

“It’s not like I’m on my own”: recognising and recording the experiences of estranged students in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of institutional research undertaken at a post-1992 university in England funded by a Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute Award 2017/18 to record and recognise the experiences of estranged students in higher education. Estranged students often have no contact with their family and are studying at university without the support and approval of a family network. Little is known about the experiences of estranged students at university and the research reported here aimed to fill that gap by giving students the opportunity to take photographic images on their smartphones over a university vacation. This institutional research focused on the ways in which the university currently supported estranged students with a view to offering practical ways in which the institution could improve that support. This paper also reflects on the usefulness of photo-elicitation as a research method with estranged students.

Keywords

Estranged students, family, support, experience, photo-elicitation

Introduction

In late 2017 the author received a Lincoln Higher Education Research Award (LHERA) for a project to record the experiences of estranged students using photo-elicitation¹. As an institutional researcher in widening participation, familiar with the campaigning and advocacy work of the charity Stand Alone who support people estranged from their families including students, an identified lack of academic research with estranged students particularly of a qualitative nature (Bland and Shaw, 2015)^[1] and conversations with colleagues revealed a dearth of institutional knowledge about these students. This gap, and the opportunity to try a different research method, photo-elicitation, were motivations for the study. The sociological method of photo-elicitation offers an alternative way to explore individuals’ experiences and participant produced photographs could offer estranged students an empowering and purposeful approach to document their reality: ‘*Visual methods, particularly participant-generated photographs, help elicit detail from nuanced personal experiences*’ (Mills et al., 2017, p.12). Offering students an opportunity to engage in digital research by taking images of their student experience using their smartphones (multifunctional mobile device) seemed appropriate when recent data suggests almost eight in ten UK adults (78%) use a smartphone (Ofcom, 2018). This paper explores this LHERA project undertaken in 2018 with eight estranged students at the University of Lincoln (UoL), a post-1992 university located in the East Midlands of England, UK. It recognised and explored the experiences of estranged students and provided the institution with several recommendations in order to better support its estranged students.

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Review of literature

The term 'estranged student' is a relatively recent one in Higher Education discourse while the study of estrangement is predominantly in the fields of psychology and social work (Costa, 2018). From the latter, Agllias' definitions (2017) may help us better understand what has happened to students who define themselves or identify as estranged. She refers to the 'estrangee' as a: *Person who has been physically or emotionally estranged, disowned, or cut off by a family member or members. An estrangee does not choose the relationship dissolution. Whilst an 'estranger': Chooses to dissolve a family relationship, or emotionally distance themselves from a family member or members. They may declare this position to the other party, stop contact without an announcement or use emotional withdrawal to maintain distance. An 'estranged person' has no, or limited, emotional and or physical interactions with one or more family members, regardless of how this developed, and feels in some way dissatisfied with this arrangement. This can be an estrangee or an estranger* (2017, p.8).

The reasons given for estrangement are varied and may differ between parents and children, for example, Carr et al (2015) found that parents tended to cite more intra- and inter-family reasons such as divorce, entitled behaviours and objectionable relationships for estrangement whilst children cited more intrapersonal reasons, or the characteristics of their parents, such as toxicity. Students become estranged from their families because of abuse, clash of values and mismatched expectations around family roles. It may also result from divorce, forced marriage and family rejection (OFFA, 2017). Most estranged students remove themselves from a family situation without professional intervention and have never had contact with social services (Bland, 2016).

There are several definitions of 'estranged student' prevalent in HE which are related to the language used to establish eligibility for financial support. For example, the Student Loans Company, the government non-departmental public body providing loans to students in the UK, considers an estranged student in England to be: *Irreconcilably estranged from your parents, you won't have had any written or verbal contact with either parent and this is unlikely to change. Usually, for a period of at least twelve months* (SFE 2018, np).

Stand Alone, refer to a lack of contact with family more widely, noting that estranged students are studying without the support and approval of a family network (Stand Alone 2018, np). Students, of whom the majority in the UK are under the age of 25 - 69.0% in 2017/18 (HESA, 2019) are adults in the legal sense but are viewed as dependent on family for the purposes of accessing statutory finance from the relevant student finance body in the UK (Bland, 2018b). Estranged students do not have access to this source of financial support which it is assumed students are able to fall back on if they need it, nor do they have the familial contact and support other students receive, in particular, emotional support to help them cope during times of stress (Bland and Stevenson, 2018). This research sits within a theoretical framework which was informed by concepts of capital particularly familial in HE but Bourdieu's work (1986) was not used as an explicit framework for the research. I tried to be mindful that concepts of capital can risk a deficit view of students from less privileged backgrounds – that somehow the students themselves are at fault for not having access to family capital and that they somehow need fixing (Stevenson et al., 2010).

According to data from Stand Alone there were approximately 70 estranged students at the UoL in 2017 (Bland & Shaw, 2015). However, indicative conversations with colleagues suggested that while there was some communication with ES, for example, when they sought advice in relation to applications for estranged status via the Student Loans Company, there was no recording system in place to say for certain how many estranged students were at the university. This is not an uncommon story in the HE sector, as estranged students '*remain largely unidentified and invisible in relation to student support and policy making*' (Bland 2018a, p.69). In addition, Bland and Shaw's research (2015) also suggested that one of the biggest barriers estranged students face is a lack of understanding around familial estrangement such that it is regarded as '*taboo*' (Taylor and Costa, 2019, p.1). This provided a further impetus for the project as the study sought to raise awareness of both the existence and the experience of estranged students. The UoL also made for an interesting case, since estranged students prefer non-Russell Group institutions based on their perceptions of the

support available and because in the absence of family *'they lack the social capital or confidence to apply to a higher tariff university'* (Bland & Shaw, 2015, p.17). It was hoped that the project would usefully contribute to an institutional focus on the student experience and assist the UoL in its aim to promote fair access and widen participation as it will be better placed to help estranged students' access, continue and succeed whilst at university and achieve an *'equitable student experience'* (Bland 2018a, p69). Moreover, the Office for Students, the independent regulator of HE in England, refers to estranged students as an under-represented group of students in its recent Access and Participation Plan (APP) guidance suggesting that universities may wish to consider how they support estranged students in future APPs (OfS, 2018).

Research design

This qualitative research study adopted a participatory approach which involved the students throughout the project. Participatory research is *'intended to benefit the group from which the participants are drawn'* (Vigurs & Kara, 2017, p.13). It used the visual method of photo-elicitation – the taking and usage of photographs, as the basis for focus group interviews with the participants. Photo-elicitation is frequently used in sociological studies and is considered a useful approach to engage vulnerable groups or marginalised communities in research since it provides an opportunity for participants to document their reality (ibid. 2017). It can also provide structure to the interview, produce richer data and help create a better balance in power dynamics (Bates et al., 2017).

Institutional ethical approval was secured in December 2017. At all stages of the project the students were asked if they were happy to participate and had the choice over whether the images they took were shared with other students, staff and in any publications. Issues of consent were discussed with the students in the recruitment emails, at the introductory meeting, at the focus group sessions and during the writing of the report and subsequent publications.

Recruiting students to the project proved rather more complex than had been anticipated in the project proposal. After lengthy deliberation about the most appropriate and ethical way to do this an email was sent out to all students in early 2018. Of the students who met the eligibility requirements, eight met with the researcher at one-to-one meetings to provide information about the project, instructions for participation and to talk through issues of consent.

Estranged students are three times more likely to withdraw from university than the average student, with lack of finance a key driver in this decision (Stand Alone, 2018). It was important to financially recompense the students who contributed their time to this project, and they received Amazon e-vouchers at three stages of the project totalling, £45.

There were also concerns that participants might experience distress or discomfort as a result of taking part in the research and the researcher signposted the students to the contact details of relevant university support services in the email sent to prospective participants and on repeated occasions as well as signposting them to website of the charity Stand Alone.

The students were asked to take a series of images over the Easter university vacation which represented their student experience. This period is significant since it is assumed that most students return home and spend time with their families during university holidays. Indeed: *'The holiday periods are windows in which estranged students become particularly vulnerable, slipping between the net of parental responsibility and the responsibility of the local authority'* (Bland & Shaw 2015, p.12).

The latter only applies if they are defined as care leavers otherwise there is no local authority statutory support for estranged students who have not been in local authority care. While the experiences of estranged students and care leavers or care-experienced students in HE appear to share much in common (Bland and Shaw, 2015) care leavers are distinguished by having spent time in local authority care, although research by Harrison (2017) notes the lack of standardisation in the use of the terminology used to define care leavers and care experienced students across the HE sector.

As well as access to financial and emotional support from their families many aspects of university life seem to take students' relationships with their families for granted such as having a family home to return to during university holidays and once studies are completed (Bland, 2018). After the Easter holiday, the students attended focus groups where the images they had provided were shared with the other attendees and discussed. The students' comments about, and reactions to, these images were audio-recorded with their consent. Research questions explored perceptions of support, belonging and home; three key issues highlighted in the quantitative research from Stand Alone (Bland & Shaw, 2015). The audio-recordings were transcribed, and the transcriptions were analysed thematically using the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo. The students were also encouraged to complete a research log of the images they took during the holiday in which they described the image and what it meant to them. Six of the participants completed these logs along with 49 images which were shared securely with the researcher prior to the focus groups.

Results and Interpretation of Findings

Estrangement

The students' experiences of estrangement varied greatly amongst the eight participants and were complex and changing; some students chose not to be in contact with their parent(s) while others did not have a choice; some of them were in contact with a sibling, grandparent or godparent but others were not. One student had been in local authority care before university, one student was adopted, and one had experienced the death of a parent. Seven of the eight students were not in contact with their biological parent(s). One lived with an adoptive parent who did not approve of their lifestyle choices. This seemed to confirm what is known about the blurry nature of estrangement – importantly the latter student identified with the statements in the recruitment email pertaining to estrangement. For the most part their estrangement was hidden from other students and staff and was not acknowledged. There was some consensus amongst participants that other people had little experience or knowledge of family estrangement and in trying to understand it, friends could offer platitudes that whilst, well-intentioned, were ill-informed and sometimes hurtful. Here, S4 describes how estrangement can be a decision made by a child to protect themselves:

I mean people forget it's something that's, it's not, you didn't just choose to do it, something, things happen over however many years or whatever and you are forced into that situation which is kind of like, you or them.

Disclosure

For most of the participants, in this study, communication with the university about their estrangement was primarily in relation to having to prove their estranged status to access Student Finance (loans for tuition fees and living costs). Estranged students must provide evidence from an independent, trusted person, such as a tutor, that they have had no written or verbal contact from their parents for 12 months before the start of their course and that they expect this situation to be irreconcilable.

When participants did reveal their situation to friends at university, most of them felt that they were judged negatively but this was not always the case. S8, for example, tended to confide in university friends but it had taken time for this confidence to develop:

I'm very comfortable with friends knowing and that's again building up a personal relationship. It's not something I am open, well I am quite open about it, if it lasts then I will tell them but it's something I've had to learn to be open about over time, it's taken quite a few years to get to this stage.

Several participants had disclosed their situation to a personal tutor or other member of university staff and had had a very positive response and subsequent experience:

I think they sort of, I think the Head of year, every year, is made aware of previous things, and they're really supportive and again, if I need any extensions and stuff [S6].

But there were times when participants felt that university staff had not dealt with their disclosure very well, possibly because they had not encountered estrangement before:

I was also a little bit concerned about how my personal tutor dealt with my estrangement to the extent of I was thinking about asking for another personal tutor because she doesn't deal with it very well and asking a lot of probing personal questions which I felt was quite irrelevant and made me feel quite emotionally tired, err, drained, so that was a consideration when I had to sort of go through that process because she just didn't deal with it very well, I don't think [S8].

The students were very conscious that HE operates on certain assumptions about students – that they have parents or family, which can also shape the ways in which staff address them. S4, for example, struggled with the way a member of staff referred to his familial role as a father during conversation:

I don't think I can go to any of the staff on my course. My personal tutor is very like, he goes on and on and on about like parents and like that he's in Daddy mode when he talks to us and I just hate it really [S4].

These assumptions might also mean that key experiences such as visiting universities on Open Days or moving into student accommodation can be marked by anxiety and embarrassment (Fallon, 2017) when staff and other students refer to parents, for example, as S3 described, on moving in day:

Being a first year now, on the first day everyone was there with their families and stuff and I kind of just locked myself in my room, like a saddo.

The financial support system also operates on these assumptions about family which means that there are times of the academic year when estranged students face greater financial uncertainty such as the period between leaving school, college or work and starting at university:

It was quite a hard process mostly because student finance came in after my deposit was due, for example, so that was a really hard time, because there was that gap where obviously I was quite reliant on finding funds myself [S5].

Similarly, participants were concerned about what would happen to them once they completed their studies and talked about accepting any job offer they received in order to pay for rent because the alternative might be homelessness:

I was also very stressed because, you know, I had the dissertation and then I had the interviews. I need to have a job prepared because I'm graduating and I don't have a job yet, so, of course, I'm just constantly stressed [S1].

Student Experience: Vacations/Holidays

The Easter holiday was a challenging time for most of the participants – during university vacations the campus is extremely quiet, and most students return home to their families. As friends, housemates and course mates temporarily disappear, the isolation can be exacerbated by not knowing any other students in a similar situation: *'I was by myself, most part'* [S5].

The Easter holidays provided some of the participants with an opportunity to visit friends who remained in Lincoln, see new places and to relax:

I felt really good. To get away from the university was actually really nice. It was really nice to go and do something I don't normally do... I went to London, I've never done that before, go to London [S2].

Participants utilised a range of coping strategies to get through the Easter holidays if they struggled with the isolation including keeping busy, maintaining a routine such as going to the gym, paid

employment or voluntary work, doing household chores, studying and revising or enjoying leisure activities such as gaming or watching TV:

I spent a lot of time just walking around cos I was like from quite an isolated small town so being in the city was like quite liberating and like looking at the views and everything, so yeah, I mainly just walk around [S7].

The importance of access to different spaces other than a student home, flat or room in other buildings emerged in the focus group discussions. Access to buildings such as the Library, accessible on a 24/7 basis, were one way in which estranged students negotiated the Easter vacation: *'Even if it was just sitting in the Library it's better than sitting in the house'* [S4].

For participants who still had friends in the city over the Easter holiday, spending time with them was important to their wellbeing. All the participants were fervent in their belief that friends were as important, if not more so, than family members because they provided much of the nurturing and support for an individual that it is assumed a family might provide, and did so willingly:

Most of the time I spent with my housemate, the one from the photo, he's from Italy so he also stayed here. I also spend some time with international friends with whom I had the dinner [S1].

Support

The research participants accessed emotional and financial support during their student experience. Much of their emotional support came from their university peers but some accessed institutional support mechanisms such as the Student Wellbeing service. Their opinions of the university support they had received were mixed and appeared to be shaped by its availability, for example, counselling:

'They are quite supportive though [the university]. Like obviously Student Wellbeing as well, give you as much counselling as they can' [S5].

They also accessed support from their NHS GP and at least two of the group paid for private counselling sessions despite the increased financial pressures they endured: *'I do private sessions just for that reason because it's easier. I mean private costs so much more but it's worth it for your own sanity'* [S4].

Some of the students had received financial support from the university in the form of the University of Lincoln Scholarship awarded to undergraduate students from households with an income of £40k and under per annum, as well as the University of Lincoln Financial Assistance Fund - Foyer/Supported Housing Bursary and the Summer Fund. They highlighted that aside from what they can borrow or earn, no-one else is responsible for them: *'They had a scholarship for me to pay off my housing when the university stops because I'm not here. So that really helped me'* [S6].

Some of them had also received information and advice from Student Support in relation to having to prove their status when applying for maintenance loans from Student Finance England. The participants had been unaware that the university supports estranged students before they applied to study at the University of Lincoln. The thought of accessing institutional support could sometimes feel uncomfortable, for example, the participants weren't keen on the idea of an estranged students support group which have proved popular at other universities² but they were keen for the university to recognise students more formally, for example, through the Stand Alone Pledge³, so that they were no longer invisible.

² For example, P.A.U.S.E. at the University of Salford: <https://www.salford.ac.uk/askus/our-services/diversity-and-faith/estranged-students>

³ A public commitment from a Higher Education Institution to support estranged students signed by a member of its senior management team.

Project participation and the use of photo-elicitation as method were considered therapeutic by some of the students. Although all eight students had volunteered to take part in the project, the act of taking images of their experience had been difficult since it necessitated confronting their situation:

It was hard for me but I don't like to think about being estranged and not being as close with my family as some people are, how my friends get excited to go home and be like 'Maybe my Mum will call?', it's kind of, I don't like to think about it, I don't really think about it [S1].

However, project participation also provided an opportunity for the students to reflect on their student experience and this could be positive since it highlighted their independence at university and for some, the extent of their involvement in, and enjoyment of, university life:

I really enjoyed it. I think it made me reflect on what I'm actually doing and made me realise, I don't know how to say it in a non-cheesy way, but that my life is not that bad, although university, when you look at it with tunnel vision, I looked at it and I really do love studying [S2].

The focus groups also provided an opportunity for participants to meet with other estranged students, which was the first time they had encountered other students with experiences like their own whilst at university. This, in itself, was considered reassuring:

So it was nice knowing, as somebody said they'd got the email from you, there must be other people then in the same situation... Because like you said it's nice to know that people are in the same position and, like, they deal with the same kind of things. So it's not like I'm on my own against this sort of thing [S6].

The images taken by the participants on their smartphones seemed to 'extend along a continuum' in much the same way as described by Harper (2002, p.13). At one end, there were 'visual inventories of objects, people and artefacts' with images in the middle depicting the institutional experience of university such as pictures of buildings and at the other end of the continuum there were images illustrative of the 'intimate dimensions of the social' (ibid.) which might include family or other intimate social groups, and in this instance were photos of participants' friends, pets and of themselves.

Conclusion

The motivation for this study was to provide an opportunity for estranged students at one university to share their experiences of student life in order to raise awareness of their situation and in so doing, reduce stigma and taboo around familial estrangement. The students were not asked to provide the researcher with any details about their experience of estrangement – they were simply given the option to identify with one, or more, statements about estrangement. This felt like the most sensitive way of engaging with the participants who had, for the most part, not shared details about their experience with any other members of staff. The anonymity of research participants is always a consideration in research (BERA, 2018), but it felt particularly pertinent in this project as some of the students expressed concerns to the researcher during the one-to-one meetings about who they might come across in the focus groups. Moreover, there were anonymity issues to consider in relation to the use of the visual materials produced and there was agreement that the project would not share any image which might identify a participant.

Some of the participants did see the focus groups as therapeutic and it was beneficial for them to talk to each other. The researcher clearly signposted participants to sources of university support and to the online information and resources from Stand Alone. Other considerations included care of both the researched and the researcher. Estranged students, as this and other studies have shown (Taylor, 2018), worry about people's judgement of their situation. Asking them to take part in this study and take photos was risky in some ways as it was so incredibly personal: '*The potential for distress is high when asking people to gather photos of and to discuss an upsetting and unpleasant experience*' (Bates et al., 2017, p. 465) and in the course of exploring their experiences through the images taken, many of the group did talk about their personal histories which required the researcher to be

supportive and empathetic but also clear that there were boundaries in terms of the support the researcher might provide.

The students in this study included estrangees, strangers and estranged persons. Some of them had not chosen the relationship dissolution but some had. Some of the students were estranged from one family member – usually a parent – or multiple family members including siblings. For some it was a relatively recent phenomenon, others had had longer to adapt to this change. Some were approached by a family member from time to time but preferred to maintain distance. Family included biological, adoptive, marital and social kin, for example, as a result of relationships between couples (Agllias, 2017). The complexity of family and familial estrangement was borne out in this study. For example, S4 spoke of visiting the area where her family still live *'so that's really stressful'* and of her Mum who reached out to her on occasion *'I physically can't deal with that again'*. Blake reminds us that *'Relationships between family members are often assumed to look and function in a certain way' and yet, as this study has found, they are actually 'complex and diverse' (2017, p.521).*

The students were concerned about disclosing their status to other students and staff. They worried that they would be judged harshly by others. Scharp's focus on adult children's experiences of estrangement (2016) found that *'Parent-child estrangement is a particularly stigmatising process'* (p.689) and the adults in her study who did not disclose *'thought that others would not understand or would evaluate them negatively'* (p.692). This fear was strongly articulated by the students and those who had told others about their situation often regretted it, as S2 explained:

Like I had this friend and she, every single time she saw me, she would just ask me 'Have you spoken to your mother?' and it was over a four-year period, so after her I never told anyone, I never told a soul... She'd be like 'Has your Mum not tried to talk to you?' and I'd say 'No' and she'd look like horrified – well that makes me feel great, so thank you.

As the research by Stand Alone had suggested, assumptions are made about the kinds of support that students can draw on during their time at university particularly in relation to family capital which were evident in this study. The need to be able to support themselves financially was paramount in the concerns of the estranged students and although most were in receipt of Student Finance and some institutional financial support, this worry was clearly articulated and appeared to shape their perceptions of what they might do once they had graduated with the need to simply find any job in order to pay rent. Emotional support came from friends who were the most important support network as Key had found in her study of estranged students (2019) as well as from formal channels such as Student Wellbeing and Student Support. However, aside from the opportunity to attend counselling sessions, the participants were unaware of the range of institutional financial support available to them or that the university formally acknowledged the existence of its estranged students. As Bland noted: *'a surprisingly low number of estranged students were supported by their universities, and many felt uncomfortable in coming forward for support or didn't know support was there for them'* (Bland, 2018a, p.85).

This study also shed some light on the assumptions that are made about what students do during university vacations. There is an expectation that most Home students return to their families. However, estranged students, like many international students, often stay on campus, in their accommodation or with friends and those that remain, particularly in this case at a small campus university, can struggle with the isolation. Importantly, the project also highlighted the many coping mechanisms and strategies that the students drew on to help them make the most of their student experience. During holidays this tended to include a routine and keeping busy. Many of the participants also used the holiday as an opportunity to spend time with the friends that were in Lincoln or visit new places both within and out with the city. As Taylor and Costa caution:

It is important to consider students' own definitions, as well as resistances and personal strength evident in all interviews. Often students face isolation, uncertainty, financial instability and experience

or fear of homelessness, and yet have still secured a place at College or University using whatever limited resources, personal and practical, to navigate barriers to their academic success (2019, p.4).

The findings of this study were shared with senior management and colleagues involved in access and participation. Findings, including quotes and images were also shared during a weeklong Twitter campaign spearheaded by Stand Alone. The Estranged Student Solidarity Campaign ran during November 2018 and colleagues from Student Support sent out the tweets to help raise awareness of estranged students and the range of issues they face along with signposting to institutional support and to the charity, Stand Alone. Tackling stigma had been a key objective of the original research proposal and this felt like an important step in that process. More recently, the University of Lincoln signed the Stand Alone Pledge⁴ and the institution has publicly declared its support to existing and new estranged students and to review that support going forward. Importantly, from 2020 new University of Lincoln students will be able to indicate on the enrolment form if they identify as estranged and will receive tailored information about the range of support offered at the university. There are still gaps in institutional and sector knowledge about estranged students, but we now have a basis from which to work at our institution.

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⁴ <http://www.thestandalonepledge.org.uk/champion-institutions/17-east-midlands/61-university-of-lincoln>

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