

Family Estrangement: Establishing a Prevalence Rate

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Abstract

Family estrangement, a communication cut-off between family members, remains a neglected topic in the research literature. The purpose of the present study was to establish a prevalence rate of family estrangement, identify precipitating factors leading to estrangement, identify the relationships of the estranged relatives, determine the length of the estrangement, and determine the level of stress caused by the estrangement. Data concerning the above factors were gathered from 354 undergraduate and graduate students. Overall, 154 participants (43.5%) reported experiencing an estrangement; 60 (39%, 16.9% of the entire sample) from 1 or more immediate family members (nuclear estrangement), 94 (61%, 26.6% of the entire sample) from extended family members (extended estrangement). The most frequently cited single causal factor leading to estrangement was a disagreement with the estranged relative in both nuclear and extended estrangements. Participants reporting a nuclear estrangement were estranged from fathers with the greatest frequency. Participants involved in extended estrangements were estranged from aunts and cousins with the greatest frequency. The mean length of estrangement in nuclear estrangements was 59.4 months; 52.8 months in extended estrangements. The level of distress reported by participants was greater in nuclear estrangements. Implications for clinical practice and future research are discussed.

Keywords: Estrangement, alienation, relationship, family discord

Introduction

Almost all Americans have nuclear family relationships. Since family continues to be a significant component in the lives of many persons, and given its established benefits, it is important to gain a better understanding of the problem issues that families experience as well as the risk and predictive factors that contribute to significant family relationship problems (Ryan & Conti, 2013). One indisputable sign of such problems is family estrangement. Family estrangement, a communication cut-off between family members, constitutes one of the family transitions, along with separation, divorce, remarriage, and adoption. Like the other transitions families undergo, estrangement might become a temporary or permanent condition.

Among the various family transitions, researchers have noted that estrangement is a relatively neglected topic (Agllias, 2011; Dattilio, 2010; Dattilio & Nichols, 2011; Galvin, Bylund, & Brommel, 2008; LePoire, 2006; Turner & West, 2006; Ungar, 1999; Vangelisti, 2004). However, it often becomes an issue in clinical practice (Agllias, 2011; Dattilio & Nichols, 2011). Consequently, prevalence rates are unavailable (LeBey, 2001; Richards, 2008). Recurring interaction is integral to family functioning (Emlen, 1995). Estrangement brings this essential process to a standstill and impairs family functioning, so it merits further investigation. Estrangement is mentioned in Genesis (27: 43, American Standard Version) and Job (19: 13, American Standard Version), suggesting it has been a culturally relevant phenomenon throughout history. Currently, family estrangement is the subject of many self-help books (Bloch, 2011; Boss, 1999; Davis, 2003; Herst & Padwa, 1998; LeBey, 2001; Lieberman, 2002; Sichel, 2004; Sucov, 2006; Tannen, 2001) and is often depicted in literary works and film.

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Internet search engines such as Google and Yahoo list over 776,000 and 890,000 estrangement related sites respectively (Richards, 2008). A July 2015 Google search listed over 733,000 estrangement related citations and over 580,000 citations dealing specifically to family estrangement.

1.2 A Proposed Definition of Family Estrangement

Conti and Ryan (2013) reviewed definitions of estrangement from numerous sources to arrive at an operational definition for research purposes. Significant contributors used the term estrangement to indicate a pernicious family interpersonal problem, significant, ongoing, and difficult or impossible to resolve (Benswanger, 1987; Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Ungar, 1999). Family estrangement is a distinct phenomenon, different from emotional estrangement, social estrangement, self-estrangement, structural estrangement, and alienation (Conti & Ryan, 2013).

Ultimately, the present authors proposed the following definition of family estrangement:

1. A complete communication cut-off between relatives, which means absolutely no intentional direct communication between the estranged parties. Indirect communication may occur, for example, through other family members or lawyers.
2. The communication cut-off is maintained deliberately or intentionally by at least one person.
3. The estranged relatives know how to contact each other. Neither is considered missing. Consequently, the cousin you simply have not spoken to in many years is not estranged. People who have unintentionally fallen out of touch are not estranged.
4. At least one of the persons involved claims that something specific about the other person justifies the communication cut-off, like something the other person did, does or failed to do.

The primary purpose of the present study was (a) to establish an overall prevalence rate of family estrangements, (b) identify precipitating factors leading to estrangements, (c) identify the relationship of the estranged relatives, (d) determine the length of the estrangement; and (e) determine the level of stress caused by the estrangement.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Participants in this study were 354 undergraduate and graduate students from four northeastern universities. See Table 1 for participant demographics. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 56 ($M = 24$, $SD = 7.1$), and 288 (81.4%) participants reported a marital status of single. The high proportion of single participants was probably related to the fact that over 80% of the sample was less than 27 years old and attending college. A one-way ANOVA indicated significant differences in marital status and age ($F(4, 349) = 75.54$, $p = .032$). A Tukey HSD post-hoc test indicated that single participants ($M = 22.08$, $SD = 4.0$) were younger than married participants ($M = 36.20$, $SD = 10.2$), divorced participants ($M = 36.0$, $SD = 11.2$), and separated participants ($M = 31.0$, $SD = 1.7$), but not participants who reported living together ($M = 23.7$, $SD = 3.6$). There were 283 females and 71 males. The high proportion of female participants reflects the demographics of the institutions (one was an all-female college) and departments of each college (most of the participants were psychology and education majors). Participants were awarded course credit for participation. Only three participants declined to participate; two had been in foster care or adopted and reported being raised in several different families and one reported her entire family was deceased. After obtaining informed consent and assuring participants of anonymity, questionnaires were completed in a classroom setting in groups ranging from 20-30 students. All participants were treated in accordance with the *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* (American Psychological Association, 2002) and in accordance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines.

Table 1 : Participant demographics (N = 354)

Gender <i>n</i> (%)
Female 283 (79.9)
Male 71 (20.1)
Age in years
Range 18-56
18-24 years 266 (75.1)
25-34 years 57 (16.0)
35-44 years 18 (5.0)
45-56 years 13 (3.8)
Mean age (<i>SD</i>) 24 (7.1)
Race
White/European 228 (64.4)
Black/African 48 (13.6)
Hispanic 59 (16.7)
Asian 18 (5.1)
Native American 1 (0.3)
Marital Status
Single 288 (81.4)
Married 41 (11.6)
Living together 15 (4.2)
Divorced 7 (2.0)
Separated 3 (0.8)

2.2 Materials and Procedure

Given the pioneering effort of systematically studying family estrangement, a trial-and-error approach was used in developing definitions and questionnaire items. After IRB approval was granted, initial questions were piloted several times on a small group of psychology graduate students. These students were fully informed of developing research ideas, and engaged collaboratively in the early exploration and critique of how items were worded and their precise meaning. Graduate student input led to the refinement of items. This led to a second phase of pilot testing, wherein sets of questionnaire items were administered to small groups of undergraduate students. Questions and comments from the undergraduates led to further refinement. This process was repeated twice more, such that a total of 33 undergraduate students took part in pilot testing.

During pilot investigations, clarifying statements were added including the estrangement is maintained deliberately or intentionally by at least one person, and neither person is considered missing. In pilot testing, it was found that without exception, the person maintaining this communication cut-off justified it by disparaging the character or conduct of the other person. Pilot testing also helped with refining the operational definition, including the concern about duration. Upon discovering that 3 of the 33 pilot participants were experiencing a recent communication cut-off less than 30 days, rather than losing data about recently emerged or potential cut-offs, a separate category of emergent estrangement, defined as a communication cut-off of 30 days or less, was created. All pilot participants who reported an estrangement lasting for more than 30 days were confident that this communication cut-off was long lasting.

Some participants reported being involved in more than one estrangement. The estrangements for each of these participants were independent of each other, but still involved family members. Following a series of questions based on this information, it was decided that to collect data on more than one estrangement would be burdensome. Participants involved in more than one estrangement were instructed to apply their questionnaire responses to the estrangement they felt was most significant. This was adopted as the final procedure as well, and was written into the directions on the questionnaire. Each participant received a packet containing an informed consent form, a demographic questionnaire, and a questionnaire developed for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire included the following criteria for family estrangement printed in bold:

1. A complete communication cut-off between relatives, which means absolutely no intentional direct communication between the estranged parties, duration greater than 30 days. Indirect communication may occur, for example, through other family members or lawyers.
2. The communication cut-off is maintained deliberately or intentionally by at least one person.
3. At least one of the persons involved claims that something specific about the other person justifies the communication cut-off, like something the other person did, does or failed to do.
4. The estranged relatives know how to contact each other. Neither is considered missing.
5. Emergent estrangement: a communication cut off less than 30 days.
6. Relatives are defined as biological parents, children, brothers and sisters in Nuclear Estrangements, and grandparents, grandchildren, aunts, uncles, and first cousins in Extended Estrangements. Any estrangements involving step relatives were originally classified as Step-estrangements, however, only one participant reported an estrangement to a stepparent.

The essential aspect of estrangement is the impediment to communication. The present survey was designed to collect demographic data and information about estrangement, including current or past estrangements, the number and relationship of relatives involved, precipitating factors, and attitudes toward estrangement. The literature review revealed no measures from which to assess construct or criterion validity. Thus, the criterion was the operational definition, which was presented to all participants. Its clarity to participants was established during repeated pilot testing, when the criteria and estrangement items underwent numerous revisions.

3. Results

Of the total number of participants ($N = 354$) who completed questionnaires, 198 participants (55.9%) reported never having experienced an estrangement. One hundred and fifty-four (43.5%) reported experiencing an estrangement, and another 2 (0.6%) reported an emergent estrangement, defined as an estrangement that began less than 30 days prior to responding. Of the 154 participants who reported experiencing an estrangement, Nuclear Estrangement occurred in 60 (39%, 16.9% of the entire sample) cases, with 7 (11.6%) from more than one immediate relative, and 5 (8.3%) from at least one immediate relative and one or more extended relatives. For participants who reported a Nuclear Estrangement ($n = 60$), 31 (51.7%) reported an ongoing estrangement, 28 (46.7%) reported having been involved in an estrangement which is now repaired (they were once estranged but are now talking), and 1 (1.7%) reported being involved in a terminal estrangement (the relative they were estranged from died before the estrangement was healed). The duration of Nuclear Estrangements ranged from 1 to 300 months ($M = 59.4$, $SD = 65.1$) (4 participants failed to include this data), with 35 (62.5%) participants reporting a duration of 48 months or less. The number of siblings was not related to the length of estrangement for participants reporting a repaired or terminal estrangement ($r = -.060$, $p = .762$); however, participant age was related to the length of reported estrangement ($r = .425$, $p = .024$).

Participants who reported a Nuclear Estrangement from a single relative ($n = 53$) were estranged from fathers with the greatest frequency (54.7%, $n = 29$), followed by brothers (20.8%, $n = 11$), sisters (15.1%, $n = 8$), then mothers (9.4%, $n = 5$). Of the 60 participants who reported a Nuclear Estrangement, 44 (73.3 %) indicated a single causal factor led to the estrangement. The most frequently cited single causal factor leading to estrangement was a disagreement with the estranged relative which was reported by 14 (32%) participants. See Table 2 for all reported factors causing estrangement.

Table 2: *Reported factors causing estrangement*

Estrangement type: ExtendedNuclear (<i>n</i> = 94)(<i>n</i> = 60)	
n (%)	
Factor participant reported:	
Disagreement	24 (25.5)14 (23.3)
Money/inheritance/business	22 (23.4)8 (13.3)
Divorce	8 (8.5)12 (20)
Substance abuse	7 (7.4)10 (16.7)
Abuse	7 (7.4)8 (13.3)
Romantic relationship	6 (6.4)9 (15)
Mental illness	5 (5.3)2 (3.3)
Religion	4 (4.3)1 (1.7)
Neglect	4 (4.3)2 (3.3)
Unknown	3 (3.2)5 (8.3)
Terminal illness	3 (3.2)2 (3.3)
Sexual orientation (homophobia)	2 (2.1)0
Politics	2 (2.1)0
Race	1 (1.1)0

Note. Percentages exceed 100% because participants reported more than one cause.

The participant acknowledged initiating the estrangement in 14 (23.3%) cases. The other person initiated the estrangement in 27 (45%) cases. The participant claimed the estrangement was a collusion between the participant and the relative in 17 (28.3%) cases. Items that discriminate the initiation from the maintenance of the estrangement indicated 48.3% (*n* = 29) (2 participants failed to answer) reported that the estrangement was mutually maintained by both parties. Of those involved in non-mutually maintained estrangements, 26.7% (*n* = 16) indicated the other relative maintained the estrangement, and 21.7% (*n* = 13) reported the participants themselves unilaterally maintained the estrangement. Over 63% (63.3%, *n* = 38) of those participants reporting a nuclear estrangement felt the reasons for the estrangement were valid (2 participants failed to answer questions in this section). A majority of participants reporting a nuclear estrangement (75%, *n* = 45) (2 participants failed to answer) indicated they would not recommend estrangement as a solution to a family problem.

3.1 Extended Estrangements

An Extended Estrangement was reported by 94 (61%) participants (26.6% of the entire sample); 27 (28.7%) from one extended relative, and 67 (71.3%) from two or more extended relatives. For participants who reported an Extended Estrangement (*n* = 94), 69 (73.4%) reported an ongoing estrangement, 20 (21.3%) reported having been involved in an estrangement which is now repaired, and 5 (5.3%) reported being involved in a terminal estrangement. The duration of Extended Estrangements ranged from 1 to 240 months (*M* = 52.8, *SD* = 51.4), with 72.7% reporting a duration of 60 months or less. The number of siblings was not related to the length of estrangement for participants reporting a repaired or terminal Extended Estrangement ($r = -.298, p = .157$), and participant age was unrelated to the length of reported estrangement ($r = -.061, p = .779$). Several participants reported being estranged from more than one relative (e.g., cousin and aunt) and more than one relative with the same relationship (e.g., 3 cousins). Participants who reported an Extended Estrangement from a single relative (*n* = 27) were estranged from aunts with the greatest frequency (33.3%, *n* = 9), followed by cousins (25.9%, *n* = 7), uncles (18.5%, *n* = 5), grandfathers (14.8%, *n* = 4), grandmothers (3.7%, *n* = 1), then step-mothers (3.7%, *n* = 1). Of the 94 participants who reported an Extended Estrangement, 37 (39.4 %) indicated a single causal factor led to the estrangement. The most frequently cited single causal factor leading to estrangement was a disagreement with the estranged relative, which was reported by 24 (64.9%) participants (see Table 2). Over 64% (64.9%, *n* = 61) of those participants reporting an extended estrangement felt the reasons for the estrangement were valid (2 participants failed to answer questions in this section).

The participant acknowledged initiating the Extended Estrangement in 21 (21.3%) cases. The other person initiated the Extended Estrangement in 51 (54.3%) cases. The participant claimed the estrangement was a collusion between the participant and the relative in 21 (22.3%) cases. Items that discriminate the initiation from the maintenance of the Extended Estrangement indicated 44.7% ($n = 42$) (2 participants failed to answer) reported that the estrangement was mutually maintained by both parties. Of those involved in non-mutually maintained estrangements, 34% ($n = 32$) indicated the other relative maintained the estrangement, and 19.1% ($n = 18$) reported they themselves unilaterally maintained the estrangement. A majority of participants reporting an Extended Estrangement (76.6%, $n = 72$) (2 participants failed to answer) indicated they would not recommend estrangement as a solution to a family problem.

3.2 Distress

Participants were asked to rate the level of distress they experienced, and the amount they thought the estranged relative experienced as a result of the estrangement on a 4-point Likert-type scale, anchored at 0(*none*) and 4(*significant*). Overall, a significant difference was found for the level of distress between Nuclear Estrangements and Extended Estrangements experienced by participants ($t(141) = 2.116, p = .037, d = .45$). The mean for participants reporting Nuclear Estrangements was significantly higher ($M = 2.36, SD = 1.40$) than the mean of participants reporting Extended Estrangements ($M = 1.67, SD = 1.66$). No significant differences were found for reported relative distress ($t(141) = .617, p = .539$).

For participants reporting Nuclear Estrangements, higher rates of self-distress were associated with shorter estrangements ($r = -.385, p = .020$). However, the length of estrangement was unrelated to the perceived amount of distress (as rated by the participant) to the estranged relative ($r = -.245, p = .149$). In Extended Estrangements the length of estrangement was unrelated to the amount of distress reported by participants for themselves ($r = -.227, p = .071$) or the amount experienced by the estranged relative ($r = -.185, p = .143$).

3.3 Other Estrangements

Participants were also asked about other estrangements in their families. Specifically, if their parents were estranged from any other relatives or if any other relatives were estranged from each other not directly involving them. See Table 3 for the number and type of other family estrangements.

Table 3: Other reported family estrangements

<i>n</i> (%)
Parents with other relatives ($n = 209$):
No estrangement 105 (50.2)
Definite estrangement 100 (47.8)
Possible estrangement 4 (1.9)
Number of relatives:
136 (34.6)
226 (25.0)
312 (11.5)
411 (10.6)
511 (10.6)
6 or more 8 (7.8)
Other family estrangements
No estrangement 130 (62.6)
Definite estrangement 66 (31.6)
Possible estrangement 13 (6.2)

4. Discussion

Over 43% of participants reported experiencing a definite estrangement, most of them lasting less than 4 years. These results suggest that family estrangements are a common and long-lasting occurrence among college students, and are consistent with speculations by LeBey (2001) and Davis (2003) who claimed family estrangements are a fairly common occurrence. The fact that over 46% of Nuclear Estrangements have healed is good news for future research on the process of healing estrangements among immediate family members. However, the high rate of Extended Estrangements (61%, $n = 94$, 26.6% of the entire sample) is somewhat alarming and will require more research using diverse samples of participants. Furthermore, the fact that 3 emergent estrangements appeared in pilot testing with a sample of 33, while only 2 (0.6%) participants in the final research reported an emergent estrangement may speak to the low reliability of this phenomenon. Emergent estrangements may emerge and disappear rapidly. Since all estrangements have the potential to end early on, further study of this phenomenon is also warranted. The small number of participants ($n = 6$; 3.9%), 5 of whom who were Extended Estrangements, whose estranged relative had died before the estrangement healed might be higher in an older sample.

The results of this study suggest that estrangement is widespread, perhaps nearly as common as divorce in some segments of society. Families have historically been symbiotic systems in which a rift necessarily creates psychic discord for all parties. This early exploration suggests that, just as in divorce, the most typical pattern of estrangement is an acrimonious separation imposed unilaterally by one party over the protests of the other. The jealousy, fighting, tolls on family business, and other problematic reactions to estrangement may represent attempts to alleviate the dislocation by remaining psychologically enmeshed. Akin to the problems seen in marriage, estrangement can be as permanent as divorce, serious but reconcilable like a maintained separation, or even fleeting. Further explorations may follow the path of divorce research which examines the impact of family estrangement on the children, the various types of estrangement, and factors influencing reconciliation. However, family estrangement is more complicated in that the finality of divorce facilitates grieving and recovery, two healing processes essentially absent for victims of estrangement.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

To promote functional family relationships, future research should address how estrangements are initiated and maintained and whether preventative factors can be found and promoted. Further exploration of contributing factors in the individual and in the family unit is warranted. Individual factors might include attachment deficits, forgiveness deficits, anger control deficits, limited protective resources, the level to which the individuals value family cohesiveness, or the level of compassion for those indirectly affected, such as children who are estranged from a beloved family member only because their parents are estranged from this person, among other possibilities. Family factors may include the role of patriarchs, matriarchs, or hierarchy in supporting cohesiveness; the role of countersymbiotic or homeostatic needs in the family system or a fragile complementarity in the pre-estrangement relationship. An exploration of factors which facilitate mending is needed, as well as knowledge of within-family and demographic risk factors for estrangements.

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