Every family: Intergenerational estrangement between older parents and their adult-children

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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Acknowledgements

A mind that is stretched to a new idea never returns to its original dimension

( Oliver W. Holmes)

Some suggest the proof of a good thesis is when the examiner knows the student learnt something. However, the main lessons are the ones witnessed by supervisors, family, and friends, the lessons most often excluded from the text. I would like to thank the following people who witnessed and supported my doctoral journey and the associated life lessons:

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Publications from this Research


Agliias, K. (Forthcoming 2011). Utilizing participants’ strengths to reduce risk of harm in a study of family estrangement. *Qualitative Health Research, Accepted 15th December 2010*. 
Conference Presentations from this Research


¹ This paper was awarded the Helen Bartlett Prize for Innovation in Ageing Research by the Emerging Researchers in Ageing Initiative (Australia).
² This paper was subsequently published as a journal article in *Families in Society*, 2011.
Abstract

This qualitative investigation of intergenerational family estrangement commenced in 2007, with the main aim of exploring and understanding the lived experience of older people estranged from an adult-child or children. It sought to explore how people defined, explained, experienced, and made sense of estrangement from a family member in later life. A qualitative methodology grounded in the interpretive constructivist paradigm was employed. This approach required extended engagement, a flexible research design, and placed the person experiencing the phenomenon at the centre of the research. Data was collected from 25 participants who had been estranged. Two in-depth interviews were conducted with most participants, with some participants using diaries to record additional data. A researcher’s journal was used to record field notes and methodological decision-making. An interpretive phenomenological analysis was conducted.

A systematic review of the literature revealed family estrangement was a conceptually complex and under-researched phenomenon. Yet, this study found that estrangement was not an uncommon experience in families, it was not always resolvable, and it potentially affected the entire intergenerational family system. Many participants experienced family estrangement as a significant and traumatic loss, a situation exacerbated by its ambiguous nature and social disenfranchisement. Various factors were found to be associated with the development of family estrangement including events which could have contributed to the adult-child’s perception of being rejected or devalued by the participant, multiple concurrent family stressors, and interference by a third party aimed at alienating the adult-child from their parent.
This study makes significant contributions to the fields of social work, family studies, and ageing. It appears to be the first rigorous qualitative exploration of intergenerational family estrangement, and offers rich and detailed description of the estrangement experience. The research adds to knowledge about later-life intergenerational relationships, and gives voice to older people who have experienced family estrangement. As a preliminary study, this research provides a foundation for a longer-term research and policy agenda which focuses on family estrangement.