. Reflecting on his career, he was able to take a new perspective and find meaning in the work he was currently doing *"where I am, the work we're doing, we're getting to go out and make some fairly significant change as it stands"*. Finally, Arthur displayed a commitment to upskilling himself, and continuing his professional development, he said *"I don't see that there will be an end point in my upskilling in that arena, because it's a constantly evolving field and we're constantly learning"*. Arthur finishes his story in reflecting on his motivation and purpose within his current role, *"this is actually meaningful and doing things with other people rather than necessarily just back into the academic environment"*.

4. Cross-Narrative Comparison and Discussion

After analysing each participant's narrative and identifying themes individually, commonalities across the narratives were explored (Beal, 2013; Lieblich, 1998; Riessman, 2008). Following guidance from Reissman (2008) and Beal (2013) patterns were explored across the narratives, highlighting common threads and variations in how participants made sense of their experiences. In keeping with the interpretive nature of narrative research, the comparison and discussion are integrated throughout each theme, rather than presented as separate sections (Reissman, 2008).

Participants narratives will be considered in light of the current literature (as discussed in Part One) and through theoretical frameworks such as Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and Posttraumatic Growth Theory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). These frameworks are introduced at this stage to support interpretation and were not imposed on the data from the outset. They were drawn on inductively to enrich the understanding and meaning constructed from the narratives. Four prominent themes across the narratives were constructed: *Relationships, harnessing strengths and accomplishment, autonomy and agency, and loss and the reworking of identity.*

4.1 Relationships. Reflective of the literature, relationships were constructed as a central theme across participants' narratives (Demo & Fine, 2010; Harvey & Fine, 2011). They often served as important sources of emotional support, stability, and transformation during and after parental separation. However, the nature of these relationships varied implicitly according to the individual's personal, social, and familial context.

For both Lily and Marsha, sibling bonds served as a protective factor. These relationships were rooted in a shared childhood context and mutual understanding of family challenges. Lily described her older sister as a *protector* and *role model*. Marsha, on the other hand, emphasised the sense of solidarity she shared with her brother as they navigated the impact of their dad's mental health struggles; *"Because we're the same age... maybe going through what we went through with Dad... that makes us closer."* Their narratives reflect findings from the literature which highlight how shared adversity can foster closeness and resilience among siblings (Abbey & Dallos, 2004; Ängarne-Lindberg et al., 2009; Eldar-Avidan et al., 2009; Jacobs & Sillars, 2012; Thomas & Woodside, 2011). These sibling bonds also reflect SDT's emphasis on relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000), meeting the psychological need for connection, safety, and emotional understanding during times of disruption.

For Morgan, the sibling dynamic was notably different. Her younger sister struggled to manage emotionally with the complexity of their family situation, leaving Morgan feeling a sense of responsibility to support her. As a result, her relationship with her best friend was incredibly important as she was a constant source of support. Morgan's wider peer group also played a protective role during a challenging period in Sixth Form, recognising changes in Morgan's behaviour they ensured she received the support she needed. As evident in the literature (Ramadhan et al., 2024; Thomas & Woodside, 2011), Morgan's reliance on peers rather than family when navigating emotional difficulty reflects a relational reorientation, in

which individuals prioritise emotionally supportive relationships. Her narrative illustrates how, in the absence of familial emotional reciprocity, friendships can become an important source of emotional validation and support (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

In addition to peers and siblings, previous research highlighted that adults outside of the family system were also key protective factors for CYP navigating parental separation (Bahonar et al., 2024; Brownlee, 2007; Ramadhan et al., 2024; Thomas & Woodside, 2011). This was echoed in the participants narratives, where non-parental adults such as teachers, coaches and friend's families played significant roles in the participants stories. For example, Lily identified her food technology teacher and sports coach as key figures in helping her feel seen and supported during adolescence. Both Marsha and Morgan described spending extended time at their friends' houses. And finally, Arthur recalled the influence of university faculty staff, who he described as his *"proxy family",* in helping him build a new social identity and community, especially as he adjusted to life outside his home country. These relationships highlight how relatedness, as defined in SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000), can be met through supportive figures beyond the family system who can foster a sense of belonging and stability.

4.2 Harnessing Strengths and Accomplishment. Across the narratives, participants described experiences of investing in activities that not only aligned with their personal interests and strengths but also provided a sense of purpose and accomplishment. Previous research suggests that self-fulfilment and academic growth are indicators of PTG in adult children of parental separation (Bahonar et al., 2024; Hartman et al., 2016; Ramadhan et al., 2024). These experiences appeared to not only foster a growing sense of competence but also contribute to the development of confidence and self-identity.

For Lily, achievements in sport, and her long career in sports coaching, became a key aspect of her identity, particularly during periods of navigating challenging family dynamics, health difficulties and social exclusion. She spoke of swimming and gymnastics not just as hobbies, but as a refuge. Lily later returned to formal education in adulthood, pursuing a degree in psychology to redefine her professional path. This decision indicates a shift in priorities and a desire to find personal meaning, value and purpose in her work. Lily's narrative is supportive of the literature (Cartwright & Mc Dowell, 2008; Konstam, 2009), and it reflects themes of new possibilities within PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004): *"Your career should mean something to you… and I was ready for a change."*

Arthur's narrative highlights how academic achievement served as both a protective factor during adversity and a pathway to psychological growth. His natural strength in education provided an early sense of competence, aligning with SDT's notion of feeling effective and capable (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This foundation became particularly significant during the adjustment to his parents' separation and the impact of the later loss of his dad, offering a consistent source of confidence and self-worth. As he progressed to university, Arthur began to experience a deeper sense of autonomy, gaining control over his choices and actively investing in his future. Over time, his engagement with learning evolved from a coping strategy into a meaningful pursuit, resulting in a successful career in architecture. This transition reflects the new possibilities domain of PTG, as Arthur channels his early strengths into a fulfilling career (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

What links these narratives together is not simply that participants achieved something, but that their accomplishments were driven by personal history and context. Reflective of the literature, these achievements were often in response to early adversity, acting initially as protective factors and evolving into sources of personal meaning and direction (Konstam, 2009). Through the lens of SDT, engaging in these activities reflect the satisfaction of core psychological needs, particularly competence and autonomy. Over time, these successes became more than achievements; they are indicative of PTG, especially in the domain of new possibilities, as participants described their trajectories not just as recovery, but as transformation. Whether through sport, academic attainment, or career shifts in adulthood, each participant narrated their success as part of a larger story of resilience, identity development, and psychological growth.

4.3 Autonomy and Agency. A common thread throughout the narratives is the search for autonomy and agency, the ability to make self-determined choices following family disruption and early responsibility. This commonality reflects that within the literature (Bahonar et al., 2024; Sever et al., 2007; Welsh, 2018), where autonomy was not immediate or straightforward, but rather something developed over time. Through the exercising of personal choice in different domains of life, participants began to reconstruct their lives and identity with a sense of purpose, empowerment and self-direction.

Arthur's narrative strongly illustrates the shift from external to internal agency. His early years were shaped by family transitions and relocations, often without his input. However, when he started university, Arthur began to assert his independence, choosing to remain abroad

while his family returned to the UK. Although he initially felt guilt around this decision, it was an important act of regaining control. He later reflected, *"I think it was just all those past experiences of being moved somewhere without any agency."* This development of independence is also reflected within the literature (Ängarne-Lindberg et al., 2009; Bahonar et al., 2024; Hartman et al., 2016)**,** and it indicates the development of autonomy, as outlined in SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000), particularly as his choices were informed by personal values rather than external expectations. Importantly, this growing autonomy was not only central to his wellbeing and motivation, but also reflects PTG, particularly in the domains of new possibilities and personal strength (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

For Lily, autonomy began developing early as a response to instability in her home environment and social difficulties at school. As reflected in the literature, taking on a caring role for her dad as an adolescent led to Lily navigating responsibility and independence well before adulthood (Sever et al., 2007). As a young adult, she actively sought distance from her family and moved into shared housing. Reflecting on this, she stated, *"I wasn't scared either about bills, living in a house, fending for myself, it felt natural."* Lily's eventual return to education is another example of her continuing to follow her values and goals. These decisions, taken on her own terms, reflect the autonomy need described in SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Furthermore, Lily's story illustrates PTG within the personal strength domain, as independence began as a means of coping, and developed into self-confidence as she started to live by her own volition. In this way, autonomy functioned as both a protective factor and a mechanism for transformation.

Marsha's narrative is grounded in her working-class background, and it illustrates autonomy through strong intrinsic motivation. She made the deliberate choice to take a gap year before university to earn and save money, emphasising financial independence and self-sufficiency. As is consistent with the literature (Eldar-Avidan et al., 2009; Hartman et al., 2016), her narrative is punctuated by statements such as *"I want to be able to prove to myself that I don't need the support"* and *"you just deal with it"*. Marsha's narrative highlights a strong alignment with SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000), particularly the needs for autonomy and competence. While her story doesn't have the same relational or geographical shifts seen in other narratives, her agency is evident in her pragmatism. Her narrative reflects the PTG domain of personal strength, as early challenges develop into strong self-efficacy (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Morgan's development of autonomy presents differently to the other participants as it is situated as more emotionally driven. She often undertook a caregiving role, managing the emotional needs of others, sometimes at the expense of her own. This is similar to the themes of managing emotions and empathy that are well documented within the literature (Ängarne-Lindberg et al., 2009; Cartwright & Mc Dowell, 2008; Eldar-Avidan et al., 2009; Sever et al., 2007). Over time, Morgan began to assert both emotional and physical boundaries, particularly in relation to her dad. Her continued engagement in further education is presented not just as an educational achievement, but as evidence of her shifting priorities and increasing self-focus. While her autonomy is more relational than others', it demonstrates a shift in identity, from caretaker to autonomous adult. This transition aligns with SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000), where autonomy involves acting in accordance with personal values, and with PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), particularly in the domain of personal strength.

Across the narratives, autonomy became a way for participants to reclaim control, construct identity, and move forward with purpose, though expressed in distinct ways. For some, it developed through acts of boundary-setting or physical independence; for others, it was driven by internal motivation and self-reliance. Drawing on SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000), these narratives reflect the psychological need for autonomy as participants made choices aligned with personal values, often in contrast to earlier life experiences characterised by instability or constraint. These choices were not only protective but also transformative, aligning with PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), particularly in the domains of personal strength and new possibilities.

4.4 Loss and the Reworking of Identity. Across all four narratives, experiences of loss, whether through death or emotional absence, were identified as key turning points that influenced how each individual understood themselves and how they navigated their lives. As recognised within the literature, participants made sense of their losses in different ways, often shaping their relationships, values, and goals moving forward (Konstam, 2009).

For Morgan, loss was repeated and layered. In the same week she learned of her parents' separation, her grandfather passed away. Her dad's inconsistent presence complicated their relationship and led Morgan to seek connection through her peers and the church. Later, while at university, the death of her stepmum marked another turning point as she grieved both the relationship and the subsequent loss of connection with her stepmum's family. Her narrative shows how cumulative loss shaped identity, prompting emotional boundaries and a redefinition

of connection. Morgan reflected how her values came to align with the church, supporting what PTG theory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) describes as greater appreciation for life and spiritual development. Though often disrupted by loss, Morgan's story reflects a redefining of relatedness in SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000), as she prioritised emotionally safe, and values aligned relationships.

Marsha's story is shaped by her complex relationship with her dad, who lived with schizophrenia. As a child, she struggled to understand his behaviour but later reframed it through the lens of mental illness: *"It wasn't because he didn't love us… it's just that was his way of showing it."* When he died during her demanding foundation year of medical training, Marsha had little space to grieve, relying on humour and pragmatism: *"You just get on with it."* Her ability to compartmentalise became central to her identity as a medical professional, allowing her to grieve and manage professional demands. Reflecting SDT's (Deci & Ryan, 2000) emphasis on competence and autonomy, Marsha's coping was driven by her values and personal strength. Her story also aligns with PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), particularly in the domains of spiritual development and personal strength, as she demonstrates a deeper level of awareness of the challenges inevitable in life.

Lily also faced significant challenges during her childhood, as both of her parents struggled significantly with their mental health. These events, though not always openly acknowledged within the family, are experiences that Lily expressed she is still working to make sense of as an adult. Lily recalled the unspoken nature of these experiences and the perceived stigma surrounding her family, especially within the context of a religious school: *"It was never really brought up about why and what had happened… It's only now being spoken about."* Lily's decision to return to education and pursue a career in psychology reflects a search for meaning and coherence, as aligned with the literature (Cartwright & Mc Dowell, 2008; Welsh, 2018) and PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), particularly in the domains of new possibilities and greater appreciation for life.

For Arthur, the death of his dad was complicated, as although their contact had been infrequent following his parents' separation, the loss was deeply felt. He expressed a desire to make his dad proud posthumously: *"Pushing myself in certain areas to make sure that if he were still around, he would have thought well of what I was doing."* His narrative illustrates how bereavement can shape future aspirations and instil purpose, aligning with PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) in the domain of new possibilities.

4.5 Divorce Variation and Fluidity Model (DVFM) (Demo & Fine, 2010)

The individual narratives, and cross-narrative themes can be understood in light of the Divorce Variation and Fluidity Model (DVFM) (Demo & Fine, 2010). They support the idea that parental separation is not a singular event, but an evolving process shaping identity, and how individuals relate to family, relationships, and the future. The current study offers several considerations to the DVFM. First, as much of the literature informing this model examines the legal transition of divorce, this study suggests that CYP whose parents were not formally married but separated would also benefit from being understood within this framework. Particularly as this would reflect modern family structures. Second, participants' narratives highlight that fluidity extends beyond relational changes to include cumulative grief and ongoing identity reconstruction. For example, all participants recounted additional significant adversities in their narratives (e.g., bereavements), which were further complicated as a result of parental separation. Many described these as forms of complex grief, including the loss of stepfamilies, which rendered these events more difficult to navigate. Furthermore, supportive relationships outside the nuclear family (e.g., mentors and school staff) were a key protective factor supporting adjustment, calling for a broader relational lens. Third, this study suggests that autonomy can be considered as an important protective factor, not simply an outcome of resilience but a developmental mechanism through which individuals construct meaningful goals. Finally, educational settings can function as important spaces for CYP navigating family transitions, emphasising the role of these settings in post-separation adaptation.

4.6 Spirituality

The narratives can be considered in light of their sociohistorical context (e.g., cultural values), as individuals experiences can be explored in response to their social differences (Burnham, 2018). A unique finding of this study is that the participants' narratives offer another perspective of the spirituality domain of PTG. Tedeschi et al. (2018) argue that "spirituality always unfolds within a religious context" (p.122), however, in the current study, spirituality was more closely aligned with meaning-making and a deeper level of awareness, rather than religious belief or faith. This difference may reflect the cultural context of the participants, suggesting the need for a broader, more culturally flexible understanding of spirituality in PTG research.

4.7 Linking Between Theoretical Frameworks

Lumb et al. (2017) argues the importance of incorporating motivation into models of PTG. The authors found that dispositional autonomous motivation[1], which is supported by the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, predicts the likelihood of experiencing PTG through adaptive cognitive appraisal and coping. The current study suggests that individuals thrive when their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled. While not explicitly measured, the themes identified in the current study present a narrative-based development of autonomous motivation. As such, this study contributes a qualitative extension to SDT, illustrating how psychological growth and resilience following parental separation may be supported through environments and relationships that nurture autonomy, competence and connection.

Figure 6

A Contextual Framework Linking SDT and PTG Following Negative Life Events

It is important to note that experiencing a negative life event (e.g., parental separation), is not, in itself, a prerequisite for PTG, and that not all individuals will experience growth as a result. Therefore, understanding the factors that may facilitate PTG and recognising the impact of individual differences is essential. PTG should be understood as an outcome of the individual's efforts to process and work through the adversity, rather than a direct consequence of the event itself (Calhoun et al., 2010). Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that in

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[1] Within SDT "autonomous motivation (i.e., choiceful responding) refers to a tendency to initiate behaviour for the inherent pleasure and interest that one finds in a given activity (intrinsic motivation), because it is an integral part of a per son's self-identity (integrated regulation), or because the behaviour is consistent with one's values (identified regulation)" (Lumb et al., 2017, p.314).

keeping with the qualitative approach to the current study, this research does not aim to present a single objective 'truth', rather seeks to add depth to the evolving story of how individuals narrate their lived experience.

5. Constraints and Considerations of the Research

While this study offers a rich insight into the educational experiences of four adult children of parental separation, several boundaries must be acknowledged. The small sample size was a deliberate methodological choice in line with a Big Q qualitative research, prioritising depth and transferability over generalisability (Braun and Clarke, 2021). As inherent to narrative research, the approach to, and findings of the study are shaped by the interpretive lens of the researcher, whose subjectivity is both a strength and an integral part of meaning-making. Additionally, localised recruitment strategies may have unintentionally excluded individuals not connected to the selected communities.

6. Implications for EPs

The findings highlight key implications for EPs working with CYP who have experienced parental separation (explored further in Part Three).

Firstly, is the importance of supportive relationships, highlighting the need for emotionally safe, connection-rich school and community environments. EPs can help adults who work with CYP to respond with empathy and curiosity. Particularly as the emotional complexity, and fluid nature of parental separation requires psychologically informed responses to ambiguous or complex grief. By conceptualising parental separation through a lens of loss rather than solely as a family breakdown, EPs can reframe and reconstruct children's emotional responses as grief-related, even in the absence of bereavement. This may be particularly helpful in supervision contexts, such as with Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSA's), where reframing the experience can reduce stigma, promote empathy, and validate children's emotions.

Another important implication for EPs is the role of achievement and engagement in identity development, reinforcing the value of strengths-based approaches within EPP. EPs can help schools nurture autonomy and competence by recognising diverse interests, strengths and creating opportunities for success. The emphasis on autonomy also highlights the need for giving CYP a voice, particularly during times of transition. EPs can promote the use of narrative

tools, such as the tree of life (Ncube, 2006), to support CYP to feel connected to their values, morals, relationships and life experiences.

Finally, psychological theories such as PTG and SDT offer valuable frameworks for informing EPP. In particular, the link between SDT and PTG can provide a helpful conceptual lens in consultation when exploring how CYP may be experiencing disrupted autonomy, relatedness, or competence following their parents' separation. By collaboratively identifying where psychological needs are unmet, EPs can support school staff to respond proactively, using curiosity to understand behaviour and emotional responses, and co-develop targeted strategies that address autonomy, relatedness, and competence. This process can help CYP move toward more adaptive, task-oriented coping, promoting resilience and the potential for PTG. In summary, EPs can apply these theories in consultation, assessment, and intervention to support wellbeing, motivation, resilience, psychological growth, and a shift toward strength-based school cultures.

7. Conclusion

This research explored the educational stories of adults who experienced parental separation in childhood, focusing on how they narrate their journey and experiences of education. The research question was: *In what way do adults who experienced parental separation in childhood narrate their journey and experiences of education?* Participants shared their stories through semi-structured interviews, informed by a narrative inquiry approach.

Lieblich's holistic-content analysis was used to analyse individual narratives and identify unique themes, followed by comparison of narrative accounts to construct common threads across the stories. Four overarching themes were developed: relationships, harnessing strengths and accomplishment, autonomy and agency, and loss and the reworking of identity.

The voices of the participants highlight the need to approach CYP's experiences with sensitivity and nuance. This research also presents an alternative narrative to that found in dominant literature, offering insight into resilience, growth, and identity development. Implications for EPs highlight the value of embracing narrative techniques to support CYP's identity development, promoting relational approaches, and drawing on positive and strengths-based psychology to promote resilience and psychological growth.

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Part Three: Major Research Reflective Account

Word Count: 6177

Introduction

This critical appraisal will take a narrative, chronological approach to exploring the research process outlined in Part Two. Throughout the critical appraisal, a reflective and reflexive approach will be adopted to explore the decisions that have shaped the research process, while also highlighting the researcher's personal and professional growth throughout the journey. This account will be written in the first person in order to locate the researcher within the narrative, and the researchers' own perceptions, values and beliefs will be explored throughout the critical appraisal process.

The critical appraisal will be presented in two main parts:

- Critical account of the development of the research practitioner.
- Contribution to knowledge and dissemination.

2. Part A: Critical Account of the Development of the Research Practitioner

2.1 Inception of the Research

Deciding on a research topic for my thesis was both exciting and challenging, given my broad, and ever-growing areas of interest within my practice. Initially overwhelmed by the range of possibilities, as each area felt rich with potential, I sought supervision to refine my focus. Through this process, I came to understand what our tutors had described as the 'grief of letting go', being the challenge and acceptance of narrowing down ideas and leaving some behind. To support the decision-making process, I reflected on my values, questioning what was most important to me and what I could remain committed to throughout the project. I realised that aligning my topic with my values would not only give my research purpose but also sustain my motivation throughout the process. This helped me navigate the tension between possibility and purpose, guiding me toward a direction that felt both meaningful and sustainable. Therefore, to introduce my thesis, it is important that I provide some context regarding my background and perspective.

Professionally, I am a trainee educational psychologist (TEP). Within the field of educational psychology, an element of the role which I value highly is being able to reframe negative perspectives, challenge assumptions, and seek to highlight strengths and possibilities

where possible (Cameron, 2006; Gameson & Rhydderch, 2008). Personally, I am an adult child of divorced parents, as well as a stepparent within a stepfamily. My parents separated when I was 10 years old, and my brother was 6 years old. My parents' separation led to chain of events which included new relationships with stepparents and stepsiblings, transitions and changes to the routine and structure that I had always known. Now, as an adult who is a part of a stepfamily, I find that I am still making sense and finding meaning of my experiences, reconstructing my own story as an adult child of divorce.

I reflected deeply on what resonated with me and identified a subject of both professional and personal interest that felt meaningful and aligned with my commitment to holistic approaches and positive psychology. Whilst on placement, concerns relating to parental separation was becoming more apparent within my case work, as well as an anecdotal topic of discussion during supervision sessions for Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSA). Therefore, this decision was not just about academic relevance, it was about exploring something that could contribute to my growth as a practitioner and person. This, and my reflection on sense-making and stories is what led to my decision to do narrative research, I will discuss this further later on in this section. The literature on parental separation and divorce is extensive, which initially made me feel that there was little room for new research in this area. However, Braun and Clarke (2024) provided valuable guidance, encouraging qualitative researchers to initiate conversations around familiar topics. Inspired by this, I set out to explore and contribute to the conversation on resilience and psychological growth following parental separation.

2.2 Ethical Considerations

Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, considering whether I was practicing ethically was central to my approach at every stage of the research. Although I was not explicitly requesting that participants tell the story of how their parents separated, given my own experiences, I anticipated that participants may want to provide context to their story, and that the ongoing process of parental separation throughout somebody's life, might lead to difficult topics being discussed. Leaning into the ethos of narrative research, I was able to take on an active listening approach to facilitating the interview (Lieblich, 1998). I used my skills as a practitioner to help create a safe space for participants to feel able to share their stories and respond empathically when emotive parts of the story were being told. This conversational approach to conducting interview felt different to the styles of interviews I have engaged in

previously. However, this approach felt more genuine, and I feel that this experience strengthened my confidence in being more open within an interview.

As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2013), to protect anonymity of participants, pseudonyms chosen by the participants were used. I decided to use pseudonyms rather than participant numbers or codes as I felt numbers or codes would dehumanise the participants and take away the personal nature of their narratives. As with the nature of storytelling, there were some key characters who played significant parts in the participants stories. In these instances, I asked participants to choose a pseudonym for these characters too. I also redacted some personal information such as the names of schools, universities and place names to ensure that participants could not be identified.

Member checking, also referred to as respondent or participant validation, involves seeking feedback from participants or stakeholders on the data or its interpretations (Motulsky, 2021). Aligning with my ethical values and epistemological position of social constructionism, I decided to share the reconstructed narratives with the participants to ensure that they authentically represented participants' experiences. I emailed participants to provide them with the opportunity review their narratives and provide feedback, if they wanted to. This process allowed participants to confirm the accuracy of their stories, clarify any misrepresentations, whilst ensuring their voices remained central to the research. All four participants responded, with three of the participants sharing that they were satisfied with their reconstructed narrative, and one participant offering feedback. Morgan suggested that my initial description of her dad's relationships did not fully capture the extent and impact of the numerous relationships she had to navigate. Through co-constructing this narrative with her, I was able to convey the complexity and significance of these experiences with greater depth and nuance. Furthermore, Morgan's feedback further highlighted the fluid nature of parental separation and the significance of how CYP may experience multiple family transitions over time, often leading to the rupture of some relationships and the sometimes-repeated development of new ones.

2.3 Researcher Positionality

Insider research refers to studies conducted by researchers who are members of the group or community being studied (Mercer, 2007). In my previous experiences of research, I have never considered myself as an 'insider researcher', and at the outset of this project, I had not fully anticipated how much this would influence my work. There were times, particularly

when initially reading the general literature around parental separation, where I thought perhaps this project was slightly 'too close to home'. During these times, I kept a personal reflective diary and sought supervision from my peers and fellow TEPs.

I soon came to recognise the strengths of being an insider researcher. Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) outlined three main advantages of conducting insider research: (a) possessing a deeper understanding of the culture being studied; (b) maintaining the natural flow of social interactions without disruption; and (c) having an established intimacy which promotes both the telling and the judging of truth (pp. 8-9). I felt that I established a safe, non-judgemental space to tell these stories as my participants were aware of my positionality. Discussions in supervision helped me to question my own thinking, Finlay (2002) notes that no researcher can completely see or understand all of their own biases and assumptions. However, by practicing critical reflexivity, they can slowly uncover and challenge these hidden influences over time.

I also came to recognise that my values and approach to the research aligned with that of a 'Big Q' researcher (Kidder & Fine, 1987). This identity became a source of support and guidance in informing my decision making. Braun and Clarke (2013) describe Big Q research as being "underpinned by qualitative methodologies, which shape the entire research process, from the questions asked to how data are generated, analysed, and interpreted." (p.4). Throughout, I felt the 'ghost of positivism' as I sometimes worried that my position as insider researcher would mean my interpretation of the literature and data would be 'biased'. However, I found reassurance in accepting that it was not *if* I had influenced the data but recognising *how*. For example, during interviews, I noticed I was particularly curious when participants spoke about their experiences with stepparents. I often asked follow-up questions or gave more space to these discussions. In hindsight, this may have influenced the data encouraging them to elaborate more fully or frame their narratives in relation to family dynamics beyond their biological parents. Rather than viewing this as a limitation, I acknowledge it as part of the co-constructed nature of qualitative interviews.

Developing my understanding of the 'ologies' has been a journey throughout the doctoral training, and something I had to spend time getting my head around in order to 'make it make sense'. Guba (1994) described a research paradigm as a set of beliefs that describes how a researcher views the world. For this study, I carefully considered a range of research paradigms, using key texts and supervision to guide my thought process. After careful thought, I chose a relativist ontology with a social constructionist epistemology. The relativist ontology

perspective describes reality as subjective and shaped by individual experiences (Crotty, 1998). I felt a sense of safety within this perspective, as I was aiming to present multiple truths and realities, rather than one single 'truth'. This was also key in helping me decide which approach to methodology I should take.

The social constructionist epistemological perspective emphasises that social phenomena and knowledge are created through social interactions and shared understandings (Burr, 2015). This perspective aligned with my approach to the research, as I viewed knowledge as co-constructed rather than discovered, and focused on how participants constructed meaning in their stories, shaped by cultural and social contexts.

I had explored other research paradigms for this research such as a critical realism ontological stance and a social constructivist epistemological position. Critical realism suggests that while our knowledge of the world is socially constructed, there exists an objective reality with underlying structures that can be partially uncovered through research (Bhaskar, 2013). Social constructivism focuses on individual cognitive processes of meaning-making rather than the socially shared, discursive nature of knowledge construction emphasised in the study (Phillips, 1995). While critical realism and social constructivism could have been feasible frameworks for this research, they were not chosen because they conflict with the current research's focus on subjectivity and co-constructed meaning.

Axiology is the branch of philosophy that deals with the study of values, Guba (1994) states that axiology addresses questions of the role of values in research, focusing on what is considered important in the research process, from the choice of topics to the methods of inquiry and interpretation. As I had decided to approach this research through a positive and strengths-based psychological lens, I felt it was important to be transparent with the reader about this perspective. Following discussions with my supervisor, I decided that explicitly stating my axiological position would provide important context, helping the reader to understand the values and assumptions that shaped the design and interpretation of this study.

2.4 Writing the Literature Review

The literature surrounding parental separation and divorce is vast, this led me to feel overwhelmed as I didn't know where to start. I turned to the two major educational psychology journals and was surprised to see that there was no mention of parental separation or divorce. Given that statistically this is an experience that many children will experience, I found this

perplexing. In the early stages of engaging with the broader literature on parental separation, I noticed that the experience of separation and divorce was largely negatively framed. This evoked a negative response within myself, recognising that it jarred with the perspective of positive psychology that I was positioned in and perhaps did not resonate with how I viewed myself as an adult child of divorce. To explore different perspectives, I turned to texts by Kay-Flowers (2019) and Harvey and Fine (2011) as they presented research which prioritised the voice of the individual experience.

To further my understanding of conducting a literature review, I sought assistance from the Cardiff University Psychology librarian and received guidance from my research supervisor. This, and supporting reading by Siddaway et al. (2019) enhanced my knowledge and understanding of different databases and the distinctions between various types of literature reviews. Two of the most common literature reviews are narrative and systematic. A narrative literature review is a comprehensive, qualitative summary of existing research on a particular topic. It synthesises findings across studies, typically without a systematic approach to search or selection, and provides a conceptual overview of the research field (Booth et al., 2021). A systematic literature review involves a structured and methodical approach to identifying, evaluating, and synthesising all relevant studies focused on a particular question. It aims for reproducibility and transparency in the review process (Liberati et al., 2009). I decided to take elements of both a narrative and systematic approach to the literature review as I wanted to provide a comprehensive introduction to the research that told the complex story and history of parental separation and divorce.

Deciding on a question to ask of the literature took much time and consideration. To help inform my thinking, I reflected on my axiological position, and what initially led me to decide on this research topic. Considering reading by Masten (2014), my beliefs aligned with the idea that personal development and resilience are important for individuals navigating challenging life events. Given my values around supporting resilience, and understanding an individual's capacity for growth, I felt it was important to explore how individuals can experience positive psychological development despite the adversities associated with parental separation. My focus on psychological growth reflects back to my values in practice of challenging negative beliefs and offering alternative perspectives. Additionally, my belief in the importance of understanding diverse family dynamics has shaped my interest in how different individuals respond to this experience and the factors that support their growth.

Fundamentally, I was curious to explore an alternative perspective on divorce and separation to the one that currently dominates the literature.

For the systematic approach to the literature review, I decided to use Scopus, PsycINFO and Social Policy and Practice to search for literature to address the research question. I used Scopus for its broad multidisciplinary coverage, capturing research across psychology, education, and social sciences relevant to parental separation. PsycINFO was chosen for its focus on psychological literature, providing targeted studies on mental health and well-being. Social Policy and Practice was included to access research on social work and policy, offering important context on family and societal factors. The search terms used for the selected databases yielded a number of results. Many, however, were not relevant to the topic. I noticed that the bulk of the literature in the results focused on protective factors at the time of the separation, interventions offered to children which fostered resilience and coping mechanisms. However, the focus of my literature review was to explore the development of psychological growth post-separation. It is important that the reader understands that the outcomes for children and young people post parental separation is not simple and requires a nuanced understanding. Some of the studies selected for the review do not only emphasise psychological growth, but also acknowledging times which were challenging for individuals. Based on my positionality as a Big Q researcher, and recognising my axiological position, I decided to view this literature with the lens of positive psychology. This also aligned with my ontological position as I was not looking to present a single truth, and somebody else may interpret and present this literature in a different way.

2.5 Research Aims and Question

Within narrative research, research questions are typically open-ended and developed from a stance of curiosity because the method seeks to explore the complex, subjective, and socially constructed nature of participants' stories. Open research questions allow participants the flexibility to narrate their experiences in ways that are meaningful to them, rather than being confined to predefined categories or assumptions. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) note that a curious stance helps researchers avoid imposing their own assumptions, allowing participants' voices to guide the direction of the study. Whilst this aligned with my aim of the research, I found myself worrying about the 'what ifs'; What if education was not important? What if the participants have not 'adjusted' well post-separation? What if there are no 'signs' of

psychological growth? To overcome these concerns, I engaged in ongoing conversations with my research supervisor, this supported me to feel at ease with the uncertainty.

2.6 Methodology

Committing to my methodology felt like one of the larger hurdles of this project. To give me an overview of some potential routes, I used Braun and Clarke (2013) to help guide my thinking. My aim was to present the stories of individuals who had experienced parental separation, this led me to consider both Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) or Narrative Analysis (NA).

Table 4: Comparison of NA and IPA at a glance

	Narrative Analysis	**Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**
Methodological Considerations	NA prioritises the entire narrative.	IPA focuses on identifying key themes across cases.
Research Question and Focus	NA focuses on how people construct and perform their stories.	IPA focuses on subjective experience and personal meaning.
Role of the Researcher	NA acknowledges the researcher's active role in co-constructing meaning.	IPA assumes the researcher is interpreting an internal experience.

In line with my axiological beliefs, NA analyses personal stories holistically, exploring how individuals' structure and present their experiences rather than just what they experienced (Lieblich, 1998). This was important for my research as I aimed to explore the complexities of how individuals make sense of parental separation and their educational journey over time, rather than distilling it into common themes. IPA breaks down participant accounts into themes and patterns across cases, emphasising the psychological meaning of experiences (Smith et al., 2021). Even whilst comparing narrative themes, I adhered to NA by ensuring themes and quotes were presented within context, maintaining the narrative integrity of each participant's story. The approach to IPA (e.g., coding, categorising and compare experiences), may have potentially lost the richness of how each individual constructs their story.
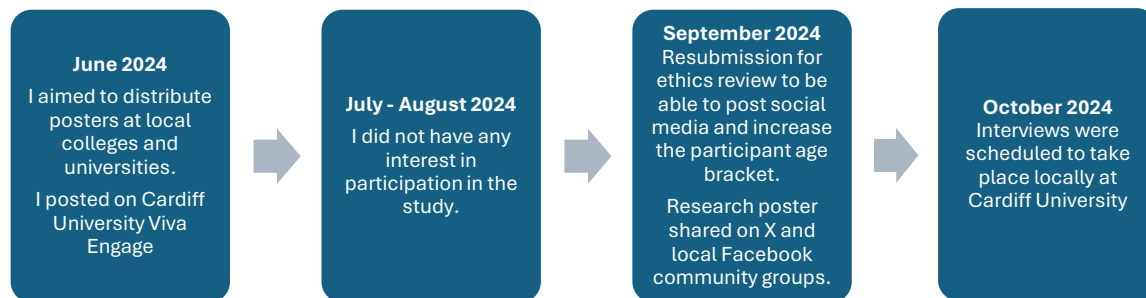
Although both approaches acknowledge the individual subjective experience, the focus of the current study is on storytelling, meaning making, and identity construction over time rather than just capturing how an experience feels at a single moment. IPA would not sufficiently capture the social, discursive, and performative aspects of storytelling, which are central within NA.

Aligning with my position as a Big Q researcher, instead of assuming objectivity, I critically reflected on my influence in the research process. Within NA, the interview is not a neutral space as participants shape their narratives in response to the researcher, the context, and their own evolving self-understanding (Riessman, 2008). This aligned with Big Q's rejection of the detached, neutral researcher model (Kidder & Fine, 1987). Whereas in IPA, the researcher analyses participants' words as a way to access their internal world, the focus is on interpreting meaning, not co-constructing it (Smith et al., 2009). This approach would not align with my social constructionist stance, as it assumes that the researcher is uncovering hidden psychological meaning rather than co-creating knowledge through dialogue and storytelling.

2.7 Participant Selection and Recruitment

From the outset, it was important to me to prioritise the individuals voice and hear their stories. I initially sought young adults as my participants (age 18-25), with the aim to recruit participants from local colleges and universities. However, I did not receive any interest from potential participants. Upon reflection, I wondered whether enough time had passed for young adults to fully make sense of their experiences. Additionally, Braun and Clarke (2013) recommend using a form of advertising to recruit participants; this was done by using a recruitment flyer (Appendix J) and contacting local colleges and universities to circulate the flyer. I had not anticipated the difficulty of being unable to advertise or put up posters on college and university campuses, which limited students' opportunities to participate. I found this very frustrating, and ethically, I felt as though these barriers were limiting whose voices were present within the literature. However, I understood that these barriers were in place to protect students and prevent an influx of researchers recruiting for research. To overcome the challenges recruiting participants, I decided to expand the age range to 18-50. I chose this age range as it reflected the context in which divorce became more common with the introduction of the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1973. This furthered my reflection that adult children of divorce may have had time to make sense of their experiences throughout adulthood and therefore are

in a 'better' position to tell their story. The flow chart below outlines the participant recruitment process, and the challenges encountered along the way:

| **June 2024** I aimed to distribute posters at local colleges and universities. I posted on Cardiff University Viva Engage | → | **July - August 2024** I did not have any interest in participation in the study. | → | **September 2024** Resubmission for ethics review to be able to post social media and increase the participant age bracket. Research poster shared on X and local Facebook community groups. | → | **October 2024** Interviews were scheduled to take place locally at Cardiff University |

Narrative research is labour-intensive due to the detailed analysis required for each participant's story, meaning fewer participants are recommended to ensure rigorous analysis (Riessman, 2008). Creswell and Poth (2016) suggest that narrative research often involves one to five participants, depending on the scope of the study. Through conversations in supervision and considering the relatively small size of the thesis project, and the in-depth nature of NA, I sought to interview four participants. Once I expanded the age range for who was able to take part in the study, I was able to recruit participants relatively quickly.

2.8 Data Generation

Braun and Clarke (2013) state that "a qualitative interviewer is a human being, with a distinctive personal style, who uses their social skills, and flexibly draws on (and, in some cases, disregards) guidance on good interview practice to conduct an interview that is appropriate to the needs and demands of their research question and methodological approach" (p.80). Narrative interviews are often approached with broad, open-ended questions focused on participants' experiences, life events, or themes of interest (Wengraf, 2001). I initially found this daunting, as my previous experiences of conducting interviews were approached in either a structured or semi-structured way, where having a list of questions often felt like a safety blanket. Riessman (2008) notes that the "goal in narrative interviewing is to generate detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements" (p.23). To support this, Riessman (2008) and Connelly and Clandinin (1990) recommend the importance of giving up 'control' of the interview, building rapport, using prompts to gather deeper meaning, and active listening to allow for the narrative to unfold. I felt my confidence in this developed with each interview,

and that I was able to build rapport with my participants quickly, likely due to the skills I have developed throughout my role as a TEP.

2.9 Analysis

This was my first experience of using NA and although it may have been less of a challenge to adopt an approach that I was familiar with, I wanted to challenge myself and remain true to my values in the design of this research. Despite my initial reading around NA at the point of drafting my proposal, I had not anticipated the variation and ambiguity in the vast and varying approaches to NA. Coupled with the encouragement from narrative researchers to be flexible and creative with the approach, I was initially very overwhelmed. Other approaches to NA were considered, and I reflected on the purpose of the research, the theoretical framework and how I wanted the findings to be presented to guide my thinking.

I decided to approach the analysis using holistic-content analysis (Lieblich, 1998). However, I considered other approaches to NA such as forms of structural analysis (Gee, 1991; Labov, 1972; Lieblich, 1998) and dialogic/performance analysis (Riessman, 2008). Structural analysis focuses on how the story is constructed, including its linguistic or rhetorical elements, where dialogic/performance analysis interrogates how talk among speakers is interactively produced and how stories are co-constructed (Riessman, 2008). As I was interested in exploring personal meaning and understanding the participants lived experiences of parental separation and their educational journeys, a holistic-content approach was chosen (Lieblich, 1998). Unlike the other approaches, holistic-content analysis allows for an in-depth exploration of each participant's narrative as a whole, preserving the interconnectedness of events, emotions, and meaning (Lieblich, 1998). Structural analysis, which focuses on the linguistic features and the form of storytelling (Gee, 1991) would not adequately capture the richness required to understand the personal and social influences on the participant's journeys.

The holistic-content approach to NA also aligned with my research paradigms. Social constructionism suggests that knowledge is co-constructed through interactions within cultural and social contexts (Gergen, 1992), and holistic-content analysis provides a framework to explore how participants construct and narrate their realities within these contexts. Unlike dialogic/performance analysis, which focuses on the interactional dynamics of storytelling (Riessman, 2008), holistic-content analysis centres around the participant's story itself, allowing the researcher to focus on the meanings participants attribute to their experiences.

Furthermore, relativism, which assumes that reality is subjective and context-dependent, aligns with holistic-content analysis as it promotes the uniqueness of each participant's story. This approach allows for nuance, and it respects the individuality and complexity of participants' experiences, allowing the researcher to explore the multiple, equally valid realities shaped by their social, cultural, and personal contexts (Lieblich, 1998). By choosing holistic-content analysis, I was able to maintain a focus on the depth and coherence of participants' stories while honouring the diverse and subjective ways each individual navigated and made sense of parental separation and their educational journeys.

When creating the participants reconstructed narratives, I felt a level of responsibility to ensure that I was 'doing my participants' stories justice' by ensuring that I captured key events and presented their stories appropriately. To help me create a narrative from the data, I took guidance from Polkinghorne (1995) who suggests that NA involves crafting a chronological plot that synthesises data into a coherent story. This approach helps researchers explore how participants make sense of their experiences over time, who the main characters in the story are and how events are meaningfully connected. I noticed that my participants stories were mostly told in chronological order, I reflected that this is likely due to the temporal nature of education.

To allow for a layered and dynamic exploration of participants' stories, Riessman (2008) suggests that thematic analysis is particularly useful for identifying patterns and meanings across narratives. I decided to approach the discussion in this way as I felt it was important to ground the themes extracted from narratives within theoretical frameworks. This method allowed themes to be constructed inductively from the data, whilst providing the opportunity for interpretative depth whilst linking findings to existing psychological or social theories (see table of comparisons in Appendix K). I hoped that the theoretical lens of positive psychology would add depth to the analysis and set participants' stories within broader frameworks of understanding. Reissman (2008) notes that linking themes to psychological theories help us to understand the meaning-making processes of individuals and how their narratives reflect underlying psychological mechanisms or social dynamics. However, unlike other methods of thematic analysis, the context of the narrative must remain central to the discussion so to not reduce a person's lived experiences to decontextualised themes. An example of this can be seen in the theme of 'Autonomy and Agency', which appeared across all narratives but was

constructed uniquely by each participant. The meaning attached to this theme was personal, context-dependent, and often shaped by cultural and social influences.

Engaging with the concept of PTG during data extraction was sometimes challenging as I was mindful not to over-attribute growth or positivity in the narratives where it may not have been experienced. This process was iterative and often uncertain, and at times it was difficult to determine whether certain statements truly reflected growth. In those instances, I sought supervision to explore my thoughts and interpretations, as these conversations provided a valuable space where I was open to challenge, change, and alternative perspectives. Sometimes, simply having the opportunity to talk my thinking through with another person helped me to ensure I wasn't forcing the data to align with theory. I also found myself reflecting organically throughout the day, considering how others might interpret the same data. Would they see growth where I did? Or would they challenge my perspective entirely? These moments helped me to remain critically aware of my positionality and the importance of approaching each narrative on its own terms. Furthermore, I remained iterative in my engagement with the PTG literature, using it as a lens rather than mapping participant narratives directly onto PTG categories. In summary, balancing theory, the data, supervision, and reflexivity were integral to my analysis.

NA is an iterative process, involving a 'back-and-forth' process which continues until the researcher feels confident that the themes truly reflect the meaning of the data (Lieblich, 1998; Riessman, 2008). Knowing when I had done 'enough' of this was difficult, given the breadth and depth of the data I had collected. I sought guidance from Dey (2003) who presented the idea of theoretical sufficiency, where the focus shifts from exhaustively collecting data to ensuring that the analysis is sufficiently rich to answer the research question and meet the study's goals. Braun and Clarke (2013) support this as they note that in qualitative research, themes are constructed by the researcher through their interaction with the data, rather than being simply 'discovered.' Therefore, the idea of saturation, implying a fixed endpoint, does not align with the Big Q ideology, which values flexibility, reflexivity, and subjectivity in the development of themes. Theoretical sufficiency, in contrast, recognises that the adequacy of the data analysis depends on the research context, the theoretical framework, and the purpose of the study.

3. Part B: Contribution to Knowledge

3.1 Unique Contributions of the Research

I hope that this research will offer many unique contributions to the field of educational psychology. Firstly, this study contributes to the strengths-based perspective within educational psychology, rather than the deficit-based model. It provides an alternative perspective to much of the literature on children of separated parents, which has largely focused on negative outcomes, and instead presents a more complex, nuanced picture showing that children of separated parents can thrive, adapt and experience personal growth. The findings also highlight the importance of protective factors in the face of adversity.

Secondly, this study adds to the use of narrative approaches in EP research, demonstrating the value of narrative methods in understanding individual experience. This approach aligns with the holistic perspective EPs take and presents the richness of personal stories rather than presenting them as fragmented, or isolated themes.

Thirdly, this study brings light to the voice of the individual with lived experience, which surprisingly, is not that common within the divorce and separation field. Most research on parental separation relies on educators, caregivers, or secondary data rather than directly exploring the lived experiences of those affected. By approaching the research in this way, it has given authenticity and agency to individuals who experienced separation, allowing them to shape their own narratives rather than being passively studied. This aligns with educational psychology's commitment to person-centred approaches.

Furthermore, this study supports the concept that adaption and adjustment following adversity is a dynamic, nonlinear process. Aligning with prominent models within educational psychology (e.g., Bronfenbrenner (1979) ecological systems theory), the narratives presented within Part Two highlight how family, school, and peer systems interact to shape educational outcomes. These narratives call for more flexible, context-sensitive models of educational development that account for family transitions which perhaps are not given enough acknowledgement over time.

3.2 Implications for Educational Psychology Practice (EPP) and Wider Systems

The findings of this study present many implications within the field of educational psychology and wider systems. Across all of the participants narratives, peer relationships and

teacher awareness of diverse family structures was important, with one particular narrative bringing light to the impact of stigma. Understanding from adults around the familial disruptions that some children experience promotes inclusivity in educational discourse. Schools can often assume a traditional 'nuclear family' model and this study challenges this assumption. EPs can provide training to school staff on inclusive practices, ensuring that language and policies reflect diverse family experiences.

The narratives highlight the importance of enhancing social support within schools, indicating that peers, teachers and other mentors can play a vital role in the adjustment of CYP. EPs can encourage socially inclusive environments that promote a sense of belonging and where children of separated families can build strong, positive relationships. Furthermore, EPs can encourage learning opportunities that include stories and discussions about diverse family dynamics. Across the narratives, there was often a sense that school staff were mostly unaware of the changing family dynamic the individuals were experiencing, by encouraging parental engagement with schools, this disconnect may be prevented.

EPs play a crucial role in reframing the constructions held about CYP (Ashraf, 2020; Cullen & Ramoutar, 2003). By adopting a resilience-focused lens to understand the experiences of CYP who have faced parental separation, EPs can shift the narrative from one of deficit to one of strength and possibility. This perspective enables EPs to promote the use of strengths-based assessments, emphasising not only the challenges faced by CYP but also their coping strategies, internal resources, and external support systems. This perspective aligns with positive psychology principles, promoting a holistic understanding of CYP's potential and wellbeing.

This study presents the role of stories and narratives in making sense of experiences and constructing identity. EPs can use narrative techniques to help CYP process changes, find meaning, and develop a coherent sense of self (Beaudoin et al., 2016; Ncube, 2006). These approaches can be utilised to support CYP to explore how they talk about their challenging experiences, recognising themes of growth, resilience, and support.

The narratives within this study strongly represented parental separation as an ongoing process, rather than a 'one off' event. It is important that EPs and other educational professionals recognise that family transitions continue to shape CYP's experiences long after the initial separation. EPs can provide support to other educational professionals to understand

the complexity around family dynamics and how to support CYP through multiple life transitions. EPs can also support the understanding of the complex, and sometimes confusing emotions that come with parental separation. EPs can promote the use of emotion-focused interventions (e.g., emotion coaching, ELSA) to help CYP process grief, anger, or confusion and work with school staff to create emotionally safe spaces where CYP feel comfortable discussing family-related stressors.

Whether it was engagement with education, church or sports, the literature in Part One and the narratives presented in Part Two acknowledge that participants experience resilience and growth through engaging in meaningful activities. EPs have a role in using psychology (e.g., positive psychology, motivation theories, goal setting) to support CYP to identify sources of meaning in their education, whether through extracurricular activities, career aspirations, or personal goals.

3.3 Dissemination of Findings

The dissemination of this research is not only an important part of the research process but also an ethical responsibility, ensuring that the narratives of participants are heard and valued by a wider audience. By sharing their experiences, the research contributes to a shift in the broader narrative surrounding children of separated parents, developing greater understanding and supporting the potential for positive change in how their needs and experiences are viewed and addressed. To disseminate the research, initially, a summary will be shared with other TEPs as part of the Doctorate in Educational Psychology (DEdPsy) course, and in July 2025, an academic poster will be presented at the DEdPsy annual conference. I hope to publish this thesis within related journals which may include: Journal of Divorce and Remarriage; DECP Debate; Educational and Child Psychology; The British Journal of Educational Psychology; and/or the Journal of Educational Psychology. I also hope to communicate the findings in an accessible manner and continue the conversation informally across other EP media outlets such as online blogs and podcasts. Finally, although not generalisable, disseminating the narratives presented in this research would be beneficial to existing EP systems such as the ELSA provision as further professional development for experienced ELSAs.

3.4 Considerations for Future Research

Reissman (2008) notes that in narrative research it is preferable to have repeated conversations rather than 'one off' interviews. However, due to the time constraints of completing a thesis, I was not able to engage in ongoing interviews with the current participants. Future research with the capacity to do so could expand on the current study by adopting such an approach.

As outlined in Appendix I, other approaches to Lieblich's narrative research might be adopted to explore this topic area from alternative perspectives. Furthermore, future research could build on these findings by exploring the influence of cultural and socioeconomic contexts on individuals' experiences of parental separation. Further exploration into non-religious spirituality may enrich understanding of meaning-making processes in culturally diverse settings. Additionally, exploring the impact of educational transitions and non-parental adults as turning points in participants' narratives could further our understanding of how support systems foster psychological growth and identity development following early adversity.

4. Personal Reflections and Closing Comments

At the beginning of my doctoral training, I would never have imagined that I would have got to this point in my academic career. I am grateful to have been provided with the opportunity to explore a topic of personal importance that aligns closely with my professional values. In doing so, I have developed a deeper understanding of philosophy, ethics and what it means to construct meaning from our lived experiences. I am grateful to my participants, who's honesty, vulnerability and willingness to share their personal stories enabled me to paint a different picture to the one dominant within the literature on children of separation and divorce, and I hope I have maintained the integrity of their stories.

Choosing an unfamiliar approach for this research was a significant challenge I set for myself, and balancing the DEdPsy requirements alongside completing a thesis often felt like a mammoth task. This process has shaped the EP I am soon to be. By taking on the role of an insider researcher, I have deepened my understanding of self-awareness, reflecting on how my own experiences and values influence my interpretations of participants' narratives. This has challenged me to think critically about how stories are shaped by context, culture, and discourse. By adopting NA, I have developed my ability to capture, analyse, and reframe complex, nuanced stories. Furthermore, it has supported the development of skills such as

active listening, patience, and seeking interpretive depth, enhancing my understanding of the interplay between narrative elements.

5. Summary

This critical appraisal reflects on the decisions I made throughout my research journey and outlines the contributions my study has made to the field. I hope this section provides an added layer of transparency into the research process. Writing this thesis has been a challenging yet rewarding experience and writing this part has provided the opportunity to reflect on my development both as a practitioner and researcher.
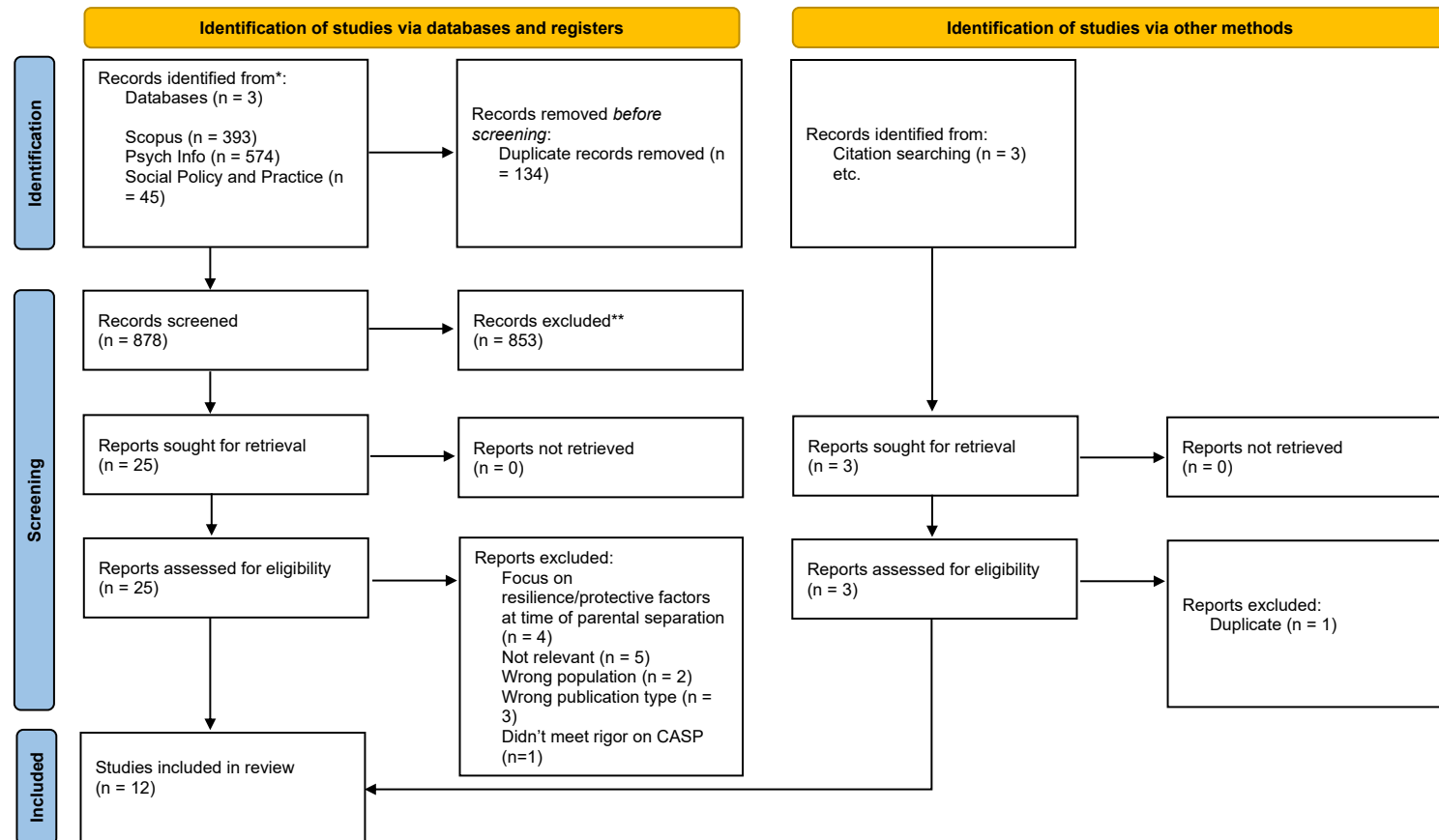
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Appendices

Appendix A: PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for new systematic reviews which included searches of databases, registers and other sources

| | **Identification of studies via databases and registers** | | **Identification of studies via other methods** |

Identification

Records identified from*:
Databases (n = 3)

Scopus (n = 393)
Psych Info (n = 574)
Social Policy and Practice (n = 45)

→ Records removed *before screening*:
Duplicate records removed (n = 134)

Records identified from:
Citation searching (n = 3)
etc.

Screening

Records screened
(n = 878)

→ Records excluded**
(n = 853)

Reports sought for retrieval
(n = 25)

→ Reports not retrieved
(n = 0)

Reports sought for retrieval
(n = 3)

→ Reports not retrieved
(n = 0)

Reports assessed for eligibility
(n = 25)

→ Reports excluded:
Focus on resilience/protective factors at time of parental separation (n = 4)
Not relevant (n = 5)
Wrong population (n = 2)
Wrong publication type (n = 3)
Didn't meet rigor on CASP (n=1)

Reports assessed for eligibility
(n = 3)

→ Reports excluded:
Duplicate (n = 1)

Included

Studies included in review
(n = 12)

*Consider, if feasible to do so, reporting the number of records identified from each database or register searched (rather than the total number across all databases/registers).
**If automation tools were used, indicate how many records were excluded by a human and how many were excluded by automation tools.

Source: Page MJ, et al. BMJ 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71.

Appendix B: Rationale for literature review exclusion criteria

Exclusion Criteria	Rationale
They focussed on exploring the experiences of individuals that had experienced domestic abuse.	• The literature review aimed to explore the psychological growth of individuals who have experienced parental separation, specifically examining how this life event may influence their development. • The psychological growth experienced by individuals who have experienced parental separation may not be comparable to the experiences of those who have been exposed to domestic abuse, which often involves additional stressors and trauma. • The concept of psychological growth in the context of parental separation is a distinct area of interest.
They were published before 2004.	• A temporal boundary was implemented to avoid overwhelming the review with studies that were not directly aligned with the current context of parental separation. • The legislative and cultural shifts around divorce and separation, parenting, and psychological growth meant that studies conducted before 2004 may reflect a dated understanding of how separation affects individuals.
They focussed on protective factors that might mitigate the effects of parental separation.	• Excluding these studies ensures the literature review maintains its focus on the ongoing psychological growth that develops through life experiences, rather than the initial or situational coping mechanisms.
They focussed on fostering resilience at the time of separation.	• By excluding the studies that solely focus on fostering resilience at the time of separation, the review can more clearly capture how individuals grow psychologically through their life journey after the separation, rather than simply how individuals were supported to manage at the time.
They were grey literature or an opinion piece.	• This is because grey literature can often lack rigorous peer review, and opinion pieces are typically subjective and not based on empirical evidence (Bellefontaine & Lee, 2014). • The focus of the systematic approach to the literature review is solely on peer-reviewed academic studies.

Appendix C: Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) and Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) Checklists

Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Checklists										
Reference	**Section A:** Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	**Section B:** Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	Is there a clear statement of findings?	**Section C:** How valuable is the research? (Will the results help locally?)
Bahonar, F., Etemadi, O., & Salehi, K. (2024). Dimensions of Post-Traumatic Growth Resulting from Parental Divorce among Young Iranian Women. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, *29*(2), 179-201.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hartman, L., Mandich, A., Magalhães, L., & Polgar, J. M. (2016). Young adults' experiences of parental divorce or separation during their adolescence: An occupational	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

perspective. *Journal of occupational science*, *23*(2), 234-244.										
Ängarne-Lindberg, T., Wadsby, M., & Berterö, C. (2009). Young adults with childhood experience of divorce: Disappointment and contentment. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *50*(3), 172-184.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cartwright, C., & Mc Dowell, H. (2008). Young women's life stories and accounts of parental divorce. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *49*(1-2), 56-77.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Thomas, D. A., & Woodside, M. (2011). Resilience in adult children of divorce: A multiple case study. *Marriage & Family Review*, *47*(4), 213-234.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Eldar-Avidan, D., Haj-Yahia, M. M., & Greenbaum, C. W.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partially – doesn't explicitly	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

(2009). Divorce is a part of my life… resilience, survival, and vulnerability: Young adults' perception of the implications of parental divorce. *Journal of Marital and family therapy*, *35*(1), 30-46.						discuss but methodological practices indicate awareness.				
Ramadhan, M. R., Ginanjar, A. S., & Djuwita, E. (2024). Post Traumatic Growth in Early Adults from Divorced Families. *Analitika: Jurnal Magister Psikologi UMA*, *16*(1), 11-22.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No – but measures taken to minimise biases.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Konstam, V. (2009). Emerging adults and parental divorce: Coming to terms with "what might have been". *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, *28*(4), 26-40.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't Tell – examples taken from a wider study of loss.	Yes	Can't Tell – examples taken from a wider study of loss.	Can't Tell – examples taken from a wider study of loss.	Yes	Yes	Yes
Matters, K. (2007). *The upside of divorce: A qualitative examination of resilience in children following parental*	Yes	Yes	Yes	No Bias possible: Author did not provide rationale on why some	Yes	No – acknowledges potential bias but no critical self-examination.	Partially – mentions informed consent and that were debrief	Yes	Partially – some data missing and not discussed.	Partially – brief and not explicit

				ppts were chosen and others not. Ppts aware of study title. Ppts had mental health training.			documents anonymised. No ethics reference number. Mentions ppts becoming emotional but this isn't discussed any further.		Discussion not well structured in relation to original aims.	
divorce (Doctoral dissertation, Chicago School of Professional Psychology). *Excluded based on CASP.*										

Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool - MMAT						
Reference	Sever, I., Guttmann, J., & Lazar, A. (2007). Positive consequences of parental divorce among Israeli young adults: A long-term effect model. *Marriage & family review*, *42*(2), 7-28.					
Category of study designs	**Methodological quality criteria**	**Responses**				
		Yes	No	Can't tell	Comments	
Screening questions (for all types)	S1. Are there clear research questions?	Yes				
	S2. Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	Yes				
	Further appraisal may not be feasible or appropriate when the answer is 'No' or 'Can't tell' to one or both screening questions.					
1. Qualitative	1.1. Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?					
	1.2. Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question?					
	1.3. Are the findings adequately derived from the data?					
	1.4. Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?					
	1.5. Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation?					
2. Quantitative randomized controlled trials	2.1. Is randomization appropriately performed?					
	2.2. Are the groups comparable at baseline?					
	2.3. Are there complete outcome data?					
	2.4. Are outcome assessors blinded to the intervention provided?					
	2.5 Did the participants adhere to the assigned intervention?					
3. Quantitative non-randomized	3.1. Are the participants representative of the target population?					
	3.2. Are measurements appropriate regarding both the outcome and intervention (or exposure)?					
	3.3. Are there complete outcome data?					
	3.4. Are the confounders accounted for in the design and analysis?					

	3.5. During the study period, is the intervention administered (or exposure occurred) as intended?				
4. Quantitative descriptive	4.1. Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research question?				
	4.2. Is the sample representative of the target population?				
	4.3. Are the measurements appropriate?				
	4.4. Is the risk of nonresponse bias low?				
	4.5. Is the statistical analysis appropriate to answer the research question?				
5. Mixed methods	5.1. Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question?	Yes			
	5.2. Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?	Yes			
	5.3. Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?	Yes			
	5.4. Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?	Yes			Partially
	5.5. Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?	Yes			

Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool - MMAT					
Reference	Milam, S. R., & Schmidt, C. K. (2018). A mixed methods investigation of posttraumatic growth in young adults following parental divorce. *The Family Journal*, *26*(2), 156-165.				
Category of study designs	**Methodological quality criteria**	**Responses**			
		Yes	No	Can't tell	Comments
Screening questions (for all types)	S1. Are there clear research questions?	Yes			
	S2. Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	Yes			
	Further appraisal may not be feasible or appropriate when the answer is 'No' or 'Can't tell' to one or both screening questions.				
1. Qualitative	1.1. Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?				
	1.2. Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question?				
	1.3. Are the findings adequately derived from the data?				
	1.4. Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?				
	1.5. Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation?				
2. Quantitative randomized controlled trials	2.1. Is randomization appropriately performed?				
	2.2. Are the groups comparable at baseline?				
	2.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	2.4. Are outcome assessors blinded to the intervention provided?				
	2.5 Did the participants adhere to the assigned intervention?				
3. Quantitative non-randomized	3.1. Are the participants representative of the target population?				
	3.2. Are measurements appropriate regarding both the outcome and intervention (or exposure)?				

	3.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	3.4. Are the confounders accounted for in the design and analysis?				
	3.5. During the study period, is the intervention administered (or exposure occurred) as intended?				
4. Quantitative descriptive	4.1. Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research question?				
	4.2. Is the sample representative of the target population?				
	4.3. Are the measurements appropriate?				
	4.4. Is the risk of nonresponse bias low?				
	4.5. Is the statistical analysis appropriate to answer the research question?				
5. Mixed methods	5.1. Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question?	Yes			
	5.2. Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?	Yes			
	5.3. Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?	Yes			
	5.4. Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?	Yes			
	5.5. Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?	Yes			

Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool - MMAT					
Reference	Welsh, M. M. (2018). *Parental Divorce, Perceived Parental Conflict Dimensions, Perception of Gains, Growth, and Parent-child Relationship in College Students* (Doctoral dissertation, Purdue University).				
Category of study designs	**Methodological quality criteria**	**Responses**			
		Yes	No	Can't tell	Comments
Screening questions (for all types)	S1. Are there clear research questions?	Yes			
	S2. Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	Yes			
	Further appraisal may not be feasible or appropriate when the answer is 'No' or 'Can't tell' to one or both screening questions.				
1. Qualitative	1.1. Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?				
	1.2. Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question?				
	1.3. Are the findings adequately derived from the data?				
	1.4. Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?				
	1.5. Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation?				
2. Quantitative randomized controlled trials	2.1. Is randomization appropriately performed?				
	2.2. Are the groups comparable at baseline?				
	2.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	2.4. Are outcome assessors blinded to the intervention provided?				
	2.5 Did the participants adhere to the assigned intervention?				

3. Quantitative non-randomized	3.1. Are the participants representative of the target population?	Yes			Partially
	3.2. Are measurements appropriate regarding both the outcome and intervention (or exposure)?	Yes			
	3.3. Are there complete outcome data?	Yes			
	3.4. Are the confounders accounted for in the design and analysis?	Yes			
	3.5. During the study period, is the intervention administered (or exposure occurred) as intended?	N/A			
4. Quantitative descriptive	4.1. Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research question?	Yes			Partially
	4.2. Is the sample representative of the target population?	Yes			Partially
	4.3. Are the measurements appropriate?	Yes			
	4.4. Is the risk of nonresponse bias low?	No			Low response rate acknowledged
	4.5. Is the statistical analysis appropriate to answer the research question?	Yes			
5. Mixed methods	5.1. Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question?				
	5.2. Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?				
	5.3. Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?				
	5.4. Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?				
	5.5. Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?				

Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool - MMAT					
Reference	Tran, K. (2023). *The Resiliency and Coping Skills Including Interpersonal and Quality of Relationships Among Adults After Parental Divorce* (Doctoral dissertation, The Chicago School of Professional Psychology).				
Category of study designs	**Methodological quality criteria**	**Responses**			
		Yes	No	Can't tell	Comments
Screening questions (for all types)	S1. Are there clear research questions?	Yes			
	S2. Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	Yes			
	Further appraisal may not be feasible or appropriate when the answer is 'No' or 'Can't tell' to one or both screening questions.				
1. Qualitative	1.1. Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?				
	1.2. Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question?				
	1.3. Are the findings adequately derived from the data?				
	1.4. Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?				
	1.5. Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation?				
	2.1. Is randomization appropriately performed?				
	2.2. Are the groups comparable at baseline?				

2. Quantitative randomized controlled trials	2.3. Are there complete outcome data?				
	2.4. Are outcome assessors blinded to the intervention provided?				
	2.5 Did the participants adhere to the assigned intervention?				
3. Quantitative non-randomized	3.1. Are the participants representative of the target population?	Yes			
	3.2. Are measurements appropriate regarding both the outcome and intervention (or exposure)?	Yes			
	3.3. Are there complete outcome data?	Yes			
	3.4. Are the confounders accounted for in the design and analysis?	Yes			
	3.5. During the study period, is the intervention administered (or exposure occurred) as intended?	N/A			
4. Quantitative descriptive	4.1. Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research question?				
	4.2. Is the sample representative of the target population?				
	4.3. Are the measurements appropriate?				
	4.4. Is the risk of nonresponse bias low?				
	4.5. Is the statistical analysis appropriate to answer the research question?				
5. Mixed methods	5.1. Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question?				
	5.2. Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?				
	5.3. Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?				
	5.4. Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?				
	5.5. Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?				

Appendix D: Overview of studies included in systematic review

Reference	Outline	Design and Methodology	Participants	Findings	Critiques/Limitations	Conclusions/ LRQ Applications
Bahonar, F., Etemadi, O., & Salehi, K. (2024). Dimensions of Post-Traumatic Growth Resulting from Parental Divorce among Young Iranian Women. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, *29*(2), 179-201.	The paper explores the dimensions of posttraumatic growth (PTG) resulting from parental divorce among young Iranian women.	Qualitative phenomenography approach. The researchers conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted in person at an association for children of divorce.	20 young Iranian women whose parents were divorced, recruited through purposive sampling.	Participants exhibited PTG in the behavioural, academic-occupational, and spiritual dimensions after experiencing parental divorce. Participants displayed adaptive behaviours like self-management, independent activism, and cultural actions, made progress in education and occupation, and relied on their religious beliefs to cope with the trauma of parental divorce. The study also found growth in the ethnic relationships and meaning of life dimensions.	The sample was restricted to young women (18 -35) who were children of divorce in Tehran. This limitation affects the generalisability of the findings to other populations, ages, genders, ethnicities, and cultures. The interview was limited to specific questions formulated based on research literature. The authors acknowledge that including more questions in the interview could have provided a deeper understanding of PTG. The researchers do not extensively discuss their own potential biases or roles as researchers, which could be seen as a limitation in the reflexivity of the study.	Young Iranian women whose parents were divorced experienced PTG in five key dimensions: behavioural, academic-occupational, spiritual, ethnic relationships, and meaning of life. Professionals should consider the potential for growth in these dimensions, rather than viewing women with divorced parents as solely vulnerable. The authors recommend conducting further research on PTG in divorced men, as well as in other cultural contexts beyond Iran.

Hartman, L., Mandich, A., Magalhães, L., & Polgar, J. M. (2016). Young adults' experiences of parental divorce or separation during their adolescence: An occupational perspective. *Journal of occupational science*, *23*(2), 234-244.	The aim of this study was to explore the process of parental divorce or separation from the perspective of adolescents and young adults, focusing on how it affects their daily occupations and engagement in meaningful activities.	Narrative inquiry approach to explore the experiences of adolescents and young adults who had experienced parental separation. Conducted two interview sessions with each participant, asking them to tell the story of their parents' divorce and how it affected their daily life and activities. Transcribed the interviews and used a systematic process to construct a co-narrative for each participant, which was reviewed and revised with the participant. Analysed the data using a holistic content analysis approach to identify themes within and across the narratives.	Six participants who experienced parental divorce/separation between ages 10-20.	Participants used occupations to cope with the transitions and help others cope during parental divorce. Participants took on increased roles and responsibilities within the family that affected their ability to engage in desired occupations. Participants experienced both supportive and lacking sources of support during the parental divorce process, which impacted their ability to meaningfully engage in occupations.	Although not the aim of narrative research, the small sample cannot be generalised to other adolescents of parental separation. Participants needed to speak English proficiently to participate in the interview, which may have excluded some potential participants and their unique experiences.	Occupation played a key role in how adolescents coped with and worked through the transitions associated with parental divorce. The authors suggest that future research should further explore the role of occupation and other contextual factors in shaping how adolescents and young adults engage following parental divorce, including potential gender differences.
Ängarne-Lindberg, T., Wadsby, M., & Berterö, C. (2009). Young adults with childhood experience	The paper aims to identify and describe the experiences and reflections of adult children whose	Semi structured interviews, with 10 interviews recorded and transcribed verbatim.	The data collated as part of this study consists of 10 recorded interviews with five women	The study identified two main categories of experiences among adult children whose parents divorced 15	Out of the initial 125 potential participants, 49 did not participate for various reasons, including being	Overall, the study highlights the importance of understanding the diverse experiences

of divorce: Disappointment and contentment. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *50*(3), 172-184.	parents divorced 15 years earlier, and the findings reveal two distinct categories: disappointment and contentment, each with several subcategories.	Qualitative content analysis of the interview transcripts to identify themes and categories related to experiences of parental divorce.	(age range = 24–30) and five men (age range = 23–30).	years earlier: disappointment and contentment. The disappointment category included disappointment toward one or both parents and disappointment with relatives and other surrounding persons. The contentment category included contentment in the belief that the members of the original family received a good or even better life after the divorce, contentment with how the divorce was handled by the parents, contentment and inner strength as a part of the child's own personality, and contentment with receiving adequate help during and after the parental divorce.	unreachable or declining to participate. Every fifth interview was recorded. This method and dropout rate could introduce bias, as those who chose not to participate/were recorded might have different experiences or perspectives. The study specifically focused on feelings of disappointment and contentment, which might overlook other significant emotional and psychological impacts of parental divorce. Participants were reflecting on their experiences 15 years after the divorce. This long retrospective period might affect the accuracy and reliability of their memories and perceptions.	of children of divorce and the need for supportive interventions tailored to individual needs. It calls for further research into the narratives of children of divorce to better understand the factors that facilitate or hinder their adjustment.
Cartwright, C., & Mc Dowell, H. (2008). Young women's life stories and accounts of parental divorce. *Journal of*	The aim of this study was to present the results of an analysis of seven young women's life story accounts of the	Life story interviews were used for participants described their lives in 3-5 chapters.	Seven women of European descent. They experienced their parents' separation during	The participants experienced significant emotional distress related to their parents' deteriorating relationship,	Participants were recruited through advertisements and volunteered to take part in the study. This self-selection may	While many participants experienced emotional distress, the study also emphasises their

Divorce & Remarriage, *49*(1-2), 56-77.	experience of parental separation during adolescence, with the hypothesis that using a life-story interview and in-depth analysis would lead to new insights into how young adults continue to relate to and deal with experiences of parental divorce.	Narrative analysis of both the structure and content of the interview data. Use of qualitative data analysis software to manage and analyse the data.	adolescence, between the ages of 12 and 18. At the time of the interviews, their ages ranged from 18 to 22 years. They were all university students, unmarried, and without children.	separation, and divorce. The participants also demonstrated self-determination and developed competencies as they navigated these challenges, particularly during their teenage years. The participants were active agents in their own lives, as evidenced by their stories of personal growth and self-determination.	result in a sample that is not representative of all young adults who have experienced parental divorce, as those who chose to participate might have different experiences or motivations compared to those who did not. The researchers' interpretations of the narratives are subjective and may be influenced by their own perspectives and biases.	resilience and ability to cope with the challenges. The narratives often included themes of personal growth, positive relationships, self-determination, and developing competencies.
Thomas, D. A., & Woodside, M. (2011). Resilience in adult children of divorce: A multiple case study. *Marriage & Family Review*, *47*(4), 213-234.	The aim of the study was to explore the experiences of resilience following parental divorce for university freshmen, and to understand how the three needs of self-determination theory (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) contributed to their resilience.	Administration of the Healthy Kids Resilience Assessment to all participating students to select participants. Individual interviews with the selected participants, lasting approximately one hour each. Participants asked to draw pictures of divorce and resilience.	Six participants with the highest resilience scores were selected for interview, five interviews were completed.	The three basic needs of self-determination theory (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) contributed to the resilience of adult children of divorce. Self-determination theory was relevant in describing the resilience of the participants. The participants demonstrated resilience through exercising autonomy,	Reliability and validity are difficult to establish in qualitative research, as replication is not always possible, and researcher interpretations can vary. The study included only those participants who scored high on resilience, which may not represent the broader population of adult children of divorce.	The study highlights how adult children of divorce can experience significant psychological growth by developing resilience and developing their autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This growth aligns with the concept of PTG, where individuals can thrive despite adversity.

		The qualitative approach used a combination of general and specific typology analysis methods to analyse the data		displaying competence, and maintaining important relationships.		
Eldar-Avidan, D., Haj-Yahia, M. M., & Greenbaum, C. W. (2009). Divorce is a part of my life… resilience, survival, and vulnerability: Young adults' perception of the implications of parental divorce. *Journal of Marital and family therapy*, *35*(1), 30-46.	The aim of this study is to deepen the understanding of how young adults whose parents divorced during their childhood perceive and experience parental divorce, in order to better understand how children cope with divorce and inform clinical interventions.	Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data. Thematic analysis and grounded theory were used to analyse the data.	22 Israeli young adults (aged 20-25) whose parents divorced during their childhood.	Resilient participants view the divorce as a meaningful and empowering transition, valuing its benefits and their parents' contribution to their development. Survivors have a more ambivalent view, recognising both coping and vulnerability, gains and losses from the divorce. Vulnerable participants view the divorce as a painful event that projected negatively on the rest of their lives, feeling they lacked support and security from their parents.	The participants were not randomly selected. This could introduce selection bias, as participants who chose to participate might have different experiences or perspectives compared to those who did not. The study was conducted in Israel; therefore cultural factors might influence the findings and limit their applicability to other cultural contexts.	The study identified three profiles of young adults affected by parental divorce during childhood: resilience, survival, and vulnerability. Resilient individuals viewed parental divorce as a meaningful and empowering transition, acknowledging its challenges while emphasising personal growth.
Sever, I., Guttmann, J., & Lazar, A. (2007). Positive consequences of parental divorce among Israeli young adults: A long-term	The study aims to search for possible positive outcomes of parental divorce among young Israeli adults, and if positive outcomes are found,	Mixed methods approach with a qualitative phase of in-depth interviews and a quantitative phase of questionnaires.	Young adults (N=14) aged 20-30 whose parents divorced when they were 10-19 years old, with at least 3 years since the divorce	A significant proportion of participants reported more positive than negative long-term outcomes from their parents' divorce.	The study's sample consisted of young adults with above-average intellectual achievement, good aptitude for insight, and high motivation to	The study concludes that although parental divorce can be challenging, it can also lead to significant positive outcomes and

effect model. *Marriage & family review*, *42*(2), 7-28.	to attempt to place them in a flow-model that represents the relationships among the variables.	Qualitative phase involved 14 interviews that were analysed by the researchers using content analysis. Quantitative phase involved administering questionnaires on coping strategies, long-term outcomes, and family background.		The positive outcomes included a sense of empowerment, increased empathy, and more mature and realistic views on relationships. The use of supportive coping strategies, such as seeking and providing support, was associated with more positive long-term outcomes.	succeed in life. This limits the generalisability of the findings to the broader population of young adults from diverse backgrounds. The study aimed to explore the positive long-term outcomes of parental divorce, which required casting a wide net with long, exploratory questionnaires. This approach may have limited the depth of investigation into specific relevant variables. Subjective nature of content analysis.	personal growth for young adults. The evidence of PTG and psychological growth is supported by both qualitative and quantitative data, highlighting the potential for individuals to emerge stronger and more resilient from difficult life experiences.
Milam, S. R., & Schmidt, C. K. (2018). A mixed methods investigation of posttraumatic growth in young adults following parental divorce. *The Family Journal*, *26*(2), 156-165.	The aims of the study are to examine factors contributing to PTG in young adults who experienced parental divorce, specifically the relationship between perceived social support, social support coping, intrinsic religiousness, and positive and negative religious coping with	Mixed methods design, collating data using both quantitative survey measures. Qualitative data collated with open-ended questions and analysed using thematic analysis. Quantitative measures included scales assessing	232 young adults aged 18-25 were recruited from a university through snowball sampling.	Perceived social support, intrinsic religiousness, and positive and negative religious coping contributed unique and shared variance to PTG in young adults who experienced parental divorce. Qualitative analysis revealed that young adults experienced both pain and positive	Participants were all college-aged (18-25 years) and predominantly White/European American, limiting the generalisability to other age and racial/ethnic groups. Slightly more than half of the sample reported being affiliated with a religious tradition,	This study highlights the importance of social support, religious coping, and personal resilience in fostering PTG in young adults following parental divorce. By applying these insights to practice, professionals can better assist CYP in navigating the challenges of

	PTG, as well as how time since divorce relates to PTG.	posttraumatic growth, social support, religious coping, and PTSD symptoms related to the parental divorce. Analysed using descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations and multiple regression analysis.		growth following their parents' divorce. Participants reported using various forms of support to cope with their parents' divorce, including supportive others, activities, religiosity or spirituality, and at times negative coping methods.	predominantly Christianity, limiting the generalisability. May also indicate why religion was a key theme in the findings. The study was retrospective and relied on participants' memory of their parents' divorce, rather than capturing the process of growth as it was occurring.	parental divorce and promoting positive growth and healing.
Welsh, M. M. (2018). *Parental Divorce, Perceived Parental Conflict Dimensions, Perception of Gains, Growth, and Parent-child Relationship in College Students* (Doctoral dissertation, Purdue University).	The paper examines the associations among perceptions of pre-divorce parental conflict, perceived gains of parental divorce, PTG, and current relationship quality with parents for college students, and how these factors differ between college students with divorced parents and those with married parents.	The study used a cross-sectional, quasi-experimental design with self-report measures to examine the associations among perceptions of pre-divorce parental conflict, perceived gains of parental divorce, PTG, and current relationship quality with parents.	430 college students.	Those with divorced parents reported greater frequency and intensity of parental conflict, and lower conflict resolution compared to those with married parents. Those with divorced parents, existential gains were positively associated with PTG, and self-blame for parental conflict was positively associated with negative interactions with mother.	The study has a homogenous sample, only used a subset of the parental conflict measure, and did not control for potential confounding variables. Participants may have difficulty accurately recalling parental conflict prior to divorce or attributing current gains to the divorce, given that some participants experienced the divorce at a young age. The author provides a thorough and transparent discussion	The study found that existential gains, such as enhanced self-esteem, purpose, and life control, positively contribute to PTG in college students who experienced parental divorce. However, there was no significant difference in PTG between students with divorced parents and those facing other family-related stressors. Practitioners may be able to support CYP by helping them to identify and explore existential benefits

					of the limitations of their study.	of divorce, normalising familial challenges and facilitating discussions about personal growth.
Ramadhan, M. R., Ginanjar, A. S., & Djuwita, E. (2024). Post Traumatic Growth in Early Adults from Divorced Families. *Analitika: Jurnal Magister Psikologi UMA*, *16*(1), 11-22.	The study explored the experience of PTG in early adults who had experienced parental divorce.	Qualitative, phenomenological approach with semi-structured, focused interviews as the data collection method. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who met the criteria, and thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data.	6 young adults (18-25) who had experienced parental divorce as children or adolescents and were raised by a single parent.	All participants experienced positive changes across the five dimensions of PTG: changes in interpersonal relationships, spiritual development, appreciation of life, new opportunities/priorities, and self-strength.	Small sample size which limits the generalisability of the findings.\n\nAll participants were women, which may not fully represent the experiences of men or other gender identities.\n\nThe study was conducted in Indonesia, and the findings may be influenced by the specific cultural and social context. The quotes presented in the paper have not been translated so I was unable to consider them myself.	The study highlights the potential for positive psychological growth following experiences like parental divorce and highlights the importance of social support, personal resilience, and targeted interventions to foster PTG.
Tran, K. (2023). *The Resiliency and Coping Skills Including Interpersonal and Quality of Relationships Among Adults After Parental Divorce* (Doctoral dissertation, The	The paper examines the relationship between parental divorce and the dispositional resiliency, attachment patterns, and reliance on others in intimate	Cross-sectional quantitative survey research design Used regression analysis to assess the relationship between dispositional resiliency and reliance on others in intimate attachments	The participants in the study were 219 undergraduate students (157 female and 62 male) from one university, ranging in age from 18 to 24 years old.	Reliance on others in intimate attachments and different attachment patterns (fear, dismissing, preoccupied, secure) could predict dispositional resiliency levels in adult children of divorce.	The study had a relatively small sample size of 92 participants, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. The sample was also predominantly female (83.7%), which could	The study highlights the potential for PTG among adults who experienced parental divorce. By focusing on resilience, secure attachments, and effective coping strategies, individuals can

					skew the results and may not fully represent the experiences of males. The study used a cross-sectional design, which captures data at a single point in time. This limits the ability to draw causal inferences about the relationships between parental divorce, resilience, and coping skills. As the data was self-report, the participants may have responded in a way they believed were socially acceptable or might not accurately remember past events. Some subscales presented low internal consistency (e.g., the Challenge subscale of the DRS). This could affect the reliability of the measurements.	overcome the challenges associated with parental divorce and experience positive growth and development.
Chicago School of Professional Psychology).	attachments of adult children of divorce.	(H1) and attachment patterns (H2). Used one-way ANOVA to investigate differences in dispositional resiliency across attachment styles (H3). Measured dispositional resiliency using the Bartone et al. (1989) Dispositional Resilience Scale. Measured attachment patterns and reliance on others using the Bartholomew and Horwitz (1991) Relationship Scales Questionnaire		There were significant differences in dispositional resiliency levels across the different attachment styles (fear, dismissing, preoccupied, secure) in adult children of divorce.		
Konstam, V. (2009). Emerging adults and parental divorce: Coming to terms with "what might have been". *Journal of Systemic*	The paper aimed to present the narratives of two emerging adults and their experiences of parental divorce.	Qualitative case-example design. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews.	Two 'emerging' adults.	Participants created narratives that speak of disappointment and loss, but also speak of growth, opportunities, and fulfilment.	Although not the aim of this case-example, the small sample cannot be generalised to other emerging adults who	Practitioners can support emerging adults and their families in the co-construction of rich and differentiated narratives related to

Therapies, *28*(4), 26-40.		Informed by grounded theory and phenomenological psychology.		The findings supported the model of loss.	experienced parental divorce.	the impact of divorce, narratives that drive emerging adults forward and provide them the space to explore what might have been if the divorce had not occurred.

Appendix E: Information Sheet

School of Psychology
Participant Information Sheet
Version: 1 Date: 21/01/2024

The Journey to Further Education: A Narrative Analysis of the Lived Experience of

Young Adults Who Have Experienced Parental Separation

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being undertaken and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others, if you wish.

Thank you for reading this.

1.   What is the purpose of this research project?

This study aims to contribute to and build on the existing literature that considers the subjective individual experience of parental separation, in relation to their experiences of education. The researcher hopes that the knowledge and insight generated from the proposed study will increase educational psychologists' (EP) awareness and understanding of working with children and young people who have experienced parental separation, and that this increased insight will inform their assessment and intervention practice.

2.   Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited because you are a young adult between the ages of 18-25 years, have accessed further education, and whose parents separated whilst you were in primary school (after the age of 5 years old).

3.   Do I have to take part?
No, your participation in this research project is entirely voluntary and it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part, we will discuss the research project with you *and* ask you to sign a consent form. If you decide not to take part, you do not have to explain your reasons and it will not affect your legal rights. For participants that are Cardiff University students, your involvement in this research project will have no effect on your education or progression through a degree course.

You are free to withdraw your consent to participate in the research project at any time, without giving a reason, even after signing the consent form.

4.   What will taking part involve?

By taking part in this study, you will be invited to share your personal story of your journey through education from the event of your parents' separation. The interview should take no more than two hours and the interview would be audio recorded. After the transcripts have been analysed, you will be invited to meet with the researcher to reflect on the analysis. This meeting is optional, and it would not be audio recorded as it does not contribute to the data collection.

5.   Will I be paid for taking part?

No

6.   What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There will be no direct advantages or benefits to you from taking part, but you will have the opportunity to share your own story and your contribution will help us understand how EPs and schools can best support children and young people who have experienced parental separation.

7.   What are the possible risks of taking part?

No foreseeable risks or disadvantages should be experienced. However, the topic of parental separation may bring up some difficult feelings, therefore if at any time you feel discomfort or uncomfortable, please let a researcher know.

8.   Will my taking part in this research project be kept confidential?

All information collected from (or about) you during the research project will be kept confidential and any personal information you provide will be managed in accordance with data protection legislation. Please see 'What will happen to my Personal Data?' (below) for further information.

9.   What will happen to my Personal Data?

All Personal data will be stored and processed according to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Your initialled and signed consent form will be stored securely and, as per the Research Records and Retention Schedule, data will be retained for a minimum period of 5 years after the end of the project or after publication of any findings based upon the data (whichever is later).

Personal data within the recording will be stored confidentially in an online, encrypted and password protected storage (University provided OneDrive) to which only the researchers will have access. After a 2-week period, this will be transcribed and subsequently anonymised using pseudonyms for your name and the names of any other people/the school used within the recording. Once anonymised, you will no longer be able to withdraw from the research project. This again will be stored on the online, encrypted and password protected storage. As per the Research Records and Retention Schedule, the transcript data will be retained for a minimum period of 5

years after the end of the project or after publication of any findings based upon the data (whichever is later).

Cardiff University is the Data Controller and is committed to respecting and protecting your personal data in accordance with your expectations and Data Protection legislation. Further information about Data Protection, including:

- your rights
- the legal basis under which Cardiff University processes your personal data for research
- Cardiff University's Data Protection Policy
- how to contact the Cardiff University Data Protection Officer
- how to contact the Information Commissioner's Office

may be found at https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/public-information/policies-and-procedures/data-protection

10.   What happens to the data at the end of the research project?

Once the data collected during the project is transcribed and anonymised (see point 9), it will be analysed by the researcher. At this point, the transcript may be shared with their academic/research supervisor Dr Gemma Ellis for academic supervision. Data will be shared between the researchers on the online, encrypted and password protected storage facility. No data sharing will occur via email prior to anonymisation. If you wish to withdraw your recordings at any time, please contact the researcher or research supervisor through the contact details at the bottom of the information sheet.

11.   What will happen to the results of the research project?

As part of their academic requirements, the researcher will write a research report noting these themes and select, anonymised verbatim quotes may be used in support of their findings/conclusions. This report will be presented and shared with academic tutors, peers and possibly the wider public through presentation or publication in an academic journal. Participants will not be identified in any report, publication, or presentation. Should you wish to obtain a copy of the report, please let the researcher know.

Your anonymised data may be stored in a data repository as part of Cardiff University's commitment to Open Science.

12.   What if there is a problem?
If you wish to complain or have grounds for concerns about any aspect of the manner in which you have been approached or treated during the course of this research, please contact Dr Gemma Ellis (Research Supervisor – ellisg6@cardiff.ac.uk) or the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee, Cardiff University at the address below. If your complaint is not managed to your satisfaction, please contact the Information Commissioner's Office should you wish to complain, can be found at the following: https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/public-information/policies-and-procedures/data-protection.

If you are harmed by taking part in this research project, there are no special compensation arrangements. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, you may have grounds for legal action, but you may have to pay for it.

13.   Who is organising and funding this research project?

The research is organised by Laura Chapman and academic supervisor Dr Gemma Ellis.

14.   Who has reviewed this research project?
This research project has been reviewed and given a favourable opinion by the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee, Cardiff University. Secretary of the Ethics Committee, School of Psychology, Cardiff University, Park Place, Cardiff, CF10 3AT. Tel: 029 2087 0707 Email: psychethics@cardiff.ac.uk.

15.   Further information and contact details

Should you have any questions relating to this research project, you may contact us during normal working hours:

Laura Chapman (chapmanl5@cardiff.ac.uk) or Dr Gemma Ellis (ellisg6@cardiff.ac.uk)

If you'd like to find out about mental health support available for students, please contact your university's student support services, or visit www.studentminds.org.uk.

Thank you for considering taking part in this research project. If you decide to participate, you will be given a copy of the Participant Information Sheet and a signed consent form to keep for your records.

School of Psychology
Consent Form
Version: 1 Date: 21/01/2024

School of Psychology

<u>**The Journey to Further Education: A Narrative Analysis of the Lived Experience of**</u>

<u>**Young Adults Who Have Experienced Parental Separation**</u>

Name of Chief/Principal Investigator: Laura Chapman (Trainee Educational Psychologist)

Type of Consent:

i)   **If research study is in the format of a questionnaire:** please tick box if consent is considered implied in taking part in the Questionnaire ☐
ii)   If consent is not implied or research study is NOT a questionnaire, please complete table below.

	Please initial box
I confirm that I have read the information sheet dated 21/01/2024 version 1 for the above research project.	
I confirm that I have understood the information sheet dated 21/01/2024 version 1 for the above research project and that I have had the opportunity to ask questions and that these have been answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary, and I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without any adverse consequences (e.g. to medical care or legal rights, if relevant).	

I understand that data collected during the research project may be looked at by individuals from Cardiff University or from regulatory authorities, where it is relevant to my taking part in the research project. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my data.	
I consent to the processing of my personal information (consent form) for the purposes explained to me. I understand that such information will be held in accordance with all applicable data protection legislation and in strict confidence, unless disclosure is required by law or professional obligation.	
I understand who will have access to my personal information, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the research project.	
I consent to being audio recorded for the purposes of the research project and I understand how it will be used in the research.	
I understand that anonymised excerpts and/or verbatim quotes from my interview may be used as part of the research publication.	
I understand how the findings and results of the research project will be written up and published.	
I agree to take part in this research project.	

Name of participant (print):

Date: Signature:

Name of person taking consent:

Date: Signature:

(print)

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN OUR RESEARCH

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM TO KEEP

Appendix G: Debrief Form

Debrief Form

School of Psychology, Cardiff University

Participant Debrief Sheet

Many thanks for taking part in the study. Your contribution has been greatly appreciated.

What was the purpose of the study?

This study aims to contribute to and build on the existing literature that considers the subjective individual experience of parental separation, in relation to their experiences of education. The researcher hopes that the knowledge and insight generated from the proposed study will increase educational psychologists' (EP) awareness and understanding of working with children and young people who have experienced parental separation, and that this increased insight will inform their assessment and intervention practice.

What will happen to my information?

The recording collected via the interview will be stored securely in the researcher's electronic password protected, encrypted files. After a 2-week period, the recording has been transcribed and anonymised using pseudonyms for your own personal details but also any names of people/school that are used. The recordings of the interview will be destroyed. This transcribed information will be shared only with the researcher and their research supervisor. However, anonymous verbatim quotes may be used in a research report.

Should you feel you no longer want your interview to be part of this research, please contact Laura Chapman on the details below within two weeks of the date and time of your interview. If you have any questions relating to the research, please contact Laura Chapman.

If you'd like to find out about mental health support available for students, please contact your university's student support services, or visit www.studentminds.org.uk.

Should you wish to complain or have grounds for concerns about any aspect of the manner in which you have been approached or treated during the course of this research, please contact Laura Chapman or Dr Gemma Ellis. If, however, you feel your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, please contact the Secretary of the Ethics Committee.

Laura Chapman   Dr Gemma Ellis

Trainee Educational Psychologist   Programme Tutor and Research Supervisor

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Tel: 029 2087 0366

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029 2087 0366uk

ellisg6@cardiff.ac.uk

Any complaints may be made to:
Secretary of the Ethics Committee
School of Psychology
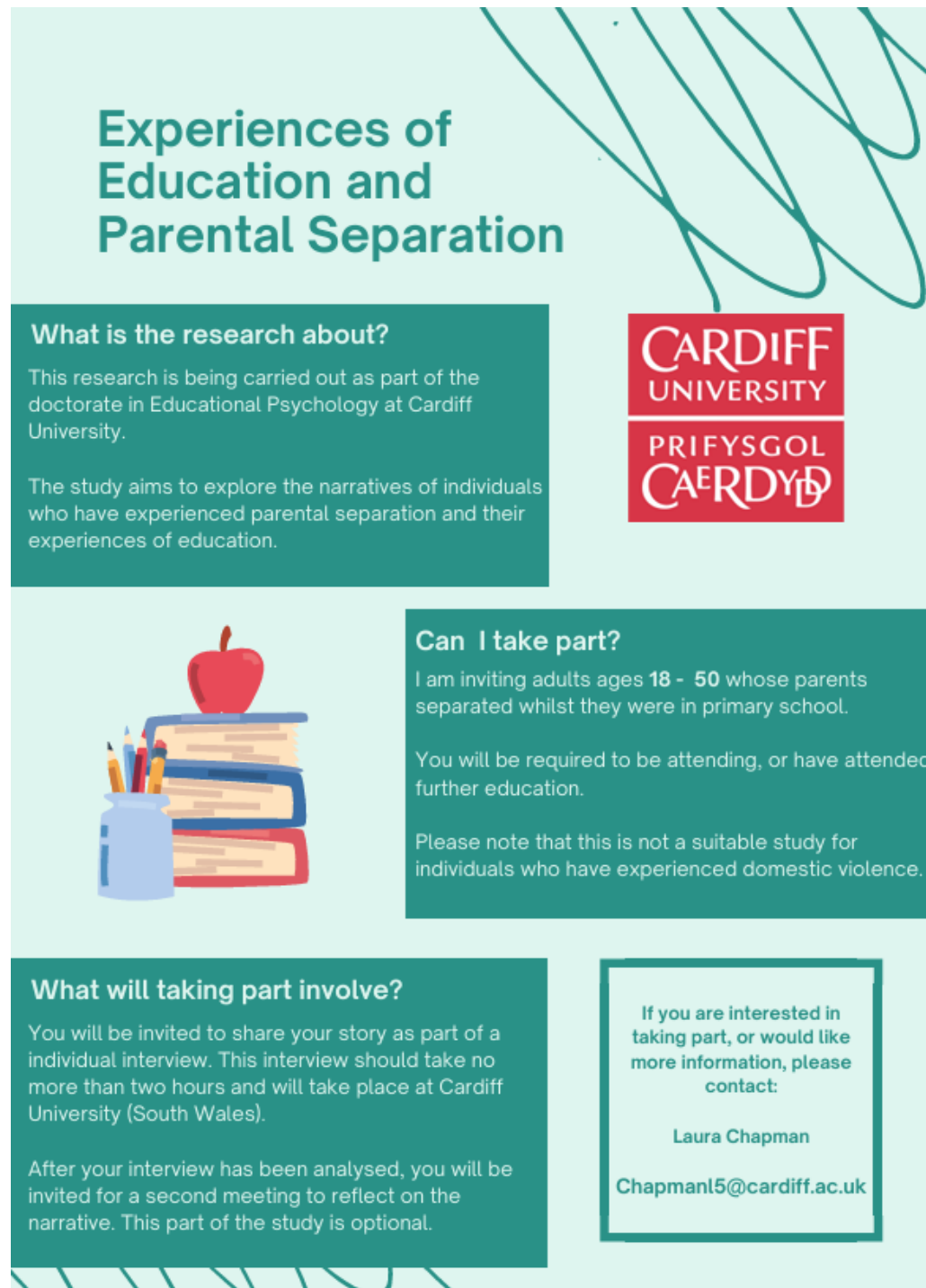Cardiff University
Tower Building
Park Place
Cardiff
CF10 3AT

Tel: 029 2087 0707

Email: psychethics@cardiff.ac.uk

Cardiff University is the Data Controller and is committed to respecting and protecting your personal data in accordance with your expectations and Data Protection legislation. The University has a Data Protection Officer who can be contacted at inforequest@cardiff.ac.uk. Further information about Data Protection, including your rights and details about how to contact the Information Commissioner's Office should you wish to complain, can be found at the following: https://intranet.cardiff.ac.uk/staff/supporting-your-work/manage-use-and-protect-data/data-protection

Appendix H: Further information

Further Information

School of Psychology, Cardiff University

Participant Support

Thank you for taking part in my research.

I wanted to get in touch following our recent conversation to ensure you're feeling supported. I understand that some of the topics we discussed can be sensitive, and I want to remind you that if you need further support, there are resources available to help.

Should you feel the need to talk to someone or seek additional guidance, I encourage you to consider reaching out to one of the following:
1. **Student Minds** - www.studentminds.org.uk.
2. **Mind Cymru** - www.mindcymru.org.uk
3. **Samaritans** – Call 116 123 (free from any phone)

As noted in the debrief form, should you wish to complain or have grounds for concern about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during this research, please contact Laura Chapman or Dr Gemma Ellis. If, however, you feel your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, please contact the Secretary of the Ethics Committee.

Warm regards,

Laura Chapman	Dr Gemma Ellis
Trainee Educational Psychologist	Programme Tutor and Research Supervisor
School of Psychology	School of Psychology
Cardiff University	Cardiff University
Tower Building	Tower Building
Park Place	Park Place
Cardiff	Cardiff
CF10 3EU	CF10 3EU
Tel: 029 2087 0366	029 2087 0366
Chapmanl5@cardiff.ac.yk	ellisg6@cardiff.ac.uk

Any complaints may be made to:
Secretary of the Ethics Committee
School of Psychology
Cardiff University
Tower Building
Park Place
Cardiff
CF10 3AT

Tel: 029 2087 0707   Email: psychethics@cardiff.ac.uk

Appendix: I: Alternatives to Analysis Using Lieblich's Model

Lieblich's Models of Reading a Narrative	Focus	What difference would have been made to the current study?
Holistic-Content	This was the analysis model implemented in the current research.	N/A
Holistic-Form	Holistic-form considers how the narrative is being told, considering both structure and style. It pays attention to the tone, narrative flow, metaphors, use of time (chronological vs. fragmented), and tension/resolution patterns.	Where the current study focusses on *what* is being said, holistic-form would consider *how* it is being said (e.g., how is symbolic language used when describing change). Analysing the narrative structure would have explored how an individual makes meaning through the way they tell their story.
Categorical-Content	Within categorical-content analysis, the content is still the focus, however it breaks the narratives down into thematic segments and relevant subtexts to analyse across cases.	The emphasis is around themes appearing in multiple narratives, with less weight given to the context. This approach might have looked to compare the frequency of certain content themes across participants (e.g., how often does the theme of support occur?).
Categorical Form	Within categorical-form analysis, specific formal features (tone, structure, metaphors, grammar) would	This approach would have homed in on a specific part of the story (e.g., the event of

	be compared across selected segments of the narratives.	parental separation or transition from primary school to secondary school) and compare how it is described across narratives. It could look to compare how each individual tells their story (e.g., is it disorganise, whilst another's concise?). The analysis would note the presence of silence, pauses, hesitations, or repetition.

*These approaches are not intended to be rigid or prescriptive; researchers are encouraged to adapt their approach in line with their research aim.

**Future research could look to explore narratives of parental separation and their experiences of education through one of these different lenses.

Appendix J: Recruitment poster

Appendix K: Comparison of Narratives

Theme	Morgan	Marsha	Lily	Arthur
Reissman (2008) states that theorising across a number of cases is an established tradition in qualitative history. However, NA "requires a subtle shift in method", keeping the story "intact" for interpretive purposes (p.74).				
Relationships	Supportive best friend Initial difficult sibling relationship A second family Spending time at friend's house Affectionate with friends Tough start to secondary school – bullying Inconsistent and complex relationship with Dad Seeking connection with male peers Different parenting styles Parking own emotions to put other people's emotions first Mediating between family members	Spending time out of the house – friend's families Sibling support Mum as a role model Choosing friends based on values	Stigma Lack of support from primary school Protecting parents Sister as a protector Living with friends Bullied at secondary school - feeling left out Dad as the voice of reason Strained relationship with stepdad	Stepdad influence A sense of belonging and connection Found family Proxy family Importance of social networks
Strengths and Achievement	Commitment to FE Going on to complete a doctorate Caring for others	Embracing challenges Enjoying learning and academically thriving in school	Sports Natural talents in swimming and gymnastics Career in sports	Academic success Validation Enjoying learning Natural talent in learning

			Returning to university later in life Career change	
Autonomy and Agency	Distancing self from family Emotional boundaries Growing up faster Choosing university based on personal interests and values Leaving the church because of own values	Working class background Self-dependence Wanting to be a 'strong' person	Following passions Confident in living alone Self-dependent or independent? Wanting to help others in the future.	Relocations Agency and independence Career focussed Adjusting to change Career aligned with values
Loss and the Reworking of Identity	Parental separation – lots of blame Death of grandad Losses coinciding Loss of a stepparent and her family in the process Struggle with mental health Time spent without best friend	Prolonged separation Parental mental health Negative response to moving house The loss of her dad Realistic and pragmatic perspectives Finding things out later on in life	Parental mental health Health concerns Turbulent parental separation	Parental separation Parental illness and death Long distance relations Appreciation for life Admiring the small things
Mapping on to theoretical perspectives Reissman (2008): "data are interpreted in light of thematics developed by the investigator (influenced by prior and emergent theory, the concrete purpose of an investigation, the data themselves, political commitments, and other factors)" (p.54)				
Themes of PTG	Personal Strength: strong emotional maturity and independence	Personal Strength: self-belief, independence	Personal strength: a strong understanding of self, self-efficacy	Personal strength: Independence, autonomy

	Relating to Others: emotional boundaries Appreciation for Life: values driven, self-determined, resilience Spiritual Change: seeking meaning and purpose with the church	Relating to Others: reflects on support from others. Friendships based on values. New Possibilities: Education as a means for growth Appreciation for Life: making sense of events retrospectively	Relating to Others: empathy, desire to help others New possibilities: career change based on values Spiritual: more so existential, reframing purpose and values	Relating to Others: relationships outside of the family unit New possibilities: career and education focussed aligned with values Appreciation for Life: gratitude, acknowledging the small things Spiritual: purpose, meaning
Themes of SDT	Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness	Relatedness, Autonomy, Competence	Relatedness, Autonomy, competence	Autonomy, Relatedness, Competence
In light of word count limitations, only select examples are presented in Part Two to illustrate the constructed themes.				

Appendix L: Chronological Plots

Chronological plots were used to support the author to develop the reconstructed narratives. To chronologically plot the events of each narrative, the transcripts were read and reread several times in order to become familiar with the timing of events that occurred. The data were then organised into events, that is, "chronologically plotted." (Nasheeda et al., 2019).

Morgan's Chronological Plot	
Who are the main characters in this story?	**Morgan:** The participant and narrator of the story.
	Morgan's Mum: Struggled with the separation and supported Morgan through her education.
	Morgan's Dad: His inconsistent presence and multiple relationships impacted Morgan's emotional wellbeing and relationship with him.
	Morgan's Sister: Younger than Morgan, she had a more emotional reaction to their parents' separation.
	Jamie: Morgan's best friend who provided significant emotional support and stability during Morgan's childhood and adolescence.
	Stepmum: Morgan's dad's partner who had a positive influence on her dad, which led her seeing him more frequently.
	Teachers: Particularly those in the English department who supported Morgan during sixth form.
What are the main events?	**Parents' Separation**: Morgan's parents separated when she was in Year 5. This coincided with her grandfather's death.
	Transition to Secondary School: Morgan had to appeal multiple times to get into her preferred school.
	Adolescence and Identity: Initially a self-described "nerd", Morgans behaviour began to change in year nine as she began to spend more time with her peers, she turned to the

	music crowd and the church. She also found herself seeking connection with her male peers.
	Academic Challenges: Struggles with attendance and engagement in sixth form, supported by certain teachers and friends.
	University Life: Studied psychology, faced challenges including the death of her stepmum during her final year.
	Current Perspective: Developed a more detached relationship with her dad and found emotional stability through friends and partner.
When and where did these events take place?	**Year 5**: Parents' separation and grandfather's death.
	Year 7: Transition to secondary school.
	Year 9: Behavioural changes in secondary school and involvement with music crowd and church.
	Sixth Form: Academic struggles and support from Mum, teachers and friends.
	University: Studied psychology, faced challenges and adversity including her stepmum's death.
	Current: Reflects on past experiences and current relationships.
How has the participant positioned herself in the story?	Morgan positions herself as the person who often took on a mature role within her family, mediating conflicts and providing support. Despite the difficulties, she managed to achieve academic success and develop a sense of independence and emotional stability. Her narrative reflects a journey of growth, self-discovery, and the importance of supportive relationships.

Marsha's Chronological Plot	
Who are the main characters in this story?	**Marsha:** The participant and narrator of the story.
	Marsha's Mum: An important figure and role model in Marsha's life, who raised her and her siblings. Marsha's mum would often try to shield the children from the challenges around them.
	Marsha's Dad: Marsha's dad was diagnosed with schizophrenia which impacted her relationship with him.
	Marsha's twin brother: A significant source of support for Marsha due to their similar experiences and upbringing.
What are the main events?	**Parents' Separation:** Marsha's parents separated over a two-year period when she was around seven years old.
	Dad's Illness: Marsha's dad developed schizophrenia which contributed to her parents' separation.
	House move to a new town: The family moved from their hometown to a city when Marsha was in year five. Marsha and her family remained in this town as her Mum had met a new partner.
	Scholarship to Private School: Marsha received a scholarship to attend a private school, which she enjoyed. Marsha completed the entrance exams for her medical training in sixth form. This was scaffolded by her tutors.
	University and Medical Training: Marsha's journey through university and medical training, including her gap year and foundation years. Marsha found adapting to the adult-learning model at university challenging. Despite enjoying being a fresher, Marsha needed to retake an exam in first year which motivated her to work harder.

	Dad's Death: Marsha's dad passed away during her foundation years as a doctor.
	COVID-19 Pandemic: Marsha's experience working as a doctor during the pandemic.
When and where did these events take place?	**Early Childhood:** Marsha's early years in her hometown, up to around age seven.
	House Move: The move to a new city when she was in year five.
	Private School: Marsha's time at a private school from year seven through sixth form.
	Gap Year: Marsha worked to save money for university during her gap year.
	University: Marsha's university years and medical training.
	Foundation Years of Training: Marsha's foundation years as a doctor, including the COVID-19 pandemic.
	Dad's Death: Occurred during Marsha's foundation years as a doctor.
How has the participant positioned herself in the story?	Marsha positions herself as a pragmatic and determined individual. She attributes her drive to her upbringing and the influence of her mum. Marsha acknowledges the difficulties she faced, such as her dad's illness and death, the challenges of moving and adjusting to new environments, and the demands of her medical training. Despite these challenges, she maintains a positive outlook and a strong sense of purpose, emphasising her commitment to her education and medical career goal of becoming a consultant.

Lily's Chronological Plot	
Who are the main characters in this story?	**Lily:** The participant and narrator of the story. **Lily's Mum:** Lily's mum experienced her own mental health challenges, and the two had a sometimes-strained relationship. **Lily's Dad:** A source of support for Lily despite his own experiences of alcoholism. **Lily's Older Sister:** A strong and supportive relationship with Lily. Often took on the role as protector. **Teachers**: Specifically, a secondary school food tech teacher and a sports coach. **Friends:** Lily would spend lots of time with, as well as moving into their home. **Stepdad:** Lily's mum's husband, with whom she had a strained relationship with.
What are the main events?	**Parents' Separation:** Lily's parents had a turbulent relationship but ultimately separated when she was eight. **Primary School Experience:** Attending a Catholic primary school and feeling stigmatised for not being Catholic and not having a 'traditional' family dynamic. **Mum's Suicide Attempt:** Lily experienced her mum's suicide attempt around the age of eight after she had come home from school. **Transition to Secondary School**: Facing bullying and significant health issues during secondary school. **A Levels**: A sense of 'growing up' **Engagement in sports:** Participation in swimming and gymnastics, leading to a career in sports coaching. **Getting a car:** Lily describes this as 'freedom'.

	Deferred University: Lily deferred her entry to university to gain life experience.
	Family Dynamics: Lily's evolving relationships with their parents, sister, and stepdad.
	Career and Education Decisions: Lily decided to change careers and pursue higher education later in life.
When and where did these events take place?	**Early Childhood:** Lily's primary school years.
	Secondary School: Transitioning to secondary school without most of her peers (as they had attended the local Catholic school), dealing with bullying and health issues.
	Adolescence and Early Adulthood: Involvement in sports coaching, living in shared housing, and working at a local leisure centre. Lily also moved out of her mum's house at this point.
	Adulthood: Pursuing a psychology degree through the Open University, dealing with family dynamics, and navigating personal challenges.
How has the participant positioned herself in the story?	Lily positions herself as somebody who has experienced significant challenges throughout her life. She reflects on her experiences with a sense of understanding and acceptance, acknowledging the impact of her family dynamics on her life choices, education and personal development. Lily highlights the importance of supportive relationships, both within her family and in her educational and professional environments. She has taken a proactive approach to her career and education, seeking personal growth.

Arthur's Chronological Plot	
Who are the main characters in this story?	**Arthur:** The participant and narrator of the story. **Arthur's Mum**: A significant figure, especially during the early years and the family's relocation. **Arthur's Dad:** Mentioned in the context of his illness, separation from the family, and his death when Arthur was in primary school. **Arthur's Stepdad**: Entered the family when Arthur was young and played a significant role in their life.
What are the main events?	**Parental Separation**: Arthur's mum had cancer, leading to the parents' separation. **Relocation**: Arthur, his mum, and sister moved to a new town when he was five. **School Transition**: Initial behavioural issues at the new school, followed by academic success. **Dad's Death**: Arthur's dad passed away suddenly when the participant was in year 6. **Secondary School**: Continued academic success and a supportive family environment. **Family Relocation Abroad**: The family moved to another country due to the stepdad's job and to keep the family unit together. **University and Independence**: Arthur stayed in the new country for university and pursued a career in architecture. **Career Development**: Focus on sustainability in architecture and ongoing professional development.

	COVID-19 Pandemic: Impact on living arrangements and work. **Continued Education and Professional Achievements**: Arthur has ongoing engagement in learning as an adult and has completed meaningful and impactful work in their field.
When and where did these events take place?	**Early Childhood**: Moved to another town at age five. **Primary School**: Initial schooling in the new town. **Year 6**: Dad's death occurred. **Secondary School**: Continued in the same town. **Family Relocation**: Moved to another country during secondary school. **University**: Stayed in the new country for university. **Career**: Worked in architecture, focusing on sustainability, with various relocations and professional developments. **COVID-19 Pandemic**: Lived in a rural town, then moved to a city to settle.
How has the participant positioned himself in the story?	Arthur positions himself as a person who has navigated various challenges and major transitions throughout his life. He acknowledges the support of his family and the impact of significant events, such as their parents' separation and his dad's death, on their personal and academic development. Arthur recognises his academic achievements and professional growth, highlighting his passion for sustainability in architecture and his ongoing commitment to education and professional development. He also reflects on the importance of agency and making meaningful contributions in his field.

Appendix M: Transcript Exerts

Transcript exerts of reading in a holistic manner. Colours represent the author following individual themes throughout the story.

Morgan

51 P: Absolutely, her whole family, to be honest, because everything was so chaotic in my family
52 because my mum was obviously struggling with that and my dad was in a really bad place
53 because he ended up breaking up with the woman that he'd left my mum for and then he was
54 just and my dad didn't have the best boundaries in terms of what to discuss with us and what
55 not (laughs).

56 I: OK.

57 P: So, I think all of that was so chaotic and difficult that that night was mostly... over (best friend)
58 all the time and her parents sort of became like a second family as well, and it was almost like a
59 safe place then, so when she didn't come with me... it was like having a comfort blanket sort of
60 taken away.

61 I: Yeah. That's really hard.

62 P: Yeah, it sounds silly, doesn't it? Cause it's like. It's just a friendship. So it's like, you know, year
63 seven friends, like all your friends are in the same school, boohoo, kind of thing, but it's also like,
64 at the time, we sort of really did need each other and it feels so much bigger at that point in your
65 life doesn't it? But yeah, we we eventually she came back and I was getting quite badly bullied
66 until she came back. And then for some reason when she came back, everyone I think everyone
67 thought I made her up (laughs) She came back to school they were all like, oh, you do have a
68 friend. Cool. We'll lay off, OK.

Laura Chapman ··· ✏ 👍
Really get a sense of how difficult the home environment was

@mention or reply

Laura Chapman ··· ✏ 👍
Boundaries with Dad

@mention or reply

Laura Chapman ··· ✏ 👍
Trying to manage with two struggling parents

@mention or reply

Laura Chapman ··· ✏ 👍
Another mention of chaos

116 P: Yeah. I think I have a lot of memories of my mum being quite down, quite overwhelmed by
117 things like what I've just described about my sister kind of taking it out of her. I remember her
118 trying to journal to get her emotions out. And then my sister found the journal and read it. And
119 obviously that was really tough on both of them because my sister again didn't really
120 understand. She just read a lot of stuff bad about my dad and then it kind of escalated that
121 situation whereas... I kind of understood it all, not completely so still young, but like I kind of
122 knew it wasn't my mum's fault, but like trying to manage my sister's moods and then also- kind
123 of step in for my mum. I think it was- trying to be strong emotionally, and also trying to mediate
124 between the two of them.

125 I: Yeah, mediate.

126 P: Yeah, I think that's sort of a theme with my family, is that I've... sort of being the one that's
127 kept my cool most of my life and they all have quite strong emotions. Um my mum's not so bad
128 when nothing big is going on, but understandably, when something big is going on it's harder, but
129 yeah, my dad and my sister are very fiery. I've sort of always had to be the one that kind of levels
130 it.

131 I: Yeah, simmers the fire down a bit.

132 P: Yeah (laughs), I think that... obviously all is going to have an impact. On. Them being able to
133 manage at school because you're you've got a lot going on. But yeah, and then I think in year 9, I
134 fell in with the music crowd and I went sort of all about my peers and I kind of just distanced
135 myself from the family and I was just out all the time like.

136 I: Hmm.

137 P: Um, I remember my year sev- my favourite teacher from year seven, who was my head of year
138 in year nine. He called my mum in and said that he was worried about me because since I

Laura Chapman
Needing to understand 'adult' themes at a young age

Laura Chapman
Empathic - thinking how hard it was for everybody else

Laura Chapman
Mediation

Laura Chapman
Mediation

> **Laura Chapman**
> Having to park own emotions

139

Marsha

205   I: Well that I was just thinking, was there anything that sort of kept you going towards that goal?

206   P: I think I just like being smart. You know, I did. And because it's not like I have anyone in my
207   family who went to uni, no one else in my family went to uni, and only I went to Uni. My mum
208   never pressured me. She wasn't- it's not like some of my colleagues who were like, "yeah, my
209   family are doctors".

210   I: So it was more like an internal pressure that rather than a anyone externally pressuring you to.

211   P: Yeah, but see, it's like I wouldn't even call it pressure, though. I didn't feel pressured to do it at
212   any point and it was more, I think I was more driven. It's probably the better word because I feel
213   like pressure almost is like there's negative like and being pushed to go that way. So I think I was
214   more, you know, I wanted to do well and maybe that's from coming up from. You know, my mum
215   was single for the majority of my upbringing. I was like, no- I wanna get good job, I wanna earn
216   good money and maybe it's coming from that like working class. But if you can call it working
217   class, I don't know. Maybe, from a poor background and maybe being in (private school) as well
218   where you're surrounded by loads of rich kids. Maybe that was a driver, I don't know. Like I
219   definitely did feel like I was one of the less well-off kids in (private school). It's not like my
220   parents like throw money at me and give me a car and all this nonsense. So maybe that was a
221   driver?

222   I: Yeah, it's an interesting being coming from that background and being surrounded by peers
223   who have, that's, yeah, that's an interesting dynamic.

224   P: It was weird (laughs). It was weird. Again, not sure if it's a good or bad thing, definitely felt...
225   different like you could definitely tell grown up like you. You do feel different to your peers,
226   especially you know when they're rocking up to school, in their Land Rovers and they have, you
227   know, horse riding parties and all sorts of things and nonsense.

Laura Chapman
A sense of success, and something different to how and where she had grown up
08 January 2025, 13:45

Laura Chapman
Wanting a better future for herself

Laura Chapman
Wanting a better future as well as seeing that all around you

Lily

248 P: I think, I just didn't want to live with my mum anymore. So I was out. I was gone. I think
249 stemming back from what had happened like there was still a lot of unanswered questions and
250 she'd remarried. And I got a younger half-brother. And then when my sister moved out, its kind of
251 just felt... I was the lodger in the house of her new family, and I was just *there* and not very much
252 welcomed.

253 I: So was the relationship quite strained? And with stepdad, did you call...

254 P: Yeah, massively. Yeah. Stepdad. Yeah. The first few years of their relationship, it was tough,
255 really tough, because his name is the same name as my dad's (name) and my sister's first
256 boyfriend. (laughs). Yeah, and I suppose the rebellious teen, was there, a little bit later because I
257 was in hospital, obviously 12 to 14, and I kinda like, I think I like between 16, yeah, between
258 about 16 and 18. I was teetering, got my car, and that was it. I was gone.

259 I: Can you tell me more about that, because you had sort of held it, held it and then?

260 P: Well, I did move in with my dad for a bit, but it was not great. Uh, because again, like him,
261 being an alcoholic, it was, not in a, horrible sense, like fend for yourself, but he wasn't there as
262 much as my mum. And even though my mum and I- like I still did my own stuff, still did my
263 washing still cooked and things like that when I was younger, cause I enjoyed it. Like, just, not
264 having someone as a figure kind of there as much as what my mum would have been.

265 I: Did your dad have a partner or anything, or was it just you and your dad at home? So you had
266 that freedom?

267 P: No he didn't. Completely. Completely. Yeah. Come home when you want. Not in a I don't care
268 kind of way, he trusted me. Like he did bring me up very streetwise and he knew that if
269 something was wrong, I would ring. I wouldn't hide from it and I would come, I would come
270 home at a reasonable time. I didn't hang around on the streets until three four o'clock in the
271 morning. But yeah, it's very, *very* different. And I didn't like the long walk to school. But I think it
272 was- and like living with my dad, being an alcoholic, it was very much a sense of parenting him

Not feeling a part of the family, especially when her sister left, last piece of the nuclear family that was

@mention or reply

Laura Chapman
Challenging relationship with step father

@mention or reply

Laura Chapman
Car providing freedom

@mention or reply

Laura Chapman
Transition between homes

@mention or reply

Laura Chapman
Maturing faster, a lot of responsibility at a young age

@mention or reply

Arthur

92 P: Exactly. The one, the complication, and I don't know how this might impact what you're
93 looking at, in terms of the the narrative that happened and the stories that unfold. When I was in
94 year 6, at the very end of my primary school journey, my dad very quickly in the space of a week,
95 he had a suspected- (pause) there was a clot on the brain in the first instance, and again, you
96 know, we two and a half hours ago were told that there'd been a problem. He'd had to go into
97 hospital. He wasn't very well. We spoke to him a couple of days later. He seemed in an OK
98 mood. And then was woken at 11:00 in the evening to rush over to (hospital) to find out that he's
99 not waking up again,

100 I: Oh gosh, I'm sorry.

101 P: So that was a, another, another part of the messy story of child of divorce and you know you
102 see someone four or five times a year, and then you get shaken awake and taken in the car to
103 find out that they're- you're not gonna go and see them anymore. Really. But it's just, I I don't
104 know again how that might play into any part of the narrative or be any part of.

105 I: No, I- well, it is, isn't it? Because, you know, if you were within a home with both parents and
106 not feeling so disconnected...

107 P: The flip side being, of course it affected our daily life much less than it would have. If we'd
108 been in that- even if my parents had divorced and we'd still been living in the same post code,
109 town, school, catchment area- because then he would have been a daily or maybe not daily, but
110 a more common part of our lives through that early development period and his loss would have
111 been that much more acute. Whereas as it was... It was about a month a year of activity and
112 actually seeing him and being with him that got cut out of our lives and because it was that
113 those increments that week, maybe, three months might pass between seeing him. It was much
114 less impactful.

Laura Chapman
Sense-making

@mention or reply

Laura Chapman
Sudden death of father, as a result of the separation there was a distance to travel,

@mention or reply

Laura Chapman
Deeper understanding of self, understanding the impact of divorce

@mention or reply

Laura Chapman
Interestingly seeing the 'positive' in a extremely difficult situation. Taking a different perspective

@mention or reply