

## Manchester Institute for Psychotherapy

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# **‘The Lived Experience of a Young Child whose Absent Father Returns Home at the end of the Second World War’**

## **1. Introduction**

What is it like to have an ‘absent’ father? Research shows that this experience can take many forms and can lead to many different outcomes. Be it the result of marital breakdown, the impact of single parenting, the apparent decline in the value of the family unit, the economic climate, the industrial revolution of the 1800s or the impact of the two world wars in the early to mid-1900s, the devastation felt by any young child when their world is turned upside down from the actions or inactions of an absent father is irrefutable.

My own experience of an ‘absent’ father is somewhat different from the examples stated above. My father suffered a violent attack to the head when I was just five years old. As a result, the man I knew and loved in my pre-school years was very different to the man he became after his intensive hospitalisation in the late 1960s. The emotional distance, other than his displays of monumental rage, disdain or disapproval when his standards were not met, led to my growing up in an extremely disciplined and, at times, quite violently frightening home, with my siblings during our most formative years.

This ‘absence’ of a father, while also seemingly to be ‘present’, is the reason I was drawn to this particular topic as a piece of research. For whatever reason, it seems more and more, these days, that fathers are becoming increasingly absent than present, perhaps due to their work or financial commitments, leading to time away from their loved ones. Having said that, the children from these families today may not necessarily have suffered in the same way as those damaged from the ravages of war or from other types of serious, emotional neglect.

In this piece of research, I hope to be able to convey a deeper appreciation of the impact of emotional absence facilitated by the use of in-depth, qualitative analysis. In particular, the detailed exploration of a one-hour interview with my co-researcher was

carried out in such a way to ensure that the qualitative value of his lived experiences was adequately retained and upheld with full integrity.

There has been considerable research (both quantitative and qualitative) conducted in this field. Studies of father absence have identified children's behavioural, academic and social problems, each with unique features linked to their developmental stages, with males seeming to be disproportionately assessed in the context of father absence.

Impaired contact or lack of contact with fathers appears to have its most dramatic effects on male children (Bee, 1974; Hetherington & Cox, 1978; Mott, 1994). Of particular concern are masculine identity development (Mitchell & Wilson, 1967), school success and social prowess as essential ingredients of successful integration into adult life and the fulfilment of the male provider role. Findings across studies indicate these effects can be short-term, long-term, or recurring, in the lives of males (Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington & Camara, 1988). Other studies suggest the longer term consequences of father absence such as the development of inappropriate sex role attitudes (Biller, 1970), promiscuity and inter-personal problems with romantic relations (Hetherington & Cox, 1978, Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

In particular, the work of Lyn Carlsmith (1964) highlights the effect of separation from fathers on young men as a result of war. It compares the aptitudes, interests and other personality characteristics of boys whose fathers were absent during World War II with boys whose fathers had not been absent. She proposed that boys who were temporarily separated from their fathers during the early years of life identified primarily with their mothers, and this early identification would have certain measurable effects on the boy's later self-concept or masculine sex-role identity. Findings from her research were based on collecting data from 450 students in the Harvard class of 1964 where a sample of 20 father-absent students was selected for individual interviews and tests, all of whom had missing fathers at various ages in their childhood due to the Second World War. A matched sample of 20 students whose fathers were not in the armed forces was then selected as the control group. The outcome of this particular joint qualitative and quantitative research showed that the absence of the father in the early years of life had a number of powerful and long-range effects on the subsequent development of the child and into adult-hood.

Bill Tuttle's work, 'Daddy's Gone to War: Father Absence and its Differential Effects on Children During the Second World War and After' (1995), showed evidence that the problem for children was not primarily the separation of children from their fathers but rather, the manner in which the mother had dealt with the original absence and then how the relationship changed upon the subsequent return of the father.

The BBC's excellent documentaries relevant to this research topic, namely, 'The World at War', 'A Century of Fatherhood: Fathers at War' and the archive material retained from World War 2 memories in the 'People's War' all show, in graphic detail, the Second World War taking a generation of fathers away from their homes to serve in the war

effort. These men returned home as strangers to their families, some of them physically disabled, some emotionally broken, or both. In the time it took many to adjust to their new lives the deprivations of war, whilst making the simple pleasures of family life and fatherhood all the sweeter for some, this period did not necessarily provide the same reassurances to all.

## **2. Method**

In this piece of work, the approach taken during the study was that of 'relational-centred phenomenological research design'. This type of research involves conducting an interview with a co-researcher, where data is seen to emerge out of the researcher-participant relationship, clearly being co-created as part of the dialogue itself. A relational phenomenologist would say that much of what we learn and know about each other arises within the inter-subjective space between researcher and co-researcher. Each will touch and impact the other in certain ways, and it is this that affects how the research unfolds. In this way, the elements of ambiguity, uncertainty and unpredictability are likely to be the norm and anything can, and usually does, appear.

### *Participant*

Ian, my co-researcher, was chosen for this particular piece of research, because he fitted the criteria of being a young boy when World War II ended. Aged 76 at the time of the research, and having experienced life with his 'absent' father whilst growing up, he was an ideal participant (co-researcher) for this topic. Born in Crumpsall, Manchester, he completed his National Service during the late 1950s, has lived and worked throughout Britain and parts of Scandinavia, and ran his own business during the 1970s. He has been married three times and has three grown-up children. Now divorced and living alone, he chose to retire from his work as a Local Government Health & Safety Officer in the late 1990s and now works part-time at his beloved football ground in Old Trafford.

### *Data collection*

The method of research was to conduct a relatively unstructured, yet in-depth, interview with my co-researcher, spending an hour or so openly discussing his experience as a child being reunited with an absent father when he returned home after the Second World War. The interview was digitally recorded for the purposes of transcription and analysis, having secured prior, written agreement of this with my co-researcher.

Keen to see how the interview experience would impact him emotionally, Ian admitted to having some trepidation about the research, but was more than happy to participate.

Given the potential opportunity for him to discover something new, the prospect of further insights being revealed during the interview was a major driver for him. The interview was highly enquiry-focused, and deliberately so, as opposed to being therapy-based. On occasion, when Ian's recollections may have taken a tangent, it was important to bring things back to the time in question, mainly to ensure things remained on track and to avoid any risk of analysing the findings too early.

### *Analysis*

Upon typing up the digital recording in order to complete the interview transcript, this was initially subjected to a close reading of the text, plus all relevant researcher handwritten notes. The second stage involved re-reading the text, whilst listening to the recording at the same time in an attempt to draw out any relevant themes. The third stage involved revisiting the findings so that the themes could be categorised and captured in some semblance of order. This process was repeated a number of times over a period of a few weeks so that an accurate conceptualisation of the data could be achieved. The resulting analysis was written up in its entirety by the one researcher, having secured its approval upon sharing the entire document with the co-researcher.

### *Ethical considerations*

Whilst not a client-therapist exchange, this research was still bound by a clear set of ethical principles centred on the TA concepts that: we are all born OK, we can all think for ourselves and that we can all change. In addition, the boundaries within the researcher : co-researcher relationship were clearly stipulated from the moment the consent form was signed by Ian. As friends, it was imperative that our more usual or heated style of communication was tempered down to ensure a satisfactory and professional outcome. Confidentiality was also a major consideration whereby it was vital to convey to Ian that, whilst discussions were being recorded and information would need to be shared with relevant parties involved in assessing this piece of work, the digital recording itself would be deleted upon satisfactory submission of the finished research project.

## **3. Findings**

### *The concept of 'absence'*

Ian was asked to cast his mind back to 1945 and to think of the first time he remembered seeing his father return home after the war. He said that it was hard to picture this scene exactly as his father had already been coming home periodically

throughout the six years the war had been going on. As a result, the concept of absence was not as clear-cut as one might have imagined for a child whose father had been called up for the war effort. The periodic returns were whenever Ian's father was granted leave, perhaps three or four months apart, about a week or so at a time.

These times felt quite normal to Ian – his father came home and went back over a period of time that seemed somewhat indefinite to him, and life for a little boy, at the age of 3 or 4, playing with his baby brother and living life with his mum was good.

*"I can remember the lovely life I had up to the war finishing.....I remember sitting on his knee one day facing him.....and I said, 'You can go get 'em now, Dad'. I remember putting my fingers on his nose and twisting it saying, 'Just do that to the Germans'. I'd hurt his nose doing that.....(laughs), so up to the war finishing.....I was a lucky, lucky, lucky, happy kid. I know that."*

Hearing this, it was very clear that, as a child, Ian did not want this time to end. Despite it being a world where terrible things were happening, his view of life then was idyllic. It was an adventure, hiding during the air raids and playing at being the grown-up whenever his mother wanted him to "get rid of the spiders". The remainder of Ian's recollections were not particularly positive though regarding his father. How much of this is down to what or how he believes his mother would have viewed life back then is all down to speculation – however, what is abundantly clear is that the return of his father made life far worse and not in the least bit better.

*"My mother's life deteriorated when he came home. If I could have her sit here now, talking and thinking back, that's what she'd say".*

It was almost as if Ian's mind would go blank as he made any attempt to recall these memories. Blocking out images or having them frozen deeply in his subconscious mind, shows that much of what happened was not being given the chance to be properly processed. Certainly, Ian's resultant confusion and blankness would suggest this to be the case.

Whilst he had only a few memories of his father prior to the end of the war, those that he had of him after 1945 did not seem to convey a father who was any less absent. In fact, whatever was there as 'present' seemed to be couched with hostility and came across as potentially damaging.

*"I remember walking along the road with him, me and me brother, and our kid wasn't looking where he going and he went like that, turned round head-first into a lamppost and his eye come up like that. Do you know what me Dad did? Cracked him on the back of his head, 'Watch where you're bleedin' going!'.....he said that to a little kid"*

Ian answered questions about his father with lots of "I don't know" responses – it seems that little was shared at an emotional level between father and son. Physically present, yes (when he was not drinking), yet emotionally absent after the war, this did not create a happy time for Ian as a boy. He was not even conscious of having a father during this time – to him it was normal to have no-one there other than his mum. Why would he

feel anything for this semi-stranger anyway? In spite of the few fun moments between them, such as “having a go at the Germans”, there was little else conveyed to show that the absence was any less felt after the war. How much of this is down to Ian deliberately or unconsciously blocking memories out is difficult to say.

The ‘absence’ enquiry had created a series of almost vacuum-like responses from Ian. This may well have been ‘absence’ being discussed as a concept, but there was also ‘absence’ as a definite mode of thinking. The joy did come back, however, upon remembering his mother. Happy to talk about his experiences, it was obviously a struggle to recall very much when asked to think of the good times.

When it comes to raising healthy, well-adjusted children in a single parent family, we already know how important it is not to bad-mouth the other parent. It would have been critically important for Ian’s mother to provide some type of explanation for why his father was away and this was done beautifully with their night-time exchanges when both love and attention were much more than evident:

*“...I remember distinctly hearing the bombers flying about and not very far away from me two places were bombed, the ICI works which was only half a mile away. I remember those things distinctly but we went upstairs to bed and we’d get into bed and being two small boys we had, we had our fun and fights and whatever, but when me Mum was going downstairs she used to give us a kiss, lying down and me mum’d lean over and give us a kiss and we’d say “night, night Mummy” and “god bless Daddy” both of us said in turn and me mum said “night, night Ian and god bless Daddy, night, night Roy, god bless Daddy” and then as she was going down the stairs we used to shout it again and (laughing) I think she must have been absolutely, ‘oh please go to sleep’, you know coz all the way down the stairs she’d do it.”*

There is no evidence of Ian ever being told that he was loved, unconditionally or otherwise, by his father. His mother, however, reminded him of the love she had for him as her son, almost daily. Consequently, there was never any doubt in the depth of his mother’s love, no matter what he did or he got up to as a little boy. We know that actions speak louder than words, and nowhere does this apply more so than with our children. The messages that Ian picked up from his father were almost non-existent. As a boy, then, it seems that, in spite of not being able to remember much about what he felt about his father, the idea of, “I need to be the one to take care of my mum because she’s not being taken care of by my dad”, seems to be a recurring, unconscious thought.

### *Duty and responsibility*

It was obvious from Ian’s description that life during the war was a much happier time for him: he was the man of the house, doing all the chores, taking care of his mum and little brother, walking with her to the shops, feeling important, feeling needed and very much loved. His life had meaning and purpose and, as his mother’s support, he felt rewarded and fulfilled.

*“These are the times I can remember when me Mam made a big issue of me being the man of the house. I got preferential treatment coz I’m the man. I used to walk on the outside of the pavement like gentlemen*

*did and I linked me Mum and I'd open the door for her and those sorts of things. I was a man in me Mum's eyes..... I was only 5 or 6..."*

This mother-son symbiosis was very evident during interview. Identifying with her at every possible opportunity clearly showed Ian's devotion to his mother and also his contempt for his father. Ian's commitment to his role as the one taking care of his mother came across, so much so, that it crossed my mind, if this major aspect of his life should be taken away, what would he have had left to do? His concern for his mother was paramount. Ian's statement that,

*"The whole of life changed in the house because me Mum had a husband to look after as well as two kiddies and we had to take sort of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> place in her priorities then",*

resonated loudly. Despite this man coming back into their lives to be taken care of as a father and husband, Ian was also unhappy that his mother did not have a more comfortable life now that the war was over:

*"My Mum still went to work. Me mother worked. Me Dad was on twice the average wage of everybody in the road (working for the newspapers) and me mother still went to work. It would've been better for me Mum if he'd left. Me mother was a beautiful woman, she was.....Everybody loved me Mum, everybody. She'd have no trouble finding somebody to look after her. Well..... I'd have always looked after her....."*

Ian's role may have changed in terms of priority, but his sense of responsibility regarding all the duties his mother needed to carry out never left him. His father did nothing, apparently – his mother did all the chores with Ian's help and many a time, she would cry about how difficult things were and it was clear that these were the things she would share with Ian, making him promise that he would do nothing to antagonise his father.

*"...I remember my mother, err we had an open fire in the sitting room and you had to go through the sitting room, out of the kitchen, down some steps to a little hole in the wall where the coal was. And if we got our delivery of coal me Mam used to pile up a sort of brick wall with coal pieces to stop it coming out, you know? And one of these pieces fell off and hit her on the toe.....and she came in and cried and we never saw her cry and I remember me and my brother were both holding her, crying, saying' don't cry' you know? And she cried a lot, she err [pause 2 secs] she did, [pause 2 secs]*

As Ian relayed this closeness of emotional bond he had had with his mother, it struck me just how much I would have relished this in my relationship with my own mother. As a subservient, very traditional, Asian housewife, my mother would not have had the marital support or the level of emotional literacy required to openly share her feelings with her then very young children. The shame of showing any weakness prevented her from doing so. Her desire to show resolve and resilience overshadowed any intimacy in our discussions or true displays of spontaneity whilst we were growing up. One could say that, in my mother's eyes, her understanding of a sense of responsibility meant that she chose not to show her feelings.

This sense of responsibility, for Ian, on the other hand, came across quite differently: whereas my mother's thinking gave rise to a potential disconnect within human

relations, it was clear that Ian displayed this connection genuinely, with a desire for others to always receive his help or support. In TA terms, his “Please Me” driver was an important one for him. This was surprisingly obvious when, in spite of being in his own moment of sadness, he asked at the end of the interview about helping me with the transcription process,

*“Do you want me to write it all out now?”*

A strange question to ask given he would have no idea how to put a transcript together. How he would have gone about achieving this, had I said ‘yes’, is beyond working out: it is simply the fact that he said it as a supporting gesture that shows his level of eagerness to please. Throughout the interview, Ian conveyed a deep sense of responsibility for his mother’s happiness. For a small boy, this was a huge undertaking, something that provided a great many positive strokes and ensured an enduring sense of self-worth.

As a result, feeling good about himself was not too difficult a task – he just had to concentrate on making sure his mum’s needs were met. Over time, however, it became clear that much was changing.

### *Ever-changing relationships*

Life before the war was obviously something Ian could not convey with any real accuracy, so regarding how things were for his mother and father as husband and wife, we can only speculate. There was a miscarriage that Ian referred to that occurred in 1948, so presumably a level of intimacy did exist between his parents. Ian’s memories at this time though were simply ones that had him feel he was getting in the way and that all his father seemed to want to do was ‘dump’ his children at his mother’s (the boys’ grandmother’s) house.

*“.....Me mum had a miscarriage in 1948. She was poorly and I was how old, 12 weren't I? And Roy was 9 and me Mum was poorly. She's in bed and erm me Dad's mother came, my nana, now how the hell she got to know I don't know because there was no phones or anything like that. But we had the same doctor and maybe the doctor, Doctor Armstrong he was called, and his sister came and then they were sitting there and me Auntie Jean, me Dad's sister was insisting Roy and I play a game of Ludo of something with her on her chair. You know and the doctor's upstairs with me Dad and all the rest of it and me uncle and erm I'm trying to look what's happening you know coz the door to the stairs was like, where this one is here and they wouldn't let me look and I don't know where Roy was. I can't think where Roy was. And then an ambulance had taken me Mum away. You know where's me Mum, oh she's gone to hospital. [Pause 3 secs] And I remember me Auntie Jean telling me that.....And erm, we went to bed. And then the next day me Mam's not there so me Dad, me Dad said err "I'll be here when you come home, I'm having a day off" you know which he didn't have a day off so when we come home he said "Right come on we're going to your nana's". And that was his mother in Higher Broughton. And I said "What for?" and he said "Well I've got to go to work." I said "Well we'll be alright, don't worry we'll be alright". I was 12 then, I'd been lighting the bleedin' fire since I was 6! .....“No, you're, we're going to your Nana's”. And it*

*was a fair old walk, it was a good walk down Leicester Road, you know. And I remember saying to him on the way there erm "You've GOT to go there coz there's no food". I said "There's food." "Oh well, I've stopped the milk". The milkman used to come every day, you know, Eddie was called the milkman, loose milk, it used to come and then you pour it in the jug. "I've stopped the milkman". And I remember thinking, I won't swear but [laughing], the milkman's not been anywhere near the place. And he dumped us with his mother until me mother come out of hospital."*

Whilst his relationship with his own father was not a particularly warm one, it was clear that Ian had good relationships with many of his friends' fathers. This was an interesting dynamic during the interview – to discover that Ian's own father did little with, or for, him but that his friends' fathers did. Even displays of affection like, "messing up me hair when he saw me" were commonplace upon meeting up with his friends' fathers but not from his own father, "... ....my Dad never did that..."

This too, I connected with, remembering my own father's sternness and wishing desperately if only he had stayed the way he had been before his attack: softer and less harsh with us.

On re-hearing this part of the interview, I then considered, what did Ian want *his* father to do? How did he want him to be with him? Not having any real display of affection, it is not clear how Ian knew things were not right, other than possibly being gifted as quite an intuitive little boy. He knew his father regularly made stories up. Ian's own experiences as an adult, moving from one relationship to the next due to his own admission of infidelity, bears no resemblance to his father's life, but the lack of feeling any more settled may have had something to do with this parallel of bending the truth

The change in Ian's family relationships can be detected in the shift of his mother's attention to now focusing on his father, not because she no longer loved Ian, her son, but that her husband also needed her. She may have continued to show her devotion, but the bedtime ritual of "Good night mummy, God bless daddy" was never quite the same again. The special bond was broken. It became necessary to seek out new opportunities to help his mother out around the house. In a strange way, the fact his father did nothing much may have actually suited Ian, in order for him to be able to remain close to his mother.

There was also no sense of play between father and son after the war. The early days when Ian's father returned home on leave seemed to be filled with jest-like fun with "go get the Germans, daddy", but upon his return, when life, in theory, was supposed to be free from fear, something was stopping this two-way flow of wonder and amazement that would normally be part of any father-son relationship. Whilst duty may have prevailed back then for Ian, there was some real sadness in his voice as he relived this time in his life.

### *Heartfelt emotions*

Listening to the interview recording a number of times, Ian's anger for his father and sadness for his mother come across with distinct clarity. Together with his own hurt, there was a real disappointment in his father's lack of feeling and some considerable guilt for not having done more for his mother.

Ian's father had let him down – this message was quite clear – it seemed that people were always apologising for his father – the shame around the drink was something that Ian would have carried as a small boy. The shame of being humiliated in front of the whole family, when he missed school and had not have been able to attend in order to take all his exams due to foggy weather, was also being carried: his father had forced Ian to tell everyone at the Christmas dinner table that he had come bottom of the class, something which Ian, to this day, says he will never forget:

*"I was the eldest of six grandchildren and we used to go to me Nana's on Boxing Day. It was like you know, that's chiselled in stone. So we'd go to me Nana's Boxing Day morning, me Dad goes and he goes out on the beer.....with Fred and the other fellas but me Mum was quite happy for him to go with them because they used to make him come back. Our Christmas dinner was always ballsed up coz he didn't come back from the pub closing up at 2 o'clock, he didn't come back while 4 and we'd all be sitting there with our knives and forks waiting for him coming.....But this day we go to me Nana's and I remember sitting here and me Dad was opposite me and we had all sorts of bits and pieces for chairs you know, all of a sudden we got 2, 4, 6 adults and six grandkids and chairs were a bit, nobody had twelve chairs, we had sitting on the arm of this and that and the other. I was sitting here, me Aunty Jean was there and me Dad was down there with me mother and we're talking about things now, prior to that Christmas it had been foggy and I'd passed my exams when I was 11 to go to St. Margaret's Central High School here, from Crumpsall.....Start September, come Christmas it was foggy and me mother said, "you're not going all that way on the bus, the buses have stopped, it's foggy". Right? Honestly. So I didn't go for 2 days and that was those 2 days, 2 days of day exams for the end of the term.....So I did the one, I did 1 day and I get a school report and it says Ian D, 1 to 24 and where was I? 24. And there's some of us no marks and then there was others where they did, went on the final day and did do the marks and there was a mark there which me Mum said well you know.....average you know. A 4 and a 5 and a 10, whatever the subjects were and sitting at this dining table my Aunty Jean and Aunty Phyllis had said about me going to school coz I was the eldest I'd done the exam and I had done that. So me Dad said "Well tell 'em where you come in the class". And I said "What do you mean". And he said "How many children in your class" and I said "24". "And where did you come?" Me mother said "Shut up". I heard her say shut up and he made me say 24<sup>th</sup>. And I cried. [Pause 4 seconds]. [Gets upset] And me Aunty Jean, me Dad's sister said "Alan, come in here". And she took him out of the room, in the room where we were eating is silent then you know. I don't know what she said, but her husband, err Frank, he went with her coz I think they thought they might be fighting. Frank followed me Aunty Jean out and went to the other room and then err, to give him a right, and he never come back. He didn't finish his dinner, he got his coat on and went."*

Why his father felt compelled to do this was a mystery then, and still is, to Ian, other than his father was a man deeply troubled by his own issues, whatever they were, and

regularly drank and took his frustrations out on his children. Heartbreaking as this is, Ian relayed his story from a position of real strength. He feels he is the person he is today in spite of his father, not because of him – the lack of emotional connection that existed between his father and those around him is something that Ian struggled with, but is fully prepared to talk about and to no longer feel ashamed, despite it being something he will never forget.

Why his mother had to continue working was also deeply troubling for Ian. He was angry that life was no better for her and that “it should’ve been” due to the money his father was making working for the newspapers. There was no excuse, in his eyes, for his mother to be struggling, still working at the Post Office or doing jobs for everyone else to make ends meet. His father was a drinker and no-one in that house saw the benefit of the extra cash after the war……. “no-one, but the pub!” he said.

Ian’s anger was present as an undercurrent throughout the interview. It troubled me to sense that he may be directing this anger towards himself. He admitted to once hitting his father and feeling terrible afterwards. At a time when his younger brother was at the receiving end of his father’s wrath, Ian felt compelled to step in and take charge of the situation. Admittedly, this was not while he was a small boy, but even as a youth, he knew it was something not to be proud of……. “You never hit your dad……” again something he was not happy about, mainly because it upset his mother.

Whilst the main emotional flavour coming out of the interview was one of sadness, there was also a deep sense of emptiness where locked out, or locked in, feelings for his father simply could not be reached. Ian’s anger today, which comes across, at times, as one of righteous indignation at how the world is these days, stems from his sense of duty and what he believes to be right or wrong. Perhaps he is directing this anger at himself for not being able to make sense of why his father was the way he was? The Adult in Ian will rationalise everything in order to come to terms with his life, but that is not where the hurt lies – his Child will still, to this day, be wondering what it is that he did wrong for all this to have happened to him and therein lies the confusion and turmoil that came across during interview.

Ian does not feel that he was ever his father’s number one priority. To his mother, he is convinced that he was the world, but to his father, there comes across a complete sense of indifference. This feeling seems to be mutual and showered with such resentment for a man who did apparently little or nothing for him.

Whether Ian is now of an age where he thinks it would be futile to work anything out about his father, he does seem to have a number of unanswered questions, some of which are relevant to this research and form part of the Discussion section that follows.

#### 4. Discussion

In this piece of research, the findings from the interview suggest a total turnaround of Ian's world where life 'was never the same again'.

##### *Alcohol addiction*

It was abundantly clear that Ian's father, Alan, had a drink problem – throughout the interview Ian never once used the word, 'alcoholic', but what he did say gave a real sense of the misery it portrayed. Christmas dinners ruined, days out that never materialised, promises always being broken, little money left for everyday shopping, no treats at birthdays, his mother's tears and endless arguments between mum and dad.

As I listened to Ian's story, I could not help but think of my own childhood: promises that were broken, days out that never materialised, celebratory dinners ruined, no treats at birthdays. Other than the fact that my family did have money, the parallel was quite remarkable. You do not need a father addicted to alcohol to create sadness within a family; a violent blow to the head can give rise to the same sad and devastating outcome.

The absent father being the same as a present father makes sense given the role that drink played in Ian's childhood. He himself did not grow up as a drinker, not until he was well into his 30s – something he obviously chose not to do given the impact it had had on his own childhood.

He does not talk much about his father, Alan's drinking – the shame seems to serve as something of a shroud. What caused him to take to drink, though, may be worth exploring. Who knows what the war did to Ian's father? Who knows what he knew prior to marrying Ian's mother? I am aware, however, that many years after, while his father was still alive, and shortly after his mother had passed away, Ian shockingly discovered that he may not have actually been Alan's son.

So, did his 'father' do the honourable thing and decide to make an honest woman of Ian's mother even though he knew she was probably not carrying his child? Alan was not someone who would ever have shared his secrets so who could ever say they really knew the man? Why was he so inwardly angry that he had to turn to drink? Does Ian, as an adult today, know where this anger stems from? History tends to have a habit of repeating itself unless we consciously choose to break the cycle. Somehow, Ian has done so and has indeed broken the cycle, by living a life in a manner that little resembled his father's. As we are not our parents, we can choose to go beyond their histories and their patterns. Having said that, it would be very interesting to discover whose footsteps Ian did choose to follow, either consciously or unconsciously, when he decided to become a father himself.

### *Parental modelling*

Ian's life as an adult can certainly be described as a colourful one. With three marriages to his name and many other, so-called indiscretions, or relationships, one could argue that his experiences entitle him to being very well-qualified to comment on the ups and downs of life. He is proud to tell people that he is a graduate from the 'University of Life'.

Ian is not always someone who is sure about what to do in his role as a parent, that much I am aware of as his friend. His honesty does him credit, though – the fact he feels he needs to ask others if what he is doing is right, especially when I, myself, am not a mother, shows how keen he is to make it right for his children. Thankfully, the TA world has given me much that I am more than happy to share this with him.

With little to go by from his father, Ian must have been fortunate to have good enough role models around him. Not everyone drank, not everyone 'did nothing' to support their family. He was always aware that his younger brother became a carbon copy of his father, whereas Ian was nothing like him. How much of this was down to discovering decades later that maybe Alan was not his real father after all? Apparently, his second wife, who was very close to his mother, had this secret shared with her and his younger brother, but not with Ian. How this impacted Ian at the time is unclear – he still thinks his mother could do no wrong and that her reasons for not telling him were probably down to never wanting to be seen as anything less than the perfect mother.

Despite this probably landing as a huge bombshell, Ian chose to do nothing with the news, having received it from his wife shortly after his mother's death. He also chose not to approach his father about it. Any contact or exchange between father and son in adult-hood can be hypothesised as virtually non-existent, i.e. no different to when Ian was a boy.

Perhaps his father was unaware of the parentage? Perhaps his mother confided this in her daughter-in-law because it was important that she exorcised this secret before passing away? Could it have been a lie? Why would his wife lie about such a thing? Why tell his younger brother and not Ian, on whom she doted? Did her shame keep her subservient to her husband all those years in marriage? Who then, indeed, was Ian's father? How much is he a product of his genetic make-up and how much is down to being exposed to the environment in which he grew up? Where does the line of truth blur into fiction?

Even if it were true, as a child, Ian would not have known that this man was not his real father and would never knowingly have conveyed that he did want him as his dad. Could this, however, have had any bearing on how Alan was with his 'son'? Where does any feud or fall-out start?

Reflecting on the research, I recognise that my own history has had many secrets held within the family. Some I know have already died with their owners and gone with them to their graves with questions left answered; some secrets, to this day, are still very much alive and continue holding people to ransom, with a creeping paralysis that is stopping people I love from moving forward in their lives. The hold and power of such secrets cannot be underestimated. This research has forced both my co-researcher and I to consider how life might have been for each of us under different circumstances.

During the interview, Ian himself stated,

*"You would have thought that....emotions.....I felt then and....can remember now, would have made me a different parent."*

As a parent, Ian often feels he could or should have done more. Whatever issues he may have had with the respective ex-wife and mother, he always insisted on doing what was best for the children, ensuring they saw as little as possible in terms of disagreements or upset.

He now has two grown-up grand-daughters, both from his eldest daughter, this latter relationship being a connection that he is most deeply proud, always placing the credit down to his first wife for doing such a good job as a single mother. Perhaps even this serves as an indirect salute to his mother? Ian tends to take very little credit himself, saying that all he did was take his daughter to the football match from when she was six years old. He admits that his own father did do this on occasion with him, which begs the question: is this the only aspect of parental modelling that Ian had to rely on?

It troubles him if he and his daughter have even a hint of a disagreement between them. Whereas, he is quite happy to argue things out with me at fever pitch as two friends, he struggles if there is any risk of a fall-out with his daughter. He never wants to upset or disappoint her – this is clearly evident, even to the point of leaving things until he has the chance to thrash them out with me, rather than upset her. One could argue that maybe that's what friends are for?

His third marriage produced two children, a boy and a girl. A disaster of a time, in Ian's words, except for the children, even though both have been estranged from him for the best part of 20 years: perhaps this was Ian's mid-life crisis? At 40 years of age, what was he thinking, sabotaging his happy (second) marriage with a wild fling while abroad and ending up with a complete stranger, albeit stunningly beautiful, in the unexpected state of pregnancy??!! Teenagers today would have known better, oh dear....oh dear.....

Knowing this as part of Ian's history makes it somewhat easier to make sense of his ways. Not always prepared to think things through and, therefore, likely to make rash decisions, in many ways, this vulnerability, even as a grown-up, where he can still get it wrong, shows the honesty of living life from the heart and how frail we are as human

beings. Maybe we all need to remember this and be prepared to show these frailties more often. Something Ian's father chose not to do, which thankfully, Ian recognised must be done.

### *Script and early life decisions*

Only now is it apparent the level of confusion there must have been in Ian's mind as a small boy. What was it that he had done wrong to have a dad like this? As a child, that is no doubt that he had a strong "Please Me" driver coming from his mother. Whilst there was also evidence of a "Be Strong" driver, there was nothing to indicate a "Don't Feel" injunction. He was always encouraged to show his feelings, certainly when it came to being a little boy, crying, playing, shouting, being naughty and having fun. Even when he had a so-called 'telling-off' from his mother, he always knew that she loved him, no matter what, quite unconditionally. Hearing this from Ian, in spite of all that was wrong growing up, somehow provided a real sense of OKness.

From his father, though, we have a very different story: there is huge "Don't be Close" injunction and little in terms of drivers. It is almost as though it did not matter what Ian did, it would never have generated positive strokes. As a result, he had no idea what to do to make his father happy. It was all quite outside Ian's control. I am not sure even if he ever saw his father smile.

In terms of early life decisions, where would this put Ian? "I can't be happy until my mum is happy" or "I can only have fun after I've done all my jobs"?? This latter decision is the less likely one to have been chosen given the amount of 'fun' Ian made sure he had in his life – not always carefully thought through perhaps, but fun all the same.

It is the former decision that strikes me as pertinent as he still holds a deep sense of regret for not doing enough for his mother, back then as a child and even now as an adult.

His guilt (which I shall re-name, 'the mafia of the mind', courtesy of MIP's TA training) is something I sense very much wrapped up in Ian's sadness. When his mother died in 1970, he was 33 years of age, a young man, at a time when he was enjoying life, busy making his fortune, not giving his past any thought and certainly not expecting any of his childhood issues to impact him in any way. It was only during his more reflective moments, many years later, after recognising the distance that had been forced as a result of a very acrimonious divorce, that he started to look a little deeper into what could really be lying at the heart of this estrangement between himself and his other two children.

## 5. Conclusion

This piece of research, when considering the impact on a young boy of an absent father, returning home after the Second World War, during the early years of his childhood, highlights a number of issues relating to the effects of father-son separation.

Whilst this particular father may not have been absent by choice due to military service, his absence was still noticeable upon his return to the family home. Whatever the reason for this emotional distance, his elder son grew up with little praise and hardly anything in terms of role-modelling how a good father is supposed to be or what he is supposed to do.

Consequently, it was not surprising to find my co-researcher later becoming something of an absent father himself with his own daughter in the 1960s during his first marriage and then again with his son and second daughter in the 1980s during his third. *His second marriage, whilst arguably his most successful in terms of fulfilling life dreams, did not produce children.*

Whilst my co-researcher may vehemently argue any link here, stating his children's experiences would have been nothing like his own, there is no denying his absence or lack of presence when his own children reached school age, albeit divorce (and not war) being the reason each time. Both instances for all three of his children took place at almost the same age when his own father returned home from the war, yet continued to remain 'absent'. Finding that history had repeated itself, in terms of a timeline experience for his children, certainly resonated with my co-researcher, for in spite of doing everything not to be like his father, an element of absence had still managed to prevail.

This lack of good role-modelling, whilst significant in its impact, can also be shown to be overshadowed through the benefit of happier times spent with significant others. This will have been my co-researcher's saving grace. He adored his mother, and had uncles and aunts who were always 'rooting for him'. Whilst this may have led to some sadness and regret later on in life for possibly 'not doing enough' for his mother, there is little doubt that my co-researcher's humility in recognising the human condition shows a real desire to readily admit any vulnerability and to make peace with his experiences. ∞

*(8334 words, excluding title page, references, appendices)*