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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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.
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“In every society there are some categories of individuals who are systematically devalued and excluded from a broad array of social relationships and social domains” (Major & Eccleston, 2005, p. 64).

Mild experiences of rejection, ostracism, and exclusion are experienced almost daily in the social context such as being ignored in a lift, or not receiving an invitation to an event. Rejection, ostracism, and exclusion are also used as a powerful deterrent or punishment for people who have transgressed interpersonal and social rules: children are sent to the naughty corner; lovers give each other the silent treatment; church members are excommunicated; prisoners are put in solitary confinement. Being estranged or disowned by one’s family is a particularly severe punishment because it “deprives individuals of their strongest, most permanent bonds, and the roots to which their existence is tied” (Williams, 2001, p. 253). Being rejected by a person one loves is arguably one of the most painful of life’s experiences.

Background and Rationale

This research emerged from a study which commenced in 2006, and explored ageing and person-centred care in residential care facilities in which I³ was engaged as a research assistant. That preliminary qualitative study examined the dynamics of the social relationships which were critical to the provision of person-centred care, with the aim of shifting from institutional management and control of behaviour to individualised care based

³ In keeping with the interpretive constructivist paradigm, this thesis is written in first person to make my presence, stance, and decision-making processes explicit and transparent.
on the unique strengths, biographies, and natural resources of residents, their families, and care staff. Residents, families, and staff from an aged care residential facility were interviewed. It was found that they regularly spoke about relatives who did not visit, who were labelled as the ‘black sheep’ of the family, or who ‘were no longer on speaking terms’. Some residents referred to these issues as problematic and painful, while others were matter-of-fact about the disclosure. Some spoke about the impact of the family member’s absence on their quality of life and the burden it placed on remaining family members to provide support and care. Researchers became increasingly aware that family estrangement was a common experience which was an oft unrecognised, untold, and a little-considered component of the ageing narrative, and one with potentially serious implications for the later-life family and for an individual’s wellbeing at the end of his or her life.

This awareness converged with a memorable incident I experienced during a student placement on a gerontology ward at the local regional hospital when a social worker contacted an older man’s estranged daughters to elicit increased support for him in palliative care. A family narrative of parental alcohol misuse, family breakdown, and childhood abuse unfolded. Two very distressed women became caught between memories of their past abuse, and the new and successful lives they had created without their father. The social worker had unwittingly entered an ethical minefield faced with the poorly understood phenomenon of family estrangement. It drew my attention to social norms and policy directives promoting family involvement – primarily female – in the provision of aged care, and elicited questions about the experience of later life for people who had become estranged from family and, in particular, from adult-children.

Focusing initially on the quality of life and wellbeing implications of being estranged from family support, I set about trying to locate information on family estrangement with
little success. I quickly realised this was a poorly conceptualised and under-researched phenomenon and a study using quality of life indicators was considerably premature. Instead, an exploratory pilot study was needed to begin to understand the experiences of people who were estranged from family members, and to highlight areas for further investigation.

Given my interest in the area of ageing and the unique perspectives which the later-life age group might provide on intergenerational relationships, the initial focus on older participants was maintained. A decision was made to focus solely on estrangement between older parents and adult-children to create some boundaries for the research design, and to enhance the depth of data collected. A life-cycle/developmental perspective suggests later life may be a period when older people are more likely to reflect on their own life, and possibly to reconcile past mistakes (Bowen, 1982; Erikson, 1997; Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986). For these reasons, I anticipated that this age group might be more open to reflecting on the presence of estrangement in their lives. I also anticipated that family estrangement might be experienced differently in later life than at other stages of the life-span due to a number of possible factors including: (i) the existence of unique intergenerational relationships, such as those between grandparents and grandchildren; (ii) the older person’s increased reliance on family members for instrumental and emotional support due to illness, reduced mobility, or diminishing social support; and (iii) the older person’s increased focus on issues associated with mortality, such as guardianship and wills.
Aims of the Study

The main aim of the study was to explore and understand the lived experience of older people estranged from their adult-child or children. Thus, the study sought to discover how people defined, explained, experienced, and made sense of estrangement from a family member in later life. To this end, it aimed to:

1. Give voice to older people who had experienced family estrangement.
2. Raise awareness of the issue of family estrangement in the public, academic, and human service spheres.
3. Commence a dialogue between human service workers about the ways in which they might listen out for, acknowledge, and work with individuals, families, groups, and communities affected by family estrangement.
4. Develop a foundation for a longer-term research agenda focusing on family estrangement, which would encompass the experiences of diverse populations and estrangement experiences.

Research Questions

In light of the background, rationale, and study aims, four research questions were posed:

1. How do older people define estrangement from their adult-child or children?
2. How do older people explain estrangement from their adult-child or children?
3. How do older people experience estrangement from their adult-child or children?
4. How do older people make meaning of estrangement from their adult-child or children?
Theoretical Perspective and Methodology

A qualitative methodology grounded in the interpretive constructivist paradigm was employed because it was considered the most appropriate for the research questions being posed, and possibly the most ethically responsible due to the sensitive nature of the research topic. Qualitative inquiry is required to collect rich data about the meaning and experience for a new or under-researched area, and when it is complex and situated (Bryman, 2008; Morris, 2006). The topic of family estrangement was complex and relatively unexplored, hence I needed to capture the various feelings, thoughts, values, and ideologies associated with the experience, rather than search for ‘universal truths’.

This approach required placing the person experiencing the phenomenon at the centre of the research, employing extended engagement and a flexible research design. In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 participants (18 female and 7 male) who were estranged from at least one adult-child. A second in-depth interview was conducted approximately 6 months later with 23 of the original participants (16 female and 7 male). The main purpose of the second interview was *member checking* where research participants were asked to verify and, if desired, suggest amendments to my initial interpretations and conclusions. Most contact was face-to-face in the participants’ natural setting. This allowed me to be responsive to their needs, to take breaks from the interview or to view photographs of the estranged adult-child. I was prepared to refer participants to appropriate professional support if they felt distressed following the interview. Free-text diaries were offered to participants who wished to record additional data, and I also kept a journal throughout the research process for recording field notes, theoretical reflections, decision-making processes, and methodological decisions.
In keeping with the interpretive constructivist worldview and qualitative methodology, an interpretive – or hermeneutic – phenomenological analysis was employed. By incorporating an interpretive or hermeneutic approach I was assuming the research participants could and would seek to make sense of their experiences because of their capacity for reflection. Therefore, I needed to engage with participants’ detailed interpretations of the estrangement experience and the meanings they associated with it. I adapted Smith, Flowers, and Larkin’s (2009) guidelines for *interpretative phenomenological analysis*[^4^], and incorporated some of van Manen’s (1990) suggestions for hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry. Smith et al. (2009) offered clear and flexible steps in analysing data and van Manen’s (1990; 2002) texts added the dimension of depth to the underlying ‘thinking’, ‘writing’, and ‘rewriting’ processes associated with hermeneutic phenomenological data analysis.

**Significance**

The study contributes to the fields of social work, family studies, and ageing. It appears to be the first rigorous qualitative exploration of intergenerational family estrangement. While some clinicians have published their knowledge about family estrangement in popular and self-help literature, a research methodology was absent in these sources. Where family estrangement was cited in qualitative studies, it was an unexpected or incidental finding and not the original focus of the research. Studies of associated concepts, such as rejection, ostracism, and social exclusion used non-familial samples and quantitative methodologies to explore short-term physiological and psychological responses to various types of estrangement-related concepts. Studies of *cutoff*, a family systems concept closely related to the notion of estrangement, also tended towards quantitative examinations of the impact of

[^4^]: Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) use the word ‘interpretative’ while other researchers use ‘interpretive’ in the same context.
intergenerational family estrangement. Consequently, this study offers a unique and empirically grounded view of the estrangement experience in later life.

The study was unique because it offered rich description of the experience of family estrangement. Extended engagement, a flexible research design, two in-depth interviews with most participants, and participants’ journals, facilitated the collection of detailed, nuanced, and rich data from 25 participants. This was supplemented with my journal in which I recorded detailed field notes, and reflections about the research.

The research adds to the established area of knowledge of later-life intergenerational relationships, which focused on the categorisation of relationship types through measures of solidarity, ambivalence, and conflict, but rarely on the notion of estrangement within these conceptualisations. Research about ageing and later-life intergenerational relationships has emerged strongly over the past 30 years. However, it has often replicated the structural biases inherent in the social system, focusing on normative samples and traditional family issues to the detriment of less socially accepted arrangements and concerns, such as same-sex couples and divorce in later life. Hence, this study highlights the non-heterogeneity of later-life families through the exploration of a rarely acknowledged experience in this age group.

The study gave voice to older people who had experienced family estrangement through a number of avenues. The research recruitment strategy initially raised the topic of family estrangement in later life in the media. I was interviewed for a number of news and current affairs radio programs. Many of these had a talk-back component following the initial interview and ‘call for research participants’. Many of the people who participated in the study confirmed that their reason for joining the study was to be heard, because they often felt alone and unheard. Some said it was a relief to tell their story during the research process and to discover they shared experiences which were similar to others.
The study raised interdisciplinary awareness of later-life intergenerational family estrangement when the initial literature review, preliminary and subsequent findings were disseminated through presentations I gave at conferences and seminars. Audiences included multidisciplinary professionals such as: gerontologists; grief and bereavement specialists; human service workers in the care professions; social workers in aged care; and emerging researchers in the area of ageing. Many practitioners confirmed that family estrangement was an issue which they regularly encountered with older clients, and one which they found was difficult to locate in research literature. Journal articles resulting from this study provided some literature to fill this gap, and my intention is to publish additional papers in the near future.

As a preliminary study, this research provides a foundation for a longer-term research agenda focused on family estrangement. It provides data which confirms and advances current definitions and understandings of family estrangement. It also enables more specific studies of the phenomenon including: the prevalence of family estrangement; the cross-cultural experience of estrangement; factors associated with the development of family estrangement; factors influencing the individual’s response to family estrangement; and evaluations of social work interventions with clients experiencing extreme grief responses to family estrangement. Primarily, this study provides the impetus to explore the adult-child’s experience of family estrangement from an older parent and I anticipate this will form the initial follow-on area of research.
Limitations of the Study

Maximum care was taken to minimise the limitations of the study through the research design. However, a number of limitations are acknowledged and noted. I decided to remain focused on the experience of the older person to gather rich data, so the estranged adult-child was not interviewed for this research and so one side of the story is missing. The recruitment strategy which focused only on mainstream media might have created limitations in terms of the range of respondents who were predominantly monocultural Anglo-Saxon older adults.

The consent and interview requirements might have prevented some people from participating, particularly those with limited literacy and privacy, and those who felt particularly stressed or overwhelmed by the estrangement experience at the time when research participants were called for. There may have been some censoring by family members where secrecy surrounded estrangement conversations. Another limitation may have been the retrospective collection of data, making it susceptible to participants’ lapses of memory and pro-social reporting of personal choices and actions. Finally, the emotional nature of estrangement might have influenced the intensity and clarity of some participants’ reported narratives.

Definition of Terms

Cutoff

This term was used interchangeably with cut-off, emotional cutoff, or emotional cut-off. It was one of eight interlocking concepts added to Bowen Family Systems Theory in 1975, and used to describe – primarily but not always – an adult-child’s problematic separation from the parental family. Bowen (1982) suggested this was most likely to occur when the adult-child had a fused (or less differentiated) relationship with his or her parents, resulting in higher levels of emotional reactivity in anxiety-provoking situations. Cutoff might be a covert
process of isolation or distancing while living with parents or an overt act such as leaving the family home without further contact.

**Estrangement**

*Estrangement* describes a reaction to intense emotion or conflict resulting in the distancing or loss of affection between one or more members of a family, and where at least one party is dissatisfied with the situation. Loss of affection might result in a physical estrangement where parties no longer have contact with each other, or emotional estrangement where parties have infrequent, perfunctory, and often uncomfortable contact. A person might actively pursue estrangement from family members or become estranged due to the decision of one or more members.

**Intergenerational Family**

The term *intergenerational family* is used to describe an extended family form, consisting of two or more – usually adult – generations or demographic cohorts, who may or may not reside together.

**Intergenerational Relationship**

The term *intergenerational relationship* is used to describe relationships between generations or demographic cohorts, e.g., mother and child or grandparent and grandchild.

**Later-Life Family**

Definitions of the *later-life family* usually refer to a family grouping of two or more generations, with at least one generation in later life (i.e., 60 years or older). However, these definitions are limited because they do not account for childless couples and families where generations are compressed (i.e., three generations under the age of 60 years). For the purpose of this research, the later-life family refers to a family grouping that consists
primarily of two generations: parents aged over 60 years; and their adult-child or children. It also includes other generations such as grandchildren and great-grandparents.

**Overview of the Thesis**

This chapter has provided the context of the study, including the background, rationale, aims, research questions, limitations, significance of the study, definition of terms, and an overview of the thesis. A literature review is presented in three chapters: Chapter 2 reviews literature about family estrangement; Chapter 3 reviews literature pertinent to understanding later-life intergenerational relationships; and Chapter 4 further develops the understanding of intergenerational family estrangement through an examination of relevant theory. The research methodology is outlined in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 describes the phenomenological findings from the study which are discussed in Chapter 7. Conclusions, recommendations for further research, and the implications for social work practice are discussed in Chapter 8.
CHAPTER 2

Literature Review: Family Estrangement

The theme of family estrangement is subtly but consistently woven throughout the history of literature, theatre, and media. A universal response to perceived betrayal, estrangement is documented repeatedly throughout the Old Testament, starting with Cain’s estrangement from, and then the murder of, Abel (Benswanger, 1987). Family estrangement may not be referred to directly, but is encompassed or entwined in a range of conditions and concepts, including family alienation, family conflict, and family feuds. Currently, newspapers, magazines, and web pages offer advice about reconciliation with estranged family members (see Casalena, 2006; Krakovsky, 2006; Sichel, 2007), simultaneously dramatising high-profile cases of family estrangement in the political, celebrity, and business arenas (see Gordon, 2006; Roberts, 2006; Stewart, 2007). Family estrangement is often an unspoken backdrop to contemporary issues, such as homelessness, child custody disputes, and cases where the body of an older person is not discovered until days or weeks after his or her death. The issue of family estrangement is referred to in discussion fora, practice, and clinical articles for human service workers (see Armstrong, 2004; Bowman, 2000; Colarusso, 2006). At the same time, there appears to be a reluctance to define or research the phenomenon in any more than a cursory manner in academic circles.

This chapter begins with an overview of the search strategy used to locate literature for Chapters 2 and 3. It reviews the literature referring to the definitions, causes, and consequences of family estrangement.
Literature Review Methodology Part 1

Terminology such as *estrangement, alienation, conflict, excommunication*, and *family*, was considered initially for use in this study. After consulting The Social Work Dictionary (Barker, 2003), The Macquarie Dictionary (Yallop, 2005) and The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English (Allen, 1990), these terms were refined and it was decided to use the following key words for the search: *family, families, and intergenerational* were paired with *estrangement* and *conflict*. After this investigation, which yielded only a small amount of literature, searches were refined using the terms *cut-off, cutoff, alienation, excommunicate* and *excommunication, ostracism* and *ostracise* paired with *family, families, multigenerational*, and *intergenerational*.

These terms were used to locate literature published between January 1997 and June 2009. This extended search period was appropriate due to the limited amount of available literature and the belief that the concept and nature of estrangement would not be altered significantly over this time period. The search targeted literature within the social sciences disciplines, such as social work, counselling, psychology, and sociology, and literature from the disciplines of medicine and psychiatry. The University of Newcastle Library Catalogue, *Newcat*, and the University of Newcastle Interlibrary Service, *get it*, were searched for books related to the topic. Then the following databases were used: *AUSTROM, Blackwell Synergy, CINAHL, Dissertations and Theses, Expanded Academic ASAP International Edition, Health Reference Centre- Academic, Medline, Proquest 5000, PsycARTICLES, PsycBooks, PsycEXTRA, Social Work Abstracts, Sociology Abstracts, and Taylor and Francis Online Journals*.

An internet search using the search engine, Google Scholar, and computer program, Copernic 2001 Basic Programme enabled simultaneous searches using the search engines:
Alta Vista, e Pilot, FAST Search, Hot Bot, Lycos, Mamma.com, MSN Web Search, Netscape Netcentre, Open Directory Project, and Yahoo. National and international longitudinal studies of ageing were targeted specifically for their insight into the prevalence of estrangement. The bibliographies of collected articles provided some additional material.

Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion

The literature review included material which examined intergenerational and multigenerational estrangement in general, and later-life intergenerational estrangement in particular. The search and review did not include literature about estrangement in the conjugal family: literature referring to estrangement between married or cohabitating couples was excluded, except where divorce or marital estrangement appeared to contribute to, or cause, intergenerational or multigenerational estrangement. Literature referring to conflict and estrangement between children and adolescents and their parents was excluded due to the specific focus of this literature and the limited evidence about the salience of findings in relation to issues experienced by later-life intergenerational families. This meant that articles referring to Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) were initially excluded on this basis (and later discussed separately in Chapter 4). Elder abuse, suicide, and homicide have been conceptualised by some as extreme forms of family conflict and estrangement but these concepts were excluded from the search terms due to inconsistencies with existing definitions of family estrangement. Research studies which did not examine estrangement specifically but which referred to it in their findings, were captured for the literature review.

The overlapping and ambiguous use of the terms alienation and estrangement became evident from the literature search. As developed by theologians, such as Calvin and Luther, philosophers, such as Hegel, Marx, and Sartre, and psychoanalysts, such as Fromm (Williamson & Cullingford, 1997), the term alienation is primarily used in philosophy,
sociology, and psychology to describe the predominantly unsatisfactory separation of the individual from another entity, such as work, society, God, or even the self. It has been used to describe a sociological process and a psychological state of being, and is sometimes used interchangeably with the term estrangement, but its focus on the socio-political and social-psychological was too far removed from the concept of family estrangement to be included in the review of literature. Nevertheless, the theory of alienation might offer insight into the later findings of this study.

Findings Part 1

The literature search yielded 35 items which met specified inclusion criteria and included five books, 17 book chapters (from two edited books), seven journal articles (including three research studies), and two other sources (one working paper and one thesis). One book, one book chapter, one journal article (research), and one conference paper published prior to 1997 were also included due to their relevance to the topic.

Estrangement was rarely mentioned in the academic and research literature examined for this review, but it was not entirely absent. An exception was Titelman’s (2003c) edited book which was devoted to reviews and studies of Bowen’s (1975) concept of emotional cutoff. Contributors included social workers, psychologists, and medical practitioners. Additionally, five recently published mainstream books focused solely on estrangement. Their authors included a psychologist (Sucov, 2006) and social worker (Sichel, 2004), who used their clinical and personal experiences of estrangement to examine the issue. The third author (LeBey, 2001), an attorney, based her book on hundreds of interviews with estranged individuals and her work with two family therapists. Davis (2002), an influential writer on child sexual abuse, also based her work on hundreds of interviews and her own personal experience of estrangement. Neither of these two authors provided a research methodology to
support their claims. The final author, Richards (2008), based her book on her personal journey of estrangement and reconciliation.

**Literature Review Methodology Part 2**

Due to the limited information gathered in the preliminary literature search, it was important to expand the inclusion criteria. Therefore, an additional search was conducted using the terms *intergenerational, later life, or family* paired with *solidarity, conflict, and ambivalence*. The terms *intergenerational relationships* and *later-life families* were also used separately. After reviewing the articles about solidarity, conflict, and ambivalence, in addition to those about later life and intergenerational relationships, many were included due to their relevance to the topic. While family conflict is not an adequate descriptor of family estrangement, there were a number of complex, often overlapping variables. In addition, it was ascertained that research into the nature of intergenerational relationships offered a starting point from which to conceptualise and locate intergenerational estrangement. Therefore it was considered important to include these articles and studies to provide a more thorough examination of intergenerational family estrangement.

**Findings Part 2**

The second search strategy yielded 67 items, including three book chapters (from three edited books), 61 journal articles (including 40 research studies), and one background paper. Additionally, one book chapter and one journal article published prior to 1997 were included due to their relevance to the topic.

A review of these new sources showed family estrangement had been disguised by its conceptual complexity (and maybe even its social undesirability). It emerged as an aberration in a small number of quantitative research studies and regularly in qualitative examinations of family solidarity, conflict, ambivalence, personal loneliness, and the later-life
intergenerational family. Family estrangement was never cited as the primary issue under investigation in these research studies and rarely reported as the main topic of discussion in journal articles.

**Defining Family**

Definitions of family are ideologically based, and in western culture the ‘nuclear’ family – of mother, father, and biological children – persists in medical, legal, and political realms despite evidence of variation and diversity. This nuclear family or traditional model tends to “proceed from the idea of the union between man and woman as the root of family” (Arnold, 2008, p. 10). It is often based in heterosexist and gendered ideologies and makes normative assumptions about “the timing and progression of successive life events, such as leaving the parental home in the late teen years to directly enter a marital union” (Gonzalez-Lopez, 2002, p. 21).

Despite the persistence of these ideas, postmodern notions of pluralism and diversity have suggested the family is an idea, rather than an entity, and have highlighted that few families fit within legal and ideological boundaries of the nuclear family model (Schmeckle, Giarrusso, Feng, & Bengston, 2006). Researchers have increasingly shifted the definitional onus to participants in their studies (Bernardes, 2000) as reflected in recent qualitative studies concerned with the changes in definition and meaning of family in the context of divorce and step-parenting (e.g., Bailey, 2007; Schmeckle et al., 2006). It is difficult to determine, but one might speculate that the increase in interest and study in the area of the intergenerational family is a result of more subjective – and diverse – definitions of family. Then again, studies of the intergenerational family may have contributed to shifting definitions of family.
While there have always been academic and popular claims of family disintegration, there is considerable evidence to suggest the family remains a key institution in contemporary society, albeit in a variety of forms (Gonzalez-Lopez, 2002). The nature, structure, and function of family is in a continual process of change, particularly as people live longer, families become more geographically mobile, family and work roles become more egalitarian, and families are influenced by biological and technological advances (Antonucci & Jackson, 2007; Floyd, Mikkelson, & Judd, 2006). “Society’s repertoire of permissible family types has been expanding continuously as people respond creatively to the challenges of everyday living in contexts where some of the older cultural and institutional constraints have lost their bite” (Moen and Wethington in Carling, 2002, p. 4). This has resulted in a diversity of new family forms and definitions, including the sole-parent family, same-sex family, living-apart-together family, and step-family (Suitor, Pillemer, & Sechrist, 2006).

For the purpose of this review, the notion of family incorporates components like kinship, affinity, and residence, but is not restricted by definitions of family which specify components of interactions or contact. Based on Bedford and Blieszner’s (1997) definition, family members may be biological (or blood relatives) or they may have become a part of the family through adoption, marriage, or social designation and include de facto relationships between heterosexual and homosexual couples. These members may continue to be referred to as family after death and “even in the absence of contact or affective involvement” (Bedford & Blieszner, 1997, p. 526). The definition also incorporates the notion that “family may include both voluntary and involuntary relationships; it creates both literal and internal boundaries; and it evolves through time; it has a history, a present and a future” (Floyd et al., 2006, p. 24).
Defining Family Estrangement

The definitions of family estrangement were found to be consistent in the small amount of literature dedicated to estrangement. *Family estrangement* tended to emphasise a significant decrease or termination of contact between the estranged parties, and a significant dissatisfaction felt by at least one of the parties. Variance occurred when literature referred to the term *cutoff* or *emotional cutoff* rather than estrangement. Cutoff was a term coined by Bowen in 1975 and tended to encompass a wider range of behaviours than were included in definitions of estrangement. Bowen’s cutoff incorporated physical and emotional distancing, where one could leave the relationship entirely or reside with their parents and be emotionally cutoff. When Bowen Family Systems theorists refer to cutoffs, they are describing a continuum of covert to overt conditions of withdrawal from family. Parties might not be dissatisfied with the degree of cutoff.

This review incorporates literature and research about estrangement and cutoff although the actual research specifically examines family estrangement. Estrangement and cutoff are examined throughout the literature review due to the theoretical overlap between them and the relevance of cutoff measurements and research to the understanding of family estrangement. When the review uses the term *estrangement*, it primarily relates to an overt condition where physical distancing is a key indicator. When the review uses the term *cutoff* or *emotional cutoff*, this indicates reference to an author or researcher with a general allegiance to Bowen Family Systems Theory (although two authors seem to have adopted the term cutoff without appearing to have adopted Bowen’s theoretical stance).
The Nature of Family Estrangement

Family estrangement or cutoff are terms “…used to describe a reaction to intense emotion” (McKnight, 2003, p. 276), which results in the distancing or loss of affection between one or more members of a family. According to the Macquarie Dictionary, when people estrange from one another, they “turn away in feeling or affection”, or keep themselves at a distance (Yallop, 2005, p. 385). Alternatively, as suggested in the Oxford Dictionary, their actions might “cause (a person or group) to turn away in feeling or affection” (Allen, 1990, pp. 400-401). In other words, a person might actively pursue estrangement from family members or become estranged due to the decision of one or more members. Estrangement might be maintained through “apathy or active disagreement” (Barker, 2003, p. 147) and it might take more than one person to create and maintain an estrangement (Titelman, 2003b). Key indicators of an estrangement identified in the literature included:

1. Physical distancing.
2. Lack of emotional intimacy.
3. Relationship viewed as unsatisfactory.
4. Intermittent conflict and avoidance.
5. A belief that there was no resolution.

Physical Distancing

The most common sign of a family estrangement was lack of contact or physical distancing. There were few, if any, shared experiences among the estranged family members (Sichel, 2004). Direct contact might have been infrequent or it might have ceased for months or even years (Jerrome, 1994). Sometimes one party moved so far away that a relationship was almost impossible to maintain (Klever, 2003). Regardless of geographical distance, face-to-face contact was either rare or totally absent.
Importantly, some theorists from the Bowen school suggested physical distancing was not always a true indicator of estrangement or cutoff (Bowen, 1982). Family members might live great distances from one another, but still maintain emotional intimacy through letters, phone calls, and emails (Klever, 2003). Clinicians also gave examples of family members living in close proximity or in the same house who were still considered to be emotionally cut off (Allen, 2003; Bowen, 1982; McKnight, 2003). These family members were most likely to be emotionally distanced and avoid potentially emotional or divisive conversation (Klever, 2003).

**Lack of Emotional Intimacy**

Sucov (2006) said that “estrangement does not imply a lesser degree of emotional involvement; to the contrary, it is often a sign of intense, unresolved animosity” (p. 6), which results in declining intimacy. Under these conditions, there was an absence of warmth, closeness, and trust and vulnerability persisted (Sucov, 2006). While there might be some perfunctory or cordial contact, one-on-one interaction between the estranged parties was highly unlikely (Benswanger, 1987; Klever, 2003). Klever (2003) said that the more cut off the parties became, the narrower the issues they tended to discuss and the more likely they avoided any emotionally-laden topics. Ackerman (2003) claimed that the more severe the cutoff, “the more people relate to one another in a stereotypical pattern, not perceiving and/or relating to the complex person and/or group that the ‘other’ is” (p. 447).

The estrangement could be characterised by a complete breakdown in communication, where family members stopped speaking to one another (Benswanger, 1987) and sharing pleasures (Sichel, 2004) and familiarity was lost. The family might refer to the estranged member as a ‘stranger’, someone they no longer knew or understood. They might speak of the person who ‘used to be’ their parent, sibling, or child, and a “feeling of unreality that
comes over them when they meet” (Sucov, 2006, p. 183). In some instances, a family member might have been ‘disowned’ by the family (Klever, 2003) or declared ‘dead’ for all intents and purposes.

**Relationship Viewed as Unsatisfactory**

One of the most fundamental indicators of family estrangement was that one or both parties viewed the situation as unsatisfactory (Jerrome, 1994; LeBey, 2001; Sichel, 2004). It might be experienced as disappointing, disturbing, or deeply distressing (Jerrome, 1994). “The sense that ‘things are not as they should be’ usually accompanies estrangement” (Davis, 2002, p. 13), along with feelings of loss, shame, guilt, and loneliness (Davis, 2002). The pain associated with family estrangement intensified when developmental milestones, such as birthdays, were reached or when most families celebrated social events, such as Christmas, together.

**Intermittent Conflict and Avoidance**

Generally, family estrangement was not viewed as a single, defining event (LeBey, 2001; Sichel, 2004; Sucov, 2006). If anything, it was almost impossible to pinpoint an exact event precipitating family estrangement. Hence the pain associated with the estrangement was often exaggerated because of its unpredictability and potential to last for an entire lifetime (LeBey, 2001). Estranged families tended “to vacillate between avoidance and explosiveness: they hide, avoid, and ignore difficulties and deny real conflict until World War III breaks out” (Sichel, 2004, p. 67). They could avoid each other emotionally or physically for long periods after an active conflict. Titelman (2003b) also described the situation where an individual might physically and emotionally cut off from the family of origin prematurely. As a consequence, he or she would be unable to function independently and might need to return
home. The potential for conflict (followed by periods of distancing) might be heightened at particular life stages, by developmental milestones, and important social events.

A Belief There is no Resolution

Benswanger (1987) and Kelly (2003) agreed that estrangement (or cutoff) seemed to create and maintain ‘rigid’, ‘polarized’, and ‘repetitive’ feelings and thought patterns. Jerrome’s (1994) research revealed a striking “tendency for estrangement to go unchallenged. Assumptions were made, conclusions were drawn, and the ensuing stalemate could last for decades” (p. 243). The breakdown in communication and physical distancing tended to keep the estranged parties from gaining new perspectives and or resolving the estrangement (Kelly, 2003). Sometimes parties believed their differences were so great they were irreconcilable (LeBey, 2001). At other times, the origin or cause of the estrangement was forgotten, but the animosity and pain remaining was so great the parties believed there was no possible solution to the impasse. In some cases, the person who had been estranged might not have been informed of the reason for the estrangement, so they did not know where to begin to find a resolution. Others might have actually lost all knowledge of the whereabouts of the other party, or the estranged family member might have died resulting in the belief there was no chance of resolution.

Causes of Family Estrangement

The literature suggested that many estrangements resulted from months or years of tension and conflict about family issues which members refused to speak about, or denied, or merely resigned themselves to. Tension culminated in a single, often minor, and sometimes unrelated incident leading to estrangement (Davis, 2002; LeBey, 2001; Sichel, 2004). Bowen family systems theory took this notion even further suggesting, “it takes many family members and multiple generations to create cutoff” (Titelman, 2003a, p. 136). Ecological systems and life-
cycle theories were predominantly used throughout the literature to examine and explain the underlying causes of family estrangement. Causes cited included social and structural impediments, abuse and betrayal, communication barriers, and generational transmission. Certain events across the life-span and particular relationships appeared to make families more vulnerable to estrangement. Empirical data was not found to support or deny these theories. Commentary about the causes of estrangement seems to have remained in the popular and practice realm, rather than in academia. The exception to this rule was literature referring to the work of Murray Bowen, originator of Bowen Family Systems Theory (see Bowen, 1982). Bowen’s (1982) concept and theory of emotional cutoff have been researched through a number of qualitative and quantitative methods. His explanation of the causes of cutoff is examined, with connections drawn between his work and the estrangement literature.

Three authors located family estrangement within its social, political, historical, economic, and cultural context (Jerrome, 1994; LeBey, 2001; Sucov, 2006). While “the tensions between attachment and separation, power and passivity, loyalty and betrayal, old values and new commitments” were found to be universal in families, meanings were determined through the socio-political context in which they operated (Sucov, 2006, p. 23). For example, Jerrome (1994) commented on the effect of Western society’s promotion of independence, individualism, self-interest, and autonomy on the relationships of the parents and adult-children in her research. In some instances of estrangement, these values appeared to support a position of non-intervention for both parent and adult-child. Adherence to such values prevented parents from: speaking about or negotiating notions of interference, challenging behaviours causing hurt, and making requests for help from their adult-children (Jerrome, 1994).
LeBey’s (2001) theory extended Jerrome’s findings, attributing estrangement to four key changes in US society: the Me Generation, the women’s liberation movement, changes in divorce laws, and increasing mobility. For LeBey (2001), the promotion of individualism emerging from social movements in the 1960s increased the disposability of relationships. Women became aware of their rights and were more able to support themselves economically. The relaxation of divorce laws meant women started to view marriage as a choice rather than a necessity. In other words, people, and particularly women, became more able to move away from unsatisfactory relationships. As Jerrome (1994) noted, “the recognition of kin ties [became] a matter of personal discretion and individual choice” (p. 250). The potential for estrangement between fathers and their children, and grandparents and their grandchildren increased as a consequence (LeBey, 2001). However these ideas should be viewed with caution because there was no evidence to suggest that estrangement was a new phenomenon, or that rates of estrangement had increased as a result of increased divorce rates. Additionally, family breakdown is not a recent occurrence. Early parental mortality and particularly death during childbirth contributed to reconfigured family arrangements in the past.

Parents might also be caught between societal values promoting and rewarding their adult-child’s achievement and self-interest and their own need for support and affection (Jerrome, 1994). Jerrome (1994) found parents tended to identify with “the dominant success ethos” (p. 250), often explaining their adult-child’s estrangement in terms of a socially acceptable ‘busyness’ rather than admitting their own feelings of abandonment or the possibility of family breakdown. Interestingly, Gabriel and Bowling’s (2004) in-depth interviews with 80 older people about their quality of life revealed 16 respondents who said their children and grandchildren were ‘too busy’ to see them. This was also a theme in
another qualitative study where the adult-child’s busyness was cited as a large contributor to ambivalence (Peters, Hooker, & Zvonkovic, 2006). Additionally, LeBey (2001) suggested that the increased mobility and wealth of the nuclear family had impacted on the quality of intergenerational relationships. When families were regularly in touch with, or depended on one another, they made greater efforts to sustain these relationships. Distance made it easier to estrange and harder to forgive when disagreement occurred (LeBey, 2001). One might wonder whether ‘busyness’ was a method of emotional distancing without physically moving away from extended family.

Sucov (2006) claimed that each social group had an ‘identity system’ predicated on common ethnic, cultural, and religious beliefs maintained through rituals and traditions. Citing personal and professional experience, she examined structural contributors to estrangement in Jewish families in the United States who, as a people, have been subject to exile, persecution, and segregation throughout history. This had created a pervasive vulnerability and identity system fostering “excessive closeness and dependency on one’s own people” (Sucov, 2006, p. 29), which made the family vulnerable to conflict. Indeed, Lowenstein’s (2007) cross-national research showed higher levels of close parent-child relationships in Israel, as well as higher levels of conflict, which might reflect historical and political conditions. Additionally, identity systems within immigrant communities might be challenged by external social influences from their new country. When new generations had to make choices between traditional and new cultural beliefs and values, their choices might be viewed as a threat to the family and community solidarity previously essential to survival (Sucov, 2006).

This work resonated with Bowen’s (1982) claims about the impact of social systems on the survival or success of the intergenerational family. As Titelman (2003b) suggested:
The evolutionary pressures of asymmetrical kinship and undifferentiation in the face of anxiety, generated by external stressors of scarcity, infertility, lack of food and material resources for survival, and lack of territorial security, can lead to a cutoff in kinship, to a point where one's kin are perceived as foreign, as the enemy, the "evil other" that must be annihilated (p. 38).

Similarly, Wilgus (2003) stated that his review of animal behaviour “illustrates the evolutionary substrates” (p. 67-68) for estrangement in humans suggesting ecological and relationship variables, such as limited resources, population density, stress around reproduction, rank or status, and the immigration of new members, all contributed to the complex processes of exclusionary behaviour in the animal world. He suggested there were similarities between animal and human behaviour where periods of deprivation and poverty had been correlated with increased crime, incarceration, and homelessness (and I would suggest family breakdown) (Wilgus, 2003). Such social phenomena might be viewed as precursors or direct contributors to family estrangement.

Most authors agreed that individuals who radically challenged the family belief system were vulnerable to a degree of family dispute (Benswanger, 1987; Clarke, Preston, Raksin, & Bengston, 1999; Davis, 2002; LeBey, 2001; Sichel, 2004; Sucov, 2006). Benswanger (1987) stated, “every cut-off is a reaction to the articulated or implied conviction that ‘you killed my god’, whether the ‘god’ is defined as material possessions, adequate care, or respect for a significant person, value or belief” (p. 193). When families were more rigid, inflexible, and heavily invested in their values and beliefs, conflict and estrangement were more likely to result (Davis, 2002; Sucov, 2006). As previously stated, this was particularly so if the family perceived the challenge as a threat to solidarity, identity, and survival (Benswanger, 1987; Sucov, 2006). Challenges might come in a number of political, moral, and religious forms, including family members who declared they were gay or lesbian, or
intended to marry someone from another race or religion (Davis, 2002; Sucov, 2006). For example, the disclosure of a positive HIV status led to family estrangement for some participants in Bogart et al.’s (2000) study. The challenge might simply have been a rejection of a strongly held family value, such as tertiary education or having children (Clarke et al., 1999). Sichel (2004) believed such events challenged the ‘family myth’. He said the family myth was often based on the “presumption that every family member is compatible, possesses the same goals, and loves the others without question” (p. 58). This myth was perpetuated by ‘we’ statements about shared values and behaviours and little tolerance for individual difference. Banishing members who challenged the family myth might be regarded as the only way to keep it intact (Sichel, 2004).

Unrealistic or unfulfilled expectations were also commonly cited as contributors to family estrangement (Jerrome, 1994; LeBey, 2001; Sucov, 2006). Estrangements might be fuelled by unrealistic expectations about small things, such as keeping promises or phoning family members on their birthdays (Davis, 2002; LeBey, 2001). Unfulfilled gender role expectations might contribute to this (Benswanger, 1987; Jerrome, 1994; Sucov, 2006). For example, one of the participants in Millward’s (1999) case study research spoke about her brother’s disapproval and subsequent estrangement when she would not assume the carer role for their elderly parents. Estrangements were often connected to unfulfilled expectations about larger issues, for example, relating to money and inheritances (LeBey, 2001; Sucov, 2006).

Many authors agreed there were instances where family estrangement could be viewed as a healthy response to an unhealthy situation (Davis, 2002; Hargrave & Anderson, 1997; LeBey, 2001; Sucov, 2006). For example, estrangement might result from abuse and betrayal enacted by one or more family members against another, most commonly against a
child (Davis, 2002; Hargrave & Anderson, 1997). Common examples of intergenerational abuse included physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, and neglect, which might be fuelled or complicated by adult addiction, divorce, and family secrets (Hargrave & Anderson, 1997). In these situations, the shock of violation might leave the individual vulnerable to further power imbalance, abuse, and betrayal (Davis, 2002). Adolescents and adults might make a conscious decision to end relationships when they believed the issue was so extreme it could not be broached or resolved or they believed that the abuse might continue. Some authors suggested there were extreme situations where the permanent or temporary severing of family ties was necessary to promote healing (LeBey, 2001; Sucov, 2006).

Intergenerational differences and hurts were cited as a natural part of all families, and most families were able to overcome these (Hargrave & Anderson, 1997). However, in some instances, a lack of effective communication seemed to prevent such healing and set families on a destructive path. For example, Davis (2002) claimed:

Estrangements often start because we lack the communication skills to prevent them: we don’t know how to apologize, listen or cool off and talk again tomorrow. Instead a harsh word gets set in stone. Small slights are whipped up into unforgivable injuries. Jealousy festers. Misunderstandings are never discussed or resolved. An ultimatum, made in anger, comes due (p. 14).

Alternatively, “the wounds and the hurts [may] accumulate and grow in an unforgiving or distant family atmosphere; family relationships may suffer a slow, agonizing death” (Hargrave & Anderson, 1997, p. 147). Some family members or families did not know how to communicate in such a way as to resolve issues such as those described throughout this thesis (Sucov, 2006). Most authors agreed that the identification and modification of ineffective communication patterns would prevent many estrangements, although they also
conceded this was not a simple matter (Clarke et al., 1999; Davis, 2002; LeBey, 2001; Sichel, 2007; Sucov, 2006).

Individual needs and expectations might be incompatible at different transition periods across the life-cycle (Hargrave & Anderson, 1997; Jerrome, 1994; LeBey, 2001). Critical periods, such as children leaving the nuclear family, marriage, birth, death, retirement, and divorce, often altered family equilibrium. The literature focused on three common events related to family conflict and estrangement: marriage, divorce or remarriage, and death. Marriage not only brought in-laws into the family but often different values and beliefs to challenge the family system (Jerrome, 1994; LeBey, 2001; Sucov, 2006). Clarke et al.’s (1999) research found “the structural disruption of families caused by divorce and remarriage [was] perceived as a serious constraint to both communication and contact” (p. 265) between members. Shapiro’s (2003) longitudinal analysis concluded that divorced fathers were more likely to become estranged from their adult-children than their married counterparts. Their study also showed divorced mothers were more prone to estrangement from at least one of their children than their married counterparts (Shapiro, 2003).

Impending death, and the requirements of caring for an older parent may bring latent childhood sibling rivalry to the fore (LeBey, 2001; Schulman, 1999): “As parents age and die, loyalties and lines of allegiance often shift within a family. The death (or impending death) of a parent can bring siblings together or split them apart” (Davis, 2002, p. 143). Authors agreed that inheritance was more than the transfer of funds (Davis, 2002; LeBey, 2001; Sucov, 2006). For those left behind, and despite the amount of money and property involved, it could be a symbolic transaction of power, love, loyalty, and favour (LeBey, 2001; Sucov, 2006). Authors cited lifelong disputes over the smallest of sentimental items (Davis, 2002; LeBey, 2001; Sucov, 2006). Peisah et al. (2006) conducted a thematic analysis
of fifty cases involving an older person with dementia before the Guardianship Tribunal in Australia and uncovered numerous cases of later-life family estrangement, often fuelled by latent sibling rivalry and the older person’s paranoid delusions. The ensuing conflict and estrangement was often played out through sibling and parental accusations of neglect and financial exploitation of the older person (Peisah et al., 2006).

There were a number of additional contributors to estrangement cited in the literature. For example, the intensity of family relationships when members worked in family businesses might contribute to family conflict and estrangement (Ainsworth & Wolfram Cox, 2003; LeBey, 2001; Sichel, 2004). Sichel (2004) noted the impact of family members with mental health issues, such as personality disorders. Estrangement from family has been reported to result from problem drinking in older adults (Rigler, 2000). A major theme woven consistently throughout the literature was the potential for the intergenerational transmission of family estrangement (Benswanger, 1987; Bowen, 1982; Davis, 2002; Hargrave & Anderson, 1997; LeBey, 2001; Schulman, 1999; Sichel, 2004; Sucov, 2006). This is elaborated later in this chapter when the effects of family estrangement are discussed.

**Bowen’s Work on Emotional Cutoff**

Over several decades, Dr Murray Bowen (1913-1990) developed the most definitive and well-cited work about family estrangement. Bowen, a US psychiatrist and scholar, began using the term Family Systems Theory in 1966 to describe his work into reciprocal functioning in family relationship systems, although this was changed to Bowen Family Systems Theory or simply Bowen Theory in 1974 (Bowen, 1982). His theory “attempted to describe the ways in which the human family is a part of the natural world, the world of evolution, biology and science” (Harrison, 2003, p. 249). Bowen’s theory originated from his research with parents of schizophrenic children. He hypothesised that the individual’s
emotional system was “governed by the interplay of two counterbalancing ‘life forces’, individuality and togetherness, which are rooted in biology” (Titelman, 2003b, pp. 19-20). His work moved the focus of family therapy from an individualistic or psychodynamic understanding of client problems to situating them within the nuclear and multigenerational family and societal systems (Titelman, 2003b).

Bowen’s key concept, differentiation of self, referred to the way in which a person managed the interplay of togetherness and individuality within the relationship system (Titelman, 2003b) and assisted therapists to conceptualise and work with, “the degree of … unresolved emotional attachments to families of origin” (Bowen, 1982, p. 529). Individuals were placed along a continuum from fusion to differentiation. Those who were least differentiated were regarded as more reactive to the emotional system (or anxiety) to the exclusion of intellect. The most highly differentiated individual would respond to anxiety with logical reasoning and decision-making. Indicators of fusion included:

(1) acting as if one can read the other's mind; (2) speaking or acting for the other; (3) automatically expressing emotional, social, or physical responses that are reactions to expressed or unexpressed behaviour or feelings of another family member; and (4) adopting or living out, automatically, a family belief, tradition, or lifestyle choice (Titelman, 2003b, p. 22).

Bowen (1982) was quick to emphasise that intellect did not equate to intelligence rather it indicated an ability to adapt to life’s challenges in more than an instinctive fashion. Additionally, it is important to note that the term emotional in Bowen’s work referred to instinctive, automatic responses (Illick, Hilbert-McAllister, Jefferies, & White, 2003). An individual who was able to recognise and self-regulate emotional or instinctive responses and manage anxiety was more likely to be successful in family and social relationships and
experience greater physical and emotional wellbeing than those who simply did ‘what felt right in the moment’ (Bowen, 1982; Harrison, 2003; Titelman, 2003b).

Bowen based his theory on eight interlocking concepts, including cutoff, which might offer considerable insight into family estrangement. Bowen referred to emotional cutoff or simply cutoff from the 1960s onwards, formally adding it to his theory in 1975 (Titelman, 2003b). For Bowen, emotional cutoff primarily related to the adult-child’s relationship with his or her parents, but he also acknowledged secondary cutoffs occurred between siblings and extended family. Fundamentally, the concept of cutoff:

Deals with the way people separate themselves from the past in order to start their lives in the present generation. Much thought went into the selection of a term to best describe this process of separation, isolation, withdrawal, running away or denying the importance of the parental family (Bowen, 1982, p. 382).

While differentiation was considered a normal process, adult-children were also anticipated to have some degree of unresolved attachment to their parents. Most individuals would use some combination of emotional and physical distance to maintain equilibrium in the intergenerational family (Bowen, 1982). Bowen viewed differentiation processes on a continuum, from children who ‘grew away’, to those who ‘tore away’ and those who ‘cut off’ (Titelman, 2003b). Cutoff was thought to be most likely when this attachment was situated in the fusion realm (Bowen, 1982). Titelman (2003) explained, “cutoff, insofar as it is an emotional process, is rooted in evolutionary processes that are instinctive and automatic. Cutoff functions to control and reduce anxiety generated by intense contact – stuck-together fusion – within the family of origin” (p. 22). Cutoff might be “an intrapsychic process of

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5 Concepts include triangles, differentiation of self, nuclear family emotional system, family projection process, multigenerational transmission process, emotional cutoff, sibling position, and societal emotional process.

6 Originally spelt cut-off, this was later changed to cutoff.
denial and isolation of self while living close to parents; or by physically running away; or by a combination” (Bowen, 1982, p. 382).

Since its inception, Bowen’s theory has been applied, extended, and researched by a number of professionals, predominantly family therapists. Peter Titelman has contributed significantly to the literature, offering a number of edited texts about the subject, including his edited book *The therapist's own family: toward the differentiation of self* (1987) in which family therapists documented their own journeys in the differentiation of self from family of origin, and his edited book *Clinical applications of Bowen family systems theory* (1998). The concept of cutoff was documented thoroughly in his edited book, *Emotional cutoff: Bowen family systems theory perspectives* (2003c). It is important to reiterate that when Bowen Family System theorists refer to cutoff, they might relate to both overt and covert cutoffs. This work is examined and incorporated in more detail throughout the remainder of this review.

**The Possible Effects of Family Estrangement**

The effects of estrangement might be more readily observed in animals than in humans. The non-human species might actually benefit from the ostracism, or exclusion, of certain members from the primary group: “Forced dispersal may result in range extension, outbreeding, population density regulation, and the spread of learned traditions” (Raleigh and McGuire cited in Wilgus, 2003, p. 73). The effects on the individual animal, however, might be less than satisfactory. Wilgus’s (2003) review of the research evidence across a number of species revealed effects like increased mortality and morbidity, lowered reproductive outcomes, and reduced access to food. McGuire and Raleigh’s (1986) “experimental investigation indicates that ostracism exacts a substantial biological price. It is accompanied by reduced immune function and altered brain activity” (cited in Wilgus, 2003, pp. 75-76).
While the research about the effects of estrangement in humans was less decisive and voluminous, it appeared to support some of these assertions.

It should be noted from the outset that unlike the aforementioned animal research that focused on the effects of being rejected, when authors referred to humans, they rarely distinguished between the effects of estrangement on the person who initiated the estrangement (left or rejected the relationship), or the person who was estranged (cast out or left behind). They tended to highlight the stories of those who said that others in the family had estranged them, but there were exceptions. This might be because the people seeking professional help and participating in research were more likely to feel wronged or estranged than those who chose to reduce contact or end the relationship. Additionally, it appeared that each individual’s experience of the estrangement – and subsequent version of events – might be so different that each party might honestly believe they had been ‘rejected’, ‘estranged’, or ‘cast out’ by the other. In other words, making distinctions between the estranged person and the person who initiated the estrangement was pointless, and probably impossible to determine. Most authors agreed that the conditions that created a situation so emotionally distressing as to result in estrangement would most likely have positive and negative effects on both parties (Davis, 2002; Sichel, 2004; Sucov, 2006). Hence the following section does not differentiate between the effects of estrangement on different parties, rather it reviews some of the effects that people might experience after estrangement.

Proponents of Bowen Family System Theory suggested the immediate effect of cutoff was relief from conflict and anxiety (Bowen, 1978; Titelman, 2003b). Cutoff served as a mechanism to diffuse intensity and helped to sustain a more comfortable level of functioning in the individual and the family system (Harrison, 2003; Smith, 2003): “In addition, cutoff decreases family member awareness of attachment to and conflict with one another” (Smith,
Alternatively, relief could provide the parties space to reflect on their behaviours and review the dispute (Illick et al., 2003). However, one might presume that a reduction in anxiety might be more likely for a party who chose to end the relationship than for one who was rejected or estranged unexpectedly.

Some authors cited shock, anger, hurt, devastation, and numbness as the immediate effects of estrangement (Davis, 2002; LeBey, 2001; Sichel, 2004). Sichel (2004) even likened the aftermath of estrangement to the traumatic shock of ‘being buried alive’ and involving feelings of numbness, detachment, depersonalisation, compulsive rumination, and anhedonia within an acute stress disorder framework. He suggested that in the early stages of estrangement, numbness or an inability to process intense emotions acted as an emotional anaesthetic. Estrangement also impacted on “mastery and competence, ability to delay gratification, and tolerance for frustration” in the ensuing weeks (Sichel, 2004, p. 11). While the reported short-term effects of estrangement (and cutoff) might vacillate between relief and traumatic responses, most authors agreed that unresolved estrangement could contribute to a number of negative long-term consequences including emotional disturbances, physiological abnormalities, negative impacts on other interpersonal relationships, and restricted access to resources (Allen, 2003; Bowen, 1978; Davis, 2002; Harrison, 2003; Illick et al., 2003; Jerrome, 1994; Klever, 2003; Sichel, 2004; Titelman, 2003b).

**Emotional Responses to Estrangement**

Trauma deriving from human intervention or design was much more intense and difficult to overcome than trauma resulting from accidents or chance (Sichel, 2004). Sichel (2004) stated:

The trauma of a family member physically dying usually becomes less painful with time – it falls under the heading of a natural catastrophe from which the human psyche ultimately
learns to heal. However, on two decades of evidence of the scores of my patients who've faced both kinds of trauma, the psychological death of a family cutoff clearly tends to remain torturous – and very much more emotionally damaging (p. 2).

When family estrangement occurred, the intensity of the trauma increased because it was inflicted by humans in one’s own family (LeBey, 2001; Sichel, 2004). Families were bound to the individual’s identity, and feelings of safety and security, and estrangement affected all of these conditions (LeBey, 2001; Sucov, 2006). When individuals lost contact with family, they lost contact with vital elements of self which might reduce their sense of identity (LeBey, 2001; Sichel, 2004). When a family member attacked another, they might effectively attack the individual’s beliefs about self, including their identification with particular roles, such as being a good parent or child (LeBey, 2001).

Many authors cited the persistence of the psychological pain associated with estrangement and agreed estrangement could not be left untended without negative consequences (Allen, 2003; Davis, 2002; LeBey, 2001; Sichel, 2004; Sucov, 2006). Profound hurt and anger might lead to a passive hatred, which conflicted by love, might develop into long-term resentment, competition, and rivalry between the estranged members and those associated with the estranged parties (LeBey, 2001). Those affected could become obsessed with revisiting the events leading to the estrangement, thinking about revenge, while others might imagine paths to reconciliation (Davis, 2002). The lack of rituals and social recognition surrounding estrangement might make it a hidden loss, which could not be reconciled (Sucov, 2006) or spoken about in public (Jerrome, 1994). There might be a vacuum or emptiness left where the family member used to be, and silence might be used to cover the tension associated with the emotional by-products of estrangement (Sucov, 2006).
If the estrangement were to last in the longer term, such symptoms might decrease, but they were likely to resurface at times of stress and change. If estranged parties were to live in close proximity, they might ‘sight’ each other on occasion (Sucov, 2006). Significant events in the life-cycle, like the birth of a child or retirement, might bring up previously experienced symptoms of trauma, as might unrelated traumatic occurrences (Sichel, 2004). In fact:

The general consensus among mental health professionals is that family will inevitably come back to haunt us – in our relationships with spouses, children, in-laws, friends and colleagues. There’s a whole school of thought now that walking away from family to escape problems may very well mean that we will face more problems than the ones left behind (LeBey, 2001, p. 242).

Two commonly cited contributors to, and by-products of estrangement, were emotional reactivity (Bowen, 1982; Klever, 2003; Smith, 2003) and ongoing anxiety and stress (Allen, 2003; Sichel, 2004). These effects were regularly cited by authors who used Bowen Theory in their practice and research. The greater the emotional reactivity, the greater the likelihood anxiety and stress would result (Klever, 2003). Bowen theory suggested “as stress and anxiety increase, there are greater pressures for humans to organize their lives and functioning around automatic responses to events, circumstances, and relationships” (Smith, 2003, p. 354) which might also suggest emotional reactivity and stress might be self-perpetuating in some instances. Chronic stress and anxiety that resulted from estrangement would lead to different physiological outcomes for different people (Allen, 2003).

**Physiological Responses to Cutoff**

All documented studies about the physiological responses to cutoff were conducted by researchers who incorporated Bowen Family Systems Theory into their work. Bowen (1982) suggested that when people were less differentiated, they were more emotionally reactive and
instinctively attuned to survival. He provided a new way of thinking about the cause-effect understanding of physiological and psychological conditions, and recommended the “symptomatic individual is viewed within the context of his or her relationship network” (Allen, 2003, p. 315). For example, Allen (2003) suggested her exploration of personal depression was assisted by this theoretical acknowledgement wherein the anxiety she was experiencing “was a property of the whole system, based on the way everyone was functioning and did not reside in me” (p. 322). Bowen (1982) also said those who cutoff covertly, i.e., who remained in physical but not emotional contact with the estranged party or parties, were more susceptible to internalised symptoms, such as illness and depression, while those who estranged overtly were more likely to suffer the consequences of their own impulsive behaviours. Recent investigation concluded both overt and covert cutoff might contribute to physiological changes in the individual (Allen, 2003; Friesen, 2003; Harrison, 2003) and suggested “emotional reactivity is built into biology and influences all internal states and behaviour” (Harrison, 2003, p. 247).

Friesen’s (2003) clinical practice incorporated the use of neuro-feedback research to examine the relationships between emotional cutoff and the brain, and she suggested estrangement could be observed at the level of physiology. Her research was based on Allman’s thesis about the evolution of the brain suggesting “the complexity of the human brain evolved with the development of the extended family as a social group” (Friesen, 2003, p. 84) and species with fewer living generations had a smaller cortex. Friesen (2003) suggested an increased number and complexity of relational contacts might “develop more intrinsic ability to discriminate the input from the senses with a wider range of possible associations and behaviours” (p. 91). She concluded (in concordance with Allman and
Bowen) that people who were more cutoff and had less intergenerational contact would respond to stressful situations with less evaluation and more emotional reactivity.

In terms of this theory, this evolutionary adaptation occurred over time, from generation to generation and without intervention, the cutoff of one generation was likely to affect the reactivity of the next. Bowen theory would suggest variations including the “composite level of differentiation of the family; the level of anxiety at different developmental stages; and the position of the child in the anxiety mechanisms of the family” (Friesen, 2003, p. 107) would affect brain development and the likelihood of further family estrangement during the child’s adulthood (and in future generations).

Friesen (2003) used biofeedback during twenty years of clinical practice to measure the initial and changing physiological activity in her patients in relation to relationship changes and clinical input. This included measurements of the automatic and central nervous systems. Different brain waves originated in different parts of the brain and their positioning and measurement could indicate different conditions and levels of functioning, such as emotion, focus, and depression. The individual’s physiological response was viewed as genetic. Friesen (2003) claimed she had observed two patterns associated with emotional cutoff:

The first is a highly reactive behaviour pattern that corresponds with high amplitude brain wave patterns. This means the amplitude or strength of the wave is greater than typical for the brain wave, indicating excessive activity … The second is a constricted, inwardly oriented behaviour pattern associated with low amplitude in the brain wave patterns. It is as if the individual is constraining his energy to adapt. Both have high levels of physiological activity – cold hands and high muscle tension … More emotional cutoff is associated with more reliance on existing relationships, and increased relationship sensitivity producing heightened physiological response patterns, and less ability to self-regulate (pp. 96-97).
Harrison’s (2003) multifaceted research examined the impact of cutoff on female fertility. Knowing chemical stress reactions and reproductive hormones originated and interacted in the limbic system led her to investigate possible connections between emotional reactivity, estrangement, and the regulation of ovulation. Her clinical survey of women who had not reproduced suggested an association between an extreme dependence between the woman and her family, and cutoff from the intergenerational family. A genealogical study of eight generations of the researcher’s family found a greater absence of reproduction in those members who had experienced multiple generations of estrangement.

In a clinical study of ovulation and reactivity, Harrison (2003) examined three groups of women between 1992 and 1995: (i) women without medical or mental health issues; (ii) women in treatment for anxiety related conditions; and (iii) women in treatment for infertility. Biofeedback from the first two groups of women showed they had some level of reactivity when asked to speak about their family, but this dissipated when asked to sit quietly afterwards. The group undergoing infertility treatment “sustained high levels of stress reactions while talking about their families and while sitting quietly” (Harrison, 2003, p. 261). Of this group, the women who did not ovulate were experiencing high levels of intergenerational family cutoff and had intense, although generally positive, contact with their mothers. There was little cutoff in women with delayed ovulation. It is important to note detailed information about the three studies, such as sample sizes, were unobtainable at the time of writing.

**Effects on Relationships**

Family estrangement not only affected the immediate relationship but set off ripple effects in familial and interpersonal relationships (Davis, 2002; Friesen, 2003; Jerrome, 1994; Klever, 2003; LeBey, 2001; Sichel, 2004; Sucov, 2006; Titelman, 2003b). The most obvious effect of
estrangement was isolation from one or more family members, but this had implications for associated or secondary estrangement (LeBey, 2001; Titelman, 2003b). Sometimes family members might be estranged from a person with an historically attributed ‘problem status’, without any knowledge of the person, or witness to problem behaviours (Titelman, 2003b). In other words, they inherited the estrangement. For example, if an older person were estranged from their adult-child, they would likely be denied access to their grandchildren also. Grandchildren would experience an inherited estrangement (Titelman, 2003b). In addition, grandparents might have disrupted or superficial relationships with peers in whom they could not confide about the estrangement or converse with about their grandchildren (Jerrome, 1994). Recent research tracked the emotional wellbeing of grandparents over 15 years, concluding those who had lost contact with at least one set of their grandchildren experienced higher levels of depressive symptoms than other grandparents (Drew & Silverstein, 2007).

Some authors attributed particular losses to particular types of relationships. For example, LeBey (2001) said “from grandparents, children get a sense of where they have come from and the security of having other people besides their parents to love and nurture and protect them” (p. 245). Klever (2003) also suggested cutoff from grandparents left the grandchild very susceptible to an amplified parent-child symbiosis and vulnerable to future cutoff from his or her own parents. The implications of isolation from family members might also include the loss of important genetic and historical information about family (LeBey, 2001). Authors suggested knowledge and interaction with extended family was one of the most important sources of self-understanding, which might be denied with long-term estrangement ( Bowen, 1982; Illick et al., 2003; LeBey, 2001).

Estrangement from family members might also mean isolation from certain co-existing friends, relationships, associations, and events resulting in a shrinking of social
experiences (Davis, 2002), and less people to turn to for emotional support and guidance (Allen, 2003). Interestingly, one study found older people who experienced interpersonal difficulties in one relationship (such as with a family member) often experienced problems in others (such as in friendships) (Krause & Rook, 2003). Proponents of Bowen theory also associated a number of adverse conditions to the reduction of familial networks resulting from emotional cutoff, including marital functioning, child abuse, and domestic violence. The underlying theory was:

Lacking outlets for anxiety and support that extended family can provide, relationships in the present generation become more unstable. This relationship instability and the mechanisms for handling it in the present generation, coupled with the cutoff from the past, can pave the way for symptom development (Allen, 2003, p. 316).

Indeed Bowen (1982) suggested:

The more intense the cutoff with the past, the more likely the individual to have an exaggerated version of his parental family problem in his own marriage, and the more likely his own children to do a more intense cutoff with him in the next generation (p. 382).

McKnight (2003) studied sixty families to ascertain the impact of cutoff on raising adolescents. She employed the Emotional Cutoff, Global Assessment of Functioning, and Adolescent Functional Assessment scales to measure degrees of cutoff between the adults and their parents, the degree of cutoff between the adults and their adolescent child, and connections to levels of parental functioning. Results showed a positive correlation (.38, p>.05) between mothers’ functioning and their level of cutoff from their parents: the greater the cutoff, the lower the level of functioning. However, results showed no correlation to the impairment of the adolescent, rather the reverse, where the more cut off the mother, the less the impairment. The study also showed the greater the cutoff between the mother and her
father, the more likely her child was to be cut off from his father. Significance was not evident in any of these measures when the fathers were studied (McKnight, 2003).

A number of authors stated intergenerational estrangement had negative impacts on the adult-child’s romantic attachments and marriage, including greater susceptibility to divorce (Bowen, 1982; Ferrera, 2003; Klever, 2003; Murphy, 2003). Bowen (1982) suggested individuals in sustained romantic relationships would usually exhibit similar levels of differentiation. The degree of differentiation between an emotionally immature pair was likely to be similar to or less than the differentiation between each parent and adult-child attachment (Klever, 2003). Research showed associations between avoidant or anxious (or fused) childhood attachments and fearful and dependent behaviours in later adult romantic attachments (Klever, 2003). Klever (2003) suggested, when there was higher parent and child fusion and or cutoff, associated behaviours and patterns would be re-enacted in the new romantic relationship.

Dating or coupling might provide an outlet for the adult-child to break away from the fused relationship, or seem like a quick remedy to the emptiness left by cutoff (Klever, 2003). However, instinctive responses and behavioural patterns associated with fusion and intergenerational cutoff might mean “the dating relationship is guided more by the effort to sustain positive feelings and by reacting to the other than internal principles. The reaction to the other may be overaccommodation, distance, conflict or domination” (Klever, 2003, p. 224). The anxiety and emotional reactivity brought into, and replicated in, the romantic relationship was managed through four primary mechanisms, used to varying degrees in most families: “loss of functioning in a partner, projection to an offspring, emotional distance, and marital conflict” (Murphy, 2003, p. 341).
Additionally, if one or both members of the romantic couple were estranged from some of the intergenerational family, they would have less support and fewer emotional outlets for anxiety experienced between the two, thus creating a greater focus and intensified dependence on the other (Ferrera, 2003; Klever, 2003). Klever (2003) suggested emotionally cutoff couples might function well during periods of low stress, but when events such as the birth of a child or illness arose, their stability was more likely to be threatened due to greater emotional reactivity and less intergenerational support and guidance.

High levels of anxiety and emotional reactivity resulting from cutoff have been described by some authors as potential contributors to the abusive elements of relationships. For example, Murphy (2003) suggested, when couples were more cutoff and relied heavily on the adaptive mechanism of marital conflict to cope with anxiety and emotional reactivity, this might result in domestic violence. Smith (2003) suggested an interrelationship between the presence of cutoff, isolation from intergenerational support, and child abuse. He stated, in the immediate term, aggression and abuse towards children served to decrease anxiety and conflict within the parental dyad. When families were exposed to continual and sustained anxiety, this might progressively result in higher levels of instinctually aggressive and violent behaviour. Clinical observations of families where severe child abuse was occurring commonly included family members with low differentiation, socially isolated families, and families where there was extensive intergenerational cutoff and chronic conflict between the parents (Smith, 2003).

Fewer Resources

Fewer social contacts equated to fewer resources upon which to draw, both emotionally and practically (Davis, 2002; Jerrome, 1994; Klever, 2003). For younger members of the family, this could mean reduced support and advice about important decisions, such as purchasing a
home (Davis, 2002) and fewer offers of practical assistance, such as helping with repairs (Davis, 2002). It could also mean fewer people to turn to in a crisis (Davis, 2002; Jerrome, 1994; Short, 1996). For example, Short’s (1996) in-depth interviews with 26 clients of emergency relief centres revealed kin relationships characterised by conflict and estrangement, resulting in an absence of family members with resources to share in times of crisis.

**Addressing and Living with Family Estrangement**

The clinical literature provided some advice about the steps or processes involved in attempting to reconcile with estranged members. Sichel (2004) and Davis’ (2002) books focused on addressing and living with family estrangement. Richards’ (2008) book documented her journey from abuse and estrangement to reconciliation and offered suggestions for others living with estrangement. Other books tended to focus on the history and experiences of estrangement, with a few chapters dedicated to reconciliation and living with estrangement (LeBey, 2001; Sucov, 2006). Authors claimed to have drawn from clinical experience, interviews with estranged individuals who had attempted reconciliation, and personal experiences. Sucov (2006) also acknowledged the importance of a family systems understanding, and incorporated the teachings of the Jewish faith throughout her book. Once again authors tended neither to distinguish between the party who initiated the estrangement nor the party who was estranged, rather to focus on the person who desired reconciliation or help to live with the estrangement.

Authors agreed that addressing an estrangement, reconciling with family members, or learning to live without reconciliation, was a lengthy processes involving commitment, insight, and courage, regardless of whether the person was the initiator or recipient of estrangement (Davis, 2002; LeBey, 2001; Richards, 2008; Sichel, 2004; Sucov, 2006). Most
authors suggested the first hurdle was to recognise the depth of the pain and overcome the shock associated with family estrangement (Davis, 2002; Richards, 2008; Sichel, 2004; Sucov, 2006). Sichel (2004), in particular, regarded this period of self-care as very important and suggested that the estranged ‘start to live, laugh and be happy’ through honouring their daily commitments and focusing on self-healing. Most authors suggested some form of life review as necessary to gain a better understanding about the context of estrangement. This involved reviewing family roles and myths (Sichel, 2004), family structure, patterns, traditions and rituals (Sucov, 2006), and examining one’s own family roles (Davis, 2002; Sichel, 2004).

All authors recognised the estranged individual as the site of change and personal growth, where the insight developed from family and self-exploration contributed to new perspectives, a gradual letting go of resentment and hatred, and a choice to move forward in some way (Davis, 2002; LeBey, 2001; Richards, 2008; Sichel, 2004; Sucov, 2006). Sucov (2006) suggested those most able to move from the pain of estrangement “have achieved a new appreciation for the bonds of kinship as well as for the inevitable differences between members – difference in terms of beliefs, expectations and behaviour” (p. 215). Davis (2002) believed that time and life experiences, such as having children, would bring new perspectives and greater tolerance. Both LeBey (2001) and Sucov (2006) said family review included an examination of the good memories from the past and a recognition that these could occur again in the future. Sichel (2004) suggested focusing on the habits and behaviours of successful families as a way of understanding and developing new ways of behaving and Richards (2008) suggested learning strategies to self-parent.

Most authors associated self-growth with the development of new ways of being and communicating with others, including breaking free from habitual ways of interacting,
revising expectations of others, achieving autonomy, and gaining a clearer understanding of one’s own boundaries (Davis, 2002; LeBey, 2001; Sichel, 2004; Sucov, 2006). When reconnection or reaching out to an estranged person was a part of the person’s goals, and this tended to be the focus of most books, it was described as a tentative and staged process involving considerable thought, planning, risk and persistence. Respectful communication, compassion, offering a genuine apology, acknowledging one’s complicity in the estrangement, and sometimes making amends were considered important components of reconnection. Most advised that meetings between estranged parties should not dwell on the past, or analyse or blame (Davis, 2002; LeBey, 2001; Sichel, 2004; Sucov, 2006).

All acknowledged the unresolvable nature of some estrangements (Davis, 2002; LeBey, 2001; Richards, 2008; Sichel, 2004; Sucov, 2006). Davis (2002) and Richards (2008) were particularly clear about establishing boundaries so reconciliation – and not capitulation – was achieved in relationships where abuse had occurred, and making realistic evaluations of the other person’s ability to change or reconcile. All authors agreed that the preparatory processes for reconciliation were equally as useful in preparing to live peacefully without reconciliation. While most authors had mentioned the importance of reconnection with self and others, Sichel (2004) was explicit in his advice to build a ‘second chance family’ to heal from estrangement.

Bowen viewed the family of origin as one of the most valuable sources of self-understanding and the human task as moving past purely emotionally-driven responses (Illick et al., 2003). He believed emotional attachment patterns, or a multigenerational transmission process, such as the ways parents coped with critical periods of anxiety, had considerable influence on future generational patterns. Bowen (1982) believed “systems therapy cannot remake what nature created but through learning how the organism operates, controlling
anxiety, and learning to better adapt to the fortunes and misfortunes of life, it can give nature a better chance” (p. 410). Bowen encouraged therapists to develop their professional practice through personal exploration of their own emotional attachments with their family of origin and use family systems coaches. Some of the authors in Titleman’s book wrote about their use of Bowen’s principles in bridging their own emotional cutoffs (see Eichholz, 2003; Gilbert, 2003; Kelly, 2003; Titelman, 2003c).

Bowen (1982) believed family contact was imperative to reduce anxiety and set the context to develop increased differentiation. He said that this work should be commenced in the family of origin, and this would impact positively on all other relationships, e.g., with partners and children. He advocated three primary strategies to address cutoff and improve differentiation. First he said the person should aim to develop a person-to-person relationship with every member of his or her intergenerational family. Person-to-person relationships were those “in which two people can relate personally to each other about each other, without talking about others (triangling), and without talking about impersonal things” (Bowen, 1982, p. 540). Next, he said one must become a better observer and control emotional reactions. By becoming more objective, the person would be more able to reduce instinctive emotional responses, become more neutral, and see his or her part in the cutoff. The first two steps readied the person to detriangle him or herself from emotional situations. This was a complex process involving a number of Bowen’s other theories and processes. At its core, the third step required remaining involved in family processes while emotional issues were occurring between two people and the self, and developing the capacity to remain neutral. Bowen (1982) recognised not all cutoffs were solvable, but recommended persistence and mature connection with other members of the family of origin and extended family to reduce the likelihood of the transmission of intergenerational cutoff.
Conclusion

Family estrangement appeared to be a concept and condition familiar to clinicians, and their cumulative practice wisdom was primarily cited in popular and self-help literature. The concept of cutoff, developed by family therapist Murray Bowen in the 1970s, contributed theoretical knowledge to this field and stimulated some research, particularly about the neurological substrates of estrangement from the intergenerational family. Family estrangement was also found, almost incidentally, in some small research studies about families. The literature pertained to family estrangement as a generic condition, and rarely examined its manifestation in relation to gender, culture, or particular age cohorts. However, a broadening of the initial search strategy, as documented in this chapter, revealed that theory and research about later-life intergenerational relationships provided additional information about the occurrence and nature of family estrangement in the age group of participants pertinent to this study. This literature will be discussed in Chapter 3.
CHAPTER 3

The Later-Life Intergenerational Family

With increasing life expectancy, researchers have become more interested in studying adult intergenerational relationships. In Western societies, adult-children tend to live separately, often at some distance from their older parents, and there has been growing interest in the nature of these relationships (Wenger, 2001). From the 1970s, there has been a steady increase in research into the later-life intergenerational family, including examinations of intergenerational solidarity (Bengston & Oyama, 2007; Steinbach, 2008), family caregiving and exchanges of support (Lowenstein & Daatland, 2006; Parrott & Bengston, 1999), and later-life isolation or alienation (Savikko, Routasalo, Tilvis, Strandberg, & Pitkala, 2005; Victor, Scambler, Bowling, & Bond, 2005). More recently, research into later-life experiences of family conflict (Kramer, Boelk, & Auer, 2006; Peisah et al., 2006), negative exchanges (Akiyama, Antonucci, Takahashi, & Langfahl, 2003; Krause, 2007), and older parents’ ambivalence towards their adult-children (Pillemer, Suitor, Mock et al., 2007; Rappoport & Lowenstein, 2007) have added further dimensions to understandings of the intergenerational family. While researchers seem to have subscribed to a more holistic view of intergenerational relationships, the conceptualisation and examination of later-life family estrangement remains relatively unnamed and untouched within these frameworks. This chapter examines current research and literature that specifically reviews the relationship between the adult-child and parent, including solidarity, conflict, and ambivalence constructs; the definitions and prevalence of different relationship types; factors affecting later-life intergenerational relationships; and the lessons learned or implications for future research with later-life families.
Research into the Later-Life Intergenerational Family

At the beginning of the 20th century, family theory predominantly focused on the nuclear family in the first half of life (Cohler & Altergott, 1995). Demographic changes after World War II brought an increasingly ageing population and the possibility that families would comprise up to five living generations (Cohler & Altergott, 1995). Steadily the fields of sociology, social psychology, family therapy, family studies, and gerontology became more interested in studying later-life and intergenerational families. While theories from these diverse perspectives were often difficult to integrate, knowledge of later-life intergenerational relationships advanced considerably. Allen, Blieszner, and Roberto’s (2000) literature review of 908 family gerontology articles written in the 1990s revealed a conceptual “appreciation for pluralism and resilience” in the ageing family and a utilisation of “life course, feminist, socio-emotional selectivity, and family solidarity theories” (p. 911). A later analysis of the 838 empirical family gerontology articles within their review, documented an increasing use of theory and theorising in research, and while micro-level theory predominated, there was some evidence of a growth in the incorporation of multi-level analysis in relation to later-life families (Roberto, Blieszner, & Allen, 2006).

Solidarity, Conflict, and Ambivalence

Arguably, the most influential theoretical and empirical contributions to the area of intergenerational relationships commenced with the introduction of the solidarity model in the 1970s. Originating from the sociological work of Emile Durkheim, the concept of solidarity initially referred to a societal, rather than individual construct (Merz, Schuengel, & Schulze, 2007). However, in response to Talcott Parson’s (1942, 1944) assertion of the nuclear family becoming increasingly isolated, social psychologists Bengston and his colleagues looked to theories of social organisation, group dynamics, and developmental
perspectives inductively to develop and test a model of family solidarity (Beaton, Norris, & Pratt, 2003; Bengston & Roberts, 1991). After initially focusing on three constructs – affection, association, and consensus – the model was later reformulated to include functional, normative, and structural elements to measure and predict intergenerational solidarity (Bengston & Roberts, 1991).

The six elements of intergenerational solidarity, with nominal definitions and examples of empirical indicators, are captured in columns 1, 2, and 3 of Table 3.1. Bengston and Roberts’ (1991) early research showed connections between normative solidarity and affectual and associational solidarity. In other words, when family members were positively committed to familial roles and expectations, they also showed higher levels of affection for one another and these were shown to influence the time spent with each other, or association. However, the solidarity model was increasingly criticised due to its consensual and normative emphasis (Lowenstein, 2007). Additionally, some scholars felt there was a risk of simplistic interpretation, so conflict and negative family interactions might be conceptualised and examined solely as an absence of family solidarity (Beaton et al., 2003). At the same time, researchers were becoming increasingly interested in and cognisant of the negative aspects of intergenerational relationships, such as elder abuse, isolation, and caregiver stress (Luscher & Pillemer, 1998). In a process of theory building and empirical testing, the solidarity model was reconceptualised as the solidarity-conflict model during the 1980s (Lowenstein, 2007). This re-emphasised the well-documented idea that conflict was inherent, inevitable, and possibly important in the family dynamic (Bengston, Giarrusso, Mabry, & Silverstein, 2002).

Some family researchers remained concerned about intergenerational relationships being polarised and examined from a ‘love/hate’ or ‘either/or’ approach, saying the solidarity-conflict model did not adequately capture the complexity of
Table 3.1. Six elements of intergenerational solidarity, with nominal definitions, examples of empirical indicators and comparison to estrangement indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Nominal Definition</th>
<th>Empirical Indicators</th>
<th>Estrangement Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Associational solidarity</td>
<td>Frequency and patterns of interaction in various types of activities in which family members engage</td>
<td>Frequency of intergeneration interaction (i.e., face-to-face, telephone, mail) Types of common activities shared (i.e., recreation, special occasions, etc.)</td>
<td>Infrequent or no person-to-person interaction No or few shared activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affectual solidarity</td>
<td>Type and degree of positive sentiments held about family members, and the degree of reciprocity of these sentiments</td>
<td>Ratings of affection, warmth, closeness, understanding, trust, respect, etc. for family members Ratings of perceived reciprocity in positive sentiments among family members</td>
<td>Low ratings of warmth, closeness, trust, respect, by one or more parties Low rating of perceived reciprocity of positive sentiments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consensual solidarity</td>
<td>Degree of agreement on values, attitudes, and beliefs among family members</td>
<td>Intrafamilial concordance among individual measures of specific values, attitudes and beliefs Ratings of perceived similarity with other family members in values, attitudes, and beliefs</td>
<td>Low concordance or significant disagreement about values, attitudes and beliefs in at least one key area Low rating of perceived similarity by one or more parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional solidarity</td>
<td>Degree of helping and exchanges of resources</td>
<td>Frequency of intergenerational exchanges of assistance (e.g., financial, physical, emotional) Ratings of reciprocity in the intergenerational exchange of resources</td>
<td>No, or low frequency of intergenerational exchanges Low rating of reciprocity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative solidarity</td>
<td>Strength of commitment to performance of familial roles and to meeting familial obligations (familism)</td>
<td>Ratings of importance of family and intergenerational roles Ratings of strength of filial obligations</td>
<td>Extremely high or extremely low rating of importance of family and intergenerational roles Low ratings of strength of filial obligations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural solidarity</td>
<td>Opportunity structure for relationships reflected in number, type and geographic proximity of family member</td>
<td>Residential propinquity of family members Number of family members Health of family members</td>
<td>Variable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Columns 1-3 adapted from Bengston and Schrader; McChesney and Bengston (cited in Bengston & Roberts, 1991, p. 857). Column 4 was developed from evidence cited throughout literature review.
later-life relationships (Luscher & Pillemer, 1998; Pillemer & Suitor, 2002). They suggested research was being based on the assumption that solidarity and conflict were opposing constructs on a relationship continuum, while the coexistence of solidarity and conflict had been documented since early sociological theories of the family (Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006). While the conceptualisation of ambivalence had been evident in Merton and Barber’s (1963) work, Luscher and Pillemer (1998) advanced this concept by applying it to the area of later-life intergenerational relationships (Pillemer & Suitor, 2002). Their definition included “ambivalence at the social structural level as well as the contradictory perceptions and subjective experiences of individuals” (Luscher & Pillemer, 1998, p. 416). They suggested ambivalence was built into relationships through sociological and psychological contradictions and parental ambivalence occurred when “incompatible normative expectations for relationships with children produce[d] contradictory feelings or behaviours” (Pillemer et al., 2007, p. 778). Soon thereafter, Connnidis and McMullin (2002b) contributed a sociological analysis of the ambivalence construct and added a critical perspective emphasising the contradictory socially structured elements influencing family relationships. They drew attention to the people who were most likely to be affected and disadvantaged by structured ambivalence, such as women and the elderly (Bengston et al., 2002).

In an edition of the *Journal of Marriage and Family* in 2002, scholars commented on their sense of, and issues with, each others’ work. Bengston and colleagues (2002) drew attention to the complementary nature of the solidarity-conflict construct and notions of ambivalence, but Connnidis and McMullin (2002a), who were critical of subsuming ambivalence within the solidarity-conflict model,
claimed that ambivalence and solidarity were too conceptually underdeveloped to be effectively measured. Bengston et al. (2002) claimed the solidarity-conflict model had been misrepresented as a polarised and uni-dimensional framework, when in actuality it proved family relationships could exhibit high solidarity and high conflict or low solidarity and low conflict simultaneously. They defended their classification scheme as an essential “prelude to scientific understanding and explanation” (Bengston et al., 2002, p. 570) and claimed each of the six dimensions was a distinct social element of family life and the framework illustrated almost unlimited configurations of family relationships, including diverse dimensions of ambivalence (Bengston et al., 2002). Connidis and McMullin (2002a) suggested the ability to measure multiple configurations over time did not equate to a theoretical understanding of how these conditions arose, and also criticised the measure in terms of its capacity to capture difference in populations like same-sex families. Bengston et al. (2002) questioned how Connidis’ ambivalence concept differed from symbolic-interactionist role theory.

Since this period, research, debate, and theory development has continued. Pillemer and Lusher (2004) edited a volume of Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research dedicated to intergenerational ambivalence. While the ambivalence construct was not as fully developed as the solidarity-conflict model, both significantly contributed to understandings of the later-life intergenerational family and more recently, researchers have begun to compare the utility of the two constructs (see Lowenstein’s (2007) comparison of the usefulness of the solidarity-conflict and ambivalence frameworks for measuring quality of life in older people).

Several studies have shown the common existence of ambivalence in later-life relationships and have started to examine the conditions contributing to this
(Fingerman, Hay, & Birditt, 2004; Peters et al., 2006; Pillemer et al., 2007; Szydlik, 2008; Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006; Willson, Shuey, & Elder, 2003). Rappoport and Lowenstein (2007) examined ambivalence inherent in intergenerational caregiving relationships. Others have started to examine the connections between ambivalence constructs and attachment theory (Maio, Fincham, Regalia, & Paleari, 2004; Merz et al., 2007). Merz et al. (2007) identified connections between attachment theory and the emotional and affectional components of the solidarity construct, suggesting a cross-disciplinary approach would enhance understanding of the dimensions and processes of intergenerational relationships. In fact, ambivalence research over the past ten years appears to have produced the most information about the conditions for, and contributors to, solidarity, conflict, and ambivalence in the later-life intergenerational family.

The solidarity-conflict model did not specifically name or examine estrangement, but offered one base from which to conceptualise the dimensions of intergenerational estrangement (see column 4 in Table 3.1). Additionally, empirical work conducted by Bengston and his colleagues advanced knowledge about the diversity and commonalities of the later-life intergenerational family. This research could also offer limited insight into the existence and prevalence of estrangement and give clues to the most effective ways to research this phenomenon. For example, based on the solidarity-conflict constructs, Silverstein and Bengston (1997) used latent class analysis to categorise later-life intergenerational relationship types. They examined a US sample (n=971) of adult-children. The resultant typology comprised five categories: tight-knit, sociable, obligatory, intimate but distant, and detached (see Table 3.2 for further details). In 2006, Van Gaalen and Dykstra published results on
comparable research conducted in the Netherlands. Using a much larger sample of adult-children (n=4990), they also documented five relationship types: ambivalent, harmonious, obligatory, affective, and discordant. Table 3.2 shows a comparison of each category, where most categories have similar constructs. Only Silverstein and Bengston’s (1997) sociable class and Van Gaalen and Dykstra’s (2006) ambivalent class differ considerably. The detached class in Silverstein and Bengston’s study (1997) is typified by an adult-child’s lack of engagement with parents across all solidarity indicators and, due to this definition, is likely to be the closest indicator to the concept of estrangement. However, it may not accurately capture emotional estrangements where there might be some degree of associational and functional solidarity. Van Gaalen and Dykstra’s (2006) discordant relationship type, while useful, does not fully capture estrangement, because the relationships in this category appear to involve some form of – albeit predominantly negative – interaction, and 2.5% of the original sample were not included because they had not had contact with their parent in the previous 12 month period.

Notably, these studies point to the diversity of intergenerational relationships and the historic, cultural, and structural influences on the interpersonal interactions between kin. Most studies of intergenerational solidarity, ambivalence, and conflict in the later-life family have revealed differences across gender, age, marital status of parent, parental health status, and ethnicity (for example, Fingerman, Chen, Hay, Cichy, & Lefkowitz, 2006; Ha & Ingersoll-Dayton, 2008; Lowenstein, 2007; 1997; Szydlik, 2008; Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006). Additionally, since this period, some researchers have developed and used a four-dimensional model of family relationship types (see Steinbach, 2008).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Relationship type</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tight Knit</strong></td>
<td>Adult-children are engaged with their parents based on all six indicators of solidarity.</td>
<td>Harmonious</td>
<td>Akin to relationships with friends; high emotional support, low likelihood of conflict, exchange of practical and financial support.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mothers</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>31%</td>
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<td><strong>Fathers</strong></td>
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<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sociable</strong></td>
<td>Adult-children are engaged with their parents based on geographic proximity, frequency of contact, emotional closeness, and similarity of opinions but not based on providing assistance and receiving assistance.</td>
<td>Ambivalent</td>
<td>Intensive exchange of material support accompanied by strain or conflict.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mothers</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>28%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fathers</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>23%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Obligatory</strong></td>
<td>Adult-children are engaged with their parents based on geographic proximity, frequency of contact but not based on emotional closeness and similarity of opinions. While only about one-third of children in this class are engaged in providing and receiving assistance, this proportion is slightly higher than that for the sample as a whole.</td>
<td>Obligatory</td>
<td>Just keeping in touch. Likelihood of contact high, probability of conflict, financial and emotional support neither high nor low.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mothers</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>16%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fathers</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>16%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Intimate but distant</strong></td>
<td>Adult-children are engaged with their parents on emotional closeness and similarity of opinions but not based on geographic proximity, frequency of contact, providing assistance, and receiving assistance.</td>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>Emotionally supportive with few other meaningful exchanges. Low likelihood of contact, practical and financial support. Low levels of conflict.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mothers</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>19%</td>
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<td><strong>Fathers</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>14%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Detached</strong></td>
<td>Adult-children are not engaged with their parents on any of the six indicators of solidarity.</td>
<td>Discordant</td>
<td>Predominantly negative engagement. Low levels of contact, emotional, practical and emotional support. High level conflict.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mothers</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>7%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fathers</strong></td>
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<td>27%</td>
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Source: Column 1 and 2 developed from information cited in Silverstein and Bengston (1997); Columns 3 and 4 developed from information cited in Van Gaalen and Dykstra (2006).
Szydlik’s (2008) conclusions about his research into solidarity and conflict between German parents and their adult-children provided some interesting and useful connections to the estrangement concept. Consistent with the thoughts of most prominent researchers in this field, he suggested solidarity and conflict were not at either end of the intergenerational relationship continuum and conflict did not necessarily mean an absence of solidarity but existed within the solidarity construct. He emphasised one could not have a conflict without contact with the other person (and associational solidarity was an element of the solidarity model). Therefore, he suggested that “the opposite of solidarity is not conflict, but rather generational autonomy as a consequence of ending the relationship” (Szydlik, 2008, p. 102). This is framed as estrangement within this thesis.

The findings of the aforementioned studies and others examining solidarity, conflict, and ambivalence are critically incorporated throughout the remaining sections of this review. However, it is important to consider these in light of Szydlik’s (2008) claims and in terms of the overall limitations of research into later-life family conflict and estrangement.

**Prevalence of Solidarity, Conflict, Ambivalence, and Estrangement**

Research into the prevalence of family estrangement was primarily absent from the literature. Researchers had examined conflict, solidarity, and ambivalence, and while estrangement had not been specifically defined or measured in these studies, Van Gaalen and Dykstra’s (2006) discordant category and particularly Silverstein and Bengston’s (1997) detached category aligned somewhat with definitions of estrangement. Research studies in the area of family discord were predominantly quantitative examinations of the sources and magnitude of conflict to the exclusion of
the phenomenological and qualitative elements (Clarke et al., 1999). However, some of these studies might offer insight into the potential and likelihood of estrangement, and have been included on this basis.

Studies showed that generally, levels of intergenerational solidarity were high and levels of conflict low (Bengston & Oyama, 2007; Lowenstein, 2007; Pillemer et al., 2007; Szydlik, 2008; Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006). Lowenstein’s (2007) examination of later-life intergenerational relationships confirmed this finding across Norway, England, Germany, Spain, and Israel. Affectual solidarity, or the emotional bonds between generations, have been observed to be consistently high across six comparable research studies (Bengston & Oyama, 2007). Fingerman et al.’s (2004) study of participants from 13 to 80 years old (n=187) showed that older people rarely viewed intergenerational relationships as solely problematic. However, they were more likely to perceive kin relationships with ambivalence than relationships with friends and acquaintances. The older participants were less likely to perceive their relationships to be ambivalent than the younger generations (Fingerman et al., 2004). This supported other research suggesting older people were more likely to regulate their emotions and view relationships positively as they aged (Bengston, cited in Beaton et al., 2003).

While the majority of intergenerational relationships studied exhibited high levels of solidarity and few exhibited high levels of conflict, this did not mean conflict was absent from the relationships exhibiting high solidarity. In fact, the abundance of research literature concluded that conflict was central to, and frequent in, intergenerational and, indeed, interpersonal relationships (Clarke et al., 1999; Parrott
& Bengston, 1999; Roloff & Waite Miller, 2006; Szydlik, 2008). The potentially beneficial aspects of conflict within relationships remained under-investigated.

Clarke et al. (1999) offered the most comprehensive examination of conflict. They added an open-ended question to the University of Southern California Longitudinal Study of Generations (Wave 4) survey in 1991, asking adult-children (n=641) and their parents (n=496) to comment on areas they had “differed, disagreed or been disappointed about” in their relationship (p. 262). Around two thirds of respondents reported disagreements and conflict, with parents citing an average of 1.03 issues and adult-children reporting 1.88 issues (Clarke et al., 1999).

Van Gaalen and Dykstra (2006) examined data from the *Netherlands Kinship Panel Study* which was a large-scale survey investigating the relationship between 4,990 adult-children and their surviving biological parents. The study used multiple measures of relationship quality, including frequency of contact, exchanges of help, emotional support, and money to construct a typology of relationships between parents and their adult-children. They categorised 4% of the relationships in this study as discordant or comprised of predominantly negative engagement between the dyad. This was consistent with Fingerman et al.’s (2004) finding that 6% of the adult-children in their study experienced their ties to parents as solely problematic. Silverstein and Bengston (1997) found similar results in their sample of adult-child and mother relationships determining 7% of the sample were detached, i.e., adult-children were not engaged with their mother across six key indicators of solidarity. However, they also found a remarkable gender bias, with 27% of adult-children claiming to have detached relationships with their fathers (Silverstein & Bengston, 1997).
Szydlik (2008) analysed longitudinal data from over 20,000 German adults (over 40) who were part of the German Ageing Study or the German Socio-Economic Panel Study. Over 10% of participants reported intergenerational family conflict. Results also showed that around one third of the respondents experiencing intergenerational conflict said they ignored the issue, while nearly half said they avoided the other person, or had ceased contact (Szydlik, 2008).

So most intergenerational relationships experienced some conflict and a minority experienced their relationships as primarily conflictual. However, as alluded to previously, these studies might not have captured the experiences of participants who did not experience solidarity or conflict due to an absence of contact or estrangement with family. So, it might be the participants who were unable to be surveyed about relationship quality were the most relevant to this review, i.e., a study on family estrangement would precisely seek to include those who were excluded from these studies. For example, Van Gaalen and Dykstra (2006) excluded 219 or 2.5% of respondents from their study because they reported no contact with a parent in the prior twelve months. Of these respondents, 85% rated their relationship with their parent or parents as not great, this being the lowest measure on the survey scale (Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006).

An Australian longitudinal study, The Dubbo Study of the Health of the Elderly (McCallum, Simons, & Simons, 2007), found an even higher rate of possible estrangement. A biomedical and sociological examination of healthy ageing, the study followed a cohort of 2805 non-institutionalised participants aged over 60 years. Unpublished data from the initial 1988 collection showed 122 or 4.3% of participants had little or no contact with their adult-children (Simons, 9th October, 2007).
Weinberg’s (2000) exploration of welfare reform and mother-led Mexican-American families found a distinct lack of family support for women trying to support their families. A purposive sample of 30 women (aged 18-45), who had worked in low-paid jobs or had been on welfare since school-leaving age, was interviewed about the issues preventing them from returning to work, or of finding higher-paid employment. Of the thirty women interviewed, 11 were estranged from their mothers (nine additional mothers were deceased), and 17 participants did not have one supportive parent in their lives. Detailed data collected from an interdisciplinary palliative medicine program in East Tennessee in 2003, showed that of the 129 patients able to participate, five were concerned about “estrangement from others” when questioned about spiritual concerns (Cowan, Burns, Walker Palmer, Scott, & Feeback, 2003).

In 1992, Jerrome conducted a series of life history interviews with 27 families to explore the way in which personal development was affected by the life-course transitions of other family members. Participants were sourced through various community groups and were aged from their late forties to late eighties. An unexpected finding eventuated. Seven families spoke of an estrangement between parents and children and three families revealed estrangement between siblings (Jerrome, 1994).

Goodger’s (2000) examination of social support among older Australians also exposed estrangement as a common experience for the more isolated participants in his study. Using the Duke Social Support Index, Goodger (2000) drew a sample of ten participants from the higher and ten from the lower quintiles to participate in in-depth interviews about their experiences of social support. It is important to note only seven
participants from the *low support* group were successfully interviewed. However, six of the seven participants from the *low support* group reported serious conflict or estrangement from family.

**Factors Affecting the Quality of Later-Life Intergenerational Relationships**

Researchers saw intergenerational relationships as involuntary, subject to the interplay of sentiment and ascribed social meanings and expectations, and the longest and arguably the most important relationships throughout the life-span. Increasing longevity meant 21st century kinship bonds were likely to last for more years than at any other time in history (Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006). The significant majority of the adult-child and parental relationship was experienced when both generations were in adulthood, often for over 40 years (Cooney, 1997).

Theorists suggested there were challenges inherent in long and intimate relationships. For example, Merton and Barber (1963) suggested ambivalence would increase in relationships “of indefinite duration, in relationships based in authority and in situations where relationship partners occupy different positions in the social structure” (cited in Pillemer & Suitor, 2002, p. 603). Research showed adults were more likely to experience conflict and ambivalence with kin than with non-kin (Akiyama et al., 2003; Fingerman et al., 2004). There was some evidence the provision of care and support to the elderly was influenced by historic family interaction and experiences (Merz et al., 2007; Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006). However, Van Gaalen and Dykstra (2006) suggested it was more complex than this because “culturally prescribed notions about duties and obligations continue to play a role in family relationships. Striving to achieve a balance between normative
expectations and personal goals and circumstances is a source of complexity in family interactions” (p. 947).

An analysis of data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study involving 4,589 adult-children and their parents showed intergenerational relationships changed over time (Merz, Schuengel, & Schulze, 2008). It appeared that “young adults perceived their parents more as providers than recipients of interest and advice” (Merz et al., 2008, p. 728). However, this changed after the child reached 40 years of age: “The older the children and their parents, the more it was the children showed interest in their parents’ activities and whereabouts and provided them with advice; while for older parents, children were a source of support and the initiators in the relationship” (Merz et al., 2008, p. 728). Most importantly, intergenerational relationships were difficult to terminate and replace when compared to purely voluntary relationships with friends and acquaintances (Fingerman et al., 2004; Krause & Rook, 2003). Krause and Rook’s (2003) longitudinal survey of older adults (n=515) found negative interpersonal interactions were stable over a six-year period, suggesting it was either difficult or undesirable to terminate unsatisfactory kin relationships. They viewed this finding in terms of Cartesen’s (1992) socio-emotional selectivity theory, which suggested older people reduced their social networks as they aged, shifting their allegiance to a core group comprised primarily of kin (Krause & Rook, 2003).

It could be suggested this finding be viewed in terms of Neyer and Lang’s (2003) research showing that kin remained the most important source of emotional and instrumental support in later life. While social support, which is generally based on reciprocity, could be sourced from a variety of relationships if necessary, “people give more weight to kinship in awkward and emergency situations” (Neyer & Lang,
Another explanation might be the *intergenerational stake hypothesis* suggesting “the older generation has a greater psychological social investment, or ‘stake,’ in their joint relationship than does their younger generation, and this [positively] influences their perceptions and evaluations of their common intergenerational relationships” (Bengston & Oyama, 2007, p. 11).

Whatever the motivator for the older person’s increased and persistent involvement with younger generations, the increased focus, contact, and reliance on kin might also contribute to greater ambivalence and conflict (Pillemer & Suitor, 2002). Additionally, Krause, and Rook (2003) conceptualised these negative relationships as long-term chronic stress or strain, so it would be interesting to monitor how long, and at what level, stress could be tolerated without eventual estrangement.

One of the most commonly cited challenges to the adult-child and parent relationship was the tension between connection and separateness throughout the life-course (Beaton et al., 2003; Bowen, 1982; Fingerman et al., 2004; Pillemer & Suitor, 2002). The adult-child needed a sense of belonging within the intergenerational family, but they also needed to differentiate or individuate in terms of interests, pursuits and relationships (Bedford & Blieszner, 1997; Bowen, 1982). For example, Bengston and Roberts’ (1991) research investigated the role of attitudinal consensus or consensual solidarity in the quality of intergenerational relationships, finding “parent-child agreement or consensus over abstract cognitive orientations (for example, attitudes towards politics, religion, and sex-role ideologies) was independent of levels of affect and association, which themselves exhibited a moderately high degree of association” (p. 860). This seemed to suggest that differences of opinion
could be tolerated in many intergenerational families. Additionally, from developmental literature there was some evidence a certain degree of conflict and individuation was developmentally appropriate for the young adult, who usually resolved this distance after a period of time (Colarusso, 1995; Levinson, 1978).

On the other hand, excessive contact, support, and dependence have been shown to have negative effects on intergenerational relationships (Fingerman et al., 2006; Ha & Ingersoll-Dayton, 2008; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998; Pillemer et al., 2007). As cited previously, Bowen’s (1982) work suggested adult-children who were unable to differentiate or separate effectively from their family of origin would be more reactive to issues with their parents. Both Pillemer et al. (2007) and Ha and Ingersoll-Dayton’s (2008) studies showed an association between parental ambivalence and higher levels of adult-child dependence: “[Adult] children’s problems were positively associated with ambivalence, as was the mother’s perception that exchange in the relationship was inequitable in the child’s favour” (Pillemer et al., 2007, p. 776). Pillemer and Suitor (2002) found greater maternal ambivalence when adult-children had not reached normative adult milestones and financial independence. Szydlik’s (2008) study also showed financial help from family members was often associated with conflict.

Fingerman et al.’s (2006) study showed that ambivalence was reduced when family members invested in more than one role in the family (e.g., wife, mother, and worker). Their evaluation of role centrality theory suggested family members, who identified strongly with a particular role and viewed it as self-defining, would have more extreme responses to changes in, and challenges to, that role. Those family members who were more autonomous were less likely to be reliant on positive
feedback from one source only and more likely to think positively about the parental relationship (Fingerman et al., 2006).

Changes in roles necessitating increased contact and dependence were shown to have an impact on intergenerational relationships. For example, there has been considerable investigation into later-life caregiver stress, where adult-children experienced an array of financial, physical, and emotional consequences when parents became more reliant on them for care (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2005). Research studies revealed significant effects on intergenerational relationships when parents’ health deteriorated and caregiving responsibilities increased (Fingerman et al., 2006; Fingerman, Pitzer, Lefkowitz, Birditt, & Mroczek, 2008; Gaugler, Zarit, & Pearlin, 1999; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998; Kramer et al., 2006; Neufield & Harrison, 2003; Peisah et al., 2006; 1999). Other studies showed an increased likelihood of ambivalence or conflict when either adult-children or their parent experienced health deterioration, although these effects varied according to gender (Fingerman et al., 2008; Szydlik, 2008). Hank’s (2007) study showed parental health was related to an increased level of adult-child contact but did not investigate the effect of this on solidarity. Some researchers suggested that increased dependence, worry, and contact relating to health deterioration might be significant contributors to conflict and ambivalence (Fingerman et al., 2008; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998; Szydlik, 2008).

Across three studies involving health status change, intergenerational conflict was related to differences of opinion about health status and health-related decisions made by the primary carer, criticisms of the quality of care given to the older person by the primary caregiver, and possible accusations of exploitation of the older person (Kramer et al., 2006; Neufield & Harrison, 2003; Peisah et al., 2006). Latent sibling
rivalry was demonstrated as a significant factor in conflict across these studies (Kramer et al., 2006; Neufield & Harrison, 2003; Peisah et al., 2006). Peisah et al. (2006) reported that “in 33% of cases involving siblings, there was obvious competition about who was acting in their parents’ best interests and who was the ‘better child’” (p. 488). Another contributor to conflict was the reappearance (and reported interference) of estranged family members when the older person’s health status changed (Kramer et al., 2006; Neufield & Harrison, 2003).

Impending death and dementia have also been shown to create conflict, exacerbate existing tensions, and bring sibling rivalry to the fore (Kramer et al., 2006; Lieberman & Fisher, 1999; Neufield & Harrison, 2003; Peisah et al., 2006; Schulman, 1999). Kramer et al.’s (2006) research showed 55% of dying elders (n=120) experienced some form of family conflict in their last six months of life. Peisah et al.’s (2006) examination of 50 disputes before the Guardianship Board in Australia revealed 41 disputes were between family members and, of these, 27 were between siblings and five between an older person and their adult-child.

Family stress theory suggested life-cycle changes caused stress in the family system as individuals adjusted their roles and positions to accommodate events such as birth, marriage, and death (Beaton et al., 2003). Changes in marital status repeatedly have been shown to impact upon or cause stress to intergenerational relationships although findings and explanations for causation varied (Clarke et al., 1999; Daatland, 2007; Ha & Ingersoll-Dayton, 2008; Kalmijn, 2007; Pezzin, Pollak, & Steinberg Schone, 2008; Stuijvergen, Van Delden, & Dykstra, 2008). Considerable research showed intergenerational relationships were negatively affected when the mother or father became separated, divorced, or widowed (Daatland, 2007; Kaufman
& Uhlenberg, 1998; Silverstein & Bengston, 1997). Another study showed adult-
children were more likely to have obligatory and detached relations with divorced and
separated mothers than with married mothers (Silverstein & Bengston, 1997). This
negative impact appeared greater for fathers in most studies (Daatland, 2007; 

However, there was little consensus about the levels and types of support
offered to older parents after divorce or widowhood or the meaning of this in relation
to quality of these intergenerational relationships. Studies reported an increase in
support (Glaser, Stuchbury, Tomassini, & Askham, 2008; Ha & Ingersoll-Dayton, 
2008), a link between increased support and increased ambivalence within the
relationship (Hughes, Andel, Small, Borenstein, & Mortimer, 2008), a link between
increased support and a decline in ambivalence (Ha & Ingersoll-Dayton, 2008), a
decline in support offered (Pezzin et al., 2008), and the possible impact of
governmental service provision on the level of adult-child support offered in different
countries (Rezac, 2007). Importantly, there were marked differences between levels
and types of support to fathers and mothers in some studies.

The marriage of the adult-child has been shown to affect the intergenerational
relationship also (Peters et al., 2006; Sarkisian, 2006; Stuijbergen et al., 2008). First,
the adult-child’s marriage decreased contact and lessened emotional, practical, and
financial support to the older parents in Sarkisan’s (2006) study. Widowed children
gave less support to older parents than the married cohort in one study (Stuijbergen et
al., 2008). Qualitative interviews with older parents showed that they were often
ambivalent about their adult-children’s romantic partnerships and conscious of
interfering in relationship breakdown (Peters et al., 2006). However, Pillemer et al.’s (2007) study showed less parental ambivalence when a child was married.

Other structural conditions, such as gender, have also been shown to influence the quality and type of intergenerational relationships, (Beaton et al., 2003; Bedford & Blieszner, 1997; Cooney, 1997; Fingerman et al., 2006; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998; Pillemer & Suitor, 2002). Adult-children consistently reported having better relationships with their mothers in Kaufman and Uhlenberg’s (1998) study and the gender of the reporting adult-child made no difference to reports about the quality of relationships. However, sons were less likely to have tight-knit relationships with their mothers than daughters in Silverstein and Bengston’s (1997) study. Daughters were more likely to be contacted by parents or to contact parents (Hank, 2007), and daughters were more likely to show interest in their parents, give advice, and help with housework, than sons (Stuifbergen et al., 2008). Daughters were also more likely to report frequent parental conflicts (Szydlik, 2008). Fingerman et al.’s (2004) review of the literature suggested women were more invested in intergenerational relationships, and were more likely to take on kin work than their male counterparts, which might contribute to more intense interactions within these relationships.

There were a number of different factors reported as contributors to family solidarity, ambivalence, and conflict. Kaufman and Uhlenberg’s (1998) research demonstrated that participants with more siblings reported better relationships with parents, and another study showed the more siblings in a family, the less support each gave to the parent (Stuifbergen et al., 2008). Geographic proximity has been shown to enhance intergenerational contact (Hank, 2007; Stuifbergen et al., 2008). Depressive symptoms in the older person were linked to increased negative interactions with
family, friends, and acquaintances (Krause & Rook, 2003). Higher neuroticism of either adult-child or parent was associated with higher levels of intergenerational ambivalence (Fingerman et al., 2006). Lower parental education was associated with more frequent adult-child contacts (Hank, 2007) and less conflict (Szydlik, 2008). There were a number of potential theories for such occurrences, all of which were beyond the scope of this review. For example, more siblings might equate to a fairer workload, or result in greater competition for parental affection resulting in greater parental satisfaction. Regardless, it was clear intergenerational relationships were diverse and affected by a complex array of interpersonal and systemic factors.

It was suggested earlier that opposing needs could be incorporated in families where shifting relationships were negotiated and perceived as mutually satisfying (Bedford & Blieszner, 1997; Bengston & Roberts, 1991). However, more recent literature suggested some relationship differences were seldom discussed or negotiated at all, and many arguments ended without resolution (Beaton et al., 2003; Roloff & Waite Miller, 2006; Szydlik, 2008). Roloff and Waite Miller (2006) suggested that many “individuals simply stop talking or leave the scene physically or psychologically” (Roloff & Waite Miller, 2006, p. 155) during conflict. Beaton et al.’s (2003) examination of unresolved issues between thirty adult couples and parents found only seven couples would directly confront the parent about the issue of concern. Fifteen participants were content to discuss the issue within their own marriage but not with the parent, four couples said they would use indirect methods of resolution, and four stated they would avoid the issue to maintain the current relationship status and hope the problem would resolve itself (Beaton et al., 2003).
It seems, then, that some intergenerational conflicts were able to be ‘put aside’ in order to keep the peace, avoid confrontation, avoid hurt feelings, and maintain emotional and functional supports (Beaton et al., 2003; Bengston & Roberts, 1991; Szydlik, 2008). As Bengston and Roberts (1991) suggested, “the weight of normative expectations may induce parents and children to ‘bracket’ differences in opinions over abstract ideas in order to allow interaction and feelings of closeness – a sort of generational ‘cease-fire zone’” (p. 860). This was consistent with Hagestad’s (1979) conceptualisation of ‘demilitarized zones’ where particular topics and issues were knowingly avoided by family members in an effort to maintain solidarity (cited in Cooney, 1997). However, in some situations ‘boundary recognition’ allowed families to recognise and discuss differences while ‘agreeing to disagree’ on some issues (Cooney, 1997).

There was limited research about rule violations resulting in expulsion or rejection from the family, but one exploratory study offered some perspectives (Fitness, 2005). Three hundred and fifteen people were asked about the very worst thing a particular family member could do to another and what the likely consequences would be. Over 40% of participants stated abandonment, or rejection, was the worst thing parents could do to their children, and this was second only to sexual abuse by a father (44%). It appeared breaking the primary duties to nurture and protect a child was unforgivable, and warranted exclusion. Over 25% of participants stated that rejection was the worst thing children could do to their parents, and this was second only to inappropriate sexual behaviour by a daughter (27%). It appeared that parents, and particularly mothers, were owed inclusion in their children’s lives as ‘payment’ for their historical parental duties and care (Fitness, 2005).
Challenges Associated with Research in this Field

Most relationship research focuses on “active, ongoing, voluntary relationships” (Bedford & Blieszner, 1997, p. 526). However, later-life intergenerational family research tries to examine various types of relationships, such as:

(a) ascribed or non-voluntary; (b) persistent, bounded only by birth and death … ; (c) primarily sentimental or symbolic, often in the absence of much face-to-face contact; (d) unstable, as the pool of potential resources diminishes during the course of old age … ; (e) embedded within and influenced by a kinship system of relationships that span generations of members both living and dead; and (f) subsume a variety of role types (e.g., sibling, spouse, child), each with some unique norms and expectations (Bedford & Blieszner, 1997, p. 527).

Intergenerational relationships were seen to be complex, diverse, and difficult to research with unitary research methods. There was considerable difficulty in capturing the incidence and nature of estrangement when classifying relationships according to solidarity-conflict and ambivalence measures. Clear and consistent definitions of estrangement were needed before research in this area could advance. In fact, Lowenstein (2007) suggested the need for research on less normative samples if insight was to be gained into particular intergenerational issues, such as estrangement and elder abuse. She recommended “using both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and the triangulation of databases in order to further address and advance these different concepts” (Lowenstein, 2007, p. 106).

Fingerman et al.’s (2004) comments on the sampling limitations of their study also pointed to potential flaws in the study of estrangement. They noted some participants did not list all their siblings as ‘family’:

... some participants may have severed ties with certain relatives because of extreme negative circumstances, and may no longer include those relatives in their listings of
social partners. Thus, our findings may miss a proportion of ties that are so intensely negative to be disbanded, or so inconsequential as to warrant no mention (p. 803).

This leant support to Jerrome’s (1994) warning that researchers should not take participants’ statements about the lack of family literally, but should rather investigate the meaning of such statements. Research into the reporting accuracy of adult-children and their parents showed that “perceptions of support and contact are colored by their expectations, motivations and feelings about their relationships” (Mandemakers & Dykstra, 2008, p. 495). Additionally, older people might be less likely to report family discord. Research showed older people tended not to report conflict with their children during therapy sessions (Mancini & Blieszner, in Beaton et al., 2003) and offered more positive reports of their relationships than their adult-children did in research studies (Bengston, in Beaton et al., 2003).

Sample attrition should also be examined closely when using normative samples. For example, Krause and Rook’s (2003) research into negative interactions in later life showed greater attrition of older participants who had reported negative interactions with their children. These issues pointed to the need for more quantitative research based on behavioural indicators rather than on perceptual measures. Additionally, in-depth qualitative interviews might increase the reporting of socially undesirable conditions, such as conflict and estrangement (Beaton et al., 2003). It might also be useful to gather information from participants who did not complete research about the quality of their intergenerational relationships.

Cooney (1997) pointed out that a situation still existed where intergenerational relationships were studied from the perspective of one family member (or statistical unit), either the adult-child or the parent, using normative samples. The full dynamics
of family life were difficult to capture, even when studying several members of the same family, so this situation yielded limited views of the interlocking family system (Campbell, Conndis, & Davies, 1999). Studies of adult-child and parent mostly focused on one child only or children as a single unit (Pillemer et al., 2007), while there was considerable evidence parents had very different relationships with different children and that they favoured some children for different aspects of their relationships (Pillemer et al., 2007; Pillemer, Suito, Mueller-Johnson, Secrist, & Heidorn, 2006; Suito et al., 2006).

Additionally, intergenerational ties were known to “vary for persons of different racial and economic groups, given subcultural variations in familial norms, family needs and resources” (Cooney, 1997, p. 466) and “relationships outside the boundaries of marriage and parenthood, such as those among siblings, are typically overlooked” (Campbell et al., 1999, p. 114). Existing data also suggested important variations in terms of gender, so it was imperative to study intergenerational relationships with these variations under consideration (Cooney, 1997).

Conclusion

The literature portrayed family estrangement as a complex and as yet not fully conceptualised issue theoretically or empirically. It was often found to be subsumed under other concepts and conditions, such as conflict and ambivalence. Research pertaining to family estrangement tended to be found on the margins of research into intergenerational relationships. While the concept might have been considered under various names across disciplines, it appeared that no single discipline had taken charge of definition or investigation. To this end, an examination of the literature and
research must extend beyond the scope of estrangement and intergenerational relationships and draw upon broader theories and research, as described in Chapter 4.
CHAPTER 4

Theory Relating to Family Estrangement

As evidenced by this review to date, the area of family estrangement in later life was difficult to locate specifically in the literature. However, as the topic was explored, evidence emerged to indicate the link between estrangement and other fields of knowledge and understanding. Family studies and gerontology were found to be relatively new multidisciplinary fields for understanding family estrangement and later-life family estrangement. Beyond this, varied bodies of knowledge were located to offer new understandings. While the limits of this thesis, and review, did not allow for a systematic analysis of each area, this section includes an examination of how attachment theory, the life-course and life-span perspectives, the social psychology of exclusion, parental alienation, and parental alienation syndrome, models of conflict, grief and loss theories, and quality of life and wellbeing studies, provide insight into the experience of family estrangement. Each section provides a brief overview and comment on its potential relevance to deepen understanding of later-life family estrangement.

Attachment Theory

Attachment has been studied by a variety of researchers and disciplines. However, John Bowlby is credited with the development of attachment theory in the post-WWII period. Bowlby’s ideas about attachment stemmed from theories of evolution and ethology. He suggested humans had an innate attachment behavioural system “that regulates infant proximity-seeking and contact maintaining behaviours with one or a few specific individuals who provide physical or psychological safety or security”
These behaviours included smiling, crying, following, and clinging. When attachment figures were reliably responsive and sensitive to these cues, children would feel a sense of attachment security. When attachment figures were not reliably responsive and sensitive, secondary attachment strategies such as hyperactivation/protest or deactivation/compulsive self-reliance would be activated (Shaver, Mikulincer, Lavy, & Cassidy, 2009). According to attachment theory, the strength and security of a child’s bond with its primary caregiver or attachment figure, would depend on the level of accessibility, responsiveness, and sensitivity afforded by the caregiver (Pearce, 2009). Over time, these experiences would contribute to the child’s relatively stable expectations or working models about self, others, and relationships (Miller & Kaiser, 2001).

Mary Ainsworth’s theories, and particularly her innovative methodologies, contributed significantly to the advancement of these concepts (Bretherton, 1995). Ainsworth (1978) identified three patterns of infant attachment to their primary caregivers: secure, anxious-resistant, and avoidant (Bretherton, 1995). Children with secure attachment preferred to interact with their primary caregiver, showed distress when left alone or with a stranger, sought the caregiver on reunion, and were able to return to play in a short period (Pearce, 2009). Children with anxious attachment were possessive of their caregiver, highly distressed during separation, and vacillated between rejection and a need for closeness on reunion. Children with avoidant attachment appeared to lack connection with the caregiver and were unperturbed by strangers, distressed during separation, but rejected or did not acknowledge the caregiver on reunion (Pearce, 2009).
Importantly, Bowlby’s and Ainsworth’s initial theory related to the primary caregiver or attachment figure, namely, the mother, but their later work recognised the child could form an attachment with any or multiple caregivers (Pearce, 2009). There is now evidence to show the primary and secondary caregivers’ ‘secure states of mind’ or their own attachment working models were also associated with the child’s attachment style (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Bowlby (1973) assumed attachment patterns or models remained open to the influence of new attachment experiences throughout adolescence and adulthood. He suggested changes within the family and social contexts affecting the responses of key attachment figures – and particularly sensitive maternal caregiving – could also serve as an impetus for the revision of working models (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Research confirmed that experiences in childhood were the most salient indicators of adult attachment styles, but adolescent and cumulative experiences also had an effect (Beckwith, Cohen, & Hamilton, 1999; Weinfield, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2000). Recent research has confirmed adverse events, such as divorce, maternal depression, abuse, and death of a parent, were much more common in adolescents who exhibited avoidant and particularly anxious attachment patterns, regardless of early maternal sensitivity to the child (Beckwith et al., 1999; Weinfield et al., 2000).

The study of adult attachment relationships began in the 1970s with research on bereavement and divorce. In the early 1990s, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1990; 1991) proposed a four-category model of adult attachment to extend Bowlby’s notion of attachment styles developed according to notions of self and others. They suggested that if a person’s abstract image of self (or worthiness) could be negative or positive, and if a person’s abstract image of others (trustworthiness and availability)
could be negative or positive, then there were four possible combinations or models of attachment; secure, preoccupied, fearful-avoidant and dismissive-avoidant (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Essentially this advanced the notion that self-models and models of others were separate and resulted in avoidant attachment being split into two categories, fearful-avoidant and dismissive-avoidant. While people of both avoidant styles had difficulty in becoming close and relying on others, those who were fearful lacked social security and assertiveness, while those who were dismissive downplayed the importance of rejection to maintain high self-esteem. Additionally, it showed that individuals had a mix of tendencies across time and relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Bowlby was not specifically interested in the relationship between attachment and emotions, but his theory offered an insight into the ways in which “secure attachment relationships help a person resolve temporary bouts of negative emotion, including hurt feelings, and how attachment insecurities interfere with effective emotion regulation” (Shaver et al., 2009, p. 95). These ideas have been advanced over time and offer insight into the type of attachment style most likely to contribute to emotional or physical estrangement when a person feels threatened or rejected.

Avoidant models of attachment are synonymous with a deactivation or flight response to distress, and were most likely to indicate a person’s propensity to estrange from important relationships: “Deactivation involves inhibition of proximity-seeking inclinations, actions and emotional expressions and the determination to handle stress and distress alone” (Shaver et al., 2009, p. 96). When observed, the person’s avoidant
response might be perceived as independence and confidence, but Bowlby (1979) suggested people with this response were:

…deeply distrustful of close relationships and terrified of allowing themselves to rely on anyone else, in some cases in order to avoid the pain of being rejected and in others to avoid being subjected to pressure to become someone else’s caretaker (p. 138).

Recent research has shown this to be the case for people with fearful-avoidant attachments, but those with dismissive-avoidant attachments might have developed pre-emptive defences to suppress memory recall and keep the attachment system relatively suppressed during stressful events (Fraley & Brumbaugh, 2007).

Bowlby (1979) suggested conditions contributing to avoidant and anxious attachments included: persistent parental unresponsiveness; discontinuities of parenting; threats to withdraw love as a method of disciplining the child; threats to abandon the family as a method of discipline or coercing a spouse; parental threats of suicide, desertion or killing their spouse; telling a child his or her bad behaviour will contribute to the parent’s illness or death; and requiring the child to become the parent’s caregiver. Bowlby (1979) also suggested defensive or avoidant responses might also be activated when a parent asked a child to suppress memories of incidents he or she had witnessed. The child might have witnessed things they found too troubling to think about, such as domestic violence, or the parents might have done something to invoke shame (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Psychoanalytic theory would suggest the suppression of such memories might lead to attachment issues somewhere later in ones’ life. Other attachment theorists have suggested the avoidant response was more likely when attachment figures “disapprove of and punish closeness and expressions of need or vulnerability . . . [and] a person learns to expect
better outcomes if signs of need and vulnerability are hidden or suppressed” (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, p. 22).

Attachment theory offers another way of examining estrangement between family members or attachment figures. It provides a lens to examine: (i) the conditions potentially leading to the development of estrangement in attachment relationships; (ii) the influence of different attachment models on a person’s decision to estrange when conflict occurs; and (iii) the influence of different attachment models on a person’s response to being estranged from a family member.

**Life-Course and Life-Span Perspectives**

Generally, theories of life-course development referred to the multidisciplinary study of human development and change within a social and historical context (Wethington, 2005), broadly influenced by sociological, psychological, and biological theories (Walker & Crawford, 2010). While psychological theories, such as life-span perspectives, were sometimes subsumed under the umbrella of the sociologically focused life-course perspective, this section refers to life-course and life-span perspectives distinctly, while acknowledging their complementary nature and increasing convergence. This section does not have the scope to examine the influence and usefulness of biological theories, except to note they offer insight into physical development, genetics, human growth, and instinct (Walker & Crawford, 2010).

Originally there was an historical division between the developmental life-span and contextual life-course perspectives, but currently there is a multidisciplinary consensus that a combined life-course and life-span approach is imperative to an
understanding of the micro and macro influences on health and wellbeing (Fuller-Iglesias, Smith, & Antonucci, 2009). When combined, this approach provides a comprehensive theoretical framework which is particularly important in the study of later life (Fuller-Iglesias et al., 2009). It moves “beyond the study of development as isolated and age specific, recognizing that all age periods (including old age) are dynamic and cumulative” (Fuller-Iglesias et al., 2009, p. 4).

Both perspectives were founded on the premise of linked lives and differential pathways and trajectories of ageing. Linked lives referred to the interconnectedness of individuals and the “dependence of the development of one person on the presence, influence, or development of another” (Wethington, 2005, p. 116). Although the focus of life-course and life-span perspectives differed according to a subgroup or individual focus, both examined patterns of behaviour, and health and wellbeing over time (Wethington, 2005). They often used “longitudinal data to examine hypotheses about different patterns . . . associated with the effects of biogenetic, life history, social and personal factors” (Fuller-Iglesias et al., 2009, p. 12).

In addition, the life-course perspective focused on age, cohort, and historical effects and the accumulation of advantages or inequalities across the life time (Fuller-Iglesias et al., 2009). The life-span perspective focused on the concepts of individual differences, adaptivity, and plasticity (Fuller-Iglesias et al., 2009). When combined, the life-course and life-span perspectives provided considerable insight into the lives of the participants in this study and offered a basis for understanding and acknowledging the potential psychosocial influences on the data collected from participants. For example, the life-course perspective required situating and viewing
participants in their socio-historical context. This cohort primarily experienced marriage and childrearing in the 1960s and 1970s, a time of considerable social conformity, where marriage was highly desirable, labour was divided along gendered lines, and motherhood was idealised (Lindsay & Dempsey, 2009; Poole, 2005; Reiger, 2005). A life-span perspective, and particularly the work of Erik Erikson (1959; 1965; 1997) gave insight into the developmental stage of the participants and their estranged adult-children. For example, the participants in this study were experiencing the estrangement during late adulthood, a stage marked by a desire to review, make sense of, and integrate past life experiences (Machin, 2009). Many of the adult-children initiated the estrangement during adolescence, a stage when young people become more independent as they begin to form their own identity, and young adulthood, when a young person usually becomes intimate with, and committed to, a person outside of the family system (Walker & Crawford, 2010).

**Social Psychology of Exclusion**

*Sociology of Exclusion, Ostracism, Abandonment and Rejection*

An increasing body of work was found which examined the determinants and effects of negative interpersonal experiences on individuals, but the original research was conducted in a variety of behavioural science fields and used a variety of interrelated terms and concepts which prevented a more unified approach to the research and to the collation of its findings (Smart Richman & Leary, 2009).

This section examines literature from the field of social psychology, where the term social exclusion has been incorporated alongside concepts like ostracism, abandonment, bullying, and rejection. While social exclusion has been studied since the 1950s, it was not until the mid-1990s when social psychologists increasingly
examined the individual physiological, psychological, and behavioural effects of being ‘cast out’ by friends, colleagues, peers, and family (Williams, Forgas, Von Hippel, & Zadro, 2005). While research specifically about exclusion from the family is currently limited, the broader research agenda has usefulness in conceptualising and understanding family estrangement.

Generally, “relational devaluation refers to feeling less valued as a relational partner (e.g., friend, romantic partner, group member) than one desires” (Leary & Springer in MacDonald, Kingsbury, & Shaw, 2005, p. 78). Devaluation might be considered a sign or warning about ultimate exclusion (MacDonald et al., 2005). Betrayal occurred when someone put their interests in front of another party resulting in the party’s perception of low relational evaluation and a sense of rejection (Leary, 2005). Rejection was usually an explicit verbal or physical action and a declaration that the individual was not wanted as a member within a relationship or group (Williams et al., 2005). Ostracism referred to being ignored and excluded, while social exclusion was when a person was not included in a social network or group (but not necessarily ignored) (Williams et al., 2005). From these definitions, it became clear that family estrangement had close connections to ostracism, rejection, abandonment, and even social exclusion, and the following research was relevant to understanding this phenomenon.

Williams and Zadro (2005) suggested that intentional motives for ostracism tended to be punitive or defensive where exclusion was used as a pre-emptive punishment or self-protective mechanism: “Sometimes, rejection occurs when people ‘lose’ their bid for acceptance to one or more other individuals” (Leary, 2005, p. 46). People with negative personal qualities, who reacted negatively to confrontation, had
a preoccupied attachment style, had positive qualities, or who were potentially threatening to others, were more likely to be ostracised (Williams & Zadro, 2005). People with a low need for affiliation and insecure attachment, and those with tendencies toward stubbornness and avoidance were more likely to ostracise than confront another person (Williams & Zadro, 2005). Ostracism was a powerful and effective method of punishment or defence because it could be easily denied, achieved without the knowledge of onlookers, and individuals who ostracise were more likely to maintain a socially positive image with others (Williams & Zadro, 2005).

“Ostracism represents one of the strongest, most effective, and efficient punishments available to group members” (Ouwerkerk, Kerr, Gallucci, & Van Lange, 2005, p. 328). As a threat, it acted as a mechanism of control to encourage individuals to change their undesirable behaviours and to conform to social norms (Juvonen & Gross, 2005). Some suggested that the preventative or deterrent effect of potential exclusion or rejection was very strong. For example, the historical Athenian concept of ostrakismos circa 487 B.C. – where citizens were able to cast a vote to exile those with dictatorial ambitions – was not enacted every year, suggesting that the threat of expulsion was enough to deter people from aberrant behaviours (Ouwerkerk et al., 2005; Williams, 2001).

Rejection, abandonment, ostracism, and exclusion threaten a fundamental need to belong, a sense of self-esteem and control, and perceptions of a meaningful existence (Williams & Zadro, 2005). Silence was often used as a means of ostracism and a mechanism to sever connection much more effectively than conflict or exclusion where some degree of connection was retained. When “individuals are cast
out through silence they may lack vital information they could use to correct their
behaviour, or to cope with their exclusion” (Williams et al., 2005, p. 3). Control was
reduced because nothing would evoke a response from the source of ostracism.
Unlike rejection, where one knew the reason for exclusion, those who were ostracised
would be left ruminating about the reasons for exclusion and this could have a much
greater negative impact on self-esteem (Williams & Zadro, 2005). However,
Williams’ (2001) research showed that people who used ostracism had rational
explanations for their behaviour and refused to share this because by not sharing, it
increased their control over the victim or target.

The environment has always been filled with dangers requiring social or group
behaviour to survive. Consequently, humans have retained an innate instinct to
recognise and quickly respond to the potential for exclusion (Lakin & Chartrand,
2005; MacDonald et al., 2005). Studies have shown that the experience or threat of
“social exclusion can activate the physiological system that functions to protect
individuals from physical threats, thus leading to a cascade of physical defense
responses” (MacDonald et al., 2005, p. 78). People were found to have quite strong
reactions to relatively minor experiences of ostracism, and this led to the experience
of distress associated with physical pain, which subsequently activated the need for
human connection (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2005; MacDonald et al., 2005).
Research revealed that hurt, anxiety, depression, and distress could result from social
exclusion or rejection (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003; Lakin &
Chartrand, 2005), and that ostracism remained painful even when the researcher gave
participants rewards or benefits for being ostracised (Maner, De Wall, Schaller, &
Baumeister, 2007).
Researchers found three likely responses to rejection or ostracism: (i) cognitively diminishing the importance of the episode, although current research on this element is minimal; (ii) pro-social behaviours aimed at reinstating and preserving relationships; or (iii) self-protective and often anti-social behaviours aimed at increasing control (Hess & Pickett, 2010; Williams & Zadro, 2005). Research consistently showed that rejection produced aggression in the absence of provocation and intensified aggression following provocation, and these results were independent of distress or mood (Ayduk, Gyurak, & Luerssen, 2008; Catanese & Tice, 2005; De Wall, Twenge, Glitter, & Baumeister, 2009; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001). The socially excluded were more likely to assess ambiguous situations and words as aggressive (De Wall, Twenge et al., 2009), and those with higher rejection sensitivity were more likely to react aggressively than pro-socially (Ayduk et al., 2008).

Research also showed that socially excluded individuals entered a defensive state of cognitive deconstruction leading to decreases in intelligent thought, particularly in relation to complex tasks – a condition not mediated by mood (Baumeister & De Wall, 2005; Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002; Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2003). For example, when people were excluded by one person, but still included by another, their perception of exclusion was distorted. Participants believed they had been excluded by both parties and felt a similar degree of ostracism as those participants who had been excluded by two parties (Chernyak & Zayas, 2010). Participants believed that the people who had excluded them viewed them as less human (Bastian & Haslam, 2010). Exclusion resulted in emotional numbness, reduced sensitivity to physical pain, emotional insensitivity, and reduced
empathy (De Wall & Baumeister, 2006; Twenge, Baumeister, De Wall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007).

Other studies showed people who felt they had been wronged were more likely to feel a sense of entitlement and exhibit selfish behaviour (Zitek, Jordan, Monin, & Leach, 2010). Social exclusion temporarily reduced pro-social behaviour with research participants donating less, and being less willing to volunteer, less helpful, and less cooperative (Twenge et al., 2007). It also led to self-defeating behaviours, such as risk taking and procrastination (Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2002). It reduced self-awareness and self-regulation at a time when participants required increased self-awareness to re-engage with others (Baumeister & De Wall, 2005; Twenge et al., 2003). It also impaired basic self-regulatory behaviours, such as eating healthily, staying committed to a difficult task, and remaining attentive (Baumeister, De Wall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005). Stillman et al., (2009) showed that social exclusion reduced an individual’s perceptions of life as meaningful. However, some research found that providing incentives to re-engage and increasing self-awareness could reduce some of these effects (Baumeister et al., 2005).

All people instinctively recognise the potential for exclusion, but those “who have been repeatedly exposed to ostracism throughout their lives . . . may become hypersensitive to all forms of potential ostracism, often seeing the potential for rejection in situations that are actually benign” (Williams & Zadro, 2005, pp. 32-33). Their responses, including many of those mentioned previously, made them vulnerable to further rejection (Baumeister & De Wall, 2005; Romero-Canyas & Downey, 2005): “Poor self-regulation [or the ability to alter behaviour to socially defined standards] leads to social exclusion, and if exclusion also causes poorer self-
regulation, it is hard to see how individuals can escape from the downward spiral” (Baumeister & De Wall, 2005, p. 69).

However, research showed that in the early stages of a threat to inclusion, people also exhibited innate pro-social behaviours such as becoming more attentive to positive cues of acceptance, e.g., smiling faces (De Wall, Maner, & Rouby, 2009), and non-conscious behavioural mimicry (Lakin & Chartrand, 2005). Being socially excluded motivated some individuals to make new bonds and connections and increased pro-social behaviours (Maner et al., 2007). However, Romero-Canyas et al. (2010) showed how pro-social behaviours were subject to a number of conditions:

First, the rejected individual must be explicitly given the opportunity to engage in behavior that has the potential to create a positive impression on the rejection source. Second, the rejection must be highly threatening to the individual. We found that a combination of sources of threat was necessary to trigger willingness to ingratiate toward the rejection source. The rejection needed to be unambiguously clear to someone for whom acceptance and rejection are paramount concerns, and it had to clearly convey that acceptance from a valued source was improbable, albeit possible (p. 822).

Also, Molden, Lucas, Dean, Gardner, and Knowles (2009) found that being rejected led to withdrawal, increased agitation and reflection on actions one should not have taken, whereas ostracism led to individuals trying to re-engage with others, and think about actions they should have taken. These behaviours varied according to the situation and individual differences. For example, people with lower self-esteem experienced more negative reactions, women tended to engage in more compensatory behaviours, and socially anxious people took longer to resolve negative reactions to the ostracism than those with lower anxiety levels (Williams & Zadro, 2005; Zadro, Boland, & Richardson, 2006). Rejected participants who denied the rejection acted
more aggressively (Twenge & Baumeister, 2005). Responses might be determined by
the person’s relational evaluation, i.e., the degree to which the relationship was
considered valuable or important (Leary, 2005). Comparative rejection was less
painful because the person might “maintain the belief, whether accurate or illusory,
that the rejector’s choice reflected a preference among valued options” (Leary, 2005,
p. 46)

Finally, these findings should be reviewed in relation to the methodologies
employed. Most of these studies were conducted in artificial environments with
participants being rejected, ostracised, or excluded by unknown associates.
Researchers generally measured one or two components of behaviour in the short
term after rejection, ostracism, or exclusion. Studies have minimised the fundamental
and contextual differences between types of exclusion, e.g., being excluded by
workmates or one’s adult-child. Additionally, findings from individual studies were
often contradictory suggesting that a variety of complex responses to rejection,
ostracism, and exclusion warranted further investigation. Williams’ (2001) model of
ostracism and Smart Richman and Leary’s (2009) multimotive model acknowledged
the complexity of these concepts and showed the possible relational, contextual, and
dispositional factors as potentially influencing the way in which a person responded to
rejection. These models might provide a way forward in researching these phenomena
and thereby make further contributions to the study of family estrangement.
Parental Alienation and Parental Alienation Syndrome

Parental alienation – or the concept that a parent might encourage their child to choose sides against the other parent – has been recognised since the 1940s (Meier, 2009). Terms such as *pathological alignment*, *the programming parent*, *divorce-related malicious parent syndrome*, *Medea syndrome*, and *brainwashed children* have been used to describe variations of the phenomenon.

The concept of *maternal alienation* has been recognised by feminist groups since the 1960s as a component of domestic violence used by the father to debase, injure, silence, isolate, and maintain control over a woman and her children (Meier, 2009). It might also be a grooming tactic of sexually abusive fathers, who developed a ‘special’ relationship with the child in an effort to estrange him or her from sources of support (Morris, 2005). Feminists believed the strategies used by the perpetrator were successful because they were strongly embedded within discrediting social discourses holding women responsible for problems in mothering, marriage, and the family (Morris, 2005). The father recruited others, including human service providers, “into their version of events by eliciting sympathy for themselves while orchestrating repulsion and outrage towards the mothers” (Morris, 2005, p. 229).

Prominent divorce researchers, Wallerstein and Kelly observed children’s rejection of one parent in the 1970s (cited in Meier, 2009). They suggested such rejection resulted more from the dynamics of separation and divorce and the child’s resultant alignment with one parent, rather than one parent’s intentional alienation of the other. However, in the 1980s, Gardner (cited in Meier, 2009) developed the concept of alienation further. Based on his clinical experience, he named and described the concept *Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS)* where mothers used false
child abuse allegations to punish ex-husbands and maintain sole custody of their children, although he later conceded that PAS was a gender-neutral concept (Gardner, 2001). Gardner (2001) claimed PAS was a subtle but extreme form of child abuse arising:

… primarily in the context of child-custody disputes. Its primary manifestation is the child’s campaign of denigration against a good, loving parent, a campaign that has no justification. It results from the combination of a programming (brainwashing) parent’s indoctrinations and the child’s own contributions to the vilification of the target parent (p. 192).

He identified a cluster of eight symptoms exhibited by children of PAS including: (i) a campaign of denigration against the parent; (ii) weak rationalisations for the denigration; (iii) descriptions of one parent being almost flawless and the other almost always flawed; (iv) claims that the beliefs and rejections originated without influence of others; (v) unwavering support for the ‘flawless’ parent; (vi) absence of remorse for treatment of the rejected parent; (vii) the use of borrowed phrases to malign the rejected parent; and (viii) animosity towards others associated with the rejected parent (Weigel & Donovan, 2006). Recent research with self-reported alienated parents has supported the existence of these symptoms (Baker & Darnall, 2007). There were three levels of PAS, with the most severe alienation associated with hatred of the targeted parent and refusal to have any contact (Baker, 2005).

Mental health and legal professionals have consistently critiqued and rejected PAS on the basis of deficient logic and lack of scientific evidence since its inception (Meier, 2009). A US survey of mental health and legal professionals found them to be cautious about the concept of PA and reluctant to support the idea of PAS (Bow, Gould, & Flens, 2009). Criticisms focussed on gender bias, insufficient evidence
about false abuse claims, the causal role of the alienating parent, and the possible legal and personal consequences of its classification as a syndrome (Meier, 2009; Rand, 2011). Consensus was found within the scientific community regarding the lack of empirical support for Gardner’s explanation for PAS (Meier, 2009). Nevertheless, PAS has been heralded by men’s rights groups, cited in custody disputes (Adams, 2006), and its proponents continue to advocate for inclusion in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, commonly known as the DSM (Bernet, 2008).

Critiques of Gardner’s work have resulted in some practitioners and researchers preferring the terms parental alienation or the alienated child, which removed the diagnostic focus and took account of the family system and contextual factors, such as parental personalities, intense marital conflict, professional mismanagement, and the child’s vulnerabilities (Gordon, Stoffey, & Bottinelli, 2008; Meier, 2009). It moved the focus from the child’s symptoms to the alienating parents’ behaviours (Mone & Biringen, 2006). Despite the close association of parental alienation with legal disputes and intense gendered debates (Clarkson & Clarkson, 2007), a range of professionals have recognised the cluster of concepts surrounding parental alienation, and research has increased (Bow et al., 2009; Rand, 2011).

Recent research involving adults showed childhood exposure to some degree of parental alienation by both sexes, in both divorced and intact families (Baker, 2010; Baker & Chambers, 2011; Mone & Biringen, 2006). Findings suggested the degree of conflict in a marriage was a greater indicator of alienation tactics than separation and divorce (Mone & Biringen, 2006). Research with adults who identified themselves as being alienated from a parent when they were children showed a number of long-term adverse effects, including low self-esteem, depression, and lack
of trust (Baker, 2005, 2006, 2010). Some research identified common experiences of parents who viewed themselves as targets of alienation (Baker & Darnall, 2006, 2007; Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001), and common traits in parents who alienated children such as primitive defences like *splitting* (where they viewed themselves as all good and the other parent as all bad) and *projective identification* (where they provoked and treated the other parent accordingly) (Gordon et al., 2008). While evidence about the conditions and dynamics contributing to alienation remained inconclusive, the concepts have some salience for examining family estrangement, particularly when the estrangement appeared to commence during childhood in conflicted and separating families and in those families where violence was evident.

**Models of Conflict**

Definitions of estrangement typically indicated some form of withdrawal whereas many definitions of conflict assume a degree of interaction or contact between parties. According to the Macquarie Dictionary, conflict means “to come into collision; clash, or be in opposition or at variance; disagree” or “to contend; do battle” (Yallop, 2005, p. 309). The Oxford Dictionary defines conflict as “a state of opposition or hostilities” or “a fight or struggle” (Allen, 1990, p. 240). McKnight (2003) described conflict in family therapy as “the overt or covert discord between two people used to resolve their differences and to manage the connection between them” (p. 278). Rahim (2001) claimed the multidisciplinary conceptualisation and study of conflict resulted in a lack of consensus about the elements constituting ‘conflict’, and the areas different disciplines chose to research further. For example, family researchers have tended to focus most attention on the confrontational aspects of conflict, such as arguing
(Messman & Canary, 1998; Roloff & Waite Miller, 2006). However, Baron’s (1990) review of conflict definitions drew together some areas of consensus:

1. Conflict includes opposing interests between individuals or groups in a zero-sum situation;
2. Such opposed interests must be recognized for conflict to exist;
3. Conflict involves beliefs by each side that the other will thwart (or has already thwarted) its interests;
4. Conflict is a process which develops out of existing relationships between individuals or groups and reflects their past interactions and the contexts in which these took place; and
5. Actions by one or both sides thwart others’ goals (p. 199).

Estrangement is consistent with these definitions and so it constitutes a type of conflict.

Issues leading to conflict and conflict behaviours were confused or used interchangeably throughout the literature (Van de Vliert, 1997). Van de Vliert (1997) distinguished between conflict, conflict issues, conflict behaviours, and the outcomes of conflict and determined that individuals were in conflict when they were “obstructed by another individual or a group and inevitably react[ed] to it in a beneficial or costly way” (Van de Vliert, 1997, p. 5). Unlike Baron (1990), he also suggested conflict could be one-sided when a person experienced discord but failed to communicate this to the other party (Van de Vliert, 1997). A conflict issue was seen as the subject matter of the discord, the conflict behaviour was the way the party responded or reacted to the conflict issue, and the conflict outcome referred to the consequent changes (Van de Vliert, 1997).

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7 Zero-sum describes a situation in which a person’s gain (or loss) is exactly balanced by the losses (or gains) of the other.
Theorists have developed and used a number of taxonomies to research and explain conflict behaviour. From the dichotomous conceptualisation of the fight or flight response, to Blake and Mouton’s (1964) five-part typology, researchers have increasingly tried to capture the complexity of human conflict behaviours in various models and schema (Van de Vliert, 1997). However, as Van de Vliert (1997) explained, taxonomies “undervalue both the frequency of occurrence and the scientific relevance of behavioural complexity” (p. 9). Estrangement does not seem to fit easily into any existing schema. However, from the previous definitions of conflict, estrangement itself might be a conflict behaviour, where one or both parties reacted to the conflict issue by withdrawal or avoidance, or it might be a conflict outcome, where one or both parties withdrew as a result of conflictual behaviour, such as an argument, fight, or ongoing feud. Van de Vliert’s (1997) configuration of Blake and Mouton’s (1970) five-part typology (see Figure 4.1) is based on the idea that when people experience conflict, two things determine their response (conflict behaviour): concern for one’s own goals and concern for the other’s goals. Depending on these

*Figure 4.1: Conflict management grid (Van de Vliert, 1990)*
variables, the grid suggests that individuals would be more likely to respond in one of five ways: avoiding, accommodating, compromising, problem solving, or fighting (Blake & Mouton, 1970). From the literature in this review, it might be expected that behaviours, such as avoiding and fighting (both located at the bottom of the grid in Figure 4.1), would be the most likely behaviours to result in estrangement. However, this model also assumes that an avoidant response is linked to low concern for one’s own goals and low concern for the other’s goals, which does not seem compatible with estrangement, where concern for one’s own goals appears to be higher than the desire to maintain a relationship with the other person.

Using the aforementioned theory, terminology, and definitions of estrangement, I have developed a model most likely to represent the styles of conflict behaviour involved in family estrangement. In Figure 4.2, A suggests a relationship where one party accommodates the needs of the other for a period of time until this can no longer be tolerated and this leads to a degree of avoidance, depicted between

*Figure 4.2: Mapping estrangement related conflict behaviour*
A1 and C. Accommodation might ultimately lead to a confrontation or fight (A2), which results in avoidance (C) or physical estrangement (B1). B suggests a confrontation or fight which leads to estrangement (B1). C suggests avoidance behaviours are interrupted by a confrontation or fight (C1) ultimately leading to physical estrangement (B1). Or there may be an increased withdrawal (C2) leading to physical estrangement (B1). In this model, it is likely that (C) would be the closest behaviour to an emotional estrangement.

Conflict models are useful to conceptualise the behaviours (and outcomes) associated with estrangement. However, it should be noted that conflict models similar to Figure 4.2, do not take the conflict issue, conflict history, or more than one person’s conflict behaviour into account, so they are merely one avenue for beginning to define and examine estrangement.

Grief and Loss Theories
The reviewed grief and loss theories explored the way in which humans responded to the death of a loved one or the loss of something or someone meaningful or significant, such as loss of a relationship or job. Bereavement was seen as the core human response to a significant loss, and grief as the intrapersonal or psychological expression of bereavement (Corr, 2002; Weinstein, 2008). The range of grief symptoms included physical, such as lack of appetite; emotional, such as sadness; cognitive, such as preoccupation; behavioural, such as crying; and social, such as withdrawal (Machin, 2009). The experience of loss would depend upon a number of variables, including the nature of the attachment, the nature of the loss or death, co-

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8 The term bereavement is sometimes used to describe the response to a death-related loss only. This thesis uses the broader conceptualisation of bereavement as stated above.
occurrence with other life stressors, and social factors such as age, religious beliefs, and levels of support (Weinstein, 2008).

Initial understandings of grief and loss arose from psychodynamic theories (e.g., Freud) and attachment perspectives (e.g., Bowlby) emphasising normative emotions and psychological responses to death (Kellehear, 2002). For example, an attachment perspective proposed that people respond to loss by experiencing an initial numbness, followed by a phase of intense protest behaviour where they would feel anxious and restless, and might ‘search’ for the lost person (Hazan & Shaver, 1992). When the reality of the loss was realised, the person might experience deep sadness and despair, and energy might dissipate resulting in lethargy and depression. Over time, they would move through a cognitive and emotional acceptance of the loss where a new life would be established without the lost person (Hazan & Shaver, 1992).

As the field developed, it encompassed task theories (e.g., Worden), stage models (e.g., Kubler-Ross), social learning (e.g., Moos), and cognitive behavioural (e.g., Stroebe & Schutz) theories of grief and loss (Goldsworthy, 2005). Some theories still encompassed psychodynamic constructs, including the notion of engaging in ‘grief work’ to achieve resolution (Machin, 2009). One of the most influential theories was Kubler-Ross’ stage model proposed in 1969 (Machin, 2009). Although the model was originally developed to explain the experiences of the dying person, it was subsequently widely applied to bereavement. The model proposed five (non-linear) stages of grief: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kubler-Ross, 2009). Grief theories and models have been critiqued in terms of their normative assumptions about the experience of grief, their emphasis on
the pathological aspects of grief, and particularly the finality of grieving encapsulated in the concepts of *reinvestment*, *acceptance*, and *letting go* (Goldsworthy, 2005; Kellehear, 2002). Others have argued that such critiques were based on a linear interpretation and rigid application of these models in practice, rather than on the content of the models (Kellehear in Kubler-Ross, 2009; Machin, 2009; Shaver & Tancredy, 2001).

Regardless of this argument, the grief and loss theorists reviewed increasingly focused on social relationships, the positive influences of grief across the life-span, the social and cultural context of loss (Kellehear, 2002), social norms, personal styles, the way individuals make sense and reconstruct meaning of their experience, and how they integrate – rather than recover from – loss (Goldsworthy, 2005). There was acceptance of the concepts of *continuing bonds*, and suggestions that people still related to the dead after their passing (Kellehear, 2002). Originally, grief and loss theories focused on the individual’s response to death, but theorists have increasingly acknowledged the variety of losses invoking grief responses. The loss associated with family estrangement appeared to be highly consistent with ambiguous loss, and might result in ambivalence, role ambiguity, and disenfranchised grief, as explained below.

**Ambiguous Loss, Role Ambiguity, and Disenfranchised Grief**

Pauline Boss coined the term *ambiguous loss* in 1975 to describe a specific type of phenomenological loss she encountered in her work as a family therapist (Boss, 2006a). She continued to develop her theory of ambiguous loss and applied it across numerous areas of research, including divorce, infertility, incarceration, missing persons, and immigration (Boss, 2006a). As yet, it does not appear to have been
applied to the concept of later-life intergenerational estrangement, but its explanatory potential is great.

Boss (2006a) saw ambiguous loss as essentially a confused state of whether there was an absence or presence of another. She described two types of losses characterising ambiguous loss: (i) physically present but psychologically absent, such as when a person has dementia or some types of mental illness, or (ii) physically absent but still psychologically present in the mind of the person experiencing the loss of the other, such as a missing person or a partner during military service. As conceptualised in this review, estrangement primarily relates to the latter – an overt situation where family members were physically and emotionally distanced from one another, but where an interplay of psychological and social factors kept the estranged member psychologically present. Additionally, people experiencing the loss often became confused about their and others’ roles and status in their family system and they did not know how to act or what to do. Boss (2006a) called this boundary ambiguity.

Carroll, Olson, and Buckmiller’s (2007) review of 37 studies on boundary ambiguity concluded that researchers had used this term across a range of study areas in the past 30 years, yet they suggested that outside of writings by Boss, there was little theoretical building and clarification of boundary ambiguity and ambiguous loss. They claimed that “many scholars and professionals are not making a clear distinction between the constructs of ambiguous loss and boundary ambiguity” (Carroll et al., 2007, p. 224), resulting in an interchanging of these terms, blurring their original articulation (Carroll et al., 2007). The most common misconception by academia has been the tendency to assume ambiguous loss was any type of loss leading to
ambiguous perceptions by family members. Boss’ (2006a) construct of ambiguous loss, however, referred to a rare and specific inherently ambiguous type of loss due to the situational features of the loss. Boundary ambiguity was a continuous variable ranging from high to low and offered a measurement of the family’s perception of a loss situation (Boss, cited in Carroll et al., 2007).

Boss (2006) described ambiguous loss as the most stressful kind of loss, which resulted in an inability to resolve the loss as well as long-term confusion around who was in or out of a family system. Loss coupled with ambiguity, i.e., uncertainty, fogginess, and confusion or lack of clarity, created a powerful barrier to coping and grieving. The difficulties in resolving the loss could, therefore, lead to a situation of chronic loss. There already existed a societal expectation for a bereaved person to ‘get over a loss’. However, in the case of ambiguous loss, there was often no official recognition of the loss and finding closure was virtually impossible (Boss, 2006a).

Boss’s (1975) recognition of the situational and societal factors impacting on loss and grief were supported by Doka’s (1985) conceptualisation of disenfranchised grief defined as the grief people experience “when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported” (Doka, cited in Corr, 2002, p. 39). Doka argued that grief could be disenfranchised in one of three ways: the relationship was not recognised, the loss was not recognised and or the griever was not recognized (Corr, 2002). When grief was disenfranchised, those who experienced the loss were not given the opportunity to grieve, their sources of support were minimised, and opportunities to access or take part in rituals were denied (Corr, 2002).
Literature reviewed in previous chapters suggested that some people might experience estrangement as an ambiguous loss due to its ambiguous and inconclusive nature. It might also be experienced as disenfranchised grief because it was not a socially recognised type of loss. The absence of books, articles, and research about the topic might, in itself, constitute evidence about the lack of social acceptance of family estrangement.

**Quality of Life and Wellbeing Studies**

Definitions of *wellbeing* and *quality of life* were not universal and conceptualisations varied across and within sociological, health, psychological, political, and philosophical domains (Diener & Rahtz, 2000; Fayers & Machin, 2000; Rapley, 2003; Schalock & Alonso, 2002). The terms wellbeing and quality of life (QOL) were often used interchangeably in the literature (Kahn & Juster, 2002). Most frequently, *quality of life* appeared to be a more global term used to describe the individual’s overall life satisfaction across a number of domains. *Wellbeing* was most often used as a descriptor for a component or variable of quality of life, such as emotional, social, and physical wellbeing. Regardless of the complexities of defining and measuring quality of life and wellbeing, their potential relevance to understanding and measuring the effects of later-life intergenerational estrangement are considerable, if applied with caution. Connections between estrangement and quality of life are complex because of the variations between key definitions and generalised assumptions about family estrangement. However, some potentially useful evidence was found in groups of older people who were more vulnerable to a lack of social support. They included the divorced, childless, people with limited physical capacity to leave the home, and those who had never forged close ties (Grundy, 2006). While there was no specific evidence
about family estrangement in later life, links might be drawn between current quality of life findings and anticipated areas of estrangement-related research.

This section of the review takes its cue from Schalock and Alonso’s (2002) suggestion that it is more constructive to concentrate on areas of agreement in relation to core domains and indicators of quality of life. There appeared to be consensus in the literature regarding the definition of quality of life and wellbeing as a multidimensional construct, inseparable from a person’s context (Kahn & Juster, 2002; Rapley, 2003; Schalock & Alonso, 2002). Researchers have concurred that effective measurement must include subjective and objective components because the correlations between subjective global reports of quality of life and objective conditions (such as income) were consistently low (Kahn & Juster, 2002; Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999). Additionally, quality of life and wellbeing encompassed “the basic conditions of life (e.g., adequate food, shelter, and safety) plus life enrichers (e.g., inclusive social, leisure, and community activities). These enrichers are based on the individual’s values, beliefs, needs, and interests” (Schalock & Alonso, 2002, p. 25). In its simplest framework, quality of life and wellbeing might comprise three domains:

1. Being (who one is).
2. Belonging (connections to environment).
3. Becoming (achieving goals, hopes, and aspirations) (Centre for Health Promotion, 2008; Schalock & Alonso, 2002).

Taking an ecological approach, Schalock (1996) suggested three levels of analysis (microsystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem). Domains in the macrosystem were measured primarily through social indicators, domains in the mesosystem were
measured mostly through functional assessments, and domains in the microsystem were measured most accurately through personal appraisal. Schalock and Alonso (2002) suggested eight quality of life domains within these three levels of analysis: emotional wellbeing, interpersonal relations, material wellbeing, personal development, physical wellbeing, self-determination, social inclusion, and human rights. The earlier findings of this review suggested the effects of family estrangement were located primarily in the microsystem, and most prominently in the areas of interpersonal relations and emotional, material, and physical wellbeing, although an ecological understanding would suggest an effect across all domains, with links between particular ones (see Table 4.1 for examples of the elements within each microsystem domain). The following section of this review briefly examines some areas of research offering insight into the potential interactions between these domains, and the possible effects of later-life estrangement.

**Social Support and Quality of Later Life**

A body of literature links several quality of life indicators. Most pertinent were studies examining links between social support and physical health beginning with seminal research by Cobb (1976) and Cassel (1976). Social support predominantly has been conceptualised and measured structurally and functionally. Structural measures examined the degree to which an individual was linked with a social network (Uchino, 2004) and aligned well with Schalock and Alonso’s (2002) quality of life indicator of social inclusion. Functional measurements generally included the degrees of emotional, informational, and tangible support, as well as a sense of belonging (Uchino, 2004) which is broadly representative of Schalock and Alonso’s (2002) quality of life indicators of emotional and material wellbeing, interpersonal
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional wellbeing</td>
<td>Self-concept, Happiness, Spirituality, Contentment, Satisfaction, Feeling of wellbeing, Mental health status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal relations</td>
<td>Friendships, Intimacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material wellbeing</td>
<td>Possessions, Income or salary, Investments or savings, Standard of living</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal development</td>
<td>Educational level, Adaptive behaviour skills, Activities of daily living skills, Instrumental activities of daily living, Personal competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical wellbeing</td>
<td>Health status, Nutritional Status, Mobility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-determination</td>
<td>Autonomy, Self-direction, Personal control, Preferences, Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social inclusion</td>
<td>Community participation or activities, Circle of friends, Access or participation opportunities, Natural supports, Accepted social roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights</td>
<td>Voting and enfranchisement, Privacy and confidentiality, Self-determination, Ownership or entitlement, Personal values, Sense of dignity and worth, Personal freedom</td>
</tr>
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Source: Adapted from Schalock and Alonso (2002, p. 18)
relations, and social inclusion, which tended to be the measures most frequently used in the contemporary social support literature. Studies showed that informal sources of social support were most important to quality of life (Gray, 2009). In most studies, social support encompassed family support, but did not measure its discrete impact. Social support became an increasingly significant resource to older people as they aged and, in most cases, family, especially adult-children were primary providers of social support (Hooymen & Kiyak, 2005; Sugisawa, Shibata, Houghham, Sugihara, & Liang, 2002). Older people regularly reported the importance of family ties and support to their quality of life and successful ageing (Bowling & Gabriel, 2007; Krause, 2007; Shearer & Fleury, 2006; Victor et al., 2005; Wilhelmson, Andersson, Waern, & Allebeck, 2005). One quarter of older parents in one study named an adult-child as their closest friend (Gray, 2009).

A recent analysis of the National British Quality of Life Survey included a logistic regression analysis of survey data (n=999) and qualitative interviews (n=80) to uncover the definitions and factors attributed to quality of life by older people (Bowling & Gabriel, 2007; Gabriel & Bowling, 2004). Results showed a number of conditions contributed to a good quality of life, particularly social relationships and support. Family members were important in enhancing emotional stability (including feeling cared for), reducing isolation, and providing practical help in times of need (Bowling & Gabriel, 2007; Gabriel & Bowling, 2004). MacDonald’s (2007) systematic review found social support for centenarians remained important to health and wellbeing even for the oldest old.
Social support and physical wellbeing

Uchino (2004) critically reviewed 80 studies examining the link between social support and mortality and reported “about 80 percent of the studies . . . found an association between either structural or functional measures of support and lower overall mortality rates” (Uchino, 2004, p. 58). Additionally, 70 percent of the studies found a link between increased emotional support and lower mortality rates. Uchino (2004) found there was a complex association between social support, and structural variables, such as gender and socio-cultural differences, and physical health. More recent studies have consolidated findings on the positive effects of social support, social participation, and delayed mortality in later life (Bowling & Grundy, 2009; Lett, Blumenthal, Babyak et al., 2007; Lyyra & Hieikkinen, 2006; Mortimore, Haselow, Dolan et al., 2008; Zhang, Norris, Gregg, & Beckles, 2007), suggesting social support might also provide a protective function. Case study research (employing questionnaires, and family and individual interviews) showed that family support influenced and reinforced positive and negative cardiovascular health-related behaviours (Heitman, 2006). So, for example, a family member who encouraged the older person to maintain an exercise regime made a difference to compliance.

Larger social networks have been associated with lower risk for dementia in older women (Crooks, Lubben, Petitti, Little, & Chui, 2008), and memory decline has also been associated with lower satisfaction with social support (Hughes et al., 2008). Social support has been shown to have positive effects on blood pressure. (Rodriguez, Burg, Meng et al., 2007) and depressive symptoms (Sugisawa et al., 2002). The importance of emotional support to health-related quality of life featured highly in many studies (Lang & Carstensen, 2002; Lett et al., 2007; Lowenstein, 2007; Lyyra &
Hieikkinen, 2006). A study of patients with a recent acute myocardial infarction demonstrated higher levels of social support and particularly emotional support resulted in better patient outcomes (when high levels of depression were not present) (Lett et al., 2007). Lyyra and Hiekkinen’s (2006) study found a 2.5 times higher risk of mortality in women who had the lowest levels of social support, that is, they lacked reassurance of their worth, emotional closeness, feelings of belonging, and nurturance. Perceptions of health and wellbeing have also been consistently linked to disease onset, health outcomes, and mortality (Blazer, 2008). Subjective perceptions of good social support, as distinct from objective measures, have been associated with better health outcomes (Blazer, 2008; Krause, 2007; Yang, 2006).

**Social support and emotional wellbeing**

Social support was positively linked to emotional wellbeing among nursing home residents in Norway (Schroepfer, 2008). This study showed “higher levels of attachment, nurturance and reassurance of worth were associated with higher levels of mental health, social functioning and vitality” (Schroepfer, 2008, p. 71). One longitudinal national survey of US residents over the age of 65 showed anticipated social support (both practical and emotional) related positively to a greater sense of meaning in the participants’ lives (Krause, 2007). Perceived social support has been shown to reduce stress and mediate the depressive effects of functional disability (Yang, 2006). In some studies, social ties and social support were shown to buffer the effects of negative life experiences and stress (Wiggins, Higgs, Hyde, & Blane, 2004). Family support was most needed following ill health, divorce, and bereavement (Stuifbergen et al., 2008; Tomassini, Glaser, & Stuchbury, 2007). One study showed that patients with social support had lowered stress reactions and better emotional
functioning when tested two months after terminal cancer diagnosis (Ringdal, Ringdal, Jordhoy, & Kaasa, 2007).

Reciprocal social support was beneficial for older people, providing a meaningful role, emotional gratification, social interaction, and a greater likelihood of having support returned in times of need (Gruenewald, Karlamangla, Greendale, Singer, & Seeman, 2007; Lowenstein, 2007; Shearer & Fleury, 2006). In fact, one study of Hispanic elders in Florida showed that, when participants reported satisfaction with received social support or when they gave more social support than they received, they experienced lower psychological distress (Cruza-Guet, Spokane, Caskie, Brown, & Szapocznik, 2008). Gruenewald et al. (2007) also showed feelings of usefulness led to better health trajectories for older people.

**Negative interactions and wellbeing**

The social support offered was most effective when it matched the needs of the recipient at any given time (Schroepfer, 2008). The quality, rather than the level of support, has been found repeatedly to be important (Cruza-Guet et al., 2008; Hughes et al., 2008; Ryan & Willits, 2007; Schroepfer, 2008). Cultural variance around the meaning of ‘support’ and the contextual implications for whether intergenerational support was considered beneficial (or not) to the older person has been found (for examples, see Cong & Silverstein, 2008; Tomassini et al., 2007; Verbrugge & Chan, 2008; Willis, 2008). Lloyd-Sherlock and Locke’s (2008) investigation of social support in Latino elders highlighted the complexity of historical familial interactions in determining current social support arrangements, and the meaning the older person attributed to the support. Additionally, when elders had migrated to a new country,
and particularly when they were not fluent in the local language, they were likely to need increased support from adult-children (Ip, Lui, & Chui, 2007).

However, being part of a family did not necessarily mean increased quality of life. Several studies have investigated the effects of negative family and social interactions on later life especially where social support (or contact) might be stressful or conflict-ridden (Lloyd-Sherlock & Locke, 2008; Wiggins et al., 2004). Krause (2007) found negative interaction decreased participants’ senses of meaning in life in the short term. Fingerman et al.’s (2006) research showed that ambivalence about an intergenerational relationship was associated with more depressive symptoms and poorer psychological wellbeing. Results from logistic regression, after controlling for depression, showed that terminally ill older people were significantly more likely to consider hastening their death if they had poor or conflict-ridden experiences of social support (Schroepfer, 2008). Higher levels of social support were associated with higher psychological distress in one study which researchers related to a number of factors including the participant’s level of disability, desire not to be a burden to others, or the type and quality of social support being provided (Cruza-Guet et al., 2008). Family conflict and loneliness have also been shown to be risk factors for suicide in older people (Rubenowitz, Waern, Wilhelmson, & Allbeck, 2001; Waern, Rubenowitz, & Wilhelmson, 2003).

Quality of life and wellbeing research suggests that the quality of social and familial relationships affect older people’s psychological, social, and material components of health and wellbeing. This has implications for the longer-term effects of family estrangement from an adult-child in later life, particularly when alternative family support or social support is limited or negatively affected by the estrangement.
Conclusion

In the absence of substantial literature on family estrangement, Chapters 3 and 4 documented the search of the related literature and how this broad range of theoretical and research literature might offer insight into family estrangement and the later-life intergenerational family. It suggests that family estrangement is an intrapersonal process where biological, social, cultural, and historical constructs and processes interact and contribute to an individual’s decision to distance or cut off from another. The estranged person’s subsequent experience is likely to be determined by his or her biological, social, cultural, and historical conditioning and experience. This insight guided the research design and methodology and provided a lens through which to interpret the phenomenological findings from the research presented and discussed in Chapters 6 and 7 respectively. The following methodology chapter describes the research aims, methodology, data collection, and analysis process which were determined in light of the findings from the literature review in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.
CHAPTER 5

Research Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology beginning with the purpose of the study and the research questions. It provides a rationale for the research design and highlights the relevance of, and ‘fit’ between, the research methodology, design, and aims, and the population under study. It then provides a detailed description of the research procedures, including justification for the use of interpretive phenomenological analysis. It discusses the trustworthiness (or validity) of the data, the ethical considerations and, finally, the benefits and limitations of the research design. It is written in first person in what Gilgun and Abrams (2002) referred to as “the spirit of reflexivity” (p. 41). Writing in the first person makes my presence explicit, and makes my stance and decision-making processes more transparent.

Purpose of the Research

As identified in the literature review, research about the experience of intergenerational family estrangement is rare. Much of the research focused on the demographic categorisation of intergenerational relationship types (e.g., Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006), theoretical considerations (e.g., Bowen, 1978), tested physiological responses to estrangement (e.g., Friesen, 2003), or reported on estrangement as an ‘accidental’ or ‘incidental’ finding in a broader study (e.g., Jerrome, 1994). The sources devoted to the experience or meaning of estrangement were aimed at clinical and self-help audiences based on the particular author’s clinical and personal experiences. Most tended to view estrangement as a generic rather than a diverse experience (e.g., Sucov, 2006). There was a noticeable absence of methodologically
sound explorations of the experiences and the meanings of estrangement from the perspective of the population directly experiencing it.

The purpose of this research, then, was to get as close as possible to the lived experience and meaning of intergenerational family estrangement. I wanted to know how people defined, explained, experienced, and made sense of estrangement from a family member. However, I believed different generations – in various types of relationships – might experience estrangement differently, so it was important to place boundaries around the research population, to capture the unique and nuanced experiences of the participants in the study. I believed this boundary would maximise the collection of detailed data and provide thick analytic description without over-extending the resources available to me. However, this decision may have imposed limitations, and these are discussed later in this chapter.

This study focused its exploration of estrangement on one specific age range, (i.e., people aged 60 years or older) and one relationship type (i.e., estrangement between an older parent and adult-child). In terms of the life-cycle/developmental perspective, later life is characterised by older people’s desire to reflect on their own life, and maybe to reconcile past mistakes (Bowen, 1982; Erikson, 1997; Erikson et al., 1986). For these reasons, I anticipated this particular age group might experience family estrangement differently to people at other stages of the life-span and would be more open to reflecting on its presence in their lives. The main aim of the study was to explore and understand the lived experience of older people who were estranged from their adult-child or children. I posed four research questions:

1. How do older people define estrangement from their adult-child or children?
2. How do older people explain estrangement from their adult-child or children?

3. How do older people experience estrangement from their adult-child or children?

4. How do older people make meaning of estrangement from their adult-child or children?

As such, the study aimed to:

1. Give voice to older people who had experienced family estrangement.

2. Raise awareness of the issue of family estrangement in the government, public, academic, and human service spheres.

3. Commence a dialogue between human service workers about the ways in which they might listen out for, acknowledge, and work with individuals, families, groups, and communities affected by family estrangement.

4. Develop a foundation for a longer term research agenda focused on family estrangement, and encompassing the experiences of diverse populations and estrangement experiences.

**Qualitative Methodology**

I chose to employ a qualitative methodology, grounded in the interpretive constructivist paradigm, because I believed it was most likely to provide answers to the specified research questions, the most appropriate for the population under study, and the most ethically responsible due to the sensitive nature of the research topic. In keeping with Denzin and Lincoln’s (2008) definition, I use the term *paradigm* to refer to “the net containing the researcher’s epistemological, ontological, and methodological premises” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 31), including beliefs about the nature of knowledge, motivations for conducting the study, methods for collecting data, and criteria for establishing validity (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). In the
interpretive constructivist paradigm, the methodology or the best means for acquiring knowledge about human experience is most often qualitative, and data collection is often through the use of in-depth interviews and participant observation.

Qualitative inquiry is most useful when little is known about the area under study, the phenomenon being studied is complex and situated, and the researcher wishes to gather rich data about the experience and meaning of a particular little-understood phenomenon (Bryman, 2008; Morris, 2006; Richards & Morse, 2007; Sarantakos, 2005). Little is known about family estrangement, and particularly about older people who are estranged from an adult-child. Qualitative inquiry has the potential to generate a deep understanding in an area where knowledge is partial, biased, or ‘thin’ (Richards & Morse, 2007).

Unlike quantitative research which aims to test hypotheses, qualitative research works from basic assumptions offering scope to explore a relatively uncharted area and gain new knowledge and novel understandings or ideas about it (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Qualitative research requires and promotes a flexible research design with ‘responsive’ methods of data gathering from relatively unstructured data-gathering instruments (Patton, 2002). This allows for the exploration of phenomena as they become manifest during the data collection process. Padgett (2009) likened the research design to a road map, claiming flexibility should always be employed when the study’s goals might be enhanced by ‘detours’. This also allows researchers to modify their approach when the emerging data contradicts their original assumptions (Broom & Willis, 2007). Qualitative researchers show a preference for research methods, like in-depth interviewing, to allow flexibility and responsiveness to a participant’s presentation and personal circumstances, which
might enhance the quality of the data collected (Kavanaugh & Ayres, 1998; Sque, 2000; Warren, 2002).

In this study, I saw qualitative inquiry as best suited to the collection of information about what I presumed to be a very complex phenomenon, since it offered a way of representing the themes and consistencies within the data and could accommodate the complexity and contradiction I anticipated (Broom & Willis, 2007; Richards & Morse, 2007). I wanted to be able to reproduce this information in such a way as to bring the lived experience to life for various audiences. I needed to gather “understandings gained though engagement of heart and mind” rather than mere information “that simply passes through the central processors of our brains” (Gilgun & Abrams, 2002, p. 41).

In order to uncover the complexity and depth of the experience of family estrangement, I needed to make the person whose experience I was capturing central to the research (Sarantakos, 2005). I wanted the respondents to tell me about the way in which they experienced, interpreted, and made sense of being estranged from family members. In qualitative inquiry, data is usually gathered in the natural setting and takes account of the socio-historical context of the problem under study (Liampputting & Ezzy, 2009). Hence qualitative data of this nature is best gathered by direct contact with the people experiencing the phenomenon, through face-to-face conversation and or direct observation (Malterud, 2001; Patton, 2002). In qualitative inquiry, researchers are not trying to discover ‘universal truths’ (Broom & Willis, 2007) but rather to understand “intricate details about phenomena such as feeling, thought processes, and emotions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 11) and thus delve into the values and ideologies underpinning particular experiences (Healy & Perry, 2000).
In-depth interviews most often used in qualitative inquiry “provide access to the subjective perceptions of individuals, as well as the means by which they give meaning to their experiences” (Low, 2007, p. 75).

Qualitative inquiry also recognises and embraces the co-constructed nature of the data being gathered. In particular, researchers are seen to “collaborate with those involved in a particular human experience to create a valid, authentic, shared construction of the human experience being researched” (Morris, 2006, p. 194). Holliday (2007) suggested researchers must move from a position of superiority and locate themselves alongside participants, where they can take the time to wrestle with the meanings of complex situations. Qualitative researchers must make an “effort to observe themselves in interactions with others” (Johnson, 2002, p. 109), as well as engage in critical questioning and personal reflection throughout the research process as they attempt to generate new knowledge and understanding (Delattre, O cler, Moulette, & Rymeyko, 2009).

**Phenomenological Influence**

In keeping with interpretive constructivist worldview and qualitative methodology, I saw the philosophy of phenomenology as best suited to the lived experience approach I sought to capture (van Manen, 1990). I found *interpretative phenomenological analysis* as developed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), particularly suited my chosen methodology. The philosophy of phenomenology has significantly influenced the epistemological and methodological foundations of the interpretive constructivist paradigm (Creswell, 2007). However, phenomenology does not sit only within one paradigm and its methodological application varies across disciplines.
Descriptive phenomenology is most often connected to the work of Husserl (1859-1938) who suggested that in order to understand phenomena, one must examine them on their own terms or ‘go back to the things themselves’ (Creswell, 2007). This must be done with enough rigour to uncover the ‘essential qualities’ of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Husserl suggested that to understand, one must observe phenomena with ‘intentionality’ which, in this context means with as pure a mind as possible, and this is seen as feasible through the bracketing of ‘taken-for-granted’ perceptions (Magee, 2000). Husserl believed, once they were aware of their prior conceptions, individuals could isolate them or separate them out so they could view the phenomenon they were seeking to understand as it revealed itself in all its purity.

This focus was significantly developed and changed by philosophers like Heidegger (1889-1976) and Gadamer (1900-2002), who introduced a hermeneutic or interpretive position to phenomenology, and challenged notions of ‘bracketing’ (Smith et al., 2009). They focused on the meanings people attributed to their experience of a particular phenomenon, how they made sense of the experience, and the language associated with it. The phenomenological tradition has been debated and developed across time and, as such, it has provided a philosophical basis for the development of methods to research lived experience (van Manen, 1990).

Hence so-called phenomenological research methods seek to develop an understanding of the meanings humans attribute to significant experiences in their lives (Creswell, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). They assume, because humans are conscious and aware beings, “human experience makes sense to those who live it and that human experience can be consciously expressed” (Creswell, 2007, p. 227).
Researchers identify a phenomenon with potential significance to participants, locate participants experiencing the phenomenon, gather information from them, and then attempt to reduce this data to a “description of a universal essence” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58) that is common to all human experience. When incorporating a hermeneutic or interpretive component, the researcher assumes the research participants can and do seek to make sense of their experiences because of their capacity for reflection. Therefore, the researcher must also engage with, and account for, participants’ detailed interpretation of the experience and the meanings they associate with this, as well as their own pre-understandings and interpretations (Smith et al., 2009). I describe the influence of hermeneutic phenomenology on the data analysis in this research later in this chapter.

**Research Design**

Driven by the worldview or conceptual understanding of the research, the research design comprises the methodology used to address the research aims and tailored to the nature of the population under investigation (see Figure 5.1). Initially, I conducted a literature review about family estrangement to assist the development of the general research questions. Also, I reviewed literature about research with older people, vulnerable populations, and sensitive issues. Both sources of literature informed my research design, particularly my choice of in-depth interviews and journals as the two main sources of data collection. I aimed to conduct two in-depth interviews with each participant, approximately six months apart. Additionally, I encouraged participants to use a diary to record data during the period between interviews. To assist reflexivity, I also used a journal in which I recorded my methodological and theoretical decision-making processes.
**Sampling and Recruitment**

Due to the geographical dispersal of the population and the potentially sensitive nature of the topic, I distributed invitations to participate in the study through media outlets. The University of Newcastle’s Media and Public Relations Office issued a media release on the 10\(^{th}\) February 2009 (see Appendix A) to national and regional print, radio, and television outlets in the Newcastle, Central Coast, Hunter, and North Coast regions of New South Wales. In the release, I explained the nature of the study and asked media outlets to phone me if they wanted more information about participation. The media’s initial response to the release was tentative, because it coincided with a national tragedy, where many Victorian citizens were killed in
bushfires. Representatives from some print outlets contacted me to inform me the story, while it would be readily published at other times of the year, would not be suitable for publishing alongside the lead stories of family loss. However, regional radio media became particularly interested in running the story in news and talkback formats. Over the next ten days, I was interviewed for six news and three talk-back radio programs. The story was published as a secondary news story in at least six regional newspapers (see Appendix B for a list of radio programs and media outlets that pursued the story). In these radio interviews and print releases, I invited potential participants to phone me for further information about the study.

I chose purposive theoretical sampling as most appropriate for this research. The sampling was purposive as I needed to recruit people with direct experience of estrangement. However, features of the sample population were unknown to me and I could not determine sample size in advance, so flexibility was required. During the three weeks after the media release, 65 interested parties contacted me (and eight more in the 12 months thereafter). I interviewed parties for eligibility to participate in the study (see Ethical Considerations for further details). Of the 73 interested people; 13 were ineligible due to age (these were young and middle-aged adults who were estranged from their parents); 10 did not want to participate but wished to tell me their story immediately; and three did not leave return contact details, saying they did not want materials sent to their homes and did not call again to make alternative arrangements. This left 44 eligible participants, some of whom I had to place on a waiting list.

Initially, I forwarded information packages, including an invitation to participate/information statement (see Appendix C), consent forms (see Appendix D),
and reply-paid envelopes to a total of 22 potential participants and 18 agreed to become part of the study. In addition, two male partners agreed to participate. I had hoped about 20 participants would respond to the formal invitation to participate and this would be enough to reach theoretical saturation. In theoretical sampling, the researcher continues to investigate new cases (from the purposive sample) until no new information or data is forthcoming (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). Theoretical saturation is said to have occurred at this point (Flick, 2009).

Once 18 interviews (with 20 participants) had been conducted, I started to believe theoretical saturation was nearing in relation to key themes about the experience of estrangement. In other words, the major themes about the impacts of family estrangement were saturated, but the participant reports about the reasons for estrangement were still revealing new information. I decided to send out another six formal invitations to potential participants on the waiting list. Of these, five agreed to participate (and one male partner also joined the study). I decided to stop sampling after I had interviewed these 26 participants because theoretical saturation had been reached in relation to key themes. Considering the time and resources available, I decided depth and richness might be compromised if additional sampling were to occur. Five potential participants did not reply to the initial or second round of invitations. Two potential participants initially consented to participate, but withdrew consent when I contacted them to arrange an interview time (one due to ongoing illness and another due to relocation). One participant withdrew from the study after I had completed the first interview (due to illness).
Demographic Profile of Participants at First Interview

Participants’ ages ranged from 61 to 80 years at the time of the first interview with a mean age of 71 years. Male participants were slightly older than female participants (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1. Participants’ ages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Mean Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total (25)</td>
<td>61-80 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (17)</td>
<td>61-80 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (8)</td>
<td>62-79 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Four participants (including one couple) remained married to their first marriage partner, while 21 participants had experienced between one and three divorces (see Table 5.2).

Table 5.2. Participants’ marital status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Married (1st marriage)</th>
<th>Married (2nd marriage)</th>
<th>Single (1 divorce)</th>
<th>Single (2 divorces)</th>
<th>Single (3 divorces)</th>
<th>Widowed (divorced, then widowed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total (25)</td>
<td>4 (16%)</td>
<td>9 (36%)</td>
<td>5 (20%)</td>
<td>4 (16%)</td>
<td>1 (04%)</td>
<td>2 (08%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (17)</td>
<td>3 (18%)</td>
<td>4 (23%)</td>
<td>4 (23%)</td>
<td>4 (23%)</td>
<td>1 (06%)</td>
<td>1 (06%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (8)</td>
<td>1 (12%)</td>
<td>5 (62%)</td>
<td>1 (12%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 (12%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Does not add to 100%

9 Does not add to 100%

10 Does not add to 100%
Participants lived in various types of accommodation, including mobile homes, retirement villages, and government housing. The majority (60%) lived in their own home or unit (see Table 5.3).

**Table 5.3. Participants’ housing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Home or unit (25)</th>
<th>Mobile home (3)</th>
<th>Renting (2)</th>
<th>Government or legacy housing (4)</th>
<th>Retirement village (1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>15 (60%)</td>
<td>2 (08%)</td>
<td>4 (16%)</td>
<td>1 (04%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female (17)</strong></td>
<td>8 (47%)</td>
<td>2 (12%)</td>
<td>4 (23%)</td>
<td>1 (06%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male (8)</strong></td>
<td>7 (87%)</td>
<td>1 (13%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Seven participants immigrated to Australia as children or young adults. Of these, six participants migrated from the United Kingdom and one from Southern Europe (see Table 5.4).

**Table 5.4. Participant immigration**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Migrated from UK as child (3)</th>
<th>Migrated from UK as adult (2)</th>
<th>Migrated from Southern Europe as child (1)</th>
<th>Total (7)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total (25)</strong></td>
<td>3 (12%)</td>
<td>3 (12%)</td>
<td>1 (04%)</td>
<td>7 (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female (17)</strong></td>
<td>1 (06%)</td>
<td>2 (12%)</td>
<td>1 (06%)</td>
<td>4 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male (8)</strong></td>
<td>2 (25%)</td>
<td>1 (13%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3 (37%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Twenty-two participants were retired at the time of the first interview, one female participant remained casually employed in a professional occupation, one male remained employed in management, and one male still operated his own small business. Seven had previously, or continued to work in a professional occupation,
seven in sales and service, and five owned a small business (see Table 5.5 for additional occupations).

Table 5.6 shows the demographics of the children\textsuperscript{11} in each family experiencing estrangement, and the status of family estrangement when I interviewed the participants. Twenty-five participants had a total of 74 children, including 44 male and 30 female children. Participants had experienced 47 estrangements from adult-children over their lifetime. Of these, 41 estrangements were current at the time of the first and second interview. These estrangements ranged from five months to 43 years duration at the first interview (with an average duration of 15.5 years). Twenty-two estrangements were from sons and 19 from daughters. Female participants had a total of 59 children and were estranged from 29 children (14 sons and 15 daughters). Male participants had a total of 28 children and were estranged from 17 children (10 sons and seven daughters)\textsuperscript{12}.

It should be noted some participants found it difficult to remember the exact length of time they had been estranged from a particular child if the child had come in and out of their life. Also the cyclical nature of estrangement meant some participants could not give accurate data about the length of previous estrangement and reconciliation periods. In these instances, information in Table 5.6 relates primarily to the status of the estrangement at the time of the first and second interview. Three of the female participants were reconciled with a total of five previously estranged children at the time of the first and second interviews. One male was reconciled with one previously estranged child at the time of the first and second interviews.

\textsuperscript{11} Note children refers to biological, adopted, and step-children.
\textsuperscript{12} Note these figures are greater than the total estrangements cited previously because husband and wife were counted separately in these calculations.
Table 5.5. Participants’ previous or current occupations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Professional</th>
<th>Small business owner</th>
<th>Clerical and administrative</th>
<th>Technical and trade</th>
<th>Sales, service workers</th>
<th>Homemaker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total (25)</td>
<td>1 (04%)</td>
<td>7 (28%)</td>
<td>5 (20%)</td>
<td>3 (12%)</td>
<td>1 (04%)</td>
<td>7 (28%)</td>
<td>1 (04%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (17)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6 (35%)</td>
<td>1 (06%)</td>
<td>3 (18%)</td>
<td>6 (35%)</td>
<td>1 (06%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (8)</td>
<td>1 (12%)</td>
<td>1 (12%)</td>
<td>4 (50%)</td>
<td>1 (12%)</td>
<td>1 (12%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13 Does not add to 100%
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s name or pseudonym</th>
<th>Number of children including male (M), female (F), adopted (*) and deceased (#)</th>
<th>Gender of currently estranged children (type of estrangement)</th>
<th>Length of current estrangement/s</th>
<th>Estrangements that have been resolved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female Participants</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>3 children (2M, 1F*)&lt;br&gt;2 estranged (1*)</td>
<td>Son (emotional)&lt;br&gt;Daughter* (emotional)</td>
<td>Son (18months)&lt;br&gt;Daughter* (19 years)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joyce</td>
<td>8 children (3M, 5F)&lt;br&gt;7 estranged</td>
<td>Sons x 3 (physical)&lt;br&gt;Daughter (emotional)&lt;br&gt;Daughters x 3 (physical)</td>
<td>7 children (approximately 27 years)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>2 children (1M, 1F)&lt;br&gt;1 estranged</td>
<td>Son (physical)</td>
<td>Son (7 years)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lois</td>
<td>5 children (5M)&lt;br&gt;1 estranged&lt;br&gt;3 reconciled</td>
<td>Son (physical)</td>
<td>Son (20 years)</td>
<td>Sons x 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trish</td>
<td>2 children (2M)&lt;br&gt;1 estranged</td>
<td>Son (emotional)</td>
<td>Son (18 years)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant's name or pseudonym</td>
<td>Number of children including male (M), female (F), adopted (*) and deceased (#)</td>
<td>Gender of currently estranged children (type of estrangement)</td>
<td>Length of current estrangement/s</td>
<td>Estrangements that have been resolved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Virginia                      | 6 children (2M, 4F)  
5 estranged                                                                 | Daughter x 4 (physical)  
Son (physical)                                         | Daughter (c. 43 years)  
Daughter (c. 30 years)  
Daughter (c. 25 years)  
Daughter (c. 25 years)  
Son (c. 30 years) | N/A                                                |
| Jean                          | 4 children (3M, 1F)  
1 estranged                                                                 | Son (physical)                                                  | Son (7 years)                        | N/A                                  |
| Elizabeth                     | 2 children (1M, 1F)  
1 estranged                                                                 | Son (physical)                                                  | Son (3 years )                        | N/A                                  |
| Shirley                       | 1 child (1M)  
1 reconciled                                                                 |                                                               | 1 son (estranged for 22 years and reconciled for 6 years) |                                      |
| Dianne                        | 4 children (1M*, 2M, 1F*)  
1 estranged                                                                 | Daughter* (physical)                                           | Daughter* (13 years)                | N/A                                  |
| Helen                         | 1 child (1M)  
1 estranged                                                                 | Son (emotional)                                                | Son (6 years or more)               | N/A                                  |
| Debra                         | 3 children (1M, 2F)  
1 estranged                                                                 | Daughter (physical)                                           | Daughter (5 months)                 | N/A                                  |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant's name or pseudonym</th>
<th>Number of children including male (M), female (F), adopted (*) and deceased (#)</th>
<th>Number of estranged or reconciled</th>
<th>Gender of currently estranged children (type of estrangement)</th>
<th>Length of current estrangement/s</th>
<th>Estrangements that have been resolved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yvonne</td>
<td>2 children (1F, 1F#)</td>
<td>1 estranged</td>
<td>Daughter# (cyclical-emotional and physical)</td>
<td>Daughter# (c.29 years of estrangement before the daughter died)</td>
<td>Daughter (reconciled for 3 years after a 28 year emotional estrangement).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janelle</td>
<td>3 children (2M, 1F)</td>
<td>1 estranged</td>
<td>Son (physical)</td>
<td>Son (6 years)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male Participants</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronald</td>
<td>3 children (1M, 2F)</td>
<td>2 estranged</td>
<td>Daughter x 2 (physical)</td>
<td>Daughter (18 years)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>3 children (2M, 1F)</td>
<td>2 estranged</td>
<td>Son (physical)</td>
<td>Son (8 years)</td>
<td>Daughter (reconciled for 18 years after 10 year estrangement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 reconciled</td>
<td>Son (physical estrangement with brief periods of reconciliation)</td>
<td>Son (26 years)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>3 children (3M)</td>
<td>3 estranged</td>
<td>Son (emotional then physical)</td>
<td>Son (5 years and 2 years)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Son x 2 (physical)</td>
<td>Son (7 years)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gary</td>
<td>3 children (2M, 1F)</td>
<td>3 estranged</td>
<td>Daughter (physical)</td>
<td>Daughter (26 years)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Son x 2 (physical)</td>
<td>Son (26 years)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

135
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant's name or pseudonym</th>
<th>Number of children including male (M), female (F), adopted (*) and deceased (#)</th>
<th>Gender of currently estranged children (type of estrangement)</th>
<th>Length of current estrangement/s</th>
<th>Estrangements that have been resolved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>3 children (1M, 2F) 2 estranged</td>
<td>Daughter (cyclical) Daughter (physical)</td>
<td>Daughter (20 years, reconciled 3 years, then estranged 18 months) Daughter (3 years)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couples</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol and Steven</td>
<td>2 children (1M, 1F) 1 estranged</td>
<td>Son (emotional)</td>
<td>Son (9 years)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marguerite</td>
<td>3 children (2M, 1F) 1 estranged</td>
<td>Son (physical)</td>
<td>Son (5 years)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>3 Children (1M, 2F) 1 estranged</td>
<td>Daughter (physical)</td>
<td>Daughter (17 years)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frances</td>
<td>2 children (1M, 1F) 2 estranged</td>
<td>Son (physical)</td>
<td>Son (6 years)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis</td>
<td>3 children (3M) 0 estranged</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection

I invited potential participants to participate in three research processes: an initial in-depth interview; use of a diary; and a follow-up interview. I required participants to complete the initial interview to become part of the study, but they could choose whether to use the diary or participate in the follow-up interview. Of the 25 participants who returned consent forms, 16 initially agreed to use the diary and 23 agreed to a second interview. I asked the participants whether they would like to be interviewed in their home, at the University of Newcastle, or at a mutually suitable location.

In-depth Semi-structured Interview 1

I conducted interviews with 23 primary participants between March and July 2009. Additionally, the partners of three participants contributed to the study on the day of the first interview and subsequently gave consent to use this data and participate in a second interview. One participant decided to withdraw from the study after reading the transcript of her first interview, stating she was too unwell to edit the transcript to her satisfaction or to continue in the study. Therefore, I included data from 22 initial interviews with 25 participants. The initial interview lasted from between 50 minutes to two hours. I interviewed 19 participants in their homes, five at the University of Newcastle, and one in a coffee shop. I recorded each interview using a digital recorder.

After an initial conversation with the participant, I reiterated the principles of informed consent and confidentiality, explained the research process (e.g., recording, transcription, the use of pseudonyms, and analysis), and asked whether the participant had any questions. I then commenced the interview with a grand-tour question, such
as ‘could you start by telling me a little about you and your family’. During the first two interviews, I tried to use the semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix E) to ask further questions, but I soon realised participants needed to guide the interview in order to place the estrangement story in its socio-historical context. I rarely asked more than clarifying and probing questions after the first few interviews, and the interviews after this time provided much richer data. While several participants had extremely poor health and two had terminal illnesses, no-one wanted to stop the interview, even when I asked if they would like to stop and I reminded them I would be returning for a second interview.

I incorporated the practice of drawing genograms in most interviews. A pictorial description of the family aided my understanding of the family story, particularly when the story was complex. Sometimes this assisted me to listen more carefully to the ‘estrangement experience’ story because I was not struggling to remember ‘who fitted where’ in the family tree. On a few occasions, the genogram was a good way of continuing the interview when a participant was emotionally overwhelmed by the subject matter. It gave them space to take a break and then start again. Genograms also helped me to understand or record the patterns of estrangement between members of the family other than the older person and adult-child or children. Many participants showed me photographs of their family and or the estranged adult-child or children so I would know about whom they were speaking.

In terms of self-disclosure, I quickly learned disclosing I am a parent was important to almost all participants and helped to build rapport. Many said they were relieved to hear I was not just a ‘career woman’ who wouldn’t understand what they were going through. Some felt distrustful of ‘academics’ and wanted to know whether
the study was going to achieve anything or merely be a waste of tax payers’ money. All participants seemed happy with my explanations of the study and its purpose. Only two participants asked whether I had personally experienced family estrangement, and I replied with something like, “Yes, I have some idea what it is like. I don’t think there are many families who do not have some such experience”. One participant smiled and commented “I thought you must” and the other said, “Well you’d have to have some idea to be doing something like this”. Neither asked me for further details and both seemed satisfied with this response.

After completing each interview, I recorded field notes about the context, mood, non-verbal cues, and key themes or highlights in my journal. A few weeks after this, I listened to the media (or audio) file and edited it for irrelevant information. At the same time, I collected and collated demographic information and reflections on emerging themes. The media file was sent to a transcription service and the interview was transcribed verbatim to preserve meaning. After the transcripts were returned, I sent them to each participant. I asked participants to review the transcript and make any amendments or removals before the transcript was released as part of the data for analysis. Eighteen participants (including the three couples) returned their transcripts with minor or no amendments. Identifiers were removed at this stage and transcripts entered into NVivo for analysis.

**In-depth Semi-structured Interview 2**

Twenty-three people consented to participate in the second interview. These were all held at the original locations, except for one participant who was interviewed by phone instead of at home. At the second interview, I used a two-page summary as a prompt to discuss the preliminary findings with each participant. I asked participants
to comment on the findings, ask questions, and make additions and suggestions throughout the discussion. Additionally, I used this interview to ask for demographic information I might have missed during the first interview, or clarify anything puzzling me during the preliminary data analysis. Each of the second interviews included questions about the meaning of family and the ideal family, because this was a theme I believed warranted further exploration. The second interview lasted from between 40 minutes to just over two hours. The media (or audio) files were again sent to a transcription service and the interview was transcribed verbatim to preserve meaning. After the transcripts were returned, I removed all identifiers and sent the transcripts to the nine participants who had requested a copy. Three returned their transcript with minor amendments.

**Diaries and Journal**

The research design included participant and researcher journals, so I refer to different terms throughout this report to minimise confusion. I refer to the participant’s document as a *free-text diary* or *diary* and my document as the *researcher’s journal* or *journal*.

**Free-text diary**

When participants initially consented to participating in the research, 16 agreed to keep a diary. After the first interview, I issued diaries to participants who wished to use them, with the following instructions:

> There is no ‘right’ way to use the diary, you might want to write down any additional thoughts you have after the interview, to document the changing nature of the estrangement, or your responses to it.
I reiterated the voluntary nature of this part of the research. Most participants stated they did not feel they would write in the journal, or had anything else to write in the journal after they had completed the interview. However, some who had previously used writing or journals to tell their stories, or to reflect on their lives, appeared very keen to use the diary over the six-month period.

The diary also became more than a data collection method. I wanted the diary to represent my gratitude for the stories shared with me, so I bought varied and beautiful diaries and put them in gift bags with a note of thanks to each of the participants. I also wanted the diaries to act as a symbol of self-care, so each gift bag contained my business card and a sheet reminding each participant about agencies where they could seek additional support or counselling should they require it. I gave a diary to each participant, regardless of his or her intention to use it. All participants accepted them.

I gathered three diaries at the second interview, photocopied them and then returned them to the participants. While only three participants used the diary I had given them, giving the diary seemed to promote the idea that participants could offer more than the spoken word to help me understand the estrangement experience. Five participants offered additional information in a different written form, including a poem, quotations, newspaper clippings, and letters or notes given at the time of the interviews, or mailed or emailed to me at the University. Each participant gave verbal permission to use these sources as a part of the data to be analysed, so their contributions are also referred to as ‘diary entries’ when used in Chapter 6.
**Researcher’s journal**

I also used a journal throughout the research process. In qualitative research, the researcher does not take the stance of a detached or objective observer (Malterud, 2001). The impact of the researcher’s background, assumptions, and presence is countered by a commitment to reflexive practice: “Reflexivity is a process that challenges the researcher to explicitly examine how his or her research agenda and assumptions, subject location(s), personal beliefs, and emotions enter into their research” (Hsiung, 2008, p. 212). My supervisors encouraged me to start a journal when I first began to formulate the research questions. At this time, I wrote down everything I ‘knew’ or had learnt about estrangement. I had effectively started to document the biases and assumptions I brought to the study. I continued to use the journal throughout the research process. I used it to record observations of participants and their surroundings during interviews, to document and process my thoughts about the data being collected in these interviews and, later, to record connections I made between the interviews. During the data analysis phase, I used the journal to document my theoretical musings, decision-making processes, and decisions. It had separate sections allocated for reflections, field notes, and methodological decisions.

**Data Analysis**

As stated previously, phenomenology has been used to inform an array of methods and guides for data analysis, so it was important for me to review a number for suitability and application. After this process, I chose and adapted an interpretive phenomenological framework to guide the data analysis. I developed this framework from Smith, Flowers, and Larkin’s (2009) guidelines for *interpretative phenomenological analysis* and incorporated some of van Manen’s (1990) suggestions
for hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry. Smith et al. (2009) offer clear and flexible steps in analysing data but their method is aimed primarily at small sample sizes. Hence some adaptation was necessary and extra steps were added as documented below. Additionally, van Manen’s (1990; 2002) texts added another dimension or depth to the underlying ‘thinking’ and ‘writing’ processes associated with hermeneutic phenomenology and this was essential to guiding and challenging my thoughts and analysis throughout this process. This was particularly so in relation to the importance of writing (and rewriting) as a significant element of data analysis.

I entered all the transcripts (or text files) into a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software package, NVivo. Media (or audio) files were also retained so I could return to the recordings for a nuanced verification or clarification of content or meaning. Thereafter, I completed the following eight steps to analyse the data. It should be noted that coding data is multi-directional and the following steps, while depicted as linear, are merely a representation of the reading, noting, coding, and analysing process. In actuality, the process moved back and forth from ‘the particular to the shared’, ‘the descriptive to the interpretive’, and between the participant’s focus and my own meaning making (Smith et al., 2009).

**Step 1: Prereading**

I listened to the media files, extracted all demographic information, and recorded this in an Excel spreadsheet. I also recorded additional recollections or notes about the interview in my diary. Smith et al. (2009) suggest that removing (or recording) demographic details reduces the ‘noise’ associated with complex manuscripts and helps the researcher focus on the thematic data later in the analysis.
**Step 2: Reading**

After the prereading, I conducted an initial thematic analysis by quickly reading the 25 transcripts – a process sometimes described as ‘quick and dirty’. I did this to give myself an overall picture of the interviews and to make notes about possible initial themes. It also assisted me to make a decision about the most appropriate transcripts to include in the first stage of detailed analysis. Due to the large number of transcripts, I decided to take four transcripts for the next stage of analysis: two typical cases and two atypical cases. I read each of the four transcripts without comment or notation before moving to Step 3. I did this in an attempt to ‘slow down’ the process, immerse myself in the data, and make each individual participant (or transcript) the focus of analysis.

**Step 3: Rereading and Noting**

I reread each of the four transcripts line by line. I used the annotation function in NVivo to make notes about the emergent themes and write questions about links between themes or areas of overlap. This time-consuming process, sometimes called *free textual analysis*, allowed me to examine content and language at an exploratory level. I used the ‘free nodes’ area in NVivo to record the notes and *a priori* themes.

I then wrote all the themes into a list and tried to collapse them, or arrange them in the most usable order for coding in NVivo. During this process, I realised the way I had conceptualised the themes from the four transcripts was quite confusing because certain themes had different meanings at different stages of the estrangement. For example, collapsing all the references to ‘loss’ into one theme was not conducive to understanding all the different meanings a person might attribute to ‘loss’ over time. So a participant’s story might include numerous references to losses before the
estrangement (e.g., domestic violence and divorce) and suggest these contributed to the estrangement. They might refer to the actual estrangement as a ‘devastating loss’, and later talk about ways they had dealt with feelings of loss over time. They might also talk about imminent loss, or death. I felt it was important to code all themes at different stages of the estrangement to see whether there were patterns at each stage and then to bring all the themes of loss together later for additional analysis. So a developmental approach was taken to consider the participant and their family before the estrangement, its perceived cause, its after effects, and the longer term outcomes. At this stage, I established preliminary codes as ‘tree nodes’ in NVivo.

*Step 4: Developing Emergent Themes*

This stage of analysis involved coding the remaining transcripts in relation to the preliminary codes I had established in NVivo. I also made notes (or annotations) about possible connections between themes, additional themes, or possible amendments to be read after this process. I finalised this process by recoding the four original transcripts for consistency. During this phase, I read (and coded) descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual words and phrases (Smith et al., 2009). On the first reading, the descriptive or phenomenological elements were most evident, and it was important to code the events and experiences participants described in relation to the estrangement. Secondly, it was important to code the linguistic elements or specific language participants used to describe this experience, such as the use of very violent language to describe the pain associated with estrangement. Finally, I coded (and noted) these descriptions either conceptually or interpretively. At this stage, I moved back and forth between the participants’ descriptions and explanations, and my own pre-understandings, professional understandings, and socio-historical knowledge.
Conceptual coding included the identification and recording of concepts like gender, isolation, and powerlessness.

After I had reread each code for consistency, some more appropriate titles and themes emerged. For example, it became obvious that questioning and a search for meaning were evident across many of the developmental themes. Participants often questioned why this had happened and what it meant. I developed a theme called the search for meaning and some of the previous themes fitted well within this, for example, a series of events and questioning the past. I renamed the aftermath code the push and pull of estrangement code because of the words, feelings, and behaviours evident in this code on rereading, and the strategies for survival code was renamed learning to live with estrangement.

**Step 5: Searching for Connections across Emergent Themes**

I commenced this process during the rereading process mentioned above, but refined it through writing and rewriting the themes emerging from the NVivo codes. Van Manen’s (1990; 2002) work critiques contemporary research activity for minimising and underestimating the importance of writing as part of the data analysis phase, not simply an activity completed after analysis. He suggested human research was a linguistic project, writing creates an important space for reflection, and the written word demonstrates the measure of one’s thoughtfulness (van Manen, 1990). I formalised the search for connection across emergent themes in a significant period of writing the ‘findings’ into a preliminary ‘findings’ document.

During this period, I illuminated connections and gained further clarity in relation to the titles of the codes. For example, it became obvious to me the code
about family was intricately linked to a participant’s search for meaning. Participants were exploring and talking about their family histories as evidence about their previous difficulties, and sometimes as an explanation or questioning about the contribution their family history might have made to the estrangement. Clear sub-codes emerged, e.g., *pulled towards, reaching out,* and *the effects of the ‘tug-of-war’* emerged from the primary code named *the push and pull of estrangement.*

**Step 6: Additional Insights**

In this step, I prepared a summary from the preliminary findings document to discuss with the participants at the second interview. I also documented a series of questions or areas for further exploration emerging from the data. I used the summary and the questions in the second interview with participants. At this stage of analysis, I also discussed the findings with my supervisors and employed an auditor to offer different perspectives to the analysis. The auditor confirmed an audit trail and reviewed my existing data and codes. She coded sample transcripts and cross-checked these with my coding. She confirmed much of my coding and offered additional insights into the nature of the two themes and their persistence over time: *the push and pull of estrangement* and *learning to live with estrangement.*

**Step 7: Adding and Coding New Data**

I entered the transcripts of the second interviews and diary entries into NVivo. I read and coded as described in Step 4. No new themes emerged during this process and I coded the transcripts according to the existing themes. At this stage, I also reread my diary notes to see if there were any additional data I would need to include from notes I had made throughout the data collection and analysis processes.
Step 8: Rewriting

During this step, I reread the codes (or themes) with information added during Step 7 and developed new understandings, which I incorporated through the process of writing (and rewriting) the final findings chapter for this thesis.

Trustworthiness (or Validity) of Findings

In 1985 Lincoln and Guba developed what has now become a widely acknowledged standard for appraising qualitative studies. They argued that qualitative research, based on unique ontological and epistemological assumptions, could not be judged by conventional quantitative standards. Their concept of trustworthiness became a replacement for the concept of validity used in quantitative research. It comprised four criteria correlating broadly with conventional criteria for judging the soundness of a study’s methodology but which differed in the way in which they were defined and could be met. Hence the new concepts became translations of traditionally accepted criteria as follows: Credibility related to internal validity; transferability to external validity; dependability to external reliability; and confirmability to internal reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility

Credibility requires the researcher to “establish confidence in the ‘truth’ of the findings” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290), particularly from the perspective of the participants and the consumers of the research findings. Demonstrating credibility requires the researcher to show she has employed sound research practices to represent multiple constructions accurately and findings have been approved or validated by the research participants. In this study, I incorporated techniques of extended engagement, debriefing, and member checking to increase credibility.
Member checking occurs when research participants are asked to verify and amend the interpretations and conclusions made from the data by the researcher.

While credibility is often ensured by prolonged engagement in the ethnographic sense, this was not possible with this group of participants. However, I would define the engagement with this group as extended, as it involved two in-depth interviews, a diary component, phone calls, letters, and meetings about transcripts stretching over a 12-month period. Extended engagement increased my capacity to learn about the participants, build trust, and check the information being given to me. Rather than peer debriefing, I engaged in debriefing with my supervisors to examine biases and interpretations throughout the study (also see audit process below). I used member checking informally throughout the research process and formalised this practice in the second interview when I presented preliminary findings to each of the participants for comment and revision.

**Transferability**

*Transferability* refers to the degree to which research findings can be applied to another context. In qualitative studies, where the concepts of representativeness and generalisability are not applied, transferability depends on the “similarity between sending and receiving contexts” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 297). The onus is on the researcher to provide thick description of the research conditions and process so the audience can make decisions about transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I addressed transferability through the careful and detailed documentation of the participant sample and the research design, methods, and processes I employed in the study. I have documented this contextual data clearly throughout the thesis (and will
do so in future publications) so others might assess the transferability of findings to their own research or practice context.

**Dependability**

*Dependability* refers to “whether the findings of an inquiry would be repeated if the inquiry were replicated with the same (or similar) subjects . . . in the same (or similar) context” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). It is typically related to the reliability of information given to enable a close-enough replication of the study (bearing in mind the inherently contextual nature of qualitative research). I addressed dependability through the recording and cataloguing of raw data and the clear documentation of the research and decision-making process. This was assisted by the use of a researcher journal to record information about research design and of NVivo to map and record the processes involved in coding and analysing the data. I engaged an auditor to survey the raw data (media files and transcripts), journal (reflections, methodological decisions, and field notes), and data analysis records to ensure an audit trail was available.

**Confirmability**

*Confirmability* refers to “the degree to which the findings of an inquiry are determined by the subjects . . . and conditions of the inquiry and not the biases, motivations, interests, or perspectives of the inquirer” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). I addressed confirmability through my researcher’s journal, debriefing with supervisors, member checking, and the audit trail. I transcribed the interviews verbatim to retain the original wording, and during the data analysis phase I referred back to the media files when I felt unsure of the meanings attributed to these words. In addition to confirming an audit trail, I asked the auditor to check the reliability of coding and analytic
decision-making. The auditor coded sample transcripts and these were cross-checked with my coding. The auditor wrote a short report about her findings and I incorporated some of these ideas into the later stages of data analysis.

**Ethical Considerations**

I was granted ethics clearance for this research project from the *University of Newcastle Ethics Committee* on December 11\(^{th}\) 2008 (Approval number H-2008-0323), and occupational health and safety clearance was subsequently approved. However, Cowles (1988) says ethics in social work research should be more than a simple adherence to the regulatory standards under which researchers operate. In this spirit, I was also guided by the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council, & Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee, 2007), the *AASW Code of Ethics* (Australian Association of Social Work, 1999), and literature pertaining to the ethics of researching vulnerable populations and sensitive topics (Booth & Booth, 1994; Cowles, 1988; Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2008; Dickson-Swift, James, & Liamputtong, 2008; Lee & Renzetti, 1993). Ethical issues included ensuring voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity, validation and communication of findings, and minimising the risk of harm to participants.

**Vulnerability and Sensitive Topics**

Defining and characterising older people and making assessments about the potential nature and impact of estrangement raised concern about the vulnerability of this population. First, the socially-defined category called *older people* encompasses a diverse population in terms of age, income, health status, and employment (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2005). Some people placed in this category may not view themselves as *old*
(Grenier, 2007) and some may be quite privileged across the aforementioned domains. However, the older people become, the more likely they are to experience loss, including the death of friends and relatives, and illness associated with ageing (Wenger, 2002).

Researchers (and ethics committees) define vulnerability in a variety of ways, but generally, it is a way of identifying groups who may be at greater risk of harm (and require greater protection) from the research process (Purdy in Kavanaugh, Moro, & Mehendale, 2006). Some researchers suggest older people are a vulnerable group because they “are demographically situated within a marginalized . . . population” (Gledhill, Abbey, & Schweitzer, 2008). So while I anticipated this group of participants might be considered vulnerable due to their marginalised position in society and likelihood of experiencing losses, I was fully aware also of the diverse and individual nature of such experiences.

Participants may also be considered vulnerable as a result of the sensitive nature of the research issue being explored (Kavanaugh et al., 2006). Again, sensitive research was variously defined, but it generally included research about topics which arouse and unleash deep emotions and painful memories of a deeply personal nature situated in the private sphere (Dickson-Swift, James, & Liamputtong, 2008; Kavanaugh et al., 2006). I anticipated the nature of family estrangement would evoke vulnerability in some participants and many participants would view the estrangement from their adult-child or children (and maybe grandchildren) as a significant loss. I anticipated this loss would be entwined and infused with their ideals about parenting and families.
There have been debates about the ethics of younger people researching the older population (Grenier, 2007) and also about the ethics of researching vulnerable populations (Dickson-Swift, James, & Liamputtong, 2008). However, most commentators appeared to take the stance that it was irresponsible to avoid research into sensitive topics, particularly when they were issues of social and political importance (Dickson-Swift, James, & Liamputtong, 2008). A number of studies showed that participants from vulnerable populations experience benefits from a well-conducted research process (see for example Lowes & Gill, 2006; McCoyd & Shdaimah, 2007; Peel, Parry, Douglas, & Lawton, 2006; Sque, 2000). Some suggested generational differences between researcher and participants can encourage curiosity and a ‘fresh perspective’ (Grenier, 2007). Additionally, Russell warned being too highly sensitised to preconceived ideas of age and vulnerability might alter the way one researches the population, and negate the power of the participants. From the literature, I anticipated older people experiencing estrangement from an adult-child or children would be a diverse group and there might be a number of individual and potentially collective vulnerabilities which I should account for in the research design.

**Voluntary Participation**

In the social science literature, participants are viewed as vulnerable when they have limitations on their autonomy or voluntariness (Levine, 2004; Rogers, 2005). Wenger (2002) suggested the losses associated with ageing might affect a participant’s autonomy and voluntariness, thus increasing vulnerability to exploitation by the researcher and the research process. In this study I ensured voluntary participation through the general distribution of invitations to participate in the research, which I
considered the least intrusive and coercive method available. I did not approach potential participants or contact them directly nor were they approached by any other party or offered payment for participation. Participants were self-selecting since they needed to phone me to become part of the study. This allowed me to spend time with the respondent to make a collaborative decision about the suitability of their participation. This approach was consistent with findings from a recent study that showed taking time in the initial assessment, giving information verbally, and encouraging participants to ask questions made a considerable difference to the participant’s understanding of the research and ensured the ability to give informed consent (Wade, Donovan, Lane, Neal, & Hamdy, 2009).

I ensured voluntary participation throughout the research process by providing verbal and written statements (supplied in initial information packages and reiterated during interviews and in letters accompanying transcripts). I told participants they could withdraw from the study at any time and that their participation in any aspect of the research was voluntary.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity**

I addressed confidentiality and anonymity through the careful handling of all participant files (consent forms, media files, transcripts, and diaries). After participants had approved the transcripts from their interview and consented to the photocopying of their diaries, I removed all identifiers and inserted pseudonyms. I kept a master list of participant codes and pseudonyms separately from the data and consent forms. During the active phase of the research, I held consent forms and hard copies of data on the premises of the University of Newcastle, secured in a locked filing cabinet in my office. I also secured the master list of participant codes in my
office, but in a separate locked filing cabinet. Only the project supervisors and I had access to these records. I identified electronic files by the participant’s code number and password protected and stored data on a secure network.

On completion of the research, I transferred these forms and data to the administrative office of the School of Humanities and Social Science, where they will remain secured for a period of five years beyond final publication. After the period of five years, I will delete all electronic records, hard copies of data, and shred consent forms using the University’s secure documents removal service.

**Validation and Communication of Findings**

I mailed two copies of the verbatim transcripts of their first and second interview to participants who consented for comment and revision and provided a reply-paid envelope so they could return one of the transcripts with amendments. I entered the revised transcripts into NVivo. Additionally, I gave each participant a copy of the preliminary findings from the first interview so that they could comment on their credibility. Where participants participated in a second interview, I supplied and discussed the findings at this interview. I mailed a summary of the final results to participants who did not agree to a second interview. I presented the findings at relevant conferences.

**Minimising Risk of Harm to Participants**

I minimised risk of harm through the following processes:

1. *Recruitment materials:* These stressed family estrangement was a common experience, in order to normalise the experience for potential participants.
2. Screening interview: I conducted the initial participant screening interview when the participant phoned to become a part of the study. I am a qualified social worker, with experience in youth crisis and family counselling work, and previously registered as an AASW Mental Health Provider. This experience guided my initial screening, and I warned participants with high-risk factors about the extenuating risks and encouraged them not to continue participation in the study. I anticipated if high risk factors were evident, such as recent estrangement and unstable mental health, I would refer respondents to appropriate human service agencies, but this did not eventuate.

3. Warnings on participation: I gave participants warnings about the potential negative effects of participation in the research at the time of the screening interview, in the information packages, and verbally throughout the study.

4. Referral services: I provided general information about counselling services to participants in the information package and supplied another copy at the time of the in-depth interviews. I was prepared to make a referral to a free counselling service for any participant who appeared distressed before, during, or after the interviews, but this was unnecessary.

5. Complaint procedure: I supplied procedures for complaints in the initial information package, including the contact details for the project supervisors and the University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Officer.

6. Data collection methods: I considered in-depth interviews and diaries to be appropriate methods of data collection for minimising risk of harm for this population. Face-to-face interviews are quite often cited as a suitable way to investigate sensitive issues with vulnerable populations (Johnson, 2002; Low, 2007; Zayas, 2009). Some studies suggest the in-depth interview provides
potential benefits to participants from vulnerable populations, such as an empathic, interested, and non-judgemental listener, receiving validation of one’s story, and providing a sense of commonality of experience between participants (Lowes & Gill, 2006; McCoyd & Shdaimah, 2007). The interview is ideal when interviewing people who have health concerns, because the interview is flexible in terms of timing and pace (Low, 2007). This method can be empowering for vulnerable populations if the interview is primarily participant led, and it allows the researcher to seek ongoing consent (Low, 2007).

7. **Written accounts:** People often process the issues in their lives through storytelling in both spoken and written forms. I presumed some participants might be more comfortable with the written form of storytelling, due to their familiarity with letter-writing, keeping a journal, and writing stories, so I incorporated a free-text diary into the research design. I thought this form of storytelling might provide some participants the comfort of formulating their thoughts and ideas before committing to them, and for others it might open up a free flow of ideas. I also surmised there would be difficult issues too hard to speak about, which might be more readily captured in the diary. Vannier and O’Sullivan (2008) suggested diary methods might “reduce participant reactivity” and “provide some degree of physical and psychological distance” (p. 184) from the topic. Additionally, some participants, particularly those without support networks, might feel a sense of loss when the interview was over (Wenger, 2002). My sense was the diary might be an outlet for some participants after the interview. I anticipated some participants would not be able to tell the entire story in 90 minutes, so they would use the diary as an aid.
to add additional thoughts and ideas after the initial interview period. My previous experience of presenting on this topic at conferences led me to believe some participants might not have spoken to anyone about this before and would need more than the allocated time to tell their stories. Wenger (2002) suggested it might be difficult to end an interview with some older people experiencing loneliness. The diary seemed like an appropriate method of ensuring respectful closure and allowing people to tell their story in its entirety.

8. **Strengths focus and questions:** Throughout the research, I became increasingly aware of the strengths and capacities participants exhibited in keeping themselves safe from harm, e.g., inviting a friend to phone them after the interview to debrief. Initially, I used strengths questions to determine the participants’ ‘true understanding’ of the research, and also to determine ‘competence’ in giving consent, e.g., asking participants what benefits and challenges the interview might pose. Over time, I became more attuned to consent and safety as ongoing processes rather one-off procedures and increasingly incorporated strengths questions to recognise and acknowledge participant strengths and to facilitate these strengths in the ongoing assessment of risk and reduction of harm.

**Potential Benefits of the Study to Participants and Others**

Family estrangement may be a socially undesirable condition preventing individuals from talking about the experience of being cut off from a family member. While this research process was grounded in social work values, good social work research should not substitute for, or aim to be, social work intervention or a therapeutic exercise (Padgett, 1998). However, the by-products of research may be therapeutically
beneficial, and participants might have benefited from the research process in some of the following ways:

1. The research might have been beneficial for participants who did not have anyone to confide in about their experience. Social workers perceive actually ‘being with’ someone when they are experiencing a new or difficult phenomenon can be beneficial. ‘Being with’ did not require me to ‘give advice’, but simply to listen and remain attentive while the participants told their story.

2. Specialists in the area of family breakdown suggest the first step in learning to live peacefully with family estrangement requires gaining new insight into the nature, causes, and patterns of the particular estrangement (Hargrave, 1994; Sichel, 2004). Participants might have illuminated new and different insights into the estrangement experience by participating in the interviews and or writing a diary.

3. The research might have been of indirect benefit to participants because it acknowledged an experience often overlooked or stigmatised in the social arena. Illuminating common, but negatively perceived experiences can be helpful for individuals. By advertising and conducting the study, I drew public attention to the idea of estrangement as a common occurrence and experience and possibly an inevitable part of family life. Some of the radio programs I spoke on had a talk-back component after my segment. I also hope that the knowledge gained from this project might be helpful to human service workers who come into contact with individuals who are estranged from their family
members in later life, and to policy makers and service providers concerned about the ageing population.

4. I considered the development of further understanding of a common and little-understood phenomenon in professional circles, where it tended to be pathologised with labels like *dysfunctional* and *broken families* being attached to an experience occurring in most types of relationships, to be a worthwhile endeavour possibly producing benefits in the long term.

**Limitations of the Study**

While I took maximum care to minimise the limitations of the study through the research design, there were a number of limitations to acknowledge and note. While theoretical saturation was reached in terms of the experience of family estrangement, more participants might have led to a fuller understanding of the complex dynamics of family estrangement. The recruitment strategy might have been limited in terms of the people it attracted: a predominantly monocultural sample of Anglo-Saxon adults. This might have been due to the advertising only being directed at the mainstream media, and not multicultural outlets. It was drawn to my attention that the recruitment strategy might only attract complainants or people who were bored or who wished to get something off their chest, or who hoped to have a pseudo-counselling session. However, these suspicions were unwarranted. Most of the phone contacts were from potential participants who were genuinely interested in being part of the study to advance knowledge in this area.

The consent and interview requirements might have also prevented some people from becoming participants. On two occasions, women phoned me while their partners were out of the house and asked to do the interview immediately. While I
tried to make arrangements for these women to meet me, or to phone back at another
time, neither pursued my invitations. Additionally, the information pack (containing
all the requirements of the University of Newcastle Ethics Committee) might have
been daunting for some older participants or those with limited literacy. By choosing
an in-depth interview, I might have minimised the response of people who felt
particularly stressed or overwhelmed by the estrangement experience at that particular
time.

Another limitation I expected to encounter, but which did not eventuate, was
my insider status and age: “Insights from anthropology suggest that one’s position
within or outside the defined boundary will impact the interview process and
outcome” (Grenier, 2007, p. 716). I did not want my ‘insider’ position (i.e., personal
experience with family estrangement) or my theoretical understandings of
estrangement to influence the participants’ stories. My age, a similar age to most of
the participant’s estranged children, had the potential to place me in the position of
someone who could give answers about the reasons for estrangement. While neither
of these situations occurred during the research, it was difficult to know whether my
age had a self-censoring effect for some participants.

Additionally, the secrecy surrounding estrangement conversations in some
families might have caused censoring in some instances. While one woman told me
she came into the University for the interview because she was not able to speak about
the issue in front of her husband, most women chose to hold the interview in their
homes. On two occasions, the interview was interrupted by men entering the room or
hovering close by. Some women whispered when they mentioned certain aspects of
the estrangement. As data was collected retrospectively, it was subject to participants’
lapses of memory and pro-social reporting of personal choices and actions. The emotional content of the subject matter might have positively or negatively influenced the intensity of reports about the experience or clarity about events occurring in the past.

A final limitation might be the younger generation, or the estranged adult-children, were not interviewed for this research, and thus one side of the story is missing. However, the decision to remain focused on one generation was taken to gather rich data, which might not have been possible if two generations had been studied. I decided it was better to illuminate the lived experience of one group well, and hoped I would be able to study the younger group in the future. Hence this study did not attempt to establish the veracity of the information provided but rather sought to gain an understanding of the lived experience of estrangement in later life.

Conclusion

The area of family estrangement was found to be poorly conceptualised and the lived experience of estrangement had not been examined empirically. In response, I employed a qualitative research methodology, comprising two in-depth interviews and diary entries to capture the lived experiences of older people who were experiencing, or had experienced, an estrangement from an adult-child. Twenty-five participants offered rich and complex data for analysis using NViVo software. The phenomenological findings from this analysis are discussed in Chapter 6.
CHAPTER 6

Findings

Chapter 6 documents the findings from 42 in-depth interviews and eight diary entries. In keeping with phenomenological analysis, the findings approximate the lived experiences of the participants as closely as possible. Two primary themes (or participants’ experiences) were uncovered during the data analysis, as shown in Figure 6.1: *the push and pull of estrangement* and *a search for meaning*. These two themes paralleled and often transcended two secondary themes: *the estrangement is realised* and *learning to live with estrangement*. While the secondary themes could be perceived as primarily chronological, it would be remiss to document theses stages as linear. It appears that participants continued to oscillate between – or move in and out of – the period when the estrangement was realised and learning to live with estrangement. Over time, they tended to spend more time living with estrangement, but the push and pull of estrangement never fully subsided. Sometimes they described events that were like realising the estrangement for the first time.

*Figure 6.1: Primary themes*
This chapter begins with a discussion about the ways in which the estrangement was realised and became evident, followed by a description of the ‘push and pull’ factors illuminating this reality and defining this experience. It describes the ways in which participants learnt to reposition their lives or live with estrangement over time. Finally, it examines the search for meaning inherent in the estrangement experience after it was realised and as participants learnt to live with it, and concludes with some findings about reconciliation.

**The Push and Pull of Estrangement**

In this study, participants described a number of factors ‘pushing and pulling’ their emotions, actions, and lifestyles across time. While these effects lessened and triggers for pain became less frequent, they never fully dissipated. When participants first realised they had been estranged, they often felt they had been ‘cast out’ or pushed away from the adult-child and their family. However, the majority remained emotionally ‘drawn’ or pulled towards the child. In the early stages of the estrangement, most participants continued reaching out to their child. Over time, there continued to be events and triggers offering hope and pulling participants towards the child, but the majority continued to be pushed away. This tension or back and forth of emotions, and particularly the emotional persistence required to remain open to the relationship, was exhausting for many participants.

**The Estrangement is Realised**

The participants in this study all said the adult-child initiated the estrangement by rejecting them in some way. They experienced this as being ‘pushed away’ by the child.

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14 The words *adult-child* and *child* are used interchangeably throughout this chapter.
The first ‘push’ of estrangement became evident in one of four ways:

1. The adult-child or his spouse\(^{15}\) contacted the participant, by phone, letter, or face-to-face, and told them they did not wish to have further contact. This was most commonly an unexpected event, unrelated to overt conflict, and the parent was accused of wrongdoing. For example, Trish found out about the estrangement when she received a letter from her son:

   He had sent me a letter to say I was a big disappointment, I embarrassed him at his wedding . . . and he said *I’ve got a family now* – this bit hurts – *have a good life* (Trish - interview 1).

2. The adult-child stopped contact without explanation, usually after an event, e.g., divorce or conflict. For example, Janelle said she had tried to discuss her daughter-in-law’s rudeness with her son:

   He just said, ‘Right come on kids, let’s go’, and picked up the kids, bundled them in the car and drove off, and that’s the last time I saw him and the kids (Janelle - interview 1).

3. The adult-child started to contact the participant less frequently or left all contact up to the participant. These children continued to meet with the parent, but the encounters became more and more uncomfortable for the parent, and intermittent. Carol said:

   The more it went on, the less they wanted to see of me . . . and I’d say, ‘Can we call in?’ And we’d call in, and it was sort of okay, you know, sort of – she was pretty cool (Carol - interview 1).

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\(^{15}\) In this study the spouse was always the participant’s daughter-in-law.
4. The estrangement was established in childhood or adolescence and continued into adulthood. For example, Virginia had not seen her daughter since she was 15 years old, for a period of over 40 years:

She just come home one day, walked through the house, took all her clothes, and said ‘I won’t be back’ and went, and I haven’t seen her since (Virginia - interview 1).

As highlighted above, two main types of estrangement were described. The first was a physical estrangement where the primary indication was lack of physical contact. This type of estrangement also precluded any emotional contact. The second was an emotional estrangement where the parties had sporadic contact with the adult-child. This contact was generally instigated by the participant and was described as uncomfortable and unsatisfactory. Sometimes an emotional estrangement led to a physical estrangement or vice versa.

Participants attributed three main reasons for estrangement:

1. The adult-child made a choice between the participant and someone or something else. They suggested this choice was commonly based on misinformation or inadequate information.

2. There was an inability to sustain an emotional connection due to disparate values and behaviours.

3. The adult-child punished the older person for a perceived wrongdoing. These reasons were not mutually exclusive. In fact, many of the estrangements described had elements common to more than one of these categories.
**Choice**

He has obviously chosen for whatever reason to do this and that’s what hurts I think, the choice (Marguerite - interview 1).

The participants said their adult-children made choices between the following: between their two parents when divorce occurred or when there was domestic violence in the relationship; between their parent and new spouse; between their parent and a particular lifestyle; and between their parent and their own child’s safety from sexual assault. It appeared to the participants that the adult-children felt they were unable to incorporate, integrate, or manage the tension between the different parties or lifestyles and they needed to make a choice between them. Joyce said her teenage children were pressured to make a choice after she finally alerted the police to her husband’s domestic violence:

> Then it was really open war. The lady next door could see the change in the children. They became antagonistic towards me. They would pass me in the house and wouldn’t speak to me (Joyce - interview 1).

John said his adult daughter ‘chose’ his wife after his divorce:

> She didn’t want contact at all and she told me that straight out, ‘I don’t want contact with you. I feel I’m cheating mum’ (John - interview 1).

In most cases, the participants felt their children were pressured or manipulated by the other party (or chosen one) to make a choice. This included giving false information such as an ex-wife telling the child their father had been engaged in an affair during the marriage. Some participants thought the other party offered the child incentives for remaining loyal to them, or threatened the child with negative consequences for disloyalty:
The dynasty almost sought Lawrence out and he was their focal attention. So he obviously got all the smothering from the dynasty point of view, which coloured his decisions . . . He wasn’t prepared to find out why or he listened to the one particular side of the family that had not the true story or the complete story (Lois - interview 2).

Participants often said the child did not have the full story to guide them in this decision:

I had a miserable life before I left [my marriage] . . . From day one my life was a miserable life living with her and we were married for 38 years. My kids never knew anything about it. So when it finally happened and I left, they couldn’t make out why (David - interview 2).

This was particularly evident in situations where domestic violence occurred. Participants stated their children often did not know of the abuse occurring in the home, or have the capacity to understand the manipulative behaviours of the abuser:

That bond was broken [between my daughter and I] many years ago and it’s never been – I don’t – it never got an opportunity to grow anyway, I don’t think. Her father just made sure that the rift was there and that’s all there was, with his continuous brainwashing and put-downs and subtleties (Yvonne - interview 1).

In some instances, threats of violence were used to prevent participants from seeing children:

The fact that if I saw the kids it was made so unpleasant that I couldn’t cope with it. Also there was the violence threat . . . that if I contacted the kids he would kill one of them. I knew he was capable of doing it because I had already experienced that [violence](Joyce - interview 2).

Participants also stated children were forced to make a choice when divorce proceedings were bitter:
She’d done an excellent job of poisoning those children... Basically she turned them against me. It's very hard to defend. Once you’ve been told something like that, what do you say? *I’m a good bloke?* No-one believes you anyway (Gary - interview 1).

Participants suggested, as a consequence of choosing one parent, the adult-child was prevented from gaining a new perspective or different information about the relationship. Many were suspicious that things had been said and done to sway the child away from them. For example, Robert spoke about his first meeting with his estranged daughter:

[My daughter said,] ‘By the way dad, my middle name is not Elizabeth now’, because I gave her, her middle name, Elizabeth. ‘Mum made me change it to her name, Clare.’ I was really – it doesn’t mean anything now but that’s the depth of hate, isn’t it, really? (Robert - interview 2).

Charles felt his wife had started ‘brainwashing’ his sons before the end of their marriage by telling them he was never home, not allowing him to speak to them when they phoned from boarding school, and making him the disciplinarian.

In the case of the adult-child choosing between their parent and spouse, this was often associated with spouses who had different values and behaviours to the participant. These might be entwined with socio-economic, lifestyle, or cultural differences. In this study, this was always an adult son’s choice between his wife and his mother (and sometimes other family members). However, the choice between spouse and parent was never explicitly stated but rather couched in terms of the mother or family’s dislike of, or behaviour towards, the daughter-in-law. The son usually suggested his partner was not being accepted or treated well by the mother or the family, and then severed contact, or as was more common, he estranged them emotionally.
Whether the chosen person was a parent or spouse, participants consistently described them as powerful and manipulative. In terms of power, the words and phrases used to describe the chosen person included ‘clever’, ‘very good brain’, ‘very confident’, ‘very attractive’, ‘charming’, ‘determined’, ‘articulate’, ‘powerful and influential’, ‘strong’, ‘she held that upper hand’, ‘better class’, ‘likes to be in control’, and ‘super, super confident’. The chosen ones were often also accused of manipulating the adult-child and participants used words and phrases such as ‘a manipulator’, ‘a liar’, ‘a con man’, ‘a poisonous bitch’, ‘he stage managed’, ‘predatory nature’, ‘the time keeper’, ‘she makes the bullets’, ‘she is trouble’, and ‘total control freak’. Participants often felt the chosen person used these qualities to influence the adult-child’s allegiance. For example:

I am finding it very hard to believe that Brett has not been influenced by Tonya (Jean - diary entry)

I can hear her as plain as anything in everything that he says derogative to me (Jean - interview 2).

Two participants said their adult daughters had chosen to estrange because they believed their child had been sexually abused in the parental home. Both participants stated the accusations were based on inaccurate information, and no charges had been laid after child protection and police investigations. In both instances, the estranged participant was female and the accusations were made against a male relative or partner residing in the participant’s home at the time. The two adult daughters consequently estranged from their mothers who, in both instances, believed the accusations were false, and based on inaccurate information. In other instances, the teenage child chose a different lifestyle to their parents and this estrangement continued through to adulthood. One son left home to live with another family, rather
than stay with his mother and her new partner whom he disliked. Virginia’s daughters chose to leave home as teenagers and become part of a bikie gang. Dianne believed part of the reason her adult daughter chose to estrange was to distance herself from family stressors:

In a way I can understand why Cassandra doesn’t want this life, because I sometimes would rather opt out. So, in that respect I, in my heart, think that maybe she doesn’t want her girls subjected to it . . . It would be easier if you could just opt out of life wouldn’t it? To her it’s an easy way out (Dianne - interview 1).

**Disparate values and behaviours**

Disparate values and behaviours were cited as the reason for estrangement by many of the participants who had physical contact with their children, but felt estranged from them, regardless. When participants spoke about limited emotional connection, they often commented on disparate values and behaviours in relation to telling the truth, parenting, money, politics, and cleanliness. Trish described feeling alienated from her granddaughter who was dressed in “a $350 outfit and her hat was $40” (Interview 2), while Beth was obviously distressed when her 15 year old grandson was allowed to leave high school. The behaviours resulting from different values were often regarded as insults by the older participants:

When [my grandson] was first born, I used to go up there every weekend. I bought stuff, but then I’d go up . . . and I remember I bought a set of towels and it had a little clown on it. When I got up there, they were just lying all over the backyard (Beth - interview 1).

Some parents felt that they were no longer good enough for the adult-child:

He’s moving along and he’s with the set that’s just different from the country sort of thing and we’re up here and it’s – we’re just not good enough, and when I’m with
him I don’t feel good enough. I don’t feel – I’ve hit a nail on the head there haven’t I? I feel socially inept . . . they’re all in the cappuccino set (Trish - interview 1).

Debra’s estranged daughter told her she no longer felt comfortable with her family:

Yeah, so she said, ‘The last two times I’ve come back I don’t fit in’ or ‘I don’t feel happy there’ or something and ‘I’m not coming back’ (Debra - interview 2).

Participants also spoke about different ideas and values about appropriate family support, suggesting the estranged party did not think they were getting enough support, or the type of support they deserved, or they took support for granted:

Well [my daughter-in-law] Alicia did say to me early in the piece, ‘You’ve never done anything for me.’ I said, ‘We gave you the deposit for your house, I’ve helped you paint your house, I’ve done this, I’ve done that.’ ‘No, emotionally you’ve never done anything for me.’ That was more important to her (Betty - interview 2).

I remember I lent Lisa a lot of money once. [After a period of time] I said to her, you know, ‘You’re going to have to repay that, because I’ve got a big tax bill and I’m going to need some of that money.’ She just looked at me and she said, ‘If I had of known that you wanted it back, I wouldn’t have borrowed it in the first place’ (Beth - interview 2).

When participants cited emotional disconnection as the primary element of their estrangement, their child’s drug and alcohol and or mental health issues were evident or alluded to as the possible source of different values, behaviours, and communication difficulties:

I think he’s just alienated – he’s a very intelligent person. I think he’s become a recluse and gone into a depressive state. That’s what I think it is. He’s going to be a recluse and that’s it. He doesn’t want [us] (Beth - interview 2).

I thought he was manic-depressive, but he says he’s post-traumatic stress syndrome. He used to ring me up at 3 o’clock in the morning after he’d been at the pub all night drinking on his own, he’d ring me up and he’d say, ‘Why don’t you love me?’ . . . .
‘Why did you take me out of boarding school? I got abused when I was a child.’ This is drunken ravings and I don’t know how much is truth and how much isn’t (Helen - interview 1).

Many of these participants also said the emotional disconnection started in adolescence. (This was different to participants where choice was the primary element of the estrangement. In these cases, disparate values became evident after the son chose a partner or spouse). Disparate values and behaviours did not seem to be spoken about between the parties and, in some cases, participants said they did not mention anything for fear they would lose their adult-child (and grandchildren) altogether. Meetings were often described as ‘shallow’, ‘tense’, and ‘strained’. Those participants, who had tried to speak to their child, said they were quickly silenced. Generally, the parties described themselves as ‘walking on eggshells’ in an effort to avoid offence or conflict. Jean described going to her estranged son’s home:

There’s always trepidation. There’s always fear. You don’t go with a freedom, you don’t go with a joy in your heart. Until you get there, you sort of think – panic. Even that time I went to Brett’s . . . I didn’t bring up any politics, I didn’t bring up religion, I’m not allowed, I wouldn’t dare do that with [my daughter-in-law present] (Jean - interview 1).

Some feared any disagreement could contribute to further estrangement or harmful behaviours, so they avoided any potentially controversial subjects or issues.

**Punishment**

One notion regularly linked to physical estrangement was ‘punishment’. Participants stated they felt they were being punished because they did not fulfil an expectation of the adult-child. When Betty spoke about the estrangement between her son and daughter-in-law, she recalled the following:
[My daughter-in-law said] I was punishing her by removing my babysitting services and that she would punish me; that I would never see those children again and I haven’t (Betty - interview 1).

While most acts of punishment were not as clearly stated as this, they tended to be implicit in the accusations made against the participant or the actions occurring after the expectation was not fulfilled. Many of these expectations were connected to money; when participants refused to give their adult-children financial support or loans, to give the adult-children inheritances before they were due, or asked adult-children to pay back a loan. Some participants felt they had been punished for leaving the family home, or for not being there enough as the child grew up (often due to work or crises):

I think there's elements of punishment, I've often – I feel quite strongly about that, that this is Lawrence’s way of saying I destroyed the family home by walking away from it (Lois - interview 2).

Participants said they heard these messages in the accusations the adult-child made (most often before ceasing contact):

[Timothy] said we didn’t welcome [his wife] into the family . . . . This is when we first moved in and the first Christmas . . . and she wouldn’t come. She said she hadn’t had enough respect (Carol - interview 2).

He said to me, ‘I had an illusion. You as a great mother was a whole illusion’ . . . . ‘Where were the holidays, where were – we never went on holidays. Where were the picnics, where were the holidays?’ (Jean - interview 2).

The Reality of Estrangement

Reaching Out

After the estrangement was realised participants described a number of ways they continued to ‘reach out’ to the child.
Keeping in their minds

I’ve persevered, I’ve sent birthday and Christmas presents every year. I always make sure the cards have granddaughter, grandson on them, to try to keep me in their mind; but they wouldn’t know me (Betty - interview 1).

After the estrangement, the majority of participants continued to mark occasions, such as birthdays and Christmases, by sending cards and presents to the estranged child (and their family). Some participants continued to do this for more than a decade. Many participants stated they did this so the child would know they still cared and thought of them, and so they would remain in the child or grandchild’s mind. Some said they did this because they did not want to give the child the opportunity to accuse them of ‘not’ sending a card or ‘not’ caring. They would often choose items with much more care than they would for their non-estranged children or grandchildren. Some chose items unique to the relationship with the person to whom they were sending it such as cards marked ‘grandson’. Others would buy items of particular significance to the child such as cricket memorabilia. Some chose gifts to say something memorable about the gift giver. For example, Charles collected a particular type of rare book and he always sent one of these to his grandchildren on special occasions:

So they’re wonderful books and also so, the grandkids when they get them won’t forget, and that’s the, actually, that’s my revenge. So I send them on their birthdays and, always fabulous, picking that they’re growing up, getting older (Charles - interview 1).

Most cards and presents were never acknowledged, and many said their gifts went into a ‘vacuum’. Some cards and presents were sent or given to a third party in the hope they would be passed on to the child or grandchildren. Some presents were
returned unopened. In these cases, participants needed to make a decision to keep the gifts (in the hope they could be given one day) or discard them:

Dear Emily . . . . I remember being in Western Australia on holidays when I received the news from one of my work colleagues that you had been born. I was very happy and packaged up a parcel and left it at the door of your other grandmother’s house . . . Daddy decided that it should be handed back and your mother brought it to [my workplace]. That made me very sad. However, I did give the clothes to charity (Lois - diary entry to her granddaughter).

Other participants used texts, emails, and phone calls to keep in their child’s mind, even though some had never received a response. Marguerite had been sending a daily text to her son for months when I first interviewed her. He had never responded. Those who were emotionally estranged thought they were more likely to keep in their children’s minds by making what some referred to as ‘non-threatening’ contacts. For example, one participant said she sent joke texts to her son to let him know she was thinking of him, and another found a postcard with a significant picture so she had a ‘reason’ to make contact with her daughter. Others persisted with leaving messages on answering machines in the hope the child would return the call. However, most said the call went unanswered, or was only returned after a number of messages had been left. Participants who received a response were most often disheartened by the perfunctory nature of the reply:

So I then sent him an email saying, I have tried to ring you on several occasions, on many occasions. Maybe it’s because there is no reception. But maybe it’s because you choose not to answer the phone. I said, Now please either email me or contact me in some way to let me know how you are. So I then received a forwarded email, which was like a Christmas card, you know, and that was it. Not even…nothing (Beth - interview 2).
One couple said they intended to send a birthday wish over various radio stations so their grandson would know they were still alive. In two instances, participants who went to their child’s home unannounced encountered conflict and, in one instance, the police were called by the estranged child.

**The olive branch**

I just think I will give her a little time and maybe I’ll send off another timid little note or something or make an overture (Debra - interview 1).

Cards and texts were also often sent as an olive branch in the initial and even the later stages of the estrangement. Some participants said they used cards to invite the child to an event, such as Christmas, or to invite them to meet up, but many of the participants spoke about making such invitations tentative and informal:

In the Christmas one I’d put, this is what we’re doing, a newsletter that I’d send to other friends. This is what we’re doing. This is when the family’s meeting. You’re most welcome to join us (Lois - interview 1).

Some participants used intermediaries to send messages of goodwill and hope for peace, although some participants stated they would not do this for fear their estranged adult-child would insult or abuse the intermediary. On occasion, relatives were sent (or acted on their own) to speak to the child about reconciling or meeting with their parent, but this rarely resulted in a meeting, or further information for the participant:

[My daughter] said, ‘Leave it with me and I’ll see what I can do.’ Well that was two years ago. And she would do something, so – but never came back to me and said, *well, Brett is not interested* (Jean - interview 1).
**Professional advice**

I went and saw a psychologist in town . . . The advice in respect to Julia was don’t chase her, don’t follow her at all, just keep your distance. When she has some kids then she’ll come back. She’s getting away from the influence of mum and she’ll want to more than likely come back to see you (Gary - interview 1).

Some participants had also reached out to professionals for advice and guidance after the estrangement, with various degrees of satisfaction. Most encounters with counsellors, psychologists, and doctors were brief, and many participants said this was not as useful as they had hoped. There were no simple solutions to estrangement:

I didn’t really get anything out of it . . . All I did was get horribly upset and she was most sympathetic, nice lady . . . But there was no actual way to solve anything (Betty - interview 2).

Affirming the participant’s experience and acknowledging the participant’s strengths and resilience seemed to be the most useful response offered by the professionals:

[The doctor said,] ‘Well you haven’t lost your integrity and you’re still a whole person’ and they were the words that were ringing in my ears when I left the surgery. I thought, okay (Yvonne - interview 1).

In two instances, naming and working on emotions associated with the estrangement was cited as positive. Charles said, before he saw a counsellor:

I was going through this whole cycle of anger, guilt, remorse, you know, going round and round, and having terrible dreams (Charles - interview 1).

His counsellor asked him to write a two-page letter detailing the core experiences of his divorce and subsequent estrangement, and the grievances he felt towards his ex-partner and sons. It took Charles six weeks to write the letter and during that period he said:
I had to relive, write, remember I’m supposed to, you know, get rid of all these out of the brain. I had to relive all the things that were the things that really upset me and the hurt . . . So when I saw him I said, ‘Well you know what? I don’t think I’ll even send it.’ He went, ‘oh,’ I said, ‘This whole process has been rather good’ (Charles - interview 1).

Shirley attended some self-development workshops to address inner anger and suggested these gave her the strength to recontact her estranged son without previously felt fear and angst.

In some cases, professionals acted as intermediaries between the participant and the estranged adult-child and offered comfort when the participants were concerned about their child’s wellbeing. Lois said her doctor reassured her she had seen her son and his family at the medical practice, and they were fine. Marguerite received a very positive response from police one night when she was highly distressed about her son’s wellbeing. Police actually contacted her son and reported back:

He said that he was well. He didn’t say he was happy, but he said he was well, and that he just felt he couldn’t talk to us at this time (Marguerite - interview 1).

When participants cited negative encounters with professionals, this tended to be in situations where some form of decision or adjudication was involved, e.g., police, child protection, family law court, and mental health service. In these situations, they often experienced professionals as making judgements, taking sides, or removing decisions from the participant without listening to their side of the story. Professionals advised several participants to move away from the situation with their estranged child and, in these instances, the participants felt the professional did not understand the gravity of such an action:
I remember I went to one doctor in town, an Indian guy, to get some hypnotherapy to help me stop smoking. And Richard had rung me up at 3 o’clock the night before. I went in and he said, ‘You are not receptive today.’ And I said, ‘No,’ I said, ‘I’ve had a phone call from my son.’ He said, ‘You tell your son to go away’ and I said, ‘You bloody well get stuffed,’ and walked out on him (Helen - interview 1).

In most cases associated with the Family Law Court, participants thought the system, and the professionals involved, did not prioritise the child’s welfare:

When it comes to the children, and these filthy, leeching, animal bastards can go and fight over a child’s life and decide whether he should see his father or whether he shouldn’t, is completely out of character with any sense of human nature (Gary - interview 1).

The Family Law Court at that time, too – in the early 80s – were petrified of violent husbands. They wouldn’t take my side at all. They told me they would not get involved. I can see the counsellor – well-known counsellor – of that era. He was frightened of him. So they wouldn’t support me (Joyce - interview 1).

Other professionals also had considerable power to make judgements about participants:

When I first came up here and went to the doctor I confided in him about my estrangement and the mental illness of my sons. I thought he sympathised with me, but one day I went to him because I was having particular problems and he must have thought it was due to stress, and he referred me to a specialist. On the referral, he wrote Dianne has a dysfunctional family. I was so embarrassed and then I really knew what he thought of me, and I couldn’t trust him (Dianne - interview 2).

Pulled towards

Participants also spoke about a number of events and processes that continued to ‘pull them towards’ the adult-child and remind them of the estrangement.
**Everyday triggers**

I mean I can laugh and joke and have a normal – but sometimes something will just happen or catch your eye and it’s awful (Marguerite - interview 1).

Many participants spoke about individual or personal ‘triggers’ pulling them back towards their child and also towards the reality of the estrangement. Seeing family photos and videos was particularly painful for some participants. Others found it difficult when they were doing something special with, or for, their other children or grandchildren, because this tended to highlight the absence of the estranged children and their families:

I was shattered last week that Chad didn’t come to his uncle’s funeral. I could not believe it, and I haven’t felt that bad for quite a few years in this journey (Betty - interview 2).

Gary spoke about a friendship he had developed with a young man who lived nearby:

He came at Christmas time and he gave me a bottle of wine, and that hurt me. Here’s a young kid, I mean I’ve just built up an association with . . . I’ve done nothing but give him a bit of advice and whatever, and he’s been pretty kind to me in there too, and here I’ve got three kids of my own that thinks I’m a filthy backside (Gary - interview 2).

Many spoke about bumping into old acquaintances or friends of the estranged child, and how questions about the child brought pain and embarrassment. Some people said they had seen reports in the media or observed aspects of other people’s relationships which reminded them of their own estrangement. A recently aired television series, *Find My Family*, was mentioned by several participants. Other triggers cited were particular events in time, or time itself. I interviewed David in early December and he said:
It still hurts. It’s Christmas time and I hate Christmas (David - interview 2).

Dear Lawrence . . . . My worst time is your birthday. I start thinking of it about the same time as Colin’s, as I know I only have a couple of weeks and then it will be yours. This year I sent SMS messages to your brothers to share the importance of the day with them. I usually spend the day quiet and withdrawn, trying to connect with you in some way (Lois - diary entry).

Lois also described another unexpected trigger, when one day she realised:

I’d been apart from Lawrence longer than I knew him. That year was so – it was just like a ton of bricks coming down on you, that you’d actually been away from him longer than you had been with him (Lois - interview 1).

Odd and unexpected things could also trigger pain:

Well, just up the road from me, a couple of hundred yards from my house, there's a big sign . . . Well, they've cut the word Todd out and it's big and it's stuck on the side of their garage and I see that every single day. I try not look, I look the other way . . . It's only coincidental, it's been there for eight years I've watched it (Trish - interview 2).

Several participants had experiences similar to Yvonne, who said:

There’s a lot goes on in the subconscious mind that you’re not aware of, because every so often I’d see somebody that reminded me of Donna. Once I really got hit in the face with it – like a fish. She was just – profile and everything was just – I stopped in my tracks (Yvonne - interview 2).

Meetings and letters

[Jennifer] hasn’t spoken to us for many years. My mum died last year. She turned up at the funeral. But she never spoke to me . . . spoke to my sister and the cousin, but never spoke to me (Frances - interview 1).

Most participants, even those who had complete physical estrangements, had experienced some contact with their child after the estrangement was realised. This
might have been a family occasion, such as a wedding, walking past each other in the
local supermarket, a letter, or text message. Unexpected meetings, letters, and texts
from the child had the potential to pull the participant back into the plethora of
emotions surrounding the estrangement. Upcoming family occasions were often
experienced by participants as potentially stressful, but were also sources of hope for
meaningful contact or reconnection with the adult-child. However, family events and
meetings often resulted in a further rebuff from the child and disappointment at the
outcome.

Events where families usually come together, such as births, death, and
marriages, were often cited as the places where the participant would meet their
estranged child or children. Some went hoping to see the child (and maybe
grandchildren) and in the hope of making some form of meaningful contact. However,
some thought they were invited to particular events just to ‘keep up appearances’ and
play ‘happy families’. Joyce said she had not had contact with her daughter for 12
months, but then she was invited to her granddaughter’s wedding:

But Mary came, just two days before the wedding. They came down here at 9 o’clock
at night, and really, the only thing – the only reason they wanted me to go to the
wedding was because I could read at Mass. I’m quite sure, that was all it was. To do a
reading – give the impression. Because I’m – haven’t spoken to them since. They
don’t want to speak to me (Joyce - interview 1).

Most experienced perfunctory contact or they were avoided or ignored by the child at
these events. Carol spoke about being invited to her granddaughter’s christening. She
believed things had changed for the better, until she spoke to her daughter-in-law on
the day:
And she said to me – I can see her in my mind’s eye now – she said, ‘Don’t think anything has changed, it hasn’t, everything will still stay the same,’ because she never invited me to that christening (Carol - interview 1).

On occasion, these meetings resulted in insults, conflict, and violence between the estranged child – and sometimes the person or people they had chosen over the estranged parent – and the participant. At the second interview, Carol and Steven described their estranged son’s attendance at their recent Christmas dinner as “just another Christmas massacre.” Family events also resulted in contact with long-lost grandchildren or other family members, who sometimes promised to contact them after the event, but this did not eventuate in each of the instances cited by participants. Joyce spoke about meeting her estranged grandson at a wedding:

He said he was so pleased to see me, and hugged me and introduced me to his wife. They were going to meet up with me and we were going to have a wonderful time together . . . I gave them my phone number, address, and there’s been nothing. That’s sad, because I don’t hold out any hopes now (Joyce - interview 1).

Incidental meetings also occurred where the participant saw the child in the local shopping centre or on the street. On most occasions, the child avoided speaking to the participant by deliberately ignoring them or disappearing into the crowd. Shirley said she had noticed her estranged son when she was walking through her suburb one day:

When he saw me coming he shot through, he lost himself in the crowd sort of thing, and that was that (Shirley - interview 1).

Dianne spoke about the pain of seeing her daughter and grandchildren in the street without being acknowledged.

There were some instances where the estranged child recontacted their parent because they needed help. In most instances, the help required was financial and
contact ceased after the request had been granted or denied. However, Helen said her son would contact her by phone when he had been drinking, and these conversations would usually end in him making accusations about her poor parenting. Virginia said she opened her door to a man holding a baby one day, who told her the child belonged to her estranged daughter and he needed help to look after it, since they had separated. She declined to help and the estrangement continued to this day.

Sometimes a meeting was initiated by the estranged child, who indicated they wanted to reconnect or restart the relationship. In the case of estrangements occurring in childhood, the adolescent or adult-child might reach out to fulfil a curiosity about their estranged parent. However, many of these meetings did not result in a closer relationship. In fact, they seemed to create a false hope about reconciliation, or slow the participant’s healing process. Jean had high hopes after a meeting with her estranged son, but this meeting proved disappointing:

Mother’s Day and once again I had hoped for that one phone call, but it didn’t happen, so I have finally had to accept the ‘fact’ that Brett has no feelings towards me. Heartbroken of course, as I thought after my visit to his home with all the family he had decided to ‘bury the hatchet’ but obviously that’s not the case . . . . I now wish he hadn’t made the pretence of being pleased to see me again . . . as all it did for me was to give me renewed hope that we could all be family once again, how cruel is that (Jean - diary entry).

However, some of these meetings did result in a period of closeness before the estrangement was reestablished, and some in longer-term reconciliation (see Reconciliation).

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Other perfunctory contacts made by some estranged children included texts on the participant’s birthday or emails or letters containing photos of grandchildren. As Trish explained:

[My daughter-in-law] is very good at sending an email – very good at sending photographs of the children but never an accompanying letter (Trish - interview 1).

In a few instances, the estranged child allowed a meeting with a participant so they could see their grandchild, but these instances were described as awkward. Frances said she thought her relationship with her daughter (and grandson) was improving until she decided to make a surprise visit:

One afternoon I went and waited for her to pick him up and I went to see him and she roused on me big time (Frances - diary entry).

Additionally, meeting with grandchildren highlighted the lack of familiarity and intimacy between the participant and the grandchild, as they had to be almost reintroduced to the child. These interactions were generally described as emotionally unsatisfactory.

Often the estranged adult-child (and sometimes the person or people they had chosen over the estranged parent) was described as holding the upper hand at these meetings. The estranged child was often described as setting the parameters for these interactions and experienced as being bossy or dominant at these functions. For example, Debra went overseas especially to make contact with her daughter. She described a series of text messages, or what she called ‘a texting war’ before her daughter would agree to meet:
[My daughter] said, ‘But when you come you’re not to make any judgment and you’re not to mention anything about mother, daughter, father.’ So I said, ‘That’s all right, we’ll do that’ (Debra - interview 2).

The estranged child could decide whether to reply to an invitation or to attend the gathering punctually, and family members might anxiously await their arrival. The child was also able to determine whether there would be further interaction after the event. Gary said that the only meeting he had had with his daughter after his divorce was when she had reached adulthood:

It had gone pretty right, a three-hour discussion. I think it’s safe to call it a three hour discussion, had gone okay. It had gone quite okay and she said, ‘Look, I don’t want you to contact me. If we’re going to see each other again it will on my terms’ (Gary - interview 1).

**Ageing, illness, and death**

I’ve thought, well probably the next time they’ll turn up is when – if they get a message to say something’s happened and either I’m in hospital or Leonard's in hospital (Elizabeth - interview 2).

Ageing had an effect on the way most participants thought about, or experienced, the estrangement with their adult-child. Participants often thought periods of critical illness or the death of a family member would ‘pull’ the child back into the family but, in most cases, these events actually emphasised the estrangement between the parties. Carol remembered the time her husband was critically ill, and her unfulfilled expectation this would bring her son home:

So he was in intensive care. He was very, very ill. But they never came up and saw him. I rang him again. I said, ‘Timothy, he’s in intensive care’ – and I might have even spoken to her – and I said, ‘he’s extremely ill’. And then flowers came . . . but they never came. They never came (Carol - interview 1).
This was a common experience for the participants in the study and, in most cases the child’s ‘push’ was experienced as unexpected, extremely painful, and disappointing. For many, the child’s refusal to come or acknowledge the event emphasised the lack of emotional connection and for others it was the final ‘push’, or signal the estrangement was unlikely to resolve.

Many participants, particularly those who had experienced recent illness or the deaths of friends, had started to think about their mortality, and this often brought new implications to the fore. When participants thought about their death, they often made decisions about wills and inheritances (see *Moving Forward*). For some, the process of thinking about their legacy meant revisiting the qualities, likes, and dislikes of the adult-child and made them feel closer to the person they once knew. For others, it appeared to reignite feelings of anger and revenge. For many participants, the realisation of their own mortality brought fears about running out of time to reconcile and tell their side of the story:

I’d hate to think that I go to my grave with that feeling still existing. I want to be able to rectify the problems while I’m still here. If I die, nobody else is going to be able to do it for me because they won’t know. They won’t know what’s happened, what’s gone on, you know. Yes, that does bother me a lot (John - interview 1).

Some were also concerned about their child’s wellbeing if they were to die without reconciling.

*The Effects of the Estrangement Tug-of-war*

Participants suggested that the ‘push and pull’ of estrangement, as described above, was like being in an emotional tug-of-war, and there were a number of negative experiences that resulted.
Losing the ‘family experience’

I always so looked forward to having a family and grandkids, all the stuff that goes with it; and it’s all gone (Betty - interview 1).

Participants suggested estrangement diminished their experience of being a family. For many, losing a child dramatically affected their ability to fulfil their role as a parent and grandparent. The absence of Mother’s and Father’s Day cards, and someone to help fix the computer, emphasised this loss for some, as did the lack of physical and emotional affection. Joyce spoke about an incident where she had received affection from a stranger, forcing her to realise the full effects of the estrangement:

I think after that incident, it did hit me with a force, of how much love I had missed, how much affection I had missed, and how much physical contact I’d missed. But it was missing out on all of those hugs all those years (Joyce - interview 1).

Some focused on the things they could not do for their child or grandchildren. For example, Joyce was concerned she could not help her estranged daughter when she had cancer. Mostly participants spoke about losing family time, i.e., events where their children and grandchildren interacted happily:

Brett has never spent one Xmas among his family since Benjamin was born and very few at his own house either. There used to be combined birthdays for the twins etc. that slipped because Sharn wasn’t the ‘birthday girl’. Xmas in July stopped over a bloody plate of vegetables (Jean - diary entry).

By far the most acute loss cited by some participants was the loss of grandchildren, and being unable to be a grandparent (although it should be noted some felt far from connected to their grandchildren). Some spoke about being unable to attend school events or to teach children to sew or knit:
The thing I miss more than anything are the kids, I’ve missed all their growing up and apparently the eldest is very good at soccer and I wouldn’t miss being dragged out at seven o’clock on a cold winter’s morning on a Saturday morning, but I’d do it . . . But I miss all of that very much (Janelle - interview 1).

My darling child, I would so love to have been part of your children’s life and shared with them the things I have with the other grandchildren. Do you know there is 15 of the little darlings? So very precious and a great joy to me. I am very sorry that you have not been able to meet Trevor. He’s a very good man and he’s very kind to me. We have shared a lot of lovely times together and he has been a lovely poppy to the grandchildren (Lois - diary entry).

At the first interview, Gary said estrangement had prevented him from fulfilling ‘nature’s role’ and prevented his grandchildren from having ‘something to look up to’. Seeing others with grandchildren, and hearing others speak about grandchildren, was extremely painful for many participants. However, grandchildren also acted as a hope or pull in some instances. Two participants had teenage grandchildren who had re-contacted them and some participants wondered whether their grandchildren might make contact when they reached adolescence.

**Social isolation**

Yes, I tend to stay out of it . . . you tend to become reclusive because it’s easier. People, on the whole, just wouldn’t understand, couldn’t believe that that sort of thing could happen (Betty - interview 1).

Estrangement had an impact on social interaction. While some relied on friendships and social intercourse as a way of coping with the estrangement (see *Learning to Live with Estrangement*), many suggested estrangement narrowed the number of people with whom they interacted or the topics about which they were able to speak. Shirley mirrored the sentiments of many participants when she said:
I felt ashamed, secretive. I did not want people to know I did not see him (Shirley - interview 1).

Many believed others would not be able to understand the notion of estrangement and feared judgement about their parenting skills, and even about their child’s behaviour. Some participants were very guarded about who they told about the estrangement, and never mentioned it at social occasions. Some said they avoided the topic of children and grandchildren in social situations, by changing the subject, asking questions of others, or only mentioning children and grandchildren from whom they were not estranged.

For some, shame and embarrassment had been experienced or reinforced in social situations. Virginia recalled the time she was invited to a Tupperware party, but her new friend asked her not to mention her daughters’ marital status or the estrangements. Joyce spoke about being judged and isolated by members of her church:

One of the things that I did learn was that, after all the children had left and I was struggling and battling, [the] majority of the Catholics couldn’t understand how a mother could desert their children in a way. There was an invisible line out there. They never came (Joyce - interview 1).

Helen dreaded questions about family in medical situations, saying:

They say, ‘Who’s your next of kin?’ and I give them the phone number, you know. And they sort of look at it and say, ‘Well haven’t you got an address?’ And I say, ‘No.’ It’s embarrassing (Helen - interview 1).

Carol spoke about an awkward conversation with a relative:
She said, ‘I wouldn’t be able to live if one of my children didn’t speak to me. I wouldn’t be able to’ – and I said ‘well…’ I was embarrassed. I thought where have I gone wrong and she’s so right and I’m so wrong (Carol - interview 2).

The issue of social isolation, and particularly the shame and embarrassment associated with estrangement, was most pressing for the female participants in the study:

For men who are estranged or who go off it is accepted as being okay. There is some reason for it. But, for women who are estranged from their children there is something wrong with the woman and that’s, I think, in everyone that I’ve talked to is how people treat us. When initially it happens – in my case and in others that I’ve talked to – you can nearly draw a circle around as to how far people get in touch with you and there’s that line out there, they don’t cross it because there’s something wrong with us (Joyce - interview 2).

Women were often asked to give details about family members in social situations:

You can get very embarrassed in company . . . And everybody has their grandkids in school holidays and the like, that’s when people start saying, ‘Your grandchildren never come to see you.’ Well usually [I say] ‘They’re overseas. Their mum’s from overseas and they’ve probably gone home to see [their] grandmother’ (Betty - interview 2).

Men, on the other hand, tended to be asked very basic questions about their child and grandchildren, questions they could answer easily without alluding to the estrangement:

I’ve been asked ‘what do my children do?’ I answered the question what they do but I don’t say they’re estranged (Charles - interview 2).

Men also tended to feel less embarrassed or ashamed of discussing the estrangement:

It never came up and I would have spoken – it’s like men speaking about prostate cancer. I would tell anybody. I would have spoken to anybody about it but nobody asked me (Robert - interview 2).
I don’t know that I’ve been judged in that respect. I just say, ‘well [they] don’t talk to me and I just cut them off’ (Ronald - interview 2).

Most participants told their close friends and relatives about the estrangement, but they were often guarded about the extent to which they discussed it, or burdened others:

It’s something that’s approached at times in conversation but no more than conversationally. I’ve always used professional people for meeting my needs in that area. To lay that sort of stuff on friends is, I think, tantamount to an abuse of a friendship because you’re putting an unrealistic expectation on a person to be able to listen to everything. It’s enough that they bear with you (Yvonne - interview 1).

Others felt they were protecting family and friends by not approaching this emotional subject, and this was particularly so with the estranged child’s siblings. Participants sometimes felt they should not speak to siblings for fear of upsetting them, or putting them in between the two parties:

My children and I never talk about it. It's as if it doesn’t exist. It’s awful (Marguerite - interview 2).

One participant said her husband never wanted to discuss the estrangement and asked her to refrain from bringing it up. Virginia said she had not discussed how many children she had or her children’s estrangements with her new male friend:

We were so happy, John and I, and I didn’t want to throw all this weight on him because I knew he’d take it on board (Virginia - interview 1).

Partners could also become overprotective or critical of the child’s behaviour, leaving the participants feeling responsible for distressing their partners. This was particularly so when the partner was not the estranged child’s parent. Additionally, bringing up the
subject with family and friends sometimes met with unsatisfactory responses, such as unwanted advice, awkwardness, or lack of genuine acknowledgment:

It’s like people with cancer; people ring you up and they know you’ve got it and they don’t know what to say to you. So they’re frightened of saying the wrong thing, whatever the wrong thing is, and it’s a similar sort of thing . . . So people say nothing. And it’s not what they’re feeling at all (Marguerite - interview 1).

[My relative] sends a card to me . . . and a card that says for Bill and family and she doesn't seem to get the message that we don't see Bill and the family. We said to her, ‘We don't see them, you know, he doesn't want to know us anymore,’ but she still sends the card (Elizabeth - interview 2).

Some spoke about their frustration at others’ lack of understanding and unwanted advice:

Some people say to me, ‘Just shrug it off, forget it, don’t worry about them. If they don’t want anything to do with you, don’t worry about them.’ But I can’t do that . . . I often think when people say that to me, I think I wonder how you would react if it were your children treating you this way . . . It’s alright to give advice but when you’re not in a position to know firsthand the feeling, you can’t give very good advice can you? (John - interview 1).

You know what really irks me is when people say, ‘oh well, you have four other beautiful boys, not to worry.’ They don’t know the pain in your heart and life (Lois - diary entry).

Many felt isolated by this unanticipated experience making them different to others:

You get this card from friends and they’re writing about their children in it and how they’re just one big happy family and we love one another, the children are beautiful and I think well, how does that be? . . . Because of all of Steven’s family . . . we are the only people that have the estranged child (Carol - interview 2).
A small number of female participants said they were drawn to others who were estranged. These women said, when they asked questions of new acquaintances, they would often find out they were estranged:

…but since then I’ve met another lady up here and I didn’t want to meet anybody, I just wanted to be incognito. We got friendly but I sort of kept my distance and then we got a bit friendlier. Turns out, which made me feel good in a way, that she was estranged too from her family (Dianne - interview 1).

While these discoveries made the participants feel less alone, it did not necessarily mean they were willing or able to engage in conversation about their own estrangement.

**Feeling silenced and powerless**

I’ve just about bitten my tongue off. Especially with [my daughter-in-law] I have, I’ve had to learn to keep my mouth shut with her (Janelle - interview 1).

One of the most significant issues or effects referred to by participants was the idea of being silenced and made powerless by the estrangement. Both physical and emotional estrangements seemed to sustain themselves by silencing those who wanted to bring another perspective to the fore. Many participants stated they would like to make things right, or apologise, but they had never been given the opportunity to meet with the estranged adult-child. It is important to note some of these participants said they did not actually know the reason for the estrangement and their part in it, which made it even more difficult to address. The estranged child seemed to have control over the flow of information by stopping, minimising, or delaying the participant’s input. (This input took the form of cards and presents, meetings, or phone conversations as mentioned previously). In the case of physical estrangements, participants did not
receive any response to the input they provided, but in the case of emotional estrangement delaying or minimising responses was common:

So I rang him up – oh, so this is before Christmas, and I rang and I said, ‘I will come down, will we make a time?’ And he said, ‘No, no, I can’t talk now, I’m going to a meeting, I cannot talk a minute, you’ll have to ring back.’ I said, ‘When would I ring back?’ He said, ‘Oh, a couple of days.’ I rang back in a couple of days – ‘Can’t talk, I’m too busy, you’ll have to ring again.’ [I] rang up again [and] he said, ‘Can’t make it before Christmas now, you’ll have to make it after Christmas’ (Carol - interview 1).

Participants said they were silenced by repeatedly getting answering machines or being told the adult-child was not home, having the child hang up on them, or never returning their calls. Participants experiencing emotional estrangement said this continual rebuff changed the way in which they interacted with the child. They rarely spoke to the child about not returning their calls and they were very careful about not broaching potentially divisive subjects. Some said they allowed the conversation to be purely about the child and his or her life. Over time, all participants said they reduced their expectations of the child and invitations to meet or share time together:

Because every time I said, ‘How about meeting me and having a cup of coffee,’ [he’d say], ‘We’re going to a meeting, etcetera, I’ve got to do this, I’ve got to do that.’ In other words, piss off. So, I’ve stopped saying it, but he says it and I say, ‘That would be good’ (Shirley - interview 1).

As indicated in this quote, the participant was then left to wait for the child to make an offer or invitation. For some, this rarely eventuated. In many instances, the participants alluded to the child or the chosen person as having ‘the upper hand’.

Sometimes participants described being silenced by the child’s dominant or intimidating personality or behaviours:
As I grew older and at the times I did see her and I wanted to say something, like motherly or anything like that. *Don’t start.* She actually won’t listen, she won’t listen to me . . . She’s a little bit, yeah, she can be a little bit frightening, I suppose, in that way (Debra - interview 1).

Carol spoke about a difficult family gathering which started with her son giving her husband a particularly dominant handshake. She saw it as:

…a form of saying, *up you*, because Steven had to let go first, because it was a form of, *don’t think you’re going to boss me around.* And [his wife] was very confident. He was so terrible. He was so awful. He was sarcastic (Carol - interview 1).

Others spoke about times when the child used topics of conversation to show dominance or silence the participant. They might dominate the conversation by only talking about themselves, or a topic outside of the participant’s experience, such as overseas travel or investment.

As stated previously, fear of further rejection and hurt also appeared to keep some participants silenced. For those who had emotional estrangements, fear appeared to stop them from challenging, confronting, or having a meaningful conversation, with the adult-child. They tended not to broach uncomfortable subjects for fear of the child dismissing them completely and or losing grandchildren. Helen spoke about being frustrated by not knowing where her son lived and the state of his mental health, but:

Because I’m afraid of hurting him, and estranging him, I can’t bring it up (Helen - interview 1).

For those who had physical estrangements, fear appeared to stop them from reaching out or recontacting their children in some instances:
I have been wanting to see who to get in touch with to start – make some enquiries as to, where could I find out her address? But I have – don’t know quite where to start, and I haven’t quite got the courage to face if she didn’t want to see me (Joyce - interview 1).

Some seemed fearful of what they might hear if they asked what the estrangement was about, or what they had done wrong. When Trish pondered this she said:

I wonder what he’d say, I wonder if I’d be sorry I did it? Would he tell me something that I didn’t want [to hear]? (Trish - interview 1).

Some said ex-partners and marital dynamics silenced them, and this was particularly so with women who had experienced domestic violence and men who had experienced difficult divorces contributing to the estrangement. Some of these participants felt powerless in their ability to refute the accusations their ex-partners had made against them. Most were not in the position to give the child different information due to the estrangement, and the fact the child only had contact with the ex-partner. Some were unwilling to enter into a debate about events in their marriage, or to say negative things about their ex-partner:

I never run their father down to them, but I don’t talk to them about him either – and the other three are happy that way. If they bring – if they brought it up I’d talk to them, but they never bring it up so I don’t (Lois - interview 1).

…but as far as entering the world of competition for any emotional thing, that’s too… and not nice. It was too demeaning. It was terrible. I wouldn’t be in it. What sort of person is going to compete for their own kids? (Yvonne - interview 1).

Both these women had experienced domestic violence and both believed the children were largely unaware of this dynamic. Some of the men perceived it was futile to refute accusations made by an ex-partner when the child remained living with, or kept exclusive contact with, their mother.
Looking out for the child

Many participants remained vigilant in their effort to ‘look out for the child’. Sometimes, particularly in the early stages, this involved going to places where the child (or grandchildren) might visit, in the hope of seeing them:

I must admit, I used to prowl the shopping malls where I knew my daughter-in-law shopped to see if I could see the kids. I used to go and sit outside in the hope of seeing them (Betty - interview 1).

In later stages, participants spoke about being prepared or remaining alert in case they had an accidental meeting with the child, particularly if they were going into suburbs or shopping centres close to the child’s residence or workplace, or where they thought they might see the child. Some felt they needed to be extra vigilant in their observations due to the length of the estrangement and the possible changes in their own or the child’s physical appearance:

It’s being prepared and, there is the feeling that if they walked past, they probably, I’ve put on weight and my hair’s gone white and, you know, probably look like, you know. You know they say once you go over 60 no one recognises you any way as a human being. They walk past (Charles - interview 1).

Some participants had a continued need to ‘look out’ for their child’s whereabouts or welfare, even if they could not intervene. They were often given information from friends and family members:

So my girlfriend, I nursed with in England – she lives up there . . . and I said can you find out whether they have really moved on or whether he’s just not talking any more. So no he hadn’t moved (Elizabeth - interview 1).

Some participants spoke about chance meetings with someone who had knowledge of the child. For example, Gary discovered one of his customers was his estranged
daughter’s ex-boss, so he was able to discover her new occupation. Shirley bumped into her estranged son’s childhood nanny, and this woman mentioned she had seen him at a wedding. She was also able to describe the changes in Wade’s appearance, which made Shirley more vigilant in looking out for a young man with long hair and a beard.

Technology also enabled participants to ‘look out’ for their child. The internet played a significant part in some participants’ knowledge of their child. While some looked out for birth or sporting notices appearing in the local newspaper, internet search engines were much more effective in locating children and discovering their achievements if they were interstate, overseas or their whereabouts were unknown. Helen said she was really concerned about her son’s mental health when he phoned one day, saying he was in hospital. He would not tell her which hospital he was in, or why he was there, but she was quickly able to find out and phone the facility:

So as soon as he got off the phone I got on the internet and I’ve started tracking down the hospital numbers. God bless the internet (Helen - interview 1).

Charles ‘googles’ one of his sons about twice a year to see where he is exhibiting his art works. Betty said:

I found my son – when I Googled him – that he’s the president of the P & C at the boys’ school. The kids are all in Nippers and I was quite chuffed to read that. My friend in [their city] . . . still scans the [local paper] every day in case there’s anything about my children (Betty - interview 2).

For some participants, these searches reassured them their children were ‘doing okay’.
Empathy for the child

Some participants had empathy for the estranged child and worried about the effects of the estrangement on his or her mental health and on their family, particularly for participants who were physically estranged. After a meeting with her son, Jean wrote:

I am still very concerned about Brett’s health as he looked so sad and unhappy – almost desperate . . . I do hope Brett can find some sort of peace and be happy even if it means he has to cut all ties with me (Jean - diary entry).

Yvonne’s daughter died without reconciliation, and Yvonne felt the estrangement might have contributed in some way to her cancer:

She died . . . I felt so sorry for her, really, because you know, here she was 18 years [estranged] . . . I thought that is really sad for her. Probably that – you know, in this holistic thing, she died of cancer. Well that’s – there’s a lot of emotion in that sort of thing…carrying around for…awful for her (Yvonne - interview 2).

In fact, many participants worried their child might be sad, unhappy, or unable to live a fulfilling life without extended family around them. They sometimes worried their child was missing out on the emotional and practical support the extended family could provide:

I feel sorry for her. I feel like it must be lonely being this tough girl out there in a tough world. I thought, it is a bit sad to be so isolated, out in the wilderness by yourself without family (Debra - interview 1).

She later added:

She’s painted herself into a terrible corner really and you feel sorry. I would like to just give her a couple of hundred dollars for Christmas or something and I couldn’t even do that (Debra - interview 2).

Janelle worried about how her son was surviving without her child minding:
He has three children. He’d be struggling too, because she’s working, so I dread to think who’s looking after those children in school holidays (Janelle - interview 1).

When participants felt their adult-child was being influenced or pressured by another party, they often oscillated between feeling angry and disappointed at the child’s perceived weakness and having empathy for their predicament:

My younger daughter, I feel sorry for her. I know what’s happening there and she’s being dictated to. I know that. She always has been (Gary - interview 2).

Marguerite said she felt sorry for her son, because she knew he was a good person and his choice to estrange would sit uncomfortably with him. Many participants worried about the effect their death would have on the child if reconciliation were not to occur:

I worry that Brett will regret this. I hope he’s like me that didn’t regret my mother’s death and thought, well, I hope he feels nothing towards me because if he’s the soft boy that he used to be he’s going to be pretty awful (Jean - interview 2).

**A rollercoaster of emotions**

It’s like – it’s terrible. It’s just like – and it’s – there’s so – look, it’s just so unnecessary (Jean - interview 1).

Participants were often at a loss to explain the depth of emotion associated with estrangement from an adult-child. They conveyed a range of fluctuating and dissipating emotions, which often returned unexpectedly. Over time, certain emotions seemed to fade (or return less often), but the participants were unanimous that the emotions associated with the losses of estrangement were never fully resolved, and could never be fully understood by those who had not experienced estrangement. Yvonne’s words typified the sentiments of many participants:
Nothing can describe the pain that you go through at that particular time. Nothing can describe that and I don’t think anything can describe the pain of loss. How can you – just one of those things that people have to feel before they have an appreciation of it (Yvonne - interview 1).

Some participants spoke about the shock, disbelief, and devastation of being told they were being cut off from their adult-child. Most participants simply did not expect the estrangement to happen:

He said to me, ‘You may never see us again.’ Well, to me that was the most devastating thing I’ve ever heard, because I’d never envisage that in my whole life ever happening to me (Carol - interview 2).

Oh, it was a dreadful shock. I just wanted to die, I did. I just wanted to die (Betty - interview 1).

Some spoke about being distraught, desperate, hysterical, and wounded. In fact, they often spoke about this initial pain as an assault on the body:

There’s probably two phrases that I use. One is the stab in the heart which never goes away. It might close but inside that wound goes deeper . . . then there’s the bruising that comes out. And I know I say I retreat like a wild animal back to its den. I have to do that occasionally. That’s when it gets really bad (Joyce - interview 2).

In two interviews the male partners of a female participant spoke to me about the devastating effect of estrangement on their partners:

She sits up in bed of a night time and it breaks her heart (David - interview 1).

They’ve broke her bloody heart, that’s what they’ve done (Dennis - interview 1).

Frequent crying was a commonly reported response to the estrangement in the early stages. Beth spoke about the realisation of the emotional estrangement from her daughter:
Every time I’d ring her or anything, I’d get off the phone and cry (Beth - interview 1).

Betty said she cried for the first year after her daughter-in-law instructed her she was no longer to contact her son. Janelle seemed to capture some of the other emotions particularly poignant, but not exclusive, to the period shortly after the estrangement:

In the beginning I went through the usual things, rather like going through a separation or divorce, it’s basically along the same lines. I feel that resentment, that bitterness, that anger, that in stages you go through (Janelle - interview 1).

Many participants spoke about being angry at the estranged child or the person they had chosen over the relationship with their parent. This was also aligned with frustration at not being able to get through to the child or change the situation (see Feeling Silenced and Powerless):

This child has really complete control of you . . . that's annoying and maddening and saddening and any adjective that you want to add to it probably (Lois - interview 2).

Some were disappointed. For example, Carol spoke about a conversation when she realised her husband’s silence was a cover for feelings of futility and disappointment:

And he said to me, ‘You know, he’s ruined my retirement.’ And I said, ‘Oh Steven’ – because I used to talk about it, and worry about it, and cry about it. And he said, ‘I never put – I have never in my life put as much into a person as I did with him.’ I’ve never forgotten it (Carol - interview 1).

The most commonly cited and overriding emotion, seeming to remain over time, was hurt:

I don’t mean to sound bitter or anything like that. I’m not. I’m very hurt, very, very hurt (Beth - interview 1).

Being hurt was closely aligned with being sad and sadness:
A mother is only as happy as her saddest child (Lois - diary entry).

In some instances, it seemed the hurt had turned into sadness over a period of time. For example, Yvonne initially spoke about the hurt and betrayal she experienced when her two daughters estranged, but when asked about her feelings on reconciliation with her living daughter:

No, and nor do I expect it to change. I’m still sad about it. I’m always sad about it, never tried to rationalise it or anything like that. I mean it is a real loss and it has been something that has been missing from my life (Yvonne - interview 1).

Indeed, it seemed that estrangement did have an effect on the mental health of some participants:

Well [my wife] says that she thinks that it’s affecting my health. She thinks that I’m not a happy person anymore. She actually thinks that I’m suffering depression. That’s her opinion. She thinks I’m suffering depression. I don’t know. But I guess I’m not the happy person I used to be. I used to laugh a lot (John - interview 1).

Some spoke about losing confidence. One talked about becoming more withdrawn and introspective, and two women spoke about periods when they felt suicidal:

Semi trailers looked very attractive. It was very easy to do, all you had to do was line your car up, nobody would know that it was – they can’t prove anything and you would be at fault that’s all. Then a few times that I really got myself geared up, you just pull out at the last minute because of the children and the parents. But death was a very attractive place to go (Lois - interview 2).

Additionally, as alluded to in previous sections, there were a number of emotions associated with the longer-term social impacts of estrangement. Embarrassment, shame, and guilt changed the way many participants reacted with others, and this sometimes led to isolation and loneliness:
I often think who would want to be with you when your own child doesn’t want you? (Dianne - interview 2).

I think a clown is a very good description of how I am. I’ve always felt that, because the clown is laughing on the outside, but crying on the inside. That’s how I feel. So I step out of here, and it’s like – you put on the clown face, and you head out. Anybody meets me, how are you? Fantastic. Great day. Never tell anybody how I’m feeling (Joyce - interview 1).

Some participants also spoke about being envious of others who had family. Helen spoke about her neighbour and a funeral she had recently attended:

Pat’s got cousins and aunts and uncles and nieces and nephews and god knows what turned out of the woodwork for the party – for the funeral. Came down here and they had a wake in the pergola. And I was so envious of her. She had all these people that loved her. Not jealousy, just envious (Helen - interview 1).

**Learning to Live with Estrangement**

Dear Lawrence, I cannot do any more for our relationship. I have no energy left. I am so very sad and the time span is so large. Parenting is so very difficult. I have done my utmost to be a good mother. Looking back through the journal, I don’t seem to be all bad. I hope your parenting journey is happy and fulfilling. I hope this is the final goodbye. So Lawrence, be happy and may your family unit always be happy. God bless you all. Love Mother (Lois - diary entry).

Estrangement never went away but, over time, participants said they became more accepting of the situation. The vast majority did not anticipate reconciliation, but they had not entirely given up hope of this happening either. It seemed, with time, the push and pull of the estrangement became less painful and participants were more able to accept the situation, and make decisions, to ‘let go of’, ‘stop’, ‘accommodate’, or ‘live with’ situations as they arose. All participants, whether in the earlier or later stages of estrangement, spoke about ‘getting on with their lives’, ‘having a good life’, and
‘being thankful’ for the good things in their lives. As the period of estrangement grew, participants seemed more likely to focus on ‘living’ than ‘estrangement’. Many were also consoled by knowing their child was living a ‘good life’ and some still hoped something would change before their death. It seemed, over time, the estrangement moved further into the background of the participants’ lives.

This was not to say that negative feelings disappeared completely or remained stable over time. It is not to say ‘learning to live with estrangement’ was a linear process or one that could ever be fully completed. In fact, the pain of estrangement continued to arise quite unexpectedly for some, and sometimes participants were pulled back to the emotions and behaviours associated with the first realisation of estrangement. As mentioned previously, participants often oscillated between learning to live again and the reality of the estrangement, like they were on a boat where they could relax and enjoy the scenery, until a wave hit unexpectedly and they needed to grab onto the side once more. For example, Virginia said she was finished with her family, was divorcing them, and never wanted to see them again. She had put a number of measures in place to ensure her family could not find her. This seemed to give her peace and an ability to enjoy her life. However, in the second interview, I asked what she would do if her daughter came to her door. I asked whether she would let her daughter in and, initially, she gave an emphatic ‘No’, but then a few moments later said:

I’d meet her somewhere and have coffee and ask her what she’s got in her mind, you know. See what was going on first (Virginia - interview 2).

So despite her declarations of never wanting her children back, this appeared to be a protective stance to keep her safe until another possibility arose.
Acceptance

I think with acceptance comes a lot of healing (Yvonne - interview 1).

Participants spoke about ‘accepting estrangement’ as something quite different to ‘getting over estrangement’. Over time, participants came to accept the reality of the permanence of estrangement in their lives, a more realistic evaluation of their parenting capacity, their child’s choice or decision to estrange, and their inability to change the situation. Participants spoke about coming to the realisation that their repeated actions were not changing the estrangement situation, and this was particularly so where emotional estrangements were evident. In these cases, participants often spoke about being exhausted by the process and feeling as though they ‘couldn’t be bothered’ any more:

It’s bipolar, yeah. And he would get...he would get low, and he would drink and get lower. He would get high; he would drink and get higher. I can’t handle it. I can’t handle it any more. I can’t give him the sustenance that is required by him because I’ve tippy-toed around him for so long (Helen - interview 1).

Others spoke about the realisation they did not like the interactions they were having with their child, and they did not have to accept the child’s behaviour in these interactions. After one interaction Carol said she realised:

[You] can’t be with people that don’t like you. You can’t have people like that around you. And I just thought, well, he doesn’t like us. You’re not nasty to people that you like (Carol - interview 1).

Many said the interactions remained so uncomfortable or meaningless they began to accept it was unlikely things would change:

It was playing havoc with my health and I’ve been in his company a few times and I’ve thought, no, I really don’t want to be here (Jean - interview 2).
But I could never punish myself to that degree as to be going, looking out for them [anymore]. In fact, I think I got to a stage where I didn’t want to meet them, because it was too uncomfortable for me. You get into a self-preservation mode, whereas this can’t continue, you know. Change gears (Yvonne - interview 2).

Time seemed to allow some participants to make a more realistic evaluation of their parenting capacity, and become more accepting of their own contribution to the estrangement, whether this was intentional or not. For most, they accepted they had done the best they could under the circumstances, and some were able to forgive themselves or release themselves from some of the guilt of the estrangement. John had started to come to terms with his commitment to the family business during his children’s childhood:

I had a business and I had to be responsible for that business so I had to forfeit some things. You accept that. Even though you regret it, you accept it (John - interview 1).

For others, it was a greater confidence in their assessment of their contribution to the estrangement. For example:

I honestly, honestly, don’t think I’ve done anything wrong and that saves the day really for me sometimes (Trish - interview 1).

Elizabeth was one of the few participants who accepted estrangement as a natural and common occurrence in families, and this helped her to accept it in her own:

You know it's happened always and you know you go back through families and histories there's always been somebody that was cast aside or felt unwanted and dragged themselves aside and wanted to be doing something different (Elizabeth - interview 2).
Some participants spoke about realising they could not and did not have the right to try to change their child. For some, this was interwoven with ideas about parenthood and letting go of the adult-child:

> You have to go through that period before you come to the realisation that – it’s an acceptance – that it’s their life. It’s like giving money to somebody. I can’t go and tell them how to spend it. It’s a gift (Joyce - interview 1).

For others, this acceptance placed responsibility for the estrangement back onto the child and seemed to lift some of the burden of guilt:

> What he’s chosen in his life is his problem, it’s not our problem. It’s his problem. It’s the way he wants to live (David - interview 2).

For most participants, acceptance was a gradual and often subtle process occurring over time, rather than one realisation or moment in time:

> 2007, Trevor and I had done our Christmas cards – and I used to always buy [my estranged son] a special one instead of just your run of the mill ones. Anyway, we’d done them all, and about – very close to – only a week before Christmas or something, I said to Trevor, ‘Oh my goodness. Do you know, I haven’t sent Lawrence a card.’ I had to force myself to do it. Anyway, this year I didn’t because I felt it was what I had to do – and this birthday I didn’t send him a birthday card, and I had a really sad day. I was better this year when I hadn’t sent a [Christmas] card, because by sending the card and the invitation, you’re waiting; that was a big step that I then felt that I’d stopped that waiting (Lois - interview 1).

Participants with spiritual and religious convictions were able to draw on their beliefs to ‘accept’ the estrangement. For example, Elizabeth spoke about her acceptance of God’s will:

> I think I’m pretty lucky and I think the good Lord’s looking after me and he’ll sort it out in his good time you see. I can just forgive and forget – it doesn’t mean anything. Nothing’s ever happened I haven’t resolved (Elizabeth - interview 1).
During this time – the estrangement – I often read ‘The Prophet’ by Kahlil Gibran. He says your children are not your children. They are the son’s and daughter’s of LIFE’s longing for itself. They come through you, but not from you, and though they are with you, yet, they belong NOT to you (Shirley - interview 1).

Later, Shirley wrote:

Wade, I no longer hold you responsible for my happiness and peace of mind . . . I see it as a lesson we have to learn – to survive without depending on each other (Shirley - diary entry).

Some participants said their beliefs about living with a future orientation helped them to accept the reality of the estrangement. Ronald said he was helped by:

Forward thinking, not reliving the past. Alright, I can’t do anything about it. If they want to come back, they will make the move. That’s the way I look at. After four or five years well, I haven’t got time to be worrying about that (Ronald - interview 2).

However, it is also important to note four of the male participants did not describe acceptance as a process they went through or a point they came to, but rather as an initial response to the estrangement:

I couldn’t do anything about it. As I said, I’d been running a business and couldn’t be worrying about trivialities. When I say that was a triviality, you’ve got to make money to live. That’s the way I looked at it (Ronald - interview 2).

When I asked Robert whether he mourned losing the family experience after his divorce and the consequent estrangement from his children, he said he accepted it quite quickly because:

That closeness [within the family] was really never there. It wasn’t really there. Maybe because I was working very hard or I didn’t want to be interested and because basically, this is an awful thing to say, I don’t like children (Robert - interview 2).
Some male participants tended to use phrases like ‘I don’t care’, ‘not caring’, ‘I can do without it’, and ‘it doesn’t worry me’ in instances where other participants were more likely to use terms such as ‘accepting’, ‘learning to live with it’, and ‘letting go’. Most of the men seemed to report accepting the estrangement much quicker than the women in the study. A conversation between Carol and Steven highlighted this difference:

Carol: It’s like a death. You just have to keep living. You can’t not live. But it’s – you know, it takes a long time. Well 12 or 13 years for us. But it’s a long time, isn’t it?

Steven: I wiped him years ago.

Carol: See Steven doesn’t...you don’t ever really think about him. Do you?

Steven: No. Never think about him.

Carol: One day when – the odd time when Carly [granddaughter] rang up, Steven had – he couldn’t remember her name. He said, ‘Hi darling, how are you,’ and then he said to me later ‘What’s her name again?’ (Carol and Stephen - interview 2).

The majority of participants in the second interview agreed that accepting estrangement – in the various ways mentioned previously – helped them to ‘live with estrangement’. However, the word ‘acceptance’ was inappropriate for one participant, who saw this as signifying defeat:

From my point of view I’ve never – I’ve learnt to live with it but I don’t think I could say I’ve accepted it. I think that would kill me, if I took that attitude, you know. I’ve still got some fight in me perhaps... Accept it – I don’t think I’ll ever be able to do that. I’ve learned to live with it. Obviously we do (Betty - interview 2).
Moving Forward

Pain is pain. Say you get scar tissue over it and leave it alone. You don’t keep scratching it. I couldn’t do that to myself. I mean, the hurt is there and it’s never going to go away. But to scratch it all the time…forget it (Yvonne - interview 2).

There often came a time after the participant accepted the estrangement was unlikely to change, or they were unable to bring about change, when they made a decision to think about it differently, behave differently, or focus more on other things:

So the estrangement continues and I suppose I’ve reached the point where I’m not trying to, there is no mechanism to actually change the circumstances. It really sits with them and I think it’s a bit, I feel it’s a bit like my father, with myself with my father. There is a point reached where I decided (Charles- interview 1).

This decision often involved taking action to move away from the estrangement in some way:

Then I thought, I can’t do anything more, I’ve tried, I can’t keep on resenting it and going back to the past, I’ve just got to get on with it. I’ll never get over it (Janelle - interview 1).

It seemed energy was moved from trying to resolve the estrangement to trying to live with it. In the case of emotional estrangement, participants often decided to develop boundaries between themselves and the child in an effort to minimise the pain they experienced during interactions. This involved seeing the child less, not requesting meetings, or cutting ties altogether:

I have three grandsons who now don’t talk and don’t even reply to their card and their present. I used to send them money. I’ve now discontinued that. I said right, if you can’t make a phone call and say thank you – forget it (Ronald - interview 2).
Carol said she made a decision not to ‘grovel’ any more, and not to be so available to her son when he decided he wanted to bring his daughter to see her:

Because I’m at the stage now... because he said, ‘I’ll bring her up Sunday afternoon.’ And I said, ‘No, that’s not suitable. I don’t know what I’m doing with Aunty.’ It was the first time I never fitted in with them (Carol - interview 1).

Helen decided she was not going to hide her hurt from her estranged son any longer:

This time I thought no, I will tell him what it means to me, not what I think it means to him... I said to him, ‘You haven’t told me where you live and you have made it a joke,’ which he had. I said, ‘Do you realise that I feel that you don’t trust me.’ He said, ‘Oh no mum it wasn’t that.’ I said, ‘Well that’s how I felt’ (Helen - interview 2).

In the case of physical estrangements, two participants erected a different type of boundary to protect themselves. By moving to a different location, they did not have to see their children in the street or shopping centre, and they were safe from local gossip about the estrangement. Virginia spoke about the most important step she had taken in moving forward, years earlier:

Well, what I found is move away from where they all live, move away and make a life for your own. Stop whinging and get on making your own friends...make friends (Virginia - interview 2).

More recently, she had made a decision to help her to die in peace:

I’ve closed my books. Like I said, I will divorce them [when my disabled son dies]. It’ll go in the paper too, in the Sydney paper. I’ll see a solicitor. Because I don’t want – that’s it (Virginia - interview 2).

Virginia also told the staff at her housing facility – after she discovered some people were trying to locate her – not to let any of her children know she was staying there and not to take their phone numbers. One participant found it useful to be open and
honest about the estrangement when his son had not acknowledged this with mutual colleagues:

Since then [I’ve been] describing Jonathan as my estranged son and that was a very useful thing to actually say to people, this is what it really is (Charles - interview 1).

Another form of boundary used by some participants was decision-making about wills and guardianship. Some participants had particular items and messages they wanted the estranged child to have when they were gone:

The following is one of the extracts I included in my will letter to my son. On rereading it sounds extremely harsh but quite honestly this is how I feel. Your time is not come. Love and death have their fatalities and strike home one time or another. We pay for all one day (Betty - diary entry).

I have the most wonderful treasure box for you, Lawrence, with things that I have collected over the years, birthday presents, cricket memorabilia. And Lawrence, I can’t really remember what else is in there. I will write to the children later and leave for you to give to them. [One of your brothers] has promised me that he will see to it that you get your treasure box when I have passed away . . . . What I also meant to say to you, Lawrence, is that a mother’s love is totally unconditional. So therefore, although you may not love me, I have always and will always love you (Lois - diary entry).

There’ll be some eye openers with the diaries because I’ve got a couple of rude shocks here for some of them. Some of the treatments they’ve doled out to me over the years, and they’ll have to keep reading until they get to the end, won’t they? (Jean - interview 2).

The majority of participants had thought about their wills and most had changed their will in response to the estrangement or to make some sort of statement to the child (whether this was a statement of love, revenge, or both). Many said they had received advice from solicitors to reduce the child’s inheritance rather than cutting them from their will. Only a few had removed the estranged child from the will but many had
altered the will so the child would receive a smaller proportion or less control than they might expect. For example:

I want Linda to have her cut but I don’t want her to have a say in to sell up the trust or not (Debra - interview 2).

So why am I leaving them any money in my will. I'm ranting now but I'm thinking, he's done nothing to help me, nothing. But it might make me feel better, I'd never leave Todd with nothing, but it won't go to his kids if he predeceases me. Look, I'm not going to leave any money for them to live like that, no, I'll punish him (Trish - interview 2).

However, participants also realised they would have little control over what would eventuate:

I won't be alive to see [his response to the will]. He won't be phased by all that, he's not going to burst into tears when he gets all this. He'll just say, silly woman. But it's not going to really have any effect (Trish - interview 2).

I think what will happen to my china, all silly things really, things that don’t matter but you’d like to think they were passed down through the family (Betty - interview 1).

Some participants had put things in place around impending illness and death. For example, Charles stated he did not want his sons to come to his bedside if he were to become ill. He recalled going to the bedside of his estranged father and stated:

I finally went and confronted him with all the things that he really upset us when he was in hospital . . . The result, I suppose I’m saying is, it’s not a good time to actually go because . . . here it was he was dying and I’m doing the total unload . . . So that probably told me the lesson that you’re not necessarily going to get I’d say the grieving child. You’re going to get whatever that child is going to – he thinks . . . mightn’t be what you want to hear (Charles - interview 2).
Dennis said he would not let Frances’s estranged children near the funeral if she were to predecease him:

If she dies first she will be buried . . . there is no way the bloody of them pair will come to the funeral because that won’t be on . . . they ain’t going to get no chance to come whatsoever. They put her there – they can stay away (Dennis - interview 2).

Some participants decided they could only move forward if they made a deliberate effort not to get upset and emotional about the estrangement so they did a range of things to minimise the triggers for sadness and distress. Dianne said when she moved to a new suburb, she also made a deliberate decision not to talk about the estrangement any more. Many said they put photos of the child away and stopped sending cards and presents. At the time of the interview, Trish spoke about her desire to remove some of the triggers in her life:

I feel like I want to give him all the baby books. I’ve given him a couple because really – I don’t really – I find it hard. I don’t mean hard to look at them but when I do, I think oh, I didn’t realise then what he was going to do to me (Trish - interview 1).

Some made a commitment not to react to things the child did:

You can’t really get over it, but I try not to let myself get really emotional about it anymore. Every now and then I do, but I try very hard not to (Beth - interview 1).

Shirley said she had learned to become ‘detached’, Frances said she tried ‘not to think about it’, while Steven said:

I could see which way he was going and I just cut him out of my heart . . . . It’s as simple as that. You can’t linger longer with these things (Stephen - interview 2).

However, the most significant theme was participants’ commitment to themselves to ‘get on with life’:

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I made the decision, way back, that I could go two ways: that God gave me a life to make the most of what I had, and I could either become a patient of [a mental hospital], or I could go out and embrace life, and live it to whatever I was capable of. That’s what I’ve done (Joyce - interview 1).

While some described ‘getting on with life’ as a choice, others suggested they did not have a choice. They described ‘going on’ as something innate. However, all acknowledged they had to make an effort to move past merely ‘existing’ and to lead a ‘good’ and ‘satisfying’ life after estrangement. Over time, some participants said they thought less and felt less desire to see their estranged child:

So I know if I wanted to see them I could. It would be difficult, but I could see them but what’s really strange, I don’t have any great desire to want to go and do it (Charles - interview 2).

Participants did a number of things to enhance their lives and reduce loneliness, including keeping busy:

This is the reason I get out, only because I could sit at home here and drone, drone. It’s off now but the radio is going all the time when I’m here (Ronald - interview 2).

They described a number of social, sporting, and cultural activities as well as travelling, housesitting, and writing diaries. Some participants had a schedule of activities to fill their entire week. Some felt doing voluntary work or teaching others to do something was a particularly good way of getting on with a meaningful life:

I did a lot of voluntary work when I moved into [town], when Todd went into care. I joined Bocce in there and I walked every morning . . . Just to meet people, I would go and have a coffee in the mornings, instead of at home, I’d get out and go and have a coffee. You meet people when you walk (Virginia - interview 2).

For some, like Robert, building a meaningful life was a good antidote for the loss associated with estrangement:
But you know when I look at it, I don’t care – I don’t care one little bit. I’m quite happy with my little life and travelling, I do a lot of travelling overseas (Robert - interview 1).

For others, while activities served as a way of coping, they did not fully alleviate the pain:

I do, I feel absolutely abandoned. If I didn’t fill my whole life, which I do, like I’m only home Mondays and Fridays. I teach all day Tuesday, I play ten pin on Wednesday . . . I do the . . . Kids Charity . . . It’s good. So that keeps me busy. And I’m into music and things like that. I go to Sydney and – I don’t have time to brood, thank goodness (Jean - interview 1).

Other relationships were also important in keeping participants busy and helped them to secure a good life. One participant said being honest and speaking about the estrangement in social situations was helpful. All of the participants, who felt unable to speak about the estrangement socially, had at least one person they could talk to if they needed to, but this did not necessarily mean they did speak to this person about the estrangement. Most had a small group of family or friends who knew about the estrangement and had some empathy for the participant. However, these participants were mostly valued for their general support or ‘being there’, rather than the participant’s capacity to confide in them about the estrangement. For instance, Joyce was very private about her estrangement from her children, but she also considered the general company and support of friends as essential to moving on from the acute pain of estrangement:

At my funeral, it would be my friends that I want in the front, because I could never ever, ever, have survived without them. They’re – that’s the gift God gave me – that somebody came just when I needed them. I was able to – when I’d get really down, it was just somebody would be here, or somebody would arrive, or I’d meet – that got me through (Joyce - interview 1).
Some participants spoke about special relationships essential to their ‘good life’, including non-estranged children, daughters-in-law, grandchildren, nieces, and pets:

[My daughter] and those twins gave me a reason to live, and the love they gave me was unconditional love, the reason to get up each day – to cook, to just love life because of them (Jean - diary entry).

Some spoke about these special people as a consolation for the estrangement. For example, Trish saw her relationship with her second son as very important:

But Patrick makes up for it . . . I spoke to him this morning, he’s just so different and yet I never drop in on him without telling him and I don’t do that very often. I don’t feel I need to because I know he’s there, you know (Trish - interview 1).

I have replacements, I have four cats and one dog . . . . This little dog now, he's like my life again, and he's replaced that sort of affection of the child that doesn't want you. It's a stupid thing to say but it's true, for me it works (Trish - interview 2).

Some spoke about the roles or duties the special person had assumed due to the estranged child’s absence:

I had to think about wills and guardianship and power of attorney. Fortunately my niece has picked up all those . . . Again good old Loretta will have to go through all this, poor Loretta (Betty - interview 1).

In the majority of cases, relatives and friends were cited as an important part of getting on with life, but they were not regarded as substitutes for the child or solutions to the pain. Many participants referred to their new partners as ‘the love of my life’. Robert said it was quite easy for him to move away from the estrangement because he had a new partner with whom he was madly in love, while he had been unhappy in his previous marriage. He said this minimised the effects of the estrangement from his children. New partners were often cited as providing company, affection, and a sense
of purpose. New partners were often regarded as someone to talk to, someone who did not judge, someone who made them feel wanted, and someone who monitored their health and wellbeing. Virginia spoke about the two partners she had been with since the estrangement from her children:

Gino showed me love and he showed me, made me feel that it wasn’t my fault that these things happen. Gino was wonderful. John is the same. They showed me affection where I never got it (Virginia - interview 1).

But Gary’s comment was telling in terms of the differences between romantic relationships and those with a child:

The wife has made up for some of it, yes. But I know when my boy was here, you’re heart is a different thing. You know your face glows up and you’re certainly a different person (Gary - interview 2).

**Comforting and Consoling Thoughts**

I hope one day that you will be able to read this journal and know that you are as special to me as the rest of your brothers (Lois - diary entry to her estranged son).

There were a number of thoughts to comfort or console participants after they had accepted (or come some way towards accepting) the estrangement and decided to live a life with estrangement in the background. For some this was about symbolically sending out messages of good will:

All I can hope and – occasionally I’ll light a candle at church and – just for that little family or something. So that you hope they’re happy (Lois - interview 1).

For some it was about acknowledging the good things about their child, such as loyalty, or ability to look after their new family. While Gary was saddened by his children’s choice to estrange from him, he understood the reasons for their choice:
They’re fairly loyal sort of kids. I say I always like to think I’m quite loyal. They’re being loyal to their mother. They think they’re doing the right thing by mum (Gary - interview 1).

For some, it was acknowledging the person their child had become, physically, materially, or professionally:

When I saw Linda on the bus and she ignored me, I cried all the way home on the bus, but I was thankful that I had given birth to somebody as beautiful as she was (Joyce - interview 1).

Many participants were very proud of their child’s achievements and some continued to follow their children’s successes if news of these were available in the public arena:

I’m still terribly proud of Chad and I don’t waste any opportunity in telling people (Betty - interview 2).

Participants were also comforted if they thought their child was leading a good life. All participants wanted their children to lead good and fulfilling lives. Gary said feedback from various sources attested to his children’s success and wellbeing and this gave him ‘some contentment’. Robert agreed:

[It] worries me that he doesn’t contact me now, but he’s got his own little way of life. As I say, he’s mentally retarded, and he does things, he enjoys his life (Robert - interview 1).

For participants who were emotionally estranged, contentment sometimes came from observing the child’s life, or accepting a smaller or different type of interaction to the one they had previously sought:

I content myself with what I have in my family now because I can still say ‘my family’ even though it’s at arm’s length. There’s no close ties there. But my grandkids have their own lives, they get on with them, they’re busy, and they don’t
muck around. They’re all achievers. I can see a lot of myself in them. They’re goers and they’re up and go and kick arse people (Yvonne - interview 1).

Some participants were consoled or comforted by the knowledge they were not alone in this experience. Finding out others were estranged could be quite therapeutic. Some were shocked and relieved to hear they were not abnormal:

I was telling another friend about it and I just assumed that her and her husband only had one child. I thought, he’s such a brilliant boy, he’s a lecturer at university and I was telling her about my problem and she said, ‘I don’t get on very well with my son you know.’ I said, fancy, he’s a university professor or a teacher or something and he still hasn’t got this proper, open accepting relationship with his own mother, isn’t it amazing (Debra - interview 1).

Some found comfort in having someone to talk to who shared their experience:

I had two girlfriends. One doesn’t see two of her sons. She only had three. We used to talk it over and over and over. And my other girlfriend, on the Coast, she’s got the same problem with her daughter-in-law (Carol - interview 1).

Elizabeth was the only participant who felt quite sure her child would return, due to her belief God would ‘sort it out’. However, most participants were consoled by thoughts and signs of hope which were often based on the belief something would change in the child’s life and this would invoke them to view the situation differently and return to the participant. Hope was sometimes attached to discord the participant might sense in their child’s relationship with the chosen person. Some participants believed the estranged child would eventually divorce their wife (who the participant viewed as the chosen one) and return to them. Some participants felt grandchildren might change the situation, as they started to enquire about the origin of gifts, or they started to become curious about their grandparents. (It should be noted the children of estranged adults had started to reconnect with participants in two instances). One
participant hoped her child might get treatment for his mental health issues and return to her. The fact the emotionally estranged adult-child ‘left the door open’ and never physically estranged was a constant source of hope for some participants.

A Search for Meaning

Estrangement made participants question and reflect upon their lives as they tried to make sense of the estrangement in its varied contexts. This became particularly evident during the process of conducting the initial in-depth interviews. Participants were not directed as to where, or how, to structure their estrangement story, but the majority said they must locate their story within its historical and family context. Associated stories included; the story of the nuclear family, the story of the child’s life, the story of the child’s transition into adulthood, the story of the participant’s upbringing, the story of the participant’s parental experience, and the participant’s life at the time of the estrangement. It is important to note here, participants were not making causal links between events in the child’s life (or their own) and the estrangement. Rather, it appeared they were offering ‘clues’ they thought ‘might’ be important in my research about estrangement, and at the same time hoped my results might give them some answers. I experienced this phenomenon as indicative of the participants’ continued search for meaning, even after decades of estrangement. In some cases, it felt as though participants were challenging me to make sense of their story, because they had spent so many years trying to do so, and it had proved an impossible task. Participants spoke about their struggle against the unknown elements of estrangement, particularly in relation to the child’s reasons for the estrangement in the early stages. For some, it developed into the stress of ‘not knowing’ things about the estranged adult-child (or grandchildren) as the years passed. While acceptance,
decision-making, and learning to live life to the full had often stemmed participants’
distress and urgency to find answers to the unknown, the search for meaning
continued for the majority of participants.

**Situating the Estrangement**

Most participants situated the estrangement in a number of associated stories, as
documented below.

**Participant’s Upbringing and Readiness for Marriage**

Some participants started their story of estrangement by commenting on their own
family of origin. Those who did this commented on the quality of their childhood
experiences, which were both negative and positive. Typically, those who related
negative or difficult childhood experiences made links or inferences to the
estrangement in terms of setting the scene for a difficult marriage or nuclear family
experience. They also intimated a negative childhood experience had shaped their
desire to ‘get it right’ with their own children. Several spoke about experiences of
estrangement or abandonment from their own parents:

I didn’t have a really close relationship with my own mother . . . I don’t know if it
was because I was taken away when I was a little girl because I was a caesarean birth
which was very unusual and I had to stay with my aunty for a long time (Debra -
interview 2).

Many participants spoke about traumatic childhoods, or difficult periods of growing
up, where things like parental death, illness, divorce, migration, and war featured in or
impacted on the participant and their relationship with their parent or parents:

I went to a sanatorium and I spent my seventh birthday and I was away from my
family and then off and on for years I wasn't with my family, I was with somebody
else being looked after because I had TB. So I had been away so I had got to be
reliant – you know not dependent on my mother and my dad being there (Elizabeth - interview 2).

Some spoke about lack of a parenting or parental absence, and several spoke about taking on parental roles themselves:

I’m the eldest of seven, and my mother was a sick lady from – after all of the pregnancies. We later discovered she had hypertension and a blood disorder – she died of cancer of the blood aged 44. So all I can remember in my childhood is looking after my brothers; cooking, cleaning, and expecting to control them and to mother them (Joyce - interview 1).

Shirley spoke about the impact of war on her mother’s ability to parent:

So she was dysfunctional, she had nothing to offer us so the pain still goes through and I can still feel it see, when you talk about it. So yes, the dysfunction had already started. I mean I wanted to escape my family because it was so dysfunctional, but then we were so dysfunctional and then his family was so dysfunctional and you can’t cope, it’s overwhelming (Shirley - interview 1).

Emotional abandonment was also cited by some participants:

[Parents] don’t have to leave home to be abandoned . . . . My mother said I was a great big disappointment to her (Trish - interview 2).

You see, I was always a nuisance to my parents, I was an accidental birth, why were you ever born – you create problems. I was brought up like that, I was useless. I’d never get anywhere. And I was useless at school, I was useless. When I started work I thought, and I got two engineering degrees, and I never, ever, told them. Isn’t that awful, they died without knowing (Robert - interview 1).

I came to the understanding that my whole life had been revolving around trying to gain my mother’s approval. I was the eldest, but – well she more or less never wanted me. She wanted my father, didn’t want me. Told me straight out, you know, that’s that – you know, I never wanted children, I just wanted your father . . . And my father and I were very close and she became very jealous of that. I ended up – when I came out of [the Mental Health Clinic] I finished with her completely (Jean - interview 1).
As these stories indicated, there were several participants who said they were estranged from, or felt abandoned by, one or more of their parents in either childhood or adulthood. Some had lost parents to early deaths. While few offered explanations about the impact this may have had on their estrangement, some did say it had led to an increased desire to be a good parent. Some also said their estrangement made them revisit their first experiences of abandonment or loss. Gary had lost his parents during childhood. He was the only person who said it made his estrangement easier to bear:

When I look back I’ve lost two families in life, if not perhaps a third one. One was at the age of 10, the other one was at the age of 40. Well because I’d had round one, round two I think was somewhat easier, although it was difficult (Gary - interview 1).

Some participants also spoke about being unready for marriage or naïve in their knowledge of the world before embarking on it (whether this was due to a difficult or protected childhood). Some regarded naïvety as the reason they chose abusive or unwell partners, or why they had already had several children before they realised what they were experiencing was abuse:

I didn’t know. I’d only ever had Mum and Dad, one sister, perfect life, learnt the piano, went to Catholic school, wasn’t allowed to play with children; had to stay indoors, very strict upbringing. So, I didn’t know bad people existed. My mother died when I was 14 and my father when I was 16, going on 17. I was left not knowing what people were like. I didn’t know what people were like. So this guy comes along – I’d fallen in love with somebody else, [but] it didn’t work – this guy comes, idolises me to the extreme. So, I thought he’s going to be good, he loves me more, and all of that and he did. I mean he was the first stalker they reckon (Dianne - interview 1).

[Marriage] was a disaster because I was pregnant with my daughter when I married, and I had to get married, and I didn’t want to. I was belted up for being pregnant, that was my fault . . . that was a disaster from the word go and I didn’t want that at all. I tried with that one and that’s how Paul came along because I thought – I didn’t
realise, I was very naïve in those days to think a child makes a marriage (Janelle - interview 1).

Several female participants said they chose to get married because they wanted to leave the family home or to have children:

I certainly didn’t marry out of love, I married to have children. In those days you couldn’t sort of just do what you do today. So I’m sure I wouldn’t have married the man I married (Jean - interview 1).

Anyway, I wanted to get out, you know, be allowed out but they wouldn’t let me out. So I thought, oh well, [mum] is never going to let me do anything, so I might as well go with this boy (Virginia - interview 1).

In some cases, the choice of partner also caused family conflict or estrangement, which left the participant with little support to parent:

So then I met – as I said – Donald. That was traumatic, because my father couldn’t stand him. I can see why, totally. That really then split – as I said, I went to [the city] then and worked. Then we got married, but it was against my father’s wishes. He didn’t come to the wedding (Joyce - interview 1).

The Nuclear Family’s Story

I think the divorce has got something to do with it. Their father is dead now but splitting up with their father when they were nine and eight, I think that’s when the trouble started, without anyone realising it (Trish - interview 2).

Divorce and marital discord was a component of nearly every family story told by participants. Only one couple and one other participant did not locate their child’s upbringing in relation to divorce or marital discord:

When I was having Lawrence, my marriage was in absolute shambles. I had a really horrid pregnancy with lots of unhappy times (Lois - interview 2).
Most cited family stories featuring key stressors, such as having a child with a serious medical problem or disability, or one of the parents with an addiction, or a mental or physical illness. Another stressor for some women was having, or being expected to have, large families. For example, Virginia said after her third child she was exhausted:

I said I was tired and I’m dreaming of washing nappies all the time and work, that’s all I ever did, and he said, ‘A large family, a happy family’, which is, excuse me, not right . . . Then I had another daughter 15 months later and then I decided, no, this is not going to happen again. I’ve had enough. So I cut it out and went to another bedroom. He didn’t like that. He would get very aggressive. Seven years I did that and he was getting worse and worse and worse, so I give in and I had two more [children] (Virginia - interview 1).

As this small portion of Virginia’s narrative indicates, some participants cited multiple cumulative stressors in the nuclear family’s story. Virginia’s last child had an accident when he was eight years old, which resulted in a permanent intellectual disability and she cared for him most of his adult life. She also lived with domestic violence until her 70s.

While divorces were often cited as key points of family stress, many female participants told family stories of physical, sexual, financial, and emotional abuse from their partners prior to the divorce. These stories involved long-term abuse, due to the socio-historical and religious impediments to a woman leaving a marriage with young children. For example, Joyce described a family life extremely vulnerable to additional stressors due to her husband’s drinking, irregular work habits, and abuse towards her:

Number seven was having a lot of medical problems. We had discovered she was glucose – had a glucose intolerance, and it nearly – had nearly killed her. Then
number eight had arrived – was on the way, and that was devastating. That – I didn’t know how I was going to cope with that one, because by that time the writing was on the wall. I had been physically abused. I’d been verbally abused, and that had been going on for years. Couldn’t go to anybody, couldn’t tell anybody. You were too ashamed. It was dreadful. It was – as far as I’m concerned, I’ve served hell on earth. Without going into all of the dramas that happened from that, I had left him twice, and went back, because where do you go with eight children? (Joyce - interview 1).

Joyce was among a number of women in the study who spoke about Catholicism and its influence on their decisions to stay in unsatisfactory marriages. Some participants spoke about very complex family lives and multiple traumas surrounding infertility, mental illness, and violence:

We lived here and I had a series of pregnancies, miscarriages, premature, still birth – anything that could go wrong went wrong. After the twelfth one I had a little girl who survived and then when she was three I had another little boy and he lived two days and died as well. So I’ve had a fair bit of trauma . . . . My first husband had mental health problems. He was never officially diagnosed, but he either had schizophrenia or bipolar because he had these violent mood swings where he’d attack you and tear off and then when he’d come back he couldn’t remember – he’d wonder where you got the bruises from so there was definitely problems there (Elizabeth - interview 1).

Dianne had adopted two young children when she became pregnant and went on to have another two children. She said her husband, who had an undiagnosed mental illness at the time, could not cope after this because she could no longer work to support the family. He soon became very violent towards her and this continued even after she had left him:

Because [the house] was in both of our names he was allowed to do what he liked and he’d come and I didn’t have a front or back door. So, he terrorised us and the police’s response was ‘get out of the state.’ So, the kids were traumatised and I don’t know – Andy to this day, can’t talk about his father (Dianne - interview 1).
Men also spoke about complex and unsatisfactory marital relations:

My wife, Clare, had a nervous breakdown. She had to go to actually a mental hospital for six months, so I brought Graham up from two days old – I didn’t know what to do, but he survived . . . My first wife, was a bit of a philanderer – and she used to sleep with all [her co-workers], and I don’t believe Janet is my daughter. But my first wife used to beat me, if she didn’t get her own way she used to beat me. She’d throw knives at me, plates, milk bottles (Robert - interview 1).

Gary spoke about the negative interactions continuing after his separation from his wife:

We were both living under the one roof. Every morning as I would go to work she would stand on the front veranda [and say] ‘You’re a mongrel and a bastard and I hate your guts and so do the kids.’ That was probably a bit over three months. Just as an example (Gary - interview 1).

Stressful and abusive marriages were often cited as contributors to the participant’s poor mental health while parenting. Jean made two suicide attempts while living in a violently abusive marriage. Shirley’s situation also impacted her mental health:

It’s a whole drama, I mean you could write a book, but this is what has happened. His father was a paedophile so I noticed it, I told him, I warned him you’re going to get in to trouble and he used to say, ‘It’s all in your mind, it’s all in your mind, you’re the one that’s sick.’ . . . Eventually he got caught . . . . Anyway, then I was so exhausted I even collapsed at work at one stage and the doctor said, ‘What’s the matter, you don’t collapse?’ So I had to tell him what was happening, all these court cases coming up. He said, ‘Why put up with this, another woman wouldn’t have lasted twelve months in [that] marriage.’ And, of course, there’s the Catholic background. I know the vows you stick to it and all that (Shirley - interview 1).

Some participants described family stressors or events limiting their time with their estranged child. For some participants, male and female, this was being the primary breadwinner:
I don’t think I ever worked less than 80 hours a week and up to 100 hours a week and I probably didn’t have as much time to give the family as I could have or should have (John - interview 1).

Helen spoke about numerous stressors while she was trying to work in a male-dominated industry and parent her son alone:

By [19]82, I had secondary melanomas because I’d just had too much stress. The reason I got the first one was because I’d had three traumas in a year, and you know – anyway so I got – all this time my poor son is trying to have to grow up through teenage years. So I was injecting myself daily – well I started off I got Richard to inject me, which caused him great traumas. I never thought about that, I was just using him as a helper, a pair of hands (Helen - interview 1).

As stated previously, the vast majority of participants divorced when their children were in primary or high school. Many said this event caused considerable stress to their children in terms of relocation, financial restrictions, and readjustment to new partners. Trish told a familiar story:

That [was] the house we lived in for 15 years, the boys grew up in, but once everything went sort of haywire and he left, and I was with someone else, money got a little bit sort of awkward, and I sold and I got good money for the house and that and from then on – Todd didn’t really want to come [with us] (Trish - interview 1).

The Participant’s Life at the Time of Estrangement

Participants referred to, but did not emphasise, the events going on in their life around the time of the estrangement. However, most were experiencing life changes or stressors during these times. In fact, all participants spoke about situations giving them less time for their child, or which might have been experienced as a ‘move away’ from the child. Most did not perceive it in this way when telling their story, but most of them acknowledged or wondered if these conditions could have contributed to the development of the estrangement. Of course, the most common event at the time
of the estrangement was a divorce or separation. Shirley said after her divorce she experienced a lot of financial hardship and her mental health suffered considerably. She also spoke about ‘going out’ more frequently and leaving her son at his friend’s house – the family he eventually chose to live with when he estranged from her.

When ‘choice’ was an element of the estrangement, the chosen parent seemed more able to offer some sort of normality or stability at the time, particularly the family home:

My health was up the creek. My doctor said to me, ‘Well, Lois, we can’t do anything more for you. You’re going to have to remove yourself from that situation.’ It took till the September . . . ’cause I had to walk away from the children as well. So that was hard – I cooked this wonderful meal. It was like a last supper (Lois - interview 1).

Other participants also spoke about events possibly perceived as a ‘move away’ by the estranged child, such as the grief of losing a partner, commencing university as a mature-aged student, moving to a new area, disbelieving an allegation of abuse, or needing to support one of their (non-estranged) children through a difficult period, such as divorce, custody proceedings, or mental illness:

I lost [my husband] to cancer, which I had a breakdown after that and I was in [Mental Health Clinic] . . . I’m thinking I’m in there for grief, my children thought I was in there for attention – the biggest break in my family was then, from my children. When I lost him, I more or less lost my children too (Jean - interview 1).

In many instances, a change in a participant’s circumstances had prevented him or her from doing something that he or she had previously done for the child, e.g., giving financial support, being a stay-at-home mother, or providing babysitting services. Carol spoke about the time leading up to the estrangement with her son. She said she had to erect some boundaries with her son, and asked him to move out to live his own
life. Shortly after this, Carol and her husband’s circumstances changed and they also had to ask their son to repay a previous loan, which he was unhappy about. During this period, their daughter also needed considerable support due to divorce and custody proceedings, leaving even less time for their son. Elizabeth said her son perceived their request to find his own accommodation as a form of rejection:

After [my son] and her broke up, well, he came and lived with us, but then we said, ‘look you've got to get out and make your own life.’ Well, from then on I think he felt we had pushed him away (Elizabeth - interview 2).

In some instances, the estrangement of the child might have been a defensive or protective behaviour. For example, Helen spoke about the beginning of the estrangement from her son:

He’s only 14 you know. But I didn’t understand that at the time. I was fighting for my life. I mean there is no way I could have done anything other than I did . . . but the kid’s sort of [thinking], you know, your mum’s going to die (Helen - interview 2).

In Helen’s instance, she was the only family her son had, so it was highly likely he perceived her condition (and potential death) as the ultimate act of ‘moving away’.

**Estrangement Doesn’t Have a Meaning…or Does it?**

I really can’t understand it. If somebody had put a sheet in front of me with all the whys and wherefores on it, perhaps I’d understand. Not knowing is really hard, where it all went wrong. If there’d been some major bust-up, or if it was a volatile family… (Betty - interview 1)

The most recurrent theme in participants’ stories related to the meaninglessness of the estrangement. Participants could not find adequate reasons to justify the estrangement or make it easier to accept. This was not to say they did not proffer reasons, and it certainly was not for lack of searching for answers. Participants said their search for
meaning started from the inception of the estrangement and persisted in their current lives. Throughout the interviews, they would re-engage with this process. Participants would offer a thought, a reflection, or a theory about the cause of the estrangement or its continuation, but this was always qualified with a ‘maybe’, ‘possibly’, or ‘could be’. Quite often participants would retract a statement, or rebut their theory with competing evidence. Estrangement, it emerged, was very difficult to make meaning of, and it left participants with what they often described as endless unanswered questions. Many saw the research process as a possible source of answers, when they could not find them through literature, counselling and constant reflection. After discussing the preliminary findings at the second and final interview, Betty said, with what appeared to be a mixture of disappointment and relief:

I really thought there must have been a pattern, something constant that we’d all done (Betty - interview 2).

The most prominent questions participants were left with were questions about their contribution to the estrangement. Participants asked questions like, ‘What did I do wrong?’ and ‘Should I have done something differently?’ They often second guessed the estrangement outcome by pondering questions like, ‘I wonder if I?’ and ‘Maybe I should have’. Many participants spoke about this questioning as relentlessly frustrating:

And that’s the thing, I don’t know. And it drives me insane. The first thing you think of when you get up in the morning and the last thing you think of again at night, what have I done? What if I had done something different? What if? Why? Every day (Marguerite - interview 1).

Others said the questioning was less frequent, but it always remained part of their life:
I don’t know, I really don’t – I sometimes search my mind, sometimes I get lowly days and I sit down and I start to think – and I get photographs out and I read Selina’s diary, because she used to keep a diary. I think is there anything in there that we did that we shouldn’t have done? Nothing, nothing (Robert - interview 1).

As Robert’s statement shows, satisfactory answers were rarely or never found. Participants said they questioned almost every area of their lives searching for answers. Their theories about the child, the cause of the estrangement, and its continuation often comprised multiple explanations. Common explanations included issues possibly affecting the child’s personality, such as divorce, childhood illness, mental illness, drugs and alcohol, and trauma. The following dialogue shows the multiple explanations offered in one exchange:

Marguerite: We thought maybe it’s to do with drugs but he’s very antidrug. Unless something radically has changed, he was always very antidrug.

David: I think he’s got something mentally wrong with him. In other words, I think he might have a tumour…

Marguerite: He wasn’t the same when he came back from [War Zone] (Marguerite and David - interview 2).

When asked about the estrangement, Virginia said she was at a loss to explain it. However, later in the interview, she said wistfully:

There is something wrong with all of them. I don’t know what it is. It’s all in the genes, I think. There’s a gene. There’s something not working (Virginia - interview 1).

Lois’ narrative illustrates how some participants questioned their attachment or relationship with their child. Some questioned whether they achieved early bonding
with their child, while others wondered whether they were too attached in the child’s adolescence:

I always worried about Lawrence because I had a dreadful pregnancy with him, insofar as – none of my pregnancies were difficult or the births or anything else – but the unhappiness level was extreme while I was pregnant with him. I couldn’t bond with him for three or four days, and I couldn’t call him by name and I couldn’t – breastfeeding was difficult . . . So I – I’ve explored all those issues. Did that impact on Lawrence’s little personality? His decision – I don’t know (Lois - interview 1).

I’ve got to nurture people, you know what I mean? So, maybe I suffocated her. But, she wanted me to (Diane - interview 1).

Others questioned their parenting ability or availability to parent the child:

She probably could have done with some clear boundaries and she didn’t get them really and we didn’t have enough time together, I suppose (Debra - interview 1).

Some parents wondered whether they had been too hard on their child, but many wondered if they had been too soft. Participants also said time had brought hindsight and this, too, added to their questions and concerns about their own contribution to the estrangement:

This is looking back now, knowing what I know now. But I was just a mother. Now he started with – looking back, I suppose he would have been depressed, and he took that depression out in anger, and it was mainly aimed at me (Carol - interview 1).

Others spoke about signs of the relationship disintegrating and how they only realised this retrospectively. Some spoke about critical moments or clues they might have missed. Some questioned whether they should have done things differently, such as being more patient with daughters-in-law, or given money when asked.
Another part of this questioning appeared to be about how children could turn their backs on participants when they had contributed so much to their lives. This was not framed in terms of the child ‘owing’ the parent or wanting to be ‘repaid’, rather a questioning about what these contributions must have meant to the child. For example, participants seemed to question whether these contributions meant anything to the child. Some wondered if they had a right to feel sad about the child’s lack of acknowledgement. Participants seemed to ponder how a child could take these gifts and then estrange, when they generally viewed these contributions as acts of care:

And she relied on us to mind him quite frequently . . . she got pneumonia and he was sick, so she sent him over to us to mind for five days, not that we minded, that was quite all right. And we minded him while she went to tech. I’d go and pick him up from pre-school, bring him to our place, we’d give him his tea, bath him, take him back to her place . . . And it just went from that to nothing (Frances - interview 1).

Nevertheless, participants often described the estranged child extremely favourably. For example:

Brett, that’s my younger son, who is the nicest of all my children. Not my favourite but he’s the nicest. He’s the nicest-natured, nicest character. I could probably say he’s a really nice, wonderful human being. Great father, wonderful husband (Jean - interview 1).

Participants also regularly stated they were very close to the young child, adolescent or adult-child prior to the estrangement. Even those who had difficulties with their child as a teenager still spoke positively and with admiration for their child’s characteristics and or achievements. However, as cited by the participants, their positive traits often made it more difficult for them to make sense of the estrangement:
I would always start [the conversation]: ‘Why would he be like this?’ Then Steven’s brother would say, ‘Why would he be doing this? I saw him growing up. He stayed with us. He’s a beautiful kid. Why’s he doing this?’ (Carol - interview 2).

While most participants questioned how ‘this child’ could do this to them, or leave their family behind, and this was particularly troubling when the participant felt very close to the child. For example, John was estranged from two daughters at the time of the interview, but he felt particularly distressed about one of the estrangements:

My elder daughter – I’ve probably got a different approach to my elder daughter than I have with the younger daughter because as I said, my elder daughter and I were – there was always that little bit of distance. She always sided with her mother and tended to ignore me to a degree. But my young daughter and I were always so close and to think that suddenly she’s turned against me; that really bothers me (John - interview 1).

Some participants questioned how their knowledge of, and expectations for, their relationship with the child could have been so inaccurate:

I could have understood had it been my daughter, but my son was the one I was really close to, but he was the more motivated, I must admit . . . He has done very well. Most caring boy. Even my elderly stepmother when I speak to her she says, ‘What happened to that caring boy we had?’ (Betty - interview 1).

Some questioned how the child could continue in their life without seeking answers:

Why didn't Lawrence when he was told all the things, why was he like a sponge that absorbed everything from that other side of the story, why didn't he come and bang on my flat door and say, ‘Hey you’ and be confronting to me (Lois - interview 2).

Others questioned what they viewed as extreme or odd behaviour:

Yeah, the things I would like to know why – why did he want to completely go away and change his name? (Robert - interview 2).
The Meaning of Family

[Family] is the most important thing. Things can get bad, things can get worse and things can be wonderful but without a family, you really haven’t got anything (Marguerite - interview 2).

Most participants’ searches for meaning about estrangement were connected to their ideas about ‘family’, ‘parenting’, and ‘motherhood’. For the majority, estrangement breached the unspoken rules of ‘family’, and in the second interview participants were asked to explain these ‘rules’. Most participants stated that ‘family’ or a ‘good family’ participated in shared activities and interests, where members knew – and allowed for – each other’s idiosyncrasies, and interacted positively with each other most of the time. Sharing meals, being invited to a movie, and being comfortable enough to drop into one another’s houses – if even for a few minutes – were important:

Had a really lovely dinner party last night with Chris, Sharn, Dianne and Ellen . . . It was such a lovely thing to see two of my children so comfortable and happy in each other’s company plus their offspring Sharn and Ellen really loving being together. What more could any mother, grandmother need for a perfect night – loved it – and went to bed with the thought that this is how I want to feel, emotionally ‘The last sleep of my life’ (Jean - diary entry).

Participants said, in a good family, members would feel welcomed, comfortable, and included in events:

It’s just having that ongoing kind of relationship where you’re very comfortable in each other’s company because you’ve done all these things together and you know where the other person’s at (Debra - interview 2).

Additionally, family seemed to be the place where most people felt they should feel safe about sharing and discussing their problems:
I think if your family is close you can discuss things with them. Where you don’t want to go outside and discuss things with [others] (Ronald - interview 2).

Also members would feel disappointed if they were not included in ‘family business’:

I felt very ‘outside the square’ not being able to help in any way, not comfortable enough to approach Sue on any level. So will have to just wait until someone!! decides to tell me if I have a great granddaughter or not!! (Jean - diary entry).

However, there was also an acknowledgement that comfort and sharing took energy, and investment:

Because a normal relationship is you go to a park and they sit and someone falls off the swing and you go and pick them up and you never forget those sort of nice things. Just to arrive for three quarters of an hour to be sitting like this and how are you doing? . . . . So that’s really the issue. To have a relationship you’ve got to spend time, you’ve got to sit and talk. You can’t just sort of bowl up (Charles - interview 2).

A shared history also provided knowledge about idiosyncrasies, comfort and stability to members of the family:

It's a connection to the past, I think. I think it's someone who knows your past and understands you, I think (Trish - interview 2).

For example, Lois’s diary entry showed that her shared interest kept her feeling connected to her son, even after 20 years of estrangement:

I had the most wonderful experience in 2001 and went to Lords to watch a test with Merv Hughes. Do you remember going to Sydney to watch the matches? And we sat in the Brewongle stand. Do you remember asking could you bang on the boundary tin as Dennis Lillee ran, in the chant Lillee, Lillee? (Lois - diary entry).

For some, a shared history was important to a ‘good family’ because it connected members to their past and helped in identity formation:
People like to know who their grandpop is. I mean if we are having, how many young kids go to Gallipoli each year? Not because it’s fashionable, but because they think, oh gee, hang on where did I come from (Gary - interview 2).

For many participants ‘family’ meant big extended family gatherings where everyone was included, invited, and attended:

So we always had a big family-type environment. My husband is one of 10 children. And the cousins, we all went to the beach together, we all did those things – in the 60s or 70s, because you had to do that, there was nothing else to do . . . . So family was everything (Carol - interview 2).

It seemed that attendance at these events was important, and a missing individual or family was noticed, and spoken about:

So his cousin said to me one day when I was at a family function, ‘What’s wrong with him, why doesn’t he come to any of these things, what, is he up himself?’ And I said, ‘I don’t know, I don’t think she likes us.’ And he said, ‘Do you want me to go down and knock his fucking head off?’ I said, ‘No, I don’t’ (Carol - interview 1).

When the family had few members, keeping family together took on an additional importance:

We were all a very close happy family, always birthdays, Christmas, very close. And as I said, I worked really hard at that because my family are all in England. I don’t have any here. So it meant a lot to me (Marguerite - interview 1).

Keeping family together and family gatherings were particularly important to participants who felt abandoned, had lost parents when they were young, or did not feel close to their parents:

Because I come from such a dysfunctional family myself and I vowed and declared when I first married that I would always keep a myth of my family together and welcome anyone into it, so that we could gather more people around us instead of having this fraction thing (Jean - interview 2).
My father was a very hard man, he was a very strict man but he did what he thought was necessary in the upbringing of my sister and I. I never got close to my father, never and I always regretted that . . . I always thought to myself, I do not want my children to feel the same about me and I don’t want the same relationship between my kids and myself as I had with my father (John - interview 1).

Members of a ‘good family’ also provided emotional and practical support to one another when they could:

Once again Dianne leaves me another gift without fanfare – $50 in an envelope on the bed!! ‘MUM THIS IS A LITTLE TOWARDS THE INGREDIENTS FOR TONIGHT’S DINNER’. She is so generous, loving and thoughtful (Jean - diary entry).

Members of a good family also provided extra help when one of its members needed support:

She’s had mental health problems for years and years . . . . We were always down there looking after them . . . [She] wasn’t managing very well when the kids were little. She had Shannon and they’ve had a rattley old bed so we bought them bunk beds. It’s been just an ongoing thing (Elizabeth - interview 1).

Yvonne described family as:

A close-knit network. An emotional anchor. I think that sums it up. I mean, a network, a supportive thing, an anchor, you sort of hang onto for support anyway. But that’s a family (Yvonne - interview 2).

Participants considered membership of a family to be a long-term commitment and an unbreakable bond. This belief seemed to contribute to the initial shock and disbelief associated with estrangement:

I never thought I’d die a lonely old woman, I always [thought] I’d have, especially [my husband] and the kids (Betty - interview 1).

Many participants said there was no reason good enough to break the family bond:
You can’t just drop family like that. There’s got to be whole heaps of reasons. Like I remember, like I told you about my [relative] that did that murder, they didn’t give up on him (Virginia - interview 2).

Some wondered how someone could cut family ties without remorse. For example:

Can you forget a family? Four brothers that were all so close, and a mother and a father? (Lois - interview 1).

Most participants thought that if you were a good parent your children would stay with you:

[Our relatives have] these children and I know it sounds terrible, but we worked the hardest with [our children] and gave them the most and did everything that we – and – because that’s what they say: ‘We can’t believe it Carol. We can’t believe that you and Steven’. . . . Where he’s got sisters that are divorced, the kids are on drugs, they are doing this, they’re doing that. They’re still coming back [laughs] (Carol - interview 2).

One of the greatest benefits of ‘family’ and being a grandparent seemed to be watching children become productive and successful members of society:

Basically you’re seeing yourself again. Jeez that’s me or that’s a product of me (Gary - interview 1).

Love, companionship, extension of the family, seeing your grandchildren grow up. I don’t want anything from them, I don’t want them to do anything for me, I just wanted them to be there (Betty - interview 2).

Participants often viewed motherhood as a very special role involving a very unique and important relationship with a child:

You know what a powerful thing the relationship with your mother is. That’s why it’s hurting so much that she has to cut it off because you know your own relationship with your mother is so powerful. Even though they might be good or they might be
bad or they might be indifferent and they can still twist a knife – but that’s such a powerful relationship (Debra - interview 1).

Mothers were also meant to protect their children’s innocence regardless of personal cost:

What do you expose children to? They’re such precious little creatures that you don’t want to expose them to anything. The best thing – was for me to manage it the best I could, and then find a way out of it and make a new life (Lois - interview 1).

Motherhood deserved ‘respect’ from their adult-child (and their partners). This was the least one could do for a ‘mother’ or ‘parent’. For many, ‘respect’ meant courtesy and acknowledgement from their adult-child:

I just said to Pamela, ‘Don’t invite me if you’re having Mary and the family, because I don’t want to be put through that rudeness again. I am beyond it. They are my daughter and my grandchildren, but that doesn’t give them the right to speak to me like that’ (Joyce - interview 1).

And respect also meant keeping in contact with one’s mother:

I mean really I don’t care if he’s got 10 women or half a dozen wives. He’s only got one mother. And he knows that. He knows really that he should really contact me (Marguerite - interview 1).

Some participants said they had not been perfect mothers, but still felt they should be treated with respect for their effort:

I never claimed to be the perfect parent nor have I ever expected my kids to consider me their responsibility but I do believe I should be respected at least as much as a person deserves (Jean - diary entry).

Some thought that their children should be able to look beyond parenting mistakes and forgive any wrongdoings:
I look at her and I think, at some stage in your life, you’ve got to look at your own parents and just say, well they did the best they could at their time because everybody is subject to all those cultural influences. It’s amazing how pervasive they are in people’s decisions about what they do (Debra - interview 1).

The value of motherhood was particularly high for some women in the study, who stated they always wanted to be a mother, or motherhood was their primarily goal in life:

And that’s all I ever wanted to be, was a good mother and a good grandmother. I didn’t care how I got to be a mother, couldn’t have cared less, you know (Jean - interview 1).

When I first met Dianne, she said:

I’m the mother’s mother. I am so motherly. I was on TV because I took in all these homeless kids. I’ve got to nurture people, you know what I mean? (Diane - interview 1).

In the second interview, she said:

I always wanted to be a good mother. I thought that not being a good mother was the worst thing that could happen, but not to be a mother is the worst thing ever (Dianne - interview 2).

This was reiterated by other women who felt very disillusioned and let down by ‘motherhood’:

In the whole scheme of things, I don’t know anymore. I just don’t think I would ever been a mother again . . . basically just one person doesn’t need that much hurt. I said your heart can only take so much. No, I wouldn’t do it; you don’t have that opportunity and have that luxury of going back, do you. If you had that luxury you would bundle them up without any feelings and send them back where they came from (Lois - interview 2).
These notions of family left many participants wondering how this could happen to ‘their’ family. Most felt the estrangement was uncharacteristic for their child, their relationship, and their family:

We weren’t perfect but we were very close, we had each other and especially being in and out of refuges and in rental properties. We survived. We’re survivors. We survived and I thought they were doing well (Dianne - interview 1).

However, this is interesting considering the findings below suggest that many families had historical estrangements in the intergenerational family (see *The Ripple Effects of Family Estrangement*). It appeared, when participants talked about estrangement as uncharacteristic for their family, they meant the ‘nuclear family’ or their expectations about their nuclear family.

*The Ripple Effects of Family Estrangement*

Chad not only blocked us, he blocked his cousin, he blocked my stepmother – who was always his grandmother to him – and his sister. We all got blocked. It wasn’t just reserved for us (Betty - interview 1).

When an adult-child became estranged, it affected a number of people in the nuclear and extended family. It was very common for the participant to mention that the child had also estranged from siblings (and their families), cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. This was often mentioned as a considerable part of the loss, because it was connected to a breakdown of family togetherness:

And it has hurt us so much. He won’t speak to his sister, his brother, anybody in the family at all. His father. He lives near his father. No-one. And it’s very hurtful, because we have family get-togethers and I’ve got other grandchildren and they know about their Uncle Curtis and they’ve never seen him (Marguerite - interview 1).
In some cases, the child was completely estranged from the entire family but, in most instances, it was a separation from some members of the family and partial or infrequent contact with others. However, partial contact was often cited as difficult for non-estranged siblings who might feel caught in between the estranged child and his or her parent. This was potentially difficult in relation to information exchange, loyalty, and staying impartial. Over time, some estranged children also became estranged from the person they initially chose over the participant, and some had also estranged from friends. In some instances, the participants said other relatives felt a need to defend them against the estranged child:

I think Philip is getting angrier and – that’s the eldest one – I think he’s getting angrier and if he does meet up with [his estranged brother] I think he’s going to do his block. You know, because they can see what it does to me (Marguerite - interview 1).

My mother, when she heard that he’s brought the clothes [I had given to the children] back, she immediately the next day went to her solicitor and drew him out of the will. So there’s a different aspect all over again. That’s her way of protecting me, but then I feel like saying, well mum don’t protect me like that because in a way you’re hurting me, because you’re hitting back at [my] son and you’re hurting me (Janelle - interview 1).

However, estrangement was not confined to the participant, the adult-child, and the associated relationships. Participants regularly mentioned existing and historical intergenerational estrangements within their family:

Of course, my brother and I, haven’t seen each other since dad’s funeral and that was eight years ago. Before that, it would have been 10 years ago. I never set eyes on him at all. He never phones, nothing (Janelle - interview 1).

My brother has now been disowned because he is a compulsive gambler and stole from me when he came up. And I said, ‘That’s it, I’m not helping you anymore.’ And so now I send him a card at Christmas and his birthday, and he sends me one. And
that’s the only communication we have, because I can’t trust him (Helen - interview 1).

But when I think about other things, I can remember about my father. He had a falling out with his own brother when they came out and they came here as young boys and that was just around the depression time. They had a big falling out and never spoke to each other for practically all the rest of their life (Debra - interview 1).

The instability of relationships was commonly referred to, where people stopped communicating and then came back together again:

But, he was virtually estranged from them for a while, my elder grandson from his mother and father, or his mother and step-father... But, of course, if he fell behind with his rent, my sister and I would help him out... He is now actually living back with them (Ronald - interview 1).

I didn’t see [my father] for about a year, and I can remember I was walking up the street, I was working, and he was on the other side of the street. And I kept walking and he crossed the road. He said, ‘Dolly, how long is this going to go on for?’... I was fine after that. Until – we had another break, thanks to my mother again, but it was only for probably a year or something, when I had the kids little (Jean - interview 1).

**Reconciliation**

At the first and second interviews, four participants spoke about reconciliation with six adult-children who had been estranged. All of these estrangements had begun in childhood, or when the child was an adolescent or in their early twenties, and had continued into adulthood. Participants described these estrangements as the result of the children choosing between parents at the time of divorce. Lois had reconciled with her three sons within five years of the estrangements being realised, and she continued to have frequent and very satisfactory relationships with these sons and their families after the reconciliation. Shirley had been reconciled with her son for six years, after
22 years of estrangement. Her state of reconciliation was something many of the other participants would have classified as emotional estrangement. She had only seen her son (and granddaughter) four times since the reconciliation, and not at all in the previous two years. She had not met her son’s wife. However, Shirley felt happy she had some contact and considered her relationship reconciled, because she phoned her son every six to eight weeks, and had spoken to his wife on the phone. Yvonne had been reconciled for three years with her daughter after a period of 28 years of emotional estrangement. She described a relationship not fully resolved or comfortable, but one in which she found satisfaction and contentment. Robert had reconciled with a daughter after 10 years of estrangement, and found happiness in visits from his daughter and her family.

In addition to these reconciliations, Marguerite phoned me after the second interview to inform me her son had contacted her after five years of complete physical estrangement. She told me, after she had reached the palliative stage of her illness, she had made a decision to put a notice in the paper to let her son know she needed to speak to him. Her son contacted her one day prior to the notice being published. At the time she phoned me, she did not know what had persuaded her son to contact her but they had arranged to meet face-to-face. Marguerite was extremely happy and excited at this prospect. She told me she could not have cared less about the reasons for her son’s estrangement. She just wanted him home before she died. I have not heard any more from her.

For the majority of participants, reconciliation happened unexpectedly, and at the child’s instigation:
One day I’m sitting in my office and the receptionist said, ‘There’s a lady here to see you’, I said, ‘What’s her name?’, she said, ‘She won’t tell me.’ Anyway, it’s my daughter . . . She sat down and we spent two hours together, and we went through everything, everything that had happened. And from then on we’ve been great, still are. She’s got three children…and they come up and see me quite regularly, and we’re back together (Robert - interview 1).

He brought all his clothes and everything in an old pollen bag…and knocked on the door and said, ‘Mum can I come and live with you?’ And fell into my arms, ‘I can’t do it anymore.’ So he – that was lovely (Lois - interview 1).

Shirley was the only participant whose reconciliation – after 22 years of complete physical estrangement – resulted from her persistent contact. She spoke about a process of gathering enough courage to contact her son. Steps included buying a card (which she had left in a drawer for months and had not actually sent), searching for his address in phone books and on the electoral roll, and going to a wellbeing group to let go of some of her hurt. Finally, she found her son’s phone number and decided she was strong enough to call:

Eventually he came on [the phone]. He said, ‘Yes, yes.’ He went like that and I said, ‘Hello Wade, it’s your mum here.’ And he started screeching, ‘I have no mother, I have no father’ screaming in the phone . . . . He kept on screaming for a few seconds and eventually he calmed down and I said, ‘Well can I ring you again? Is it all right if I ring you again?’ I said, ‘Would you like my phone number?’ He said, ‘It’s already registered on my mobile phone. I’ve already got it.’ I said ‘Well that’s good then, yes okay lovely to talk to you take care’ and that was that (Shirley - interview 1).

It was another month before Shirley called again, and her son agreed to meet her:

Then about March I got the urge again and I thought well at least he didn’t hang up in my ear and he didn’t reject me and by doing that workshop it gave me enough confidence, all right then if he rejects me, so what these days . . . I said, ‘Would you like to meet me in the Buddhist something, they’ve got a celebration.’ At first he said, ‘Yes, that would be nice’ (Shirley - interview 1).
While this first arrangement did not eventuate, Wade agreed to meet his mother at another location, on another date, and the meeting proceeded without difficulty.

At reconciliation meetings participants were able to gain some clarity about the cause the estrangement, and why the child had returned. Lois’s sons confirmed that their father and his family had placed a lot of pressure on them to create distance from their mother after the divorce, and eventually the young men had to choose who they wished to have contact with. Robert also asked his daughter about the origins of the estrangement:

She said, ‘Mum told us not to, mum said, you are not ever, you are never, ever to contact your father.’ . . . But she’d grown up then of course, that’s was, 1990 when she came back. She’d grown up and got married and had children and realised that, I want to see my dad (Robert - interview 1).

Shirley also asked her son about the roots of the estrangement:

We started talking and I can remember saying to him, “Didn’t you ever ask your father why [they divorced]?” He said, ‘I thought you broke the marriage.’ He said he was holding the grudge against me because I broke them up. I said, ‘Why me?’ I said, ‘didn’t you ever ask any questions?’ I said, ‘What about Alison’ – her name was Alison – I said, ‘what about Alison?’ He said, ‘I trusted him.’ He still wanted to put his father on a pedestal, I trusted him (Shirley - interview 1).

When asked why she had decided to contact her son after such a long period apart, Shirley said:

I felt – I wanted something off him and then – I don’t know whether I rang up or he rang up and he called me mother and I cried and cried and cried. So I wanted to be acknowledged I think . . . So after 22 years, yes, to sort of acknowledge me then and the way he said it something clicked in me and I thought God, all this drama and all this pain just to be acknowledged (Shirley - interview 1).
**Conclusion**

This chapter described the factors ‘pushing and pulling’ the emotions, actions, and lifestyles of participants after they realised they were estranged from an adult-child. Over time, participants learnt to accept the estrangement and to implement strategies to assist them to ‘learn to live with estrangement’. However the ‘push and pull’ effects and triggers for pain never fully dissipated for most participants. The majority of participants continued to try to make meaning of the estrangement in their life story, and the majority still desired reconciliation. This chapter aimed to describe the participants’ experiences as close to their lived reality as possible. The following chapter will discuss these findings in light of the literature and theory documented in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.
CHAPTER 7

Discussion

This chapter discusses the major findings of this study presented in Chapter 6. As was found in the literature reviewed in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, family estrangement is more prevalent than is generally thought and has rarely been studied in isolation. Hence the phenomenon of family estrangement was uncovered in a diverse range of literature on the family and found to be akin to Bowen’s notion of cutoff and as well to the social psychological concepts of ostracism, rejection, and exclusion. A diverse range of theories shed light on the nature of family estrangement, such as Bowlby’s attachment theory, life-course and life-span perspectives, theories of conflict, grief and loss, and parental alienation. These theories provided a lens through which to review the findings of this study.

Chapter 6 documented the experience of 25 parents in later life who were or had been estranged from their now adult-child and his or her family. Most participants experienced estrangement as a significant loss. It was an unanticipated, unexpected, unchosen, and chronic loss for which participants felt ill-prepared. The experience was highly stressful and traumatic, and the lack of clarity surrounding the estrangement appeared to threaten their health, wellbeing, and resilience. Although there were some examples where participants had made sense of the estrangement experience, most family estrangement situations violated participants’ multiple and long-held assumptions and ambitions, and were often viewed as a personal failure, making it considerably difficult to reinstate meaning in later life self-narratives. Participants not only experienced the grief reactions associated with an ambiguous
loss, but were also subjected to the social stigma associated with tainted or devalued parenthood. In many cases, the stigma accompanying estrangement positioned the participant precariously for social rejection, and they had to take active steps to manage this situation. This was particularly pertinent for female participants.

Participants in this study described events, prior to and at the time the estrangement was realised, which may have been perceived by the adult-child as rejection or relational devaluation. Most of this study’s participants were divorced from their spouse at the time when their estranged children were either children or adolescents, although a few of them were in their 20s or 30s. Nearly half of the participants suggested that interparental conflict or domestic violence were present in their families prior to and after divorce. Some said they had been preoccupied with other issues or stressors around the time of the estrangement, which might have resulted in having less time for the child during that period. Several participants said that their values and beliefs differed significantly to those of the estranged child – and or his or her partner – making it difficult to visit or communicate with the child. Participants also described common factors possibly associated with the development and occurrence of estrangement, including their children’s attributes, and the ways they behaved which were consistent with an avoidant attachment style, and third party alienation. How then might their recounted experiences be explained?

The first factor discussed – though not necessarily the most important – is the socio-historical context in which the estrangement was situated. Hence this chapter commences with an overview of parenting in the 1960s and 1970s. It proceeds to a brief discussion about the commonality of estrangement in the family system. Thereafter, the later-life experience of estrangement is explored through the lens of
grief and loss theories, particularly Stroebe and Schut’s (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) dual process model of coping with bereavement, Boss’s (1975) theory of ambiguous loss, and Doka’s (1985) notion of disenfranchised grief. Goffman’s (1963) theory of stigma provides a way to conceptualise the possible effects of dominant cultural ideologies about parenting, and particularly gender and motherhood, on the estrangement experience. The potential contributors to family estrangement – as experienced by participants in this study – are explored through the social psychological dynamics of rejection, betrayal, and hurt with insights from attachment, family stress, and parental alienation theories. Finally, an integrated theoretical framework is presented to compare current estrangement-related literature with findings from this study.

Before commencing this section, caveats must be made. It is presumed that each individual involved in estrangement has his or her own perspective, but only one person’s perspective has been documented in this study. Data collected about the causes of estrangement lacked verification or corroboration from alternate sources of evidence, such as the child or spouse. As detailed in Chapter 5, retrospective data collection and the emotional content of the subject matter might have altered the participant’s recall and influenced their narratives. The data analysis, as described in the previous chapters, revealed many common themes about estrangement and the experience of living with it, but there were also exceptions and these are acknowledged throughout the discussion.
Parenting Generation X: The Social Context

The family is not a static entity, but is shaped by context, including time and place. It is useful to view estrangement from a life-course perspective, where the family’s experience is considered alongside trajectories or patterns of behaviour, transitions, such as divorce, and contextual issues, such as historical events, gender, and socio-economic status. This section commences with a brief description of the nature and status of marriage, parenting, and family during the period in which participants raised their children.

The participants in this study grew up in Australia, the United Kingdom, or Southern Europe in the 1930s to 1960s, and married and had children primarily in Australia from the 1950s onwards. Participants’ estranged children were born between the early 1950s and the early 1980s, but the vast majority were born in the 1960s and 1970s (a group commonly known as Generation X\textsuperscript{16}). It is difficult to make definitive comments about the influence of socio-cultural constructions across this time frame, but it is useful to view some of the ideologies possibly informing participants’ views about marriage, family, gender roles, and childrearing. According to Mannheim (cited in Everingham, Stevenson, & Warner-Smith, 2007), the formation of the consciousness or ‘natural’ worldview occurs most prominently in youth, so the ideologies of the 1940s to 1960s are likely be most salient to understanding the participants’ expectations about marriage and family.

While the participants in this study did not always adhere to the cultural norms described in this section – and they offered many examples of acting outside of these

\textsuperscript{16} The term Generation X has been used to describe varying cohorts across time, but generally it refers to people who were born following the post-World War II baby boom - i.e., in the 1960s and 1970s - in Western countries.
social expectations – they regularly spoke about unfulfilled desires and internalised pressures to conform to dominant ideologies and parenting practices. This was particularly so for the women over 65 years of age. Participants said they married and raised children in a period of significant social conformity, where marriage and childbirth were social expectations. Motherhood was extremely important to most of the women in this study and the majority of male and female participants viewed mothers as the ‘natural’ and ‘indispensable’ carers of children.

In Australia, industrialisation shifted production from the household to the workplace and, by the first half of the twentieth century, there was a shift from a rural to an industrial base (Reiger, 2005). A marked division of labour along gendered lines, with men participating in the workplace and women in the domestic sphere, commenced during this period (Lindsay & Dempsey, 2009). Dally (1982) said the idealisation of motherhood, underscored by moral and religious ideologies prior to WWII, was magnified and politicised thereafter. The official idealism of motherhood became synonymous with bringing women – who had experienced a brief period in the workplace during the World Wars – back into the domestic sphere to free positions for returning soldiers. Motherhood was viewed as a woman’s primary and most valuable role in society during this period: “The importance of the family, of mother love, mother-infant attachment and constant mother care” (Dally, 1982, p. 92) were emphasised, but there was little support available to mothers and families apart from healthcare for babies and small children.

The importance and responsibility of motherhood was reinforced in the 1940s by the work of the psychoanalytic movement on the role of mothering in the development of the child and adolescent. At this time, the concept of the
schizophrenogenic mother and Bowlby’s work on attachment was captured – and some say distorted – by politicians who promoted increased expectations about the type and quality of care to be afforded to each child (Dally, 1982; Poole, 2005). Mothers were viewed as the source of their children’s behaviours and illnesses (Dally, 1982). These ideas were to persist into the 1960s when “psychologists introduced fears of ‘juvenile delinquency’ if children were not reared carefully” (Reiger, 2005, p. 60).

Many of the female participants in this study spoke about sheltered childhoods that kept them naïve about the realities of childrearing and adult relationships. Their parents also held high expectations for their moral conduct in romantic relationships, giving them little time to become acquainted with their beau before making a decision to marry. One participant spoke about her fears of pregnancy – because her mother said she would be sent away and the baby would be given up for adoption – and how she subsequently married to prevent such a shameful incident. Another spoke about her boyfriend beating her when she became pregnant, and her family’s insistence that she marry him regardless. Female participants spoke about marriage as an inevitable event: remaining single did not appear to be an option. Some said marriage was the natural progression from their childhood status and a way to leave – or break free from – the family home. Some wanted to have children and believed that marriage was the ‘natural’ and only socially acceptable way to achieve this. Others said that marriage was the natural progression from a sexual or romantic attraction to their partner. The men in this study rarely spoke about their reasons for marriage. The majority of male and female participants married in their early 20s.
Poole (2005) suggested that the nuclear family became the dominant family form in Australia during the 1950s and 1960s when fertility rates were high. Marriage was socially desirable and demographers described a ‘marriage boom’ after WWII with 90 per cent of women of a marriageable age becoming married in the 1950s and 1960s (Gilding, in Lindsay & Dempsey, 2009). Sex outside marriage and unmarried motherhood was stigmatised, sexual activity generally began in marriage (or after the intention to marry), and couples were expected to marry if pregnancy occurred outside of marriage (Lindsay & Dempsey, 2009). There was a greater emphasis on marriage as a product of romantic attraction rather than of economic necessity (Lindsay & Dempsey, 2009). The average age at first marriage in 1971 was 22 years, compared to 28.5 years in 2009 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010; Lindsay & Dempsey, 2009).

Most participants in this study lived in nuclear families after marriage, and work was divided along gendered lines, with men in the paid workforce and women in unpaid childrearing. Most female and some male participants spoke about ‘motherhood’ as the most important role in a family, and particularly in childrearing. Fathers had little involvement in the caring aspects of parenting, and were most likely to interact with children when teaching life skills, such as how to use a hammer, or participating in recreational activities, such as playing cricket. In Australia, in the 1950s and 1960s, “the breadwinner/homemaker model reached its pinnacle as the template for organising family life” (Lindsay & Dempsey, 2009, p. 22). The Commonwealth Public Service Act 1902 required that women retire from the public service once they married, and this policy was also enacted in many other areas of the workforce (Poole, 2005). The typical father operated in two different spheres, specialising in paid work in the public sphere and taking on a more remote role as
adviser, protector, and disciplinarian in the home (Singleton, 2005). The typical mother specialised in the private sphere managing emotions, attending to domestic duties, and socialising children (Lindsay & Dempsey, 2009).

Participants in this study also spoke about the family as a private entity where the father (and the couple) made the decisions. Extended family rarely contributed to or interfered with such decisions. Both the female and the male participants said that issues such as mental health, drug and alcohol use, and domestic violence were rarely acknowledged by anyone outside the immediate family. Divorce was often considered the ‘very last resort’ by extended family and society. In the 1950s, the family had become a private and isolated sphere, housed discreetly from the intergenerational family on a suburban block (Dally, 1982; Reiger, 2005). Based on anti-communist sentiment, this arrangement was promoted by successive Australian governments as “a source of personal freedom and security”, but ironically family problems, such as domestic violence and child maltreatment, remained hidden and unattended by the sovereignty and privatisation of the family (Reiger, 2005). Women were particularly vulnerable if their husbands were violent or financially controlling (Porter, 2005). Single mother families, Aboriginal families, and some migrant families were often regarded by experts and authorities as inadequate for childrearing (Reiger, 2005).

While some female participants in this study worked during marriage and after bearing their children, most returned to work following divorce. Although increasingly common, most participants said that divorce continued to be frowned upon in social circles. Social and cultural change commenced in the late 1960s in Australia due to diverse events, including increased migration, the Vietnam War, the civil and women’s rights movements, and social changes, such as the increased
availability of the contraceptive pill, led to the deinstitutionalisation of the family and strict gender roles (Poole, 2005). The Commonwealth Public Service repealed its marriage regulations in 1966 and many of the women who had raised families in the 1950s began returning to the paid workforce (Poole, 2005). The Family Law Act introduced no fault divorce in 1975, and many couples who were married in the ‘boom’ era divorced in a ‘marriage bust’ period (Lindsay & Dempsey, 2009). A new ideal of the ‘involved father’ started to emerge (Lindsay & Dempsey, 2009), but many suggest that conceptions of the ‘hands-off’ father remained entrenched in a biased Family Law Court system routinely awarding women custody of children after divorce (Singleton, 2005). This then is the socio-cultural context against which the findings of this study are discussed.

The Experience of Estrangement from an Adult-child

Estrangement as a Common Experience

This research uncovered estrangement as a common family experience that was often concealed as a result of personal shame and embarrassment developed from, and fortified by, unrealistic social constructions of parenting and particularly motherhood. During the initial recruitment period, potential participants offered their participation thinking there would be insufficient estranged people to conduct the study. However, I was actually overwhelmed with volunteers for the research, and people who did not fit the research criteria regularly asked to be contacted when another study was being conducted. Sixty-five estranged people contacted me within the first three weeks of a regional media release. Over two years later I continued to receive enquiries from estranged individuals about research participation, research results, and books or articles about the subject. Participants in this study often portrayed their estrangement
as an aberration, a solitary experience, unique to their family. Many thought they were
the only – or one of few – families experiencing estrangement. However, most
participants could name at least one other family estrangement in their
intergenerational family or in another family. Estrangements did not appear to occur
within socio-economic boundaries, with people from very different backgrounds
experiencing this phenomenon.

Estrangement as an Experience Affecting the Whole Family System
The primary aim of this research was to examine the individual’s experience of being
estranged from an adult-child. However, participants spoke about the estrangement
and its ripple effects across the family system. Participants were almost always
estranged from their grandchildren as a result of the estrangement from their adult-
child. Even when contact occurred with the grandchildren and the relationship
remained close, interaction was affected or strained by the adult-child and parental
estrangement. For example, one participant was delighted when her grandson invited
her to a school graduation function, but she had to be very careful about where she
stood and how long she stayed at the function. Siblings, new spouses, and other
members of the extended family were often estranged as a result of the adult-child’s
estrangement with the parent. In some instances, the adult-child estranged from all
members of his or her nuclear family, but mostly the estranged child had contact with
some relatives in the family system.

The Grief and Loss of Family Estrangement
Most participants experienced estrangement as a significant loss. They spoke about it
as a psychosocial death, where the child was still alive, but that their personality or
essence (as the participant’s child) was perceived to be dead (Doka & Aber, 2002).
Mostly participants described a rollercoaster of grief symptoms after they had realised their child had estranged from them. Initial responses included emotions of shock, anxiety, and helplessness; protest behaviours, such as crying; and cognitions, such as disbelief. These were interspersed with, and sometimes succeeded by, emotions of anger, sadness, frustration, and disappointment; protest behaviours like contacting, searching, and looking out for the child; and cognitions, such as preoccupation with the estrangement and thoughts of self-harm.

Participants spoke about their emotional pain as if it were a physical sensation which is consistent with social psychological and psychoanalytic theories suggesting that rejection triggers physiological defence mechanisms or threat responses associated with physical pain (MacDonald et al., 2005). Studies have shown that people often describe emotional hurt as a physical assault (e.g., being torn apart) and experience physical illness as a result (Feeney, 2005; Fitness & Warburton, 2009). Estrangement was most commonly described as provoked, and often sustained by, feelings of hurt associated with unexpected events which participants found difficult to understand (Fitness & Warburton, 2009): “Deeply hurt feelings are likely to occur only when a partner’s actions or words pierce one’s deep, visceral, generally unconscious sense of safety and security” (Shaver et al., 2009, p. 99).

As time went on, participants increasingly appraised the permanence of the experience and took steps to ‘live with estrangement’. A minority even suggested this was a relatively quick process, and these participants described a less distressing experience of estrangement. However, the majority of participants described estrangement as a unique and prolonged loss that posed considerable challenges when compared to other losses they had experienced such as divorce or the death of a close
relative. Many spoke about prolonged periods of mourning and an inability to fully adjust to, accept, or make sense of the loss, even when they had a fulfilling life without the child. Participants in the present study conceptualised grieving as an intrapersonal and interpersonal process continuing for the remainder of their life. In other words, they never got over the estrangement, which had no predetermined outcomes or end points. Rather, they were locked into an ongoing process of: (i) acknowledging the reality of the estrangement; (ii) experiencing grief reactions; (iii) learning to live without the estranged child or with their new behaviours; (iv) learning to live with new ways of relating socially; and (v) creating a fulfilling family life while never knowing if the child would return.

The participants’ responses to estrangement from an adult-child might be explained by theories of grief and loss, particularly Stroebe and Schut’s (1999) dual process model of coping with bereavement, Boss’s (1975) theory of ambiguous loss, and Doka’s (1985) notion of disenfranchised grief. The experience of loss in later life as recounted by participants in this study revealed new information on the impact of estrangement-related stigma on social connectedness. From a life-course perspective, understandings of grief and loss, estrangement, stigma, and social disconnection might be viewed as products of the social, political, and historical context in which they were experienced. While the discussion below refers to the trajectory of grief, including participant adaptation, it must be acknowledged that three participants had realised estrangement within the last five years, so their stories related to the acute experience of grief rather than to a long-term adjustment to loss.
The Dual Process Model

Stroebe and Schut’s (1999) dual process model of coping with bereavement offered a way to explain the participants’ experiences of estrangement. While specifically developed to examine the death of a spouse, the model shed light on the contextual factors influencing the intrapersonal processes involved in grieving for a child lost through estrangement. Influenced by stage and task models, as well as cognitive stress theories, the dual process model sees grief as involving multiple stressors to which people must respond by employing emotional and problem-focused coping strategies (Hansson & Stroebe, 2007; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). As shown in Figure 7.1, the model gives equal recognition to loss and restoration orientations (Machin, 2009).

*Loss orientation* includes processing the experiences and emotions associated with the experience of loss, including yearning and ruminating, revisiting memories and memorabilia of the lost person, going over the circumstances surrounding the loss, and experiencing emotions and behaviours like sadness and crying (Hansson & Stroebe, 2007). *Restoration orientation* refers to responding to secondary sources of stress or attending to the tasks to be completed due to the person’s absence, such as taking over tasks previously undertaken by the person, shaping a new identity, and reorganising life without the person (Hansson & Stroebe, 2007).

The model improves on previous understandings of bereavement as a passive condition or one in which the bereaved must confront and complete grief work to avoid pathological manifestations (Hansson & Stroebe, 2007; Stroebe & Schut, 2005). Rather, it incorporates systems thinking and, through the concept of oscillation, suggests adaptive coping is reliant on the bereaved person confronting and avoiding
The dual process model was useful in understanding the experience of estrangement described by participants in this study. Most participants experienced long periods of loss orientation, suggesting the process of grieving or mourning estrangement was slowed or altered by its ambiguity and the nature of parental attachment. Many participants said triggers, such as photos, sightings of the child, and
upcoming family events, initiated brief periods of loss orientation even for decades after the estrangement was realised, and most expected to revisit the loss for the rest of their lives. They also spoke of appraisals about the permanence and immovability of estrangement and how these cognitions assisted them to take steps to ‘live with estrangement’. These steps aligned with the notion of restoration orientation. Most participants appeared to focus on restoration as the most effective way of taking breaks from or taking control of and moving away from their loss. However, social aspects of restoration were sometimes thwarted – particularly for women – by the disenfranchised nature of family estrangement. For some participants, it appeared there were times when the interplay of ambiguity and disenfranchisement effectively froze the grieving process, as discussed below.

Estrangement as an Ambiguous Loss: The Personal Experience
In estrangement, as recounted by participants, the physically estranged adult-child was physically absent, but psychologically present in their life due to the parental attachment bond and memories of the child, as well as social reminders of the child’s existence. The emotionally estranged adult-child was often physically absent from the participant’s life, but psychologically present in their mind. However, when the emotionally estranged child visited, participants also spoke about the child as psychologically absent, changed, or unreachable. Estrangement was a loss which participants strongly associated with lack of preparation and choice: two factors shown to increase initial grief responses (Machin, 2009). It was highly stressful and traumatic, and the lack of clarity could contribute to chronic loss or frozen grief threatening to health and resilience (Boss, 2006a; Wayland, 2007).
Family estrangement might be seen as a type of ambiguous loss: “a situation of unclear loss resulting from not knowing whether a loved one is dead or alive, absent or present” (Carroll et al., 2007, p. 223). The cause, duration, and potential for reconciliation were often ambiguous in estrangement. Many participants in this study did not know whether they would see their child again before they died. Some hoped the adult-child would return and reconciliation would eventuate before their death. This hope kept them from fully acknowledging or mourning their loss. In reality, some had lost all knowledge of their child’s whereabouts and most saw reconciliation as highly unlikely. Nevertheless, the estranged person’s concept of the loss remained ambiguous since the person was caught in the tension between two opposing ideas simultaneously: the estranged person might or might not come back (Boss, 2006a).

Ambiguous loss also has the “potential to disturb and traumatise relational boundaries and systemic processes” (Boss, 2006a, p. 7). For example, one participant in this study was quite annoyed about a relative who repeatedly sent a Christmas card asking her to pass on season’s greetings to her estranged son. She felt her loss had not been acknowledged or heard. However, it was doubtful whether the relative meant to cause distress and it was more likely her lack of certainty and rules for this type of situation resulted in the maintenance of her usual festive practices. The uncertainty about the state of the relationship might lead to role ambiguity, where other family members were unsure about who was ‘in’ or ‘out’ of the family system, and what roles should be assumed or left unattended. Extended family members might not wish to offend an older person by assuming a role or duty previously carried out by the estranged child or even by acknowledging his or her absence. They were likely to be “perplexed about whether to express sympathy or maintain a solid sense of normalcy.
and/or hope” (Walter & McCoyd, 2009, p. 20). Ambiguity might also prevent the bereaved from fully attending to restoration tasks, such as taking on new roles and identities because they did not know whether the child would return:

Without an overt death in the first case, it seems premature and even cruel to grieve in socially sanctioned ways; in the second, to begin to grieve would remove the hope of return of the lost one to the social milieu (Walter & McCoyd, 2009, p. 20).

Some might be uncertain about what they were supposed to adjust to, and for how long. Additionally, the incomprehensibility of family estrangement appeared to stop some participants from seeking the social support necessary for adjusting to a new life without the estranged child.

Widely accepted in the literature on ambiguous loss, is the idea of successful or healthy mourning involving the reorganisation or reorientation of one’s world without the deceased or absent person (Field, 2006), but the nature of estrangement altered this trajectory. Viewed through the dual process model, estrangement might be seen to prevent or slow down a person’s restoration orientation, because changing roles and activities would signal an acceptance of the finality of the loss. While most participants said they spent a considerable amount of time experiencing grief reactions, the processes associated with loss orientation also appeared to be hindered because there were no rituals for mourning an ambiguous loss in Western society. The act of mourning tended to signal finality and a loss of hope. The ambiguous nature of estrangement appeared to leave many participants stranded between loss and restoration at different periods after the estrangement was realised. Only time contributed to a greater sense of acceptance, allowed a person to move more freely between the two orientations, and contributed to a ‘new normal’.
Attachment bond

Participants in this study said the loss associated with estrangement was especially difficult because of the nature of the child-parent relationship. None expected their child to treat them poorly or dismiss them altogether. For many, this situation was described as unimaginable, and their disbelief fuelled their uncertainty about the child’s return. The pain associated with estrangement was not only for the immediate but also for the past loss. The duration and intensity of the child-parent attachment bond also created many more memories and memorabilia than a social relationship, and family photos and gatherings were constant reminders of the loss. Some losses might be more difficult to accept due to the nature of the attachment bond: “The parental attachment bond to children is a result of powerful biological, evolutionary, and psychological forces operating to ensure that children will come into the world and be cared for” (Anthony & Benedek in Rubin & Malkinson, 2001, p. 221).

Weiss (2001) suggested that different classes of relationships evoked different responses to threats of loss or rejection. People carried representations or mind associations of particular relationships and would respond according to these models. For example, parental models would associate the self with being protective of the child, and parents presumed this role would remain – in some form – throughout life. The grief following estrangement could be associated with the obstruction of the protective role, as well as the actual loss.

The loss would be determined, in part, by the extent of emotional dependency on the lost attachment figure (Shaver & Tancredy, 2001). A bond would remain despite the absence of the attachment figure and long-term attachment feelings and thoughts could be triggered easily by photos and memorabilia (Weiss, 2001). Studies
consistently showed that the death of a child or adult-child was an event which elicited more intense reactions than other deaths and one which impacted on the parent across a lifetime (Moss, Moss, & Hansson, 2001; Rubin & Malkinson, 2001). Additionally, death could lead to the parent investing more time and emotion into the deceased child than living children (Rubin & Malkinson, 2001). While these studies did not refer to estrangement, they shed some light on the duration and intensity of the attachment bond and how difficult it might be to engage in activities and processes signalling finality or letting go of the bond.

A person’s attachment experiences and style (secure, anxious, or avoidant) would also affect the way in which he or she responded to loss (Bowlby, 1979; Shaver & Tancredy, 2001). In general terms, the news of losing an attachment figure activated the attachment system with the aim of re-establishing contact with the person (Field, 2006). Following a death, the permanence of the loss and the futility of proximity-seeking behaviours would be accepted over time and the bereaved would stop searching for his or her loved one (Field, 2006). However, the ambiguity of estrangement – and particularly signals of hope, such as a sighting or contact – might delay the deactivation of these systems and protest emotions like anxiety, anger, and pining might be experienced for longer periods than they would after a death.

**Meaning making**

Consistent with research on grief, many participants portrayed bereavement adaption as closely associated with cognitive appraisal and making sense of the loss (Neimeyer, 2006; Stroebe & Schut, 2005). Most struggled with the meaning of estrangement, suggesting it had no place in their life story and only brought misery. They viewed estrangement from a child as an aberrant event, when compared to normal losses such
as the death of a relative or serious illness. Many believed that estrangement was unique to their family. Most said family estrangement was inconsistent with their understanding, beliefs, and values of family, including its longevity and coherence, and the interdependency, mutual support, comfort, shared activities, links to the past, and private and safe domain it offered for sharing problems. It appeared that family estrangement violated participants’ assumptions and ambitions making it considerably difficult for them to reinstate narrative coherence to their lives. All losses have the potential to interfere with taken-for-granted assumptions about ourselves and the world, effectively altering our sense of narrative consistency and stability (Charles-Edwards, 2007). Neimeyer (2006) explained:

From a constructivist standpoint, human existence is more than simply a series of disconnected experiences imposed on people by objective circumstances, but instead arises from our attempt to ‘emplot’ the various episodes of our life story within a broader framework of meaning that makes them both intelligible and significant (pp. 62-63).

Ambiguous losses have significant potential to violate assumptions about life’s predictability, spiritual convictions, and the goodness and trustworthiness of humans, effectively disrupting the life story that once made sense (Neimeyer, 2006).

In this study, there were three key examples of participants who had clearly made meaning or sense of the estrangement experience and this appeared to have impacted positively upon their adaption to the loss. One participant framed his children’s estrangement in terms of the positive attribute of loyalty. He understood that his ex-wife would not allow the children to have contact with both of their parents, and yet he was proud of the loyalty his children showed to their mother. He gained solace from knowing that he had passed this quality onto his children. Two
women framed their child’s estrangement in terms of a greater purpose, one in God’s will and another in spiritual beliefs about life’s lessons, journey, and purpose. Boss (2006b) suggested that those who were more tolerant of ambiguity would have less difficulty adjusting and would be less likely to experience a prolonged grief reaction to an ambiguous loss. The three aforementioned participants appeared to have a greater tolerance for the ambiguity of estrangement due to their ability to make sense of it and still find life meaningful despite it.

Life stage and ambiguous loss

The importance of, and investment in, meaning or sense making was also connected to life stage. Estrangement had the potential to affect the older person’s fulfilment of middle and later adulthood developmental tasks. In this study, some participants suggested estrangement overshadowed and denied them the satisfaction associated with role fulfilment and generativity. Participants were either in their middle or late adulthood before first experiencing estrangement from their child.

In terms of Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development, middle adulthood was marked by generativity or the desire to offer guidance and assistance to the next generation and contribute to society rather than remain stagnant and self-centred (Machin, 2009). However, this was hindered for participants who no longer saw their child or grandchildren. When participants were emotionally estranged, they often suggested that their child resisted any guidance or assistance from them. Late adulthood was marked by ego integrity, the desire to integrate and accept past life experiences, and ward off the despair and disgust associated with non-acceptance (Machin, 2009). The major developmental task in later life was engagement in a process of life review and introspection about personal accomplishments and
challenges (Walter & McCoyd, 2009). However, the estrangement was often viewed as a significant failure, which made it difficult to integrate into successful life narratives. Most participants said they were proud of their children’s lives and achievements but their early contributions to the development of the child did not seem sufficient to reconcile the current estrangement, nor were their early contributions sufficient to constitute ‘good enough’ or successful parenting in later life.

Theoretically, during late adulthood people might be much more able to find meaning in their losses and confide in others through reminiscence, but this would depend on the nature of the loss and availability of confidants (Walter & McCoyd, 2009). Later life might bring maturity, flexibility, and possibly even a dampening down of emotions and greater mood stability (Hansson & Stroebe, 2007; Moss et al., 2001). Older people might have had more experience with normative and non-normative loss and this could bring greater resilience or a greater stress load (Hansson & Stroebe, 2007). Despite this, many participants in this study found it difficult to integrate the loss associated with estrangement.

Some participants said getting older and experiencing personal illness, or the illness or death of others, brought the reality of their death to the fore. This highlighted the lack of time they had to resolve the estrangement or make sense of the experience. Indeed, Williams and Zadro’s (2005) work suggested that ostracism – or in this case, estrangement – acted as a reminder of one’s mortality, giving a glimpse of the child’s life once the participant had passed on. Some participants were already engaged in a type of anticipatory mourning, thinking about their death without reconciliation, and how the child might continue without them.
One might expect estrangement from an adult-child to reduce the instrumental support available to the participant and to have a negative impact on later-life lifestyle and wellbeing. However, participants rarely mentioned a reduction in instrumental support and in no more than a cursory manner such as shown in the comment: “I suppose it would be nice to have him help me set up my new computer.” Most participants said they were easily able to fill the practical roles left void by the participant, with non-estranged children, partners, friends, and relatives. When asked about the impact of family estrangement on the later-life lifestyle and personal wellbeing, participants always concentrated on the loss of the emotional and supportive roles the child once played or the roles the participant anticipated them playing in the family.

Own contribution to the loss
For many women in this study, the idea that a child no longer wanted contact made them feel extremely inadequate as mothers, and guilty about their failure. The women blamed themselves and often protected partners and children from their pain about the estrangement. Many said they did not speak about it because it upset others. They seemed to take full responsibility for the loss, and to adopt a protective role as a consequence. Hiding the estrangement (to be discussed further in *Estrangement as a spoilt identity: Stigma and gender*) was seen not only as self-protecting but also as a way of protecting other family members from unnecessary pain.

While death due to illness or accident might not be preventable, estrangement was seen as preventable because the child was still alive, albeit absent. Estrangement implied one or both parties could have done something differently, and this belief appeared to be linked to feelings of guilt and inadequacy for many male and female
participants. In some cases, the participant had not been informed of the reason for the estrangement, so did not know where to begin to examine the situation, let alone find a resolution, or deal with the guilt. Not knowing led to endless speculation about what the participant had done wrong. Williams (2001) suggested: “being told the reason would at least give the target a sense of ‘interpretive control’. That is, just knowing helps them explain the situation and gives them a feeling of understanding” (p. 22).

Throughout childhood, and throughout life, people develop theories, beliefs, and expectations about the ways particular relationships should function and, on this basis, they construct and evaluate their own interpersonal relationships (Fitness, 2001). Family estrangement tests people’s ideas about family – and socially accepted standards and codes of behaviour for parents and children – leaving them unsure about whether they had adequately fulfilled these standards or instilled these ideals in their adult-child.

**Gender-oriented grieving**

In this study, most of the women and some of the men reported significant emotional reactions to the loss. However, some male participants seemed to ‘get over’ the loss of estrangement quite quickly. For example, one said he had a business to run and divorce proceedings to manage, so he had no time to devote to grieving a loss he could do nothing about. Another said he put all his energy into a new relationship fully believing he could not change his ex-wife’s behaviours and the consequent estrangement from his children. While limited research was found on the role of gender in the grieving process, there was some consensus about the impact of social expectations and ‘feelings rules’ on the way in which male and female grieving was perceived and experienced.
Referring back to the dual process model, research revealed that women were more loss oriented or emotionally expressive after bereavement, and men tended towards a restoration orientation where they actively engaged with the practical consequences of the loss (Parkes, 2001; Stroebe & Schut, 2008). This was quite consistent with the ways participants described their grieving experiences. Women’s grief was more likely to be expressed affectively while men’s grief was more likely to be expressed through intellectualisation, and protective and problem-solving behaviour (Martin & Doka, 2000). In the case of parenthood, mothers were likely to react to the loss of a child with greater intensity than fathers (Martin & Doka, 2000). Historically, masculine-oriented grieving was seen as less adaptive, but studies have disputed this view increasingly in favour of the idea that their grieving was different rather than deficient (Doka & Martin, 1998). (These findings will be discussed further in Estrangement as a spoilt identity: Stigma and gender).

**Multiple losses**

A number of conditions have the potential to complicate grief reactions, including concurrent losses, crisis, illness, or disability (Doka, 2002; Machin, 2009). Participants threaded their experiences of loss, particularly relational or attachment loss (e.g., adoption, miscarriage, domestic violence, or abandonment) throughout their stories. Not wanting to suggest these losses were greater or occurred more frequently than in the general population, the significance which participants attributed to them, and the ease with which they connected them to the estrangement story, might have implications not only for the factors contributing to the development of estrangement, but also to their adjustment to estrangement. Many participants first realised the estrangement during periods of change and loss, when multiple stressors, such as
divorce, remarriage, personal illness, or the death of a partner, placed a significant
grief load on them, leaving them with a diminished capacity to attend fully to the
losses.

_Estrangement as Disenfranchised Grief: The Social Experience_

Participants described estrangement as a loss rarely recognised by others. The
perceived stigma associated with having an estranged child contributed to a ‘social
silence’ and participants’ reluctance to disclose their loss. It appeared society’s
vehement endorsement of the parent-child bond, and particularly the relationship
between mother and child, became the grounds for disenfranchisement. Female
participants were particularly vulnerable to perceived stigma and this modified and
limited their social experiences.

“Every society has norms that frame grieving” (Doka, 2002, p. 6) and govern
how people feel, express, and think about grief and loss. This knowledge is widely
recognised through social sanctions, such as bereavement leave entitlements (Doka,
2002). The theory of disenfranchised grief, however, relates to situations when a
person experiences loss but their grief “is not openly acknowledged, socially validated
or publicly observed” (Doka, 2002, p. 5). In many cases, it “goes beyond a situation
of mere unawareness to suggest a more or less active process of disavowal,
renunciation, and rejection” (Corr, 2002, p. 40). Disenfranchised grief results from
one or more of the following conditions: the relationship between the person and the
bereaved is not recognised; the loss is not recognised; the griever is not recognised;
the circumstances surrounding the loss cause embarrassment, shame, or stigma; or the
person expresses their grief in ways not sanctioned by society (Walter & McCoyd,
Participants said their loss was not recognised, they were not recognised and they often felt associated shame and guilt.

Estrangement as a spoilt identity: Stigma and gender

Participants not only experienced the grief reactions associated with an ambiguous loss, but they were also subjected to the social stigma associated with tainted or devalued parenthood. In many cases, the stigma associated with estrangement positioned the participant precariously for additional rejection, and they had to take active steps to manage this situation. Many spoke about perceived or actual experiences of devaluation or stigmatisation due to the estrangement from their adult-child and grandchildren. For example, one participant told how she confided in her doctor about the estrangement and later read a referral he had written which described her family as ‘dysfunctional’. This was particularly evident in female participants’ stories where motherhood was central to their life narrative. However, participants rarely used the words stigmatised or discriminated against, rather they appeared to internalise the experience as personal shame and embarrassment. They were constantly vigilant lest questions threatening to expose the estrangement might force them to be untruthful to keep it hidden.

Goffman (1963) saw stigma as having an attribute deeply discredited by society rendering the person ‘not quite human’. So the stigmatising process was a process of selectively labelling human differences, linking particular labels to negative stereotypes, placing labelled persons in a category with the purpose of separating them from those without the label, and exerting social, economic, and political power to create status loss, group discrimination, and social exclusion (Link & Phelan, 2001; Major & Eccleston, 2005). Additionally, a stigmatised person
generally subscribed to the standards of the wider society, making him (or her) “intimately alive to what others see as his failing, inevitably causing him, if only for moments, to agree that he does indeed fall short of what he really ought to be” (Goffman, 1963, pp. 17-18), and making shame a central aspect of the stigmatising experience.

Goffman (1963) identified three types of socially defined stigma: stigma of the body or disfigurements; tribal stigma, including race and religion; and stigma of character. According to his schema, estrangement might be seen as a character blemish closely associated with social expectations about family unity and good parenting. Additionally, stigma might be associative or experienced by associating with a stigmatised person (Goffman, 1963) so being part of a stigmatised group, even though one were an outsider, might lead to associative stigmatisation as: “Throughout recorded human history, treachery and betrayal have been considered among the worst offenses people could commit against their kin” (Fitness, 2001, p. 73). In this study, it became evident that participants also felt some degree of shame and stigma associated with their child’s socially inappropriate behaviour.

The interplay of sentiment and ascribed social meanings and expectations, such as social norms about good parenting, good families, good children and, particularly, good mothers defined intergenerational relationships. Social rules suggested good parents:

- Knew where their adult-children lived and what they were doing.
- Had adult-children who would look after them in old age.
- Enjoyed spending time with their grandchildren.
Marked important occasions with their adult-children and their families, such as Christmas, birthdays, Easter, and Mother’s Day. Clearly, estrangement violated these societal ideals and many participants suggested this disparity enhanced their embarrassment and pain. The degree of stigma experienced was related to the extent of social devaluation and the perceived threat posed by the stigma.

Stigmatisation represented “one response to factors that threaten our ability to derive benefits from living in social groups” (Neuberg, Smith, & Asher, 2003, p. 36). In its most fundamental form, estrangement might be viewed as a threat to the human socialisation and survival process, a breakdown of the attachment bond protecting children in early life, older people in later life, and the weak and ill throughout their life. People often stigmatised others to feel better about themselves or to alleviate their own discomfort and anxiety (Major & Eccleston, 2005). Indeed, estrangement might remind the non-estranged of their mortality and vulnerability to a similar fate.

The relationships and bonds between parents and their children are often portrayed as foundational and unbreakable, and family role divisions are often depicted as essential and universal (Connidis & Walker, 2009). The social construction of ‘motherhood as natural’ appeared to fuel many participants’ beliefs that estrangement was unnatural by comparison. Indeed, for Connidis and Walker (2009), once aspects of family were regarded as essential, people were less likely to view them critically and variances, such as divorce and estrangement, were then more likely to be perceived as threats to traditional family life. Frequently, these ideals have served as yardsticks to evaluate parents’ success in performing their ‘natural’ roles and functions, particularly for women whose biological ties to children tend to
substantiate these normative expectations (Bowden & Mummery, 2009). They align with previously mentioned research which suggested that public perceptions of abandoning a child or rejecting a parent was one of the worst things a person could do to a family (Fitness, 2005). This has been illuminated in a number of ‘deviancy discourses’ across time, where single, lesbian, and non-residential mothers were viewed as threats to the natural order (Arendell, 2000), and women who chose not to have children were treated with suspicion and contempt (Bowden & Mummery, 2009; Heitlinger, 1991). These discourses leave little room for alternative views about variance. For example, some young people might feel a need to separate from the family in order to become an adult, achieve independence, and start a new life.

These social norms constitute cultural scripts about parenting and motherhood in Western society. They are inculcated through socialisation early in life, and construct expectations or well-ingrained ideas about the consequences of violating or failing to live up to them. Once internalised, these norms constitute a stigmatised consciousness which is intolerant of family estrangement (Link & Phelan, 2001). In the present study, the women were particularly vigilant about not disclosing or talking about the estrangement for fear of stigmatisation, judgement, ostracism, or rejection. Remennick (2000) said:

Stigma as a psychological state is only possible when its carriers adopt the mainstream social definitions of the norm; this is especially true about hidden conditions. In other words, stigma is a psychological corollary of conformity. The more a woman identifies with the universal expectation of motherhood, the deeper her perception of stigma in case she cannot meet this norm (p. 823).

Most of the women in this study actively promoted and endorsed society’s construction of, and the importance attributed to, motherhood as the primary and most
important role a woman could hold. These women viewed estrangement as incompatible with a normal existence, normal family, and their sound reputation as a mother or parent.

Most of the women in this study defined themselves primarily as mothers, effectively making their success in motherhood as the main yardstick upon which to pass judgement. As women who were primarily exposed to the mothering ideologies of the 1940s to 1960s, and often limited in their choices outside of motherhood, it was likely that many participants “made home and the family into a vehicle for . . . power and control, status, and self-realization” (Friedan, 1981, p. 92). Many women described the considerable emotional fulfilment they derived from raising children. Additionally, motherhood ideologies were particularly strong for Catholic women in Australia during this period, and they were subjected to very real threats of damnation if they did not adhere to the Church’s teachings, including restrictions on birth control and valuing self-sacrificing mothers (Porter, 2005). It appeared as though mother work almost fortified the Catholic participants in this study when they faced quite unreasonable conditions within the marriage. Three Catholic women spoke about mothering as something purposeful which kept them focused and strong. Under these conditions, one might only imagine the significant loss associated with estrangement. Findings suggested that the ability of these participants to move towards a restoration orientation appeared to be hindered or prolonged.

Remennick (2000) believed the ability to resist stigmatisation was determined by one’s capacity to assume a critical stance about dominant ideologies and disconnect from the mainstream discourse. The men in this study seemed better able to do this. Although similarly affected, they seemed more able to talk about
estrangement in social settings, cited fewer instances of perceived stigma, and described less shame and embarrassment than the women in this study. Additionally, a few of the women, whose identities were firmly career associated, described less shame and guilt about the estrangement. In relation to the dual process model, these participants seemed more restoration oriented and found their adjustment to the estrangement less problematic than others in the study.

Major and Eccelston (2005) highlighted four main ways of responding to stigma-based exclusion: (i) enhance one’s desirability as a relational partner; (ii) withdraw; (iii) seek alternative bases of inclusion; and (iv) attribute exclusion to discrimination. Participants in this study primarily engaged in the first three strategies. People who feared social disapproval or rejection were most likely to keep aspects of their identity secret (Major & Eccleston, 2005). Most participants saw estrangement as concealable in many instances so they were able to enhance or maintain their desirability as a relational partner by keeping the estrangement a secret. Participants saw disclosing to someone they trusted as good, but disclosing to someone who was subsequently dismissive, belittling, or unsupportive could be very painful. Some sought alternative bases of inclusion by moving locations or taking a new partner.

For many, previously painful experiences or even their perception of social rejection led to an appraisal of concealment (including some form of withdrawal) as the preferable option. However, according to Goffman (1963), hidden or concealable stigma made one discredit able and participants certainly alluded to this:

Individuals who conceal or disguise a stigma may not only suffer from fear that their stigma will be discovered, but may also fear social disapproval for having tried to
conceal it. This may lead to anxiety in social situations with the nonstigmatized (Major & Eccleston, 2005, p. 74).

They spoke about being vigilant in social situations, where they redirected risky conversations, minimised the information they provided to new contacts, lied about their relationship with their child, and avoided questions rather than lie, or told half-truths. This was consistent with the older people in Jerrome’s (1994) study who explained their estranged child’s absence in terms of ‘busyness’ which was seen to be more socially acceptable than abandonment.

However, participants wanted to be honest about their lives and true identity and concealment appeared to deprive some of feelings of integrity. In social psychology, self-verification theory suggested that people had “a basic need to affirm their identity” and were “motivated to have others see them as they see themselves” (Ragins, 2008, p. 198), so disclosure could bring some satisfaction or closure. Considerable research suggested self-disclosure was also important in the initiation and maintenance of relationships (Pachankis, 2007), so concealment might actually prevent this closeness from developing in the first place, leading to further feelings of non-acceptance, ostracism, or rejection. Participants were always waiting for a difficult question or awkward situation where their shameful secret would be revealed and this did not seem conducive to making close associations.

A number of participants spoke about their withdrawal from situations where they anticipated questioning or exposure. The invisibility of family estrangement, or the ability of participants to withdraw, might provide temporary protection from stigma. However, it affected participants’ social interaction and hindered their full engagement. Additionally, this invisibility might have prevented participants from
recognising and connecting with others who were estranged and so impeded peer-group affiliation. When stigma was visible, those who were stigmatised readily recognised one another and they could offer support and a ‘place’ to talk about their issues. When stigma was hidden this was not possible, and the person felt alone. People were more likely to have reduced self-esteem when they were not affiliated to a group because they were more likely to internalise the shame and not view the stigma as an external imposition (Goffman, 1963).

Group affiliation also offered alternative views of the stigma, without which the stigmatised person was prone to negative views of their own condition or situation (Major & Eccleston, 2005). In fact, many participants in this study thought family estrangement was rare and their experience was unique. Some told tales of accidentally meeting someone experiencing estrangement and their surprise at the normality of his or her behaviour, and some were judgemental about other participants in this study when given the preliminary findings. For example, a number of participants made remarks about others who had more than one or two children estranged, with some suggesting that this indicated higher culpability. Participants lacked information they might otherwise have gathered about estrangement if they had engaged in a social dialogue about it but fear of stigma prevented them from seeking further information from books, groups, or websites. Their ability to conceal estrangement appeared to contribute further to their disenfranchised grief.

**Social responses to loss in later life**

Older people might be more likely to experience disenfranchised grief because of their socio-economic position in society (Machin, 2009). This is because “ageist perspectives tend to overlook or devalue the older person’s past, their current feelings,
competence, significance to others, and their multiple roles in the world” (Moss et al., 2001, p. 244). Sometimes age itself was the prime condition for disenfranchisement, with society viewing an older person’s grief as less worthy (Hansson & Stroebe, 2007). Ageing could bring potentially exclusionary practices, such as retirement and residential care, and these might also have the potential to reduce loss recognition and social support (Williams & Zadro, 2001). While participants did not specifically state that they felt socially devalued due to their age, some suggested their estranged and non-estranged adult-children were less patient with them due to age-related issues such as ill health and limited mobility.

Machin (2009) suggested the postmodern emphasis on individuality, autonomy, and control had contributed to the expectation that most ambitions could be realised and that it was possible to have it all: “In this climate it is not easy for people to openly acknowledge those aspirations which have been thwarted and which contradict the expectation of a life free of disappointment” (p. 25). Ideologies of success, if combined with shame, guilt, and stigma, might have the potential to hinder disclosures about family estrangement and meaning making in later life.

To conclude this section on disenfranchised grief, when mourning or social expressions of grief were denied, grief would be hidden, delayed, or ridiculed (Walter & McCoyd, 2009) and less social support would be available resulting in increased risk of social isolation in later life (Walter & McCoyd, 2009). Social isolation caused by disenfranchised grief could keep the person in a loss orientation and prevent him or her from engaging in restoration-oriented behaviours, such as socialising and
assuming new roles. Additionally, some participants perceived the non-recognition and stigma associated with estrangement as a further rejection or ostracism. In some cases, this added to their feelings of guilt and shame, and in others it fortified their belief they must somehow be flawed or deserve the estrangement.

The Estrangement is Realised: Associated Factors

This section examines associations within the data, and does not make claims about causation. Claims about the cause of family estrangement are akin to claims about the cause of child abuse or divorce. They are not verifiable. As a result, the following section discusses some of the interpersonal processes and mechanisms possibly correlated with family estrangement between parents and their adult-children, including patterns of parental behaviour, life transitions, and the socio-historical context. It proposes a number of associated factors emerging from the data warranting further investigation.

Participants in this study described events prior to, and at the time of the estrangement or the point it was realised that might be construed as rejection or relational devaluation by the adult-child. Therefore, the discussion about the factors associated with estrangement is based on a hypothesis that the child or adult-child’s feelings of rejection or relational devaluation, whether real or imagined, were central to the estrangement. When particular risk factors preceded, intersected with, or followed this perceived rejection, estrangement seemed more likely to occur. Many participants described their children as possessing attributes, and behaving in ways, consistent with an avoidant attachment style. Attachment theory suggests that an avoidant attachment style would increase the likelihood of the threat of rejection resulting in avoiding or withdrawing from the parent. In many cases, participants said
they had experienced multiple family stressors or stress pile-up prior to or at the time of the estrangement, which might have contributed to or increased the adult-child’s feeling of rejection. Many participants believed third party alienation contributed to the estrangement by initiating or exaggerating the adult-child’s perception of rejection and confirming or exacerbating their suspicions of parental rejection or devaluation. Additionally, stress pile-up and third party alienation have both been shown to reduce parenting capacity and responsiveness, which might increase the likelihood of the child developing an avoidant attachment style. When several of these conditions interacted and children evaluated their parental relationship negatively, they were likely to respond in three primary, though not mutually exclusive, ways by: (i) choosing what they perceived to be a less rejecting or less dangerous relationship over a relationship with the participant; (ii) choosing to stop contact or reduce emotional interactions with the participant to prevent further rejection or hurt; or (iii) using estrangement to punish the participant for the rejection.

**Perceived Rejection and Relational Devaluation**

The majority of participants in this study divorced when their estranged adult-children were either children or adolescents, although a few were in their 20s or 30s. Only three families had not experienced divorce but two of these had experienced at least one period of parental separation. Nearly half of the participants suggested interparental conflict or domestic violence were present in their families prior to and after divorce. Many participants pondered the effects of divorce, conflict and violence on their relationships with their children. Some participants said they were preoccupied with other issues or stressors around the time of the estrangement, which may have resulted in less time for the child during that period.
Clark and Mills (1979) defined two different types of relationships: exchange and communal. In exchange relationships partners did not feel responsible for each other’s welfare. Exchanges were of comparable value and were promptly reciprocated. In communal relationships, such as the family, there was an assumption that partners would look after each other’s welfare without immediate reward, and the level of emotional intimacy would sustain disagreement and inequity for a much longer period than in exchange relationships. However, people had limited resources to dedicate to both exchange and communal relationships and, according to the various theories of social exchange, they had to make decisions about which relationships they would invest in and which they would disregard (Sprecher, 1992). They would tend to “seek those with whom they can share rewarding experiences and ignore, avoid, or reject those whose proclivities are markedly different” (Leary, 2001, p. 13). People tended to make a low relational evaluation and sometimes rejected a relationship when they perceived one or more of the following:

1. Danger - the person might physically or emotionally harm them.
2. Low worth - the person had little to offer or contribute to their goals.
3. Exploitation - the person took more than they gave, or the transaction was unfair.
4. Rejection - the person did not like and accept them (Leary, Koch, & Hechenbleikner, 2001).

The findings of this study suggested a number of these traits were attributable to participants prior to the adult-child estranging from them. Regardless of the reality of, or reasons for, the participant’s behaviour, the adult-child’s perceptions and assessments of this behaviour would be the greatest indicator of relational devaluation and subsequent estrangement. In the majority of cases, the participant’s child had
been exposed to one or more acts or situations possibly resulting in an evaluation of
the parent as dangerous, of low worth, exploitative, or rejecting. The most obvious
situations were separation, divorce, family conflict, and domestic violence. Other
parental behaviours resulting in a negative perception included refusal to give money
or a loan; perceived dislike or disapproval of the child’s partner, activities, or
behaviour; having less time to spend with the child; or the perception the parent
favoured or prioritised another person (e.g., new partner or sibling) over the child. It
should be noted, this section does not claim to speak for the absent adult-child. Rather
it uses current research about the effects of divorce, high conflict marriages, and other
family stressors to examine the issues participants said might have been perceived as
rejection or relational devaluation by the adult-child.

*Divorce: Rejection, Danger, Low Worth, and Exploitation*

As stated previously, the majority of participants in this study had been divorced at
least once, and two of the three families who remained intact had experienced at least
one episode of parental separation. Most divorced participants suggested that divorce
and marital discord negatively affected their relationship with their estranged child in
some way such as spending less time with the child, the child blaming them for the
divorce, or the child being upset with them about the consequences of the divorce,
such as moving houses. Research on separation and divorce led to the expectation that
all children, regardless of age, consequent on the breakup of a family, were
susceptible to a range of negative feelings (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006)
depending on the way in which they interpreted or appraised the circumstances of the

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17 In this section child refers to infants, children, adolescents and young adults, when the knowledge or
research applies to all age groups. The age group is cited only when knowledge or research relates to it
specifically.
divorce, and these appraisals were often an accurate predictor of the child’s subsequent stress or wellbeing (Soper, Wolchik, Sandler, Tein, & Lustig, 2007). Studies confirmed many children felt rejected or abandoned after divorce (Chung & Emery, 2010; Wolchik, Tein, Sandler, & Doyle, 2002) and tended to associate parental absence with a reduction in care or love (D'Cruz & Stagnitti, 2009), which was an extreme marker of rejection. In fact, Laumann-Billings and Emery’s (2000) study showed nearly a third of young adults from divorced families wondered whether ‘my father really loves me’. This occurred three times more often than in the non-divorced control group.

Parental divorce also contributed to children experiencing disappointment, an emotion associated with being slighted, abandoned, or devalued (Cartwright, Farnsworth, & Mobley, 2009). It was common for children to be angry at parents and the divorce situation (Bulduc, Caron, & Logue, 2007; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000), a feeling associated with rejection and exploitation. Most children felt a degree of loss after divorce, an emotion associated with feeling deprived or bereaved of someone or something (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006). They were most likely to experience some distress and hurt. These emotions indicated considerable suffering, as well as current and impending vulnerability (Bulduc et al., 2007; Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000; Shaver et al., 2009).

Divorce could contribute to the child’s perception of the ‘abandoning’ parent as dangerous and capable of causing further emotional harm. Studies showed many children feared further abandonment or rejection after divorce (Chung & Emery, 2010; Wolchik et al., 2002). The non-residential parent was most likely to be viewed as abandoning the child and children often worried about losing contact with them
(Kurdek & Berg, 1987). The dissolution of the parental relationship might even create fears of the residential parent leaving (Wallerstein et al., 2000), and the belief that, if parents could fall out of love with each other, they could just as easily fall out of love with a child.

The parent’s actions might be perceived as threatening to the child’s physical wellbeing, especially if the result of divorce was lowered income, inadequate housing, and exposure to a dangerous neighbourhood (Eldar-Avidan, Haj-Yahia, & Greenbaum, 2008). A parent’s angry and possibly violent actions at the time of separation might be perceived as threatening by the child. One might only imagine the perception of rejection, and threat a child might perceive when a parent left the home to escape domestic violence with little or no notice. A parent might be perceived as particularly erratic and dangerous if the child was oblivious to the dissolution of the marriage.

Finally, children might be more likely to perceive parents as having little to offer or of lower worth after divorce. Children were most likely to blame the non-residential parent for the separation and resultant family problems (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000), and children might be highly critical of parents who had – or who were suspected of having – an affair (Cartwright, 2006), or who did not appear to be paying enough child support (Eldar-Avidan et al., 2008). There were often numerous difficulties involved in trying to maintain a relationship with a non-residential parent, which might contribute to a child perceiving the non-residential parent as having little to contribute to their lives (Metts, Braithwaite, & Fine, 2009).
Conflict and Violence: Danger and Divided Loyalties

For nearly half of the participants, interparental conflict or domestic violence were present in their families prior to and after divorce. Although parents had often tried to hide conflict and violence from their children, most wondered if it had contributed to the adult-child’s estrangement. Indeed, there was considerable research that indicated conflict and violence might contribute to children assessing their parents as dangerous, and subject them to feelings of divided loyalty. While parents often tried to shield children from conflict, research showed that conflicts occurring with children present were actually more negative, and more likely to contain child-related themes than those that occurred in private (Papp, Cummings, & Goeke-Morey, 2002). Studies have also shown children often perceived verbal and physical parental conflict as anger that posed a potential threat to family members, and the child (El-Sheik, 1997). This was particularly so if the conflict involved destructive behaviours, such as aggression, hostility, pursuit, marital withdrawal, or submission (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp, & Dukewich, 2002). In these cases, children were likely to exhibit fear, sadness, distress, and anger (Crockenberg & Langrock, 2001; El-Sheik, 1997, 2005).

Children in high-conflict families were more fearful than those in low-conflict families and were more likely to experience heightened fear during conflicts with their parents (El-Sheik, 1997; Fosco, DeBoard, & Grych, 2007). When children believed their fathers had caused the conflict or violence, they were more likely to perceive the situation as dangerous and react with negative emotions, such as anger (Crockenberg & Langrock, 2001; Cummings et al., 2002). They were likely to see their mother’s sadness as a sign of defeat and decreased hope for the marriage
(Cummings et al., 2002). Conflict might exacerbate a child’s fear and anxiety about the family separating and rejecting them.

Domestic violence posed a real threat to the safety and wellbeing of parents and children, and children were much more likely to perceive it as a personal threat if it resulted in parental injury or if one parent left the home (Fosco et al., 2007). Research about domestic violence has shown considerable negative effects on the victim of violence, including affective conditions, such as depression and grief; cognitive changes, such as lowered self-esteem; physiological conditions, such as sleep disorders and increased drug and alcohol use; behavioural effects, such as difficulties in normal daily functioning; and social effects, such as lowered functioning (Buchanan, 2008; Spitzberg, 2009). Mothers who have been exposed to domestic violence may redirect their anger to their children (Crockenberg & Langrock, 2001). Women living in fear often unwittingly transferred these feelings to their children (Buchanan, 2008) and parental expressions of fear have been linked to greater feelings of childhood insecurity (Cummings et al., 2002). Many of these effects impacted on the relational aspects of parenting and children might perceive the parent as rejecting, dangerous, or of low worth.

When there was high conflict or domestic violence in a marriage and subsequent divorce, children were more often subjected to divided loyalties, felt pressured to take sides, or to decide which parent had the most to offer. As mentioned previously, people evaluated their relationships on the basis of the costs and benefits of remaining in the relationship, and if the cost of keeping in contact with one parent might be the loss of the parent with whom they felt most secure – usually the residential parent, or the one perceived to be the most stable – then the child would
most likely choose that parent. (This will be discussed in more detail in *Third Party Alienation*).

**Different Values and Beliefs: Feelings of Rejection**

Several participants in this study suggested they had values and beliefs – particularly around parenting, money, and cleanliness – which were significantly different to the estranged adult-child and or their partner. Consequently, this posed difficulties when visiting or communicating with the child. Studies confirmed most families could tolerate different values and beliefs about abstract cognitive orientations, such as politics and religion (Bengston & Roberts, 1991). They accomplished this through a process of boundary recognition and adherence, where particular topics were accepted as off-limits or where parties discussed differences while agreeing to disagree (Cooney, 1997). However, disputes were inevitable when individuals radically challenged strongly held and inflexible family values and beliefs (Sichel, 2004; Sucov, 2006).

Research has found “people are often hurt by occurrences that are even more ephemeral and abstract than spoken words, such as being unappreciated, ignored, or left out of others’ plans” (Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998, p. 1233). This suggests the estranged child might have been alert to behaviours and non-verbal clues that their values, beliefs, behaviours, or partner were not acceptable to the participant. Children who felt implied or actual judgement or criticism were more likely to feel rejected: “[Parental] expressions of love withdrawal, humiliation, disgust, and contempt have been signalled out as prime forms of shaming because they are highly likely to convey a negative global attribution about the child” (Mills & Piotrowski, 2009, p. 264). Shame was the primary emotional response to a rejection.
implying the person was flawed, objectionable, and possibly immoral (Leary et al., 2001; Mills & Piotrowski, 2009). It appeared that when differences between values and beliefs occurred, the adult-child perceived this as a form of rejection and, in this study was most likely to result in emotional estrangement.

**Unfulfilled Expectations: Rejection, Exploitation and Low Worth**

In this study, a number of participants spoke about the estranged child’s expectations of the parent(s) and his or her negative reactions when these were thwarted. Unfulfilled monetary expectations were frequently cited. For example, several participants spoke about lending money to their children and the child being shocked, angry, or affronted at requests for repayment. Similar reactions occurred when children, who had previously been given money, were refused further cash advances. On each occasion, participants said their own financial circumstances were unfavourable, but their children made demands nevertheless and interpreted the refusal as a reflection of the declining relationship. The adult-child might have felt exploited or rejected and perceived the parent as having diminished worth as a result.

Children often have an expectation of continued parental availability and affection and are likely to estimate their importance to the parent by comparisons with their brothers and sisters (Kowal, Krull, & Kramer, 2004). Some participants said their estranged child had accused them of giving preferential treatment to a sibling. When parents re-partnered after divorce, commenced a demanding new pursuit, or had a serious illness, the child might have perceived a loss of affection or less time spent with the parent. The resultant feelings of jealousy and rivalry indicated rejection and exploitation with the implied threat the child might lose his or her share of the relationship.
Children’s expectations, values, and beliefs about how much a parent should value them were moulded by their personal, family, and social experiences, and they were likely to feel rejected when parental actions fell below these expectations (Journet, 2005; Leary, 2005): “Even when one’s relational value is positive (and the person is still accepted), a decline in perceived relational value compared to some previous time – relational devaluation – is typically hurtful and traumatic” (Leary, 2005, p. 41). Unrealistic or unfulfilled expectations were commonly cited as contributors to estrangement in the clinical literature (LeBey, 2001; Sucov, 2006). Unfulfilled expectations primarily resulted in the person feeling defrauded out of what they felt entitled to, or into believing rules of fairness had been violated. These reactions are closely associated with relational evaluations of rejection, exploitation and low worth.

**Disbelief: Rejection and Dangerousness**

Two participants spoke about their estranged daughters’ claims that a male relative had sexually assaulted their children – the participant’s grandchildren. Neither participant believed the assault had occurred. Their disbelief, or failure to accept the accusations, was most likely perceived as a statement about the daughter’s, and perhaps even the grandchild’s, lack of trustworthiness and truthfulness. By siding with the accused they most likely jeopardised, threatened, or devalued the parent-child relationship leaving the daughter feeling rejected, and believing that the child was further exposed to assault unless the relationship was terminated.

**Avoidant Attachment Response**

Participants’ descriptions of their estranged children’s personality characteristics and behaviours often indicated an avoidant attachment style or avoidance strategies. Their
physically and emotionally estranged children appeared to be in control of their emotions and responded to the participant’s pleas for contact without emotion or merely ignored them. When emotional estrangement was primary, participants spoke about children who vacillated between aloofness and coldness and dominant or aggressive behaviours. These children refused to speak about emotionally-laden topics and participants often felt as though they were walking on eggshells while they tried to avoid any communication to provoke anger or physical estrangement. The conditions for the development of an insecure avoidant attachment style, such as stressors that resulted in the parents being less available and responsive to the child, were also evident in some of the participants’ stories, but this was not a specific avenue of investigation or measurement. Again, this section does not and cannot speak for the estranged adult-child and does not wish to label the child in their absence. Rather, it considers participants’ observations of their children in light of the theoretical viewpoint of attachment theory.

While attachment theory does not discuss estrangement *per se*, one could surmise from the premises on which this theory was built, that the person with an avoidant attachment style would be most likely to estrange emotionally or physically when he or she felt threatened or rejected by a parent. This section describes a typical avoidant response, the development of rejection sensitivity, and examines the way an avoidant attachment style mediates one’s response and adjustment to multiple critical events perceived as dangerous, rejecting, or devaluing. It does not aim to pathologise or blame mothers or parents for creating insecure attachments. Rather, it assumes attachment patterns remain open to new and cumulative attachment experiences throughout life.
Avoidance Responses to Perceived Danger, Rejection, or Relational Devaluation

In attachment research, children with avoidant tendencies were found to be more likely to overestimate the danger or threat of a stressful situation, underestimate their coping abilities, and be less likely to activate coping strategies in response (Lengua, Sandler, West, Wolchik, & Curran, 1999; 2007). Adolescents and adults with avoidant attachment styles tended to downplay the importance of attachment relationships recalling “few concrete episodes of emotional interactions with parents” (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, p. 26). They tended to avoid any emotions to activate the attachment system, which interfered with support-seeking behaviours, as well as problem solving and reappraisal (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). They tended to use preemptive avoidant strategies, such as not getting involved, averting their gaze or attention, tuning out, and failing to retrieve memories or dwell upon situations evoking attachment-related emotions (Fraley & Brumbaugh, 2007). Research has also shown that avoidant individuals tended to defensively exclude attachment-related information at the time of encoding memories18 (Fraley & Brumbaugh, 2007).

People with more avoidant attachments might try to elevate their self-image by denying vulnerability and inadequacies and try to display traits associated with self-sufficiency (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). When conflict arose, they were likely to downplay its significance, minimise the other person’s complaints, withdraw from the conflict emotionally or cognitively, avoid interacting with the other person or – if they must interact – assume dominance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). They might tend towards romantic or close relationships in a caregiving role, thus increasing a partner’s reliance on them and reducing the threat of rejection (Bowlby, 1979).

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18 Encoding is the conversion of an experience so that it can be stored in the brain and recalled in the future.
Research on the Environment and Avoidant Attachment Styles

It is possible in this study that parental preoccupation with divorce, domestic violence, or other stressors led to the parent – in this case the participant – being perceived as unavailable or unresponsive to the child’s – now the adult-child’s – requests for closeness or assistance leading him or her to become anxious, preoccupied, and hypersensitive to signs of acceptance and rejection. Research has increasingly shown how maternal sensitivity was not the sole determinant of working models of attachment and secondary parental and environmental factors also contributed (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Weinfield et al., 2000). Recent research has confirmed that adverse events, such as divorce, maternal depression, abuse, and the death of a parent, were much more common in the life stories of adolescents exhibiting avoidant and particularly anxious attachment patterns, regardless of early maternal sensitivity to the child (Beckwith et al., 1999; Weinfield et al., 2000).

Numerous studies showed negative associations between divorce and childhood adjustment and psychological wellbeing, but only a few examined the effects on adult-child attachment across the life-span. Some research showed the quality of the parent-child relationship was affected by divorce (Friendly & Grolnick, 2009) and this effect continued into adulthood (Frank, 2008; Yu, Pettit, Lansford, Dodge, & Bates, 2010). Cartwright’s (2006) research with young adults, who had experienced divorce during childhood, showed almost half reported continued difficulties with family and particularly parents, including “loss of contact with parents; difficulties relating to, respecting or trusting parents; or loss of a sense of family” (p. 139). Additionally, there was some evidence to suggest childhood divorce had long-term effects on the way in which adults thought about relationships,
particularly the belief that ‘all relationships eventually come to an end’ (Franklin, Janoff-Bulman, & Roberts, 1990; Hughes, 2005).

Residence and contact might also affect the quality of the attachment relationship (Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008). Schwartz and Finley (2005) showed children rated their fathers more favourably (in terms of nurturance and involvement) when they resided with their fathers for some period after divorce. Janning, Laney, and Collins (2010) found that the quality of personalised space and the amount of time spent with the child was positively associated with relationship quality. Unfortunately, divorce often resulted in the child spending less time with both the resident and the non-resident parents and this could have a negative influence on attachment bonds (Wolchik et al., 2002). Wolchik et al. (2002) found a relationship between fear of abandonment and the quality of mother-child relationships in post-divorce children. Studies have shown parental conflict and hostility negatively impacted on child-parent attachment (Altenhofen, Biringen, & Mergler, 2008) and domestic violence against women negatively affected the mother-child attachment bond (Buchanan, 2008; Romero-Canyas & Downey, 2005), with some studies suggesting this occurred due to reduced parenting capacity, while others suggested high levels of maternal distress and the mother’s impaired state of mind contributed to the child’s insecure attachment (Buchanan, 2008).

Other factors shown to have negative effects on child-parent attachment included treating a sibling more favourably without reasonable justification (Kowal et al., 2004), mothers with dismissive attachment styles and depression (Adam, Gunnar, & Tanaka, 2004), trauma (Muller, Kraftcheck, & McLewin, 2004), the child or family member experiencing serious illness, mental illness or disability (Evans, Keenan, &
Shipton, 2007; Godress, Ozgul, Owen, & Foley-Evans, 2005; Grant & Won Kim, 2002; Ireland & Pakenham, 2010; Keen, 2008), and a child experiencing conflicting loyalties towards their parents (Amato, 2000; Mensah & Fine, 2008). While there was little evidence to support the causal pathways between these stressors and attachment, they were worth noting as possible contributors to the development of avoidant attachment styles and possibly rejection sensitivity.

Some participants cited multiple conditions and events that might have been perceived as rejection or affected attachment throughout the estranged child’s life. Avoidant attachment styles were associated with an anticipation of loss, and ironically people with avoidant attachment styles were shown to be more susceptible to experiences of loss across the life-span (Hazan & Shaver, 1992). Repeated experiences of rejection and hurtful acts were likely to lead to certain beliefs and dispositions, including avoidant responses (Mills & Piotrowski, 2009). However, the use of avoidance strategies was particularly ineffective when people were faced with long-term stressors, a situation requiring more problem-solving and active coping strategies than short-term stressors. In these situations, additional stressors would activate further avoidant strategies, which would result in decreased adjustment or coping (Sandler, Tein, & West, 1994).

A Life-span Perspective on Attachment during Adolescence and Early Adulthood

Most participants said their child estranged or started to become emotionally estranged during adolescence and early adulthood. While attachment theorists would suggest that the parental-child relationship remains the most important influence on development through childhood, most would also agree with life-span theorists’ assertions that this attachment bond changes as the child’s social network expands.
Erikson’s model of life-span development suggested that adolescence was a period when the young person would become more independent of the parental relationship, focusing more on relationships, careers, and interests essential to forming a unique personal identity (Walker & Crawford, 2010). Early adulthood is a stage where the person’s focus is towards intimate relationships outside of the immediate family and maybe the creation of a new family (Walker & Crawford, 2010). However, striving for individuation and autonomy during adolescence has the potential to challenge parental authority. The introduction of new romantic partners into the previously nuclear family system during early adulthood has the potential to challenge existing family beliefs, values, and solidarity. Both have the potential to cause conflict. Therefore, it is important to take a broader view of attachment relationships, and beyond participant’s descriptors of their estranged child’s avoidant tendencies and behaviours, to consider the developmental stage of the estranged adult-children in this study. Perhaps attachment during this period was affected by normal developmental processes whereby some adolescents and young adults required greater distancing or withdrawal from family to develop their own identity, independence, and family system.

**Family Stress and Stress Pile-up**

Many participants spoke about stressors in their family when the estranged child was growing up, including: separation and divorce; conflict and domestic violence; a child with a disability, serious illness or mental illness; a parent with mental illness or serious illness; miscarriage or stillbirth; relocation; poverty; and parental incarceration. Over a third of participants spoke about periods when they experienced overwhelming intersecting stressors and losses. These could have been defined as a
family in crisis. These participants often spoke about coexisting conditions affecting their capacity to adjust to stressors, including large numbers of children, strained or non-existent intergenerational relationships, minimal support from the intergenerational family and community, and financial strain. Most families were able to return to a sense of normalcy and adjustment at some point, but many also queried the effect of crisis, and particularly those who had experienced prolonged periods of crisis, on the subsequent estrangement.

Stress has been found to have a positive impact on individuals and families when it motivated and excited, but too much stress could create distress potentially contributing to negative health outcomes (Olson & DeFrain, 2006). Family stress theories highlight the impact of normative stressors such as puberty, and non-normative stressors such as domestic violence, on the family system across the life-course (Galvin, Bylund, & Brommel, 2008). Hill’s (1947) original family stress model became the basis for many conceptual frameworks illustrating the associations between particular stressors and protective factors across the family life-course. All families experience stresses and these could be buffered by family resources, social supports, positive family perceptions of the situation, and parental self-efficacy (Hill, 1947, 1957). Adaptable families and those with open channels of communication were more likely to adjust to these events and processes (Galvin et al., 2008). However, when major non-normative stressors compounded with normative stressors, and particularly when stressors were multiple leaving minimal recovery time, the family system became unbalanced and more susceptible to crisis or stress pile-up (Galvin et al., 2008). When “demands accumulate and interact with each other, it does
not necessarily require a major event to push the demand load beyond the family's management threshold” (Patterson, 1988, p. 204), or into crisis.

Burr and Klein’s (cited in Segrin & Flora, 2005) theory of family stress delineated three levels, where level 1 stress required the family to respond by changing role expectations or family rules, and level 2 stress required the family to respond by changing the way members related to one another. During level 3 stress – typified by stress pile-up and family crisis – “families often have to deal with fundamental questions of whether people are good or bad, their spiritual beliefs, and how much emotional distance from family members is necessary and desirable” (Segrin & Flora, 2005, p. 210). In this state, families were unable to function effectively, roles, rules, and boundaries were generally abandoned, and all members were at increased risk of negative health, mental health, and social outcomes (Segrin & Flora, 2005). The concept of resilience was used to describe situations where individuals and families were able to “bounce back to a level of functioning equal to or greater than before the crisis” (Boss, 2006b, p. 52).

A variety of stressors were evident in all participants stories, but were much more prevalent and cumulative in some instances. In these cases, participants were more likely to question the impact of these stressors on the development of the estrangement. Indeed, research confirmed many of the stressors mentioned by participants had the potential to impact family relationships. There was increasing evidence of divorce as a process, rather than a single event. Divorce activated a number of interrelated stressors, such as the disruption of parental and intergenerational relationships, economic hardships, and relocation (Hakvoort, Bos, Van Balen, & Hermanns, 2011; Raymond & Andrews, 2009). Domestic violence has
been shown to co-exist with childhood physical and or sexual abuse in 40% of cases (Itzin in Cleaver, Nicholson, Tarr, & Cleaver, 2007). The dynamics of domestic violence, particularly when associated with substance abuse, have been shown to affect parents’ ability to control emotions, organise their lives, maintain social support, and attend to children, which might, in turn, affect child-parent attachments (Cleaver et al., 2007). Economic pressure has been shown to contribute to a number of cumulative disadvantages and exert considerable stress on families (Arditti, Burton, & Neeves-Botelho, 2010). Stress and distress has been shown to diminish the attachment figure’s psychological resources and interfere with caregiving (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Loss can reverberate throughout a family, contributing to a number of negative conditions and self-destructive behaviours, including family conflict and estrangement (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004). All of the aforementioned stressors have the potential to affect the physical and mental health of individual family members, which in itself creates a stressor.

Third Party Alienation

In this study, nearly two thirds of participants suggested their adult-child’s memories and understandings of family dynamics, and particularly their beliefs about the estranged parent, were manipulated or coloured by a third party. This was most commonly an ex-partner, the child’s other parent. One participant said her husband manipulated and separated her two daughters from her from the moment they were born. Others suggested subtle acts of parental alienation occurred throughout the marriage, but these were intensified when separation and divorce occurred. The theory and literature relating to parental alienation discussed in Chapter 4 referred to tactics and symptoms in childhood and primarily during and after divorce and custody
proceedings. However, participants in this study observed their ex-partners using some of these tactics well into their child’s adulthood and often in the absence of custody proceedings.

The types of symptoms described in Gardner’s (1998) conceptualisation of parental alienation syndrome and the alienating behaviours reported in research by Baker and Darnall (2006) were often cited by participants in this study and included badmouthing, interfering with parental contact, interfering with mail and phone contact, interfering with symbolic contact, interfering with information, emotional manipulation, and developing an unhealthy alliance. Though participants in this study cited examples in each of these categories, consistent with Baker and Darnall’s (2006) findings ‘badmouthing’ was the most frequently cited alienating behaviour observed and came in a number of forms. Many participants described instances of being denigrated, or catching their partner denigrating them, in front of their child. Much of the badmouthing described by participants had the potential to contribute to the child or adult-child’s further sense of rejection by the participant, by making the participant seem dangerous, of low worth, exploitative, or rejecting. For example, one participant said his wife told the children he was violent and dangerous. Another participant discovered her partner had told her adult-children she only contacted them because she needed money. Participants said their children were given inaccurate information about them, including they had broken-up the marriage, had had an affair, had taken all the money, did not want the child anymore, and did not pay maintenance. Participants also suspected additional subtle and secretive alienating acts, but said they had difficulty in detecting and proving the existence of such behaviours.
While this study did not specifically ask about alienating acts, research has shown around one-fifth of resident parents admitted to denying or interfering with visitation as a method of punishing the other parent (Braver, Fitzpatrick, & Bay, 1991; Stone, 2006). Therefore, it was probable, if Baker and Darnall’s (2006) list had been given to the participants, they would have identified many more deliberate alienating acts. Most participants had felt that the partner had wanted the child to choose between the parents by pressuring him or her to stop or reduce contact with them.

Mone and Biringen’s (2006) research found alienating tactics were more consistent with high-conflict marriages than separation and divorce per se. The participants who cited parental alienating behaviours had all experienced divorce and many described high-conflict marriages. Most described acts of violence or domestic violence perpetrated against them during the marriage (and sometimes afterwards). Additionally, most of the female victims of violence said they kept ‘silent’ or ‘secret’ about the abuse in the marriage. They suggested they kept the child or children protected from this information. These reports are highly consistent with accounts from non-custodial divorced mothers in Kruk’s (2010) study, eight of whom had subsequently become estranged from their children.

In their studies of parents and adult-children, Baker and Darnall (2006) noted parents were much more aware of and able to name the alienating behaviours used by the other parent, while children were not fully aware of the extent of tactics used. So it might be the case parents who protected their children from the truth about the abusive and alienating behaviours might have been unwittingly abetting the alienating tactics. This is consistent with Kopetski’s (cited in Weigel & Donovan, 2006) research showing many targeted parents had a history of passivity, over-
accommodation, and a tendency to avoid self-assertion. These findings might be important, but they should be viewed in light of the violence and interpersonal dynamics cited by the participants, rather than pathologising what were likely to be protective and self-protective parental behaviours.

The participants in this study not only described alienating tactics used by ex-partners but by their child’s siblings and daughters-in-law. In a few instances, siblings were suspected of recruiting the adult-child into an estrangement by badmouthing the participant. When sons appeared to choose their partner over their mother (and family), participants suggested this was due to alienating tactics used by the daughter-in-law. They believed their sons were told inaccurate things about them, such as they were interfering, did not like the daughter-in-law or belittled her, favoured other siblings over the son, or exploited or mistreated him, and provided inadequate care during his childhood.

It is likely the alienating tactics employed by a third party, as described above, contributed to, and confirmed the child or adult-child’s suspicions or beliefs about parental rejection or devaluation. This might be particularly so if the third party were the child (or adult-child’s) primary contact, if they felt in some way dependent upon the third party, if they were denied alternate information by reducing or stopping contact with the parent, and if the alienating tactics persisted over a long period of time. Additionally, alienating tactics might set the child (or adult-child) up in more complex ways:

Engaging the child in the betrayal and rejection of the targeted parent might be particularly effective because it could result in guilt and shame that the child will
want to ward off through justification of the rejection and avoidance of the targeted parent (Baker & Darnall, 2006, p. 119).

There was limited evidence from a retrospective study of adults who felt alienated as a child which suggested the alienated relationship continued to be negatively affected in adulthood (Mone & Biringen, 2006). Alienation might also contribute to the development of avoidant attachment styles in younger children. For example, if the child were given consistent information about the unavailability or absence of the estranged parent, or if the alienating parent prevented sensitive caregiving or visitation, this could have interfered with secure attachment.

To conclude this section on participants’ attempts to understand the child’s perceptions leading to the estrangement, participants gave numerous examples of events and processes possibly perceived by the estranged child as dangerous, exploitative, rejecting, or decreasing the child’s relational evaluation of their parent. A meta-analysis of studies of parental acceptance and children’s psychological adjustment, revealed consistent associations between perceived parental rejection and adjustment difficulties for children and adults (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002). Additionally, if the child perceived the parent’s actions as intentional or deliberate, hurt would be amplified, the child would be more likely to believe the act would be repeated, and distancing would be more likely to occur (Mills & Piotrowski, 2009; Vangelisti & Young, 2000). Research has shown the pain resulting from perceived relational devaluation from a parent often lasted for a long time and could be recalled years after the event (Gilbert & Gerlsma, 1999; Leary et al., 1998).
All the family stories told by the participants suggested one or more actions or processes contributed to the estranged child’s sense of rejection. While each story was unique, there were two primary stories. The dominant family story of estrangement involved a family who had experienced multiple long-term stressors, including serious and complex stressors, such as divorce, marital conflict, and or domestic violence. These stories typically involved third party alienation by an ex-spouse and resulted in physical estrangement. An alternate and less frequent story involved fewer and less serious stressors than in the dominant stories, where parents remained married or experienced a low-conflict divorce. In the alternate stories, attributions about the child’s avoidant and or dominant temperament featured more prominently. This was probably because emotional estrangement was more likely in these stories, and the participant was able to observe these behaviours more readily during contact with the adult-child. Participants were also more likely to question the status of the child’s mental health. In these stories, third party alienation was typically enacted by a daughter-in-law or a sibling, rather than a parent.

It should also be noted that, while there were some common factors in participants’ stories there were other children in participants’ families who were not estranged. It is likely that these children were exposed to similar processes and experiences as the estranged children. In some cases, participants had children who had been estranged previously, but reconciled after a period of time. Therefore, assumptions about the associations between these factors and subsequent estrangement should be viewed with much caution. (See Chapter 8 for further discussion about the implications of such exceptions for further research).
An Integrated Theoretical Framework

As already noted, from the outset family estrangement was found to be a little known or researched phenomenon and tracing its origins in related literature became a central part of the study. The findings then constituted these theoretical insights as a lens through which to view the empirical data from the qualitative, in-depth interviews. Hence the nature, development, and experiences of estrangement as reported in this study have been viewed from a number of theoretical positions or frameworks, ranging from the biological to the socio-political, each offering a nuanced understanding of estrangement and implications for intervention. For the most part, however, the literature tended toward clinical interpretations of family dynamics aligned to estrangement, rejection, or cutoff, with fewer authors taking a critical perspective on how dominant discourses on families are constructed. Clearly from this study, the reality does not always approximate the ideal of self-sacrificing mothers and tight-knit supportive families caring for their own. To clarify the range of perspectives, the various theoretical positions discussed in the literature relating to estrangement have been mapped against the empirical findings (see Figure 7.2). Thus Figure 7.2 illustrates the focus of the estrangement-related literature, the areas where the findings from the literature review converge with findings from the qualitative study, and the contributions the current study makes to new and advanced understandings of family estrangement.

Family estrangement was the interpersonal culmination of long-term interconnecting biological, familial, psychological, socio-cultural and historical factors.

- Associated with the adult-child’s perception or experience of rejection or relational devaluation from the parent.
- Associated with the child possessing attributes, and behaving in ways consistent with an avoidant attachment style.
- Associated with high levels of family stress, crisis, and stress pile-up, prior to or at the time of the estrangement.
- Associated with third party alienation.

Common event in families.
Not always resolvable.
Affected the whole family system.
Rarely acknowledged or discussed in the social context or public fora.
When discussed, it was usually as an aberration or sign something abnormal had occurred in the family.

Experienced as a significant and traumatic loss.
Characterised by lack of choice, clarity and preparation.
Lack of clarity and ambiguity often contributed to a difficult adjustment or prolonged loss experience.
Reinstating narrative coherence or making meaning was difficult.
Estrangement was experienced as disenfranchised and ambiguous loss.

Estrangement was considered a significant failure by the participant, inducing guilt and shame.
The parent perceived or experienced social stigma associated with tainted or devalued parenthood and particularly motherhood.
Stigma associated with estrangement positioned the participant for additional rejection.
Social situations needed to be actively managed to avoid perceived social stigma.

Unshaded areas suggest areas of convergence between the literature review and research findings. Shaded areas signify new findings or findings that extend existing knowledge.
psychological study of ostracism and rejection primarily regarded estrangement as an innate mechanism for survival (Lakin & Chartrand, 2005). People might exclude or estrange others to encourage conformity or as a form of punishment or self-protection (Ouwerkerk et al., 2005; Williams & Zadro, 2005). Initial responses to being estranged, such as hurt, anxiety, and distress, were also viewed as primal instincts activated by the threat of exclusion from the group and alerting the estranged person to the dangers associated with isolation (MacDonald et al., 2005).

Some literature and research focused on disordered attachment as being the most salient cause of estrangement between attachment figures. Attachment theory suggested that people with avoidant attachment styles would be those most likely to withdraw or estrange from an attachment relationship at times of conflict or during the activation of distressing attachment-related emotions (Bowlby, 1979), and social psychologists confirmed this propensity in studies of people with avoidant attachment working models (Fraley & Brumbaugh, 2007; Shaver et al., 2009). This study, while unable to confirm the claims of participants about their children, found that participants described their children as exhibiting avoidant attachment-related behaviours, but also questioned the influence of normal developmental processes during adolescence and early adulthood, on the distancing of family for some young people. Literature about parental alienation syndrome highlighted one parent’s deliberate campaign of interference aimed at disrupting their child’s attachment relationship to the other parent (Baker & Darnall, 2007; Gardner, 2001), and this study also found third party alienation to be a possible contributor to the development of some family estrangements.
The literature also emphasised biological, psychodynamic, and attachment responses to the loss of an adult-child caused by estrangement. Bowen family systems theorists focused on the physiological responses to estrangement, such as anxiety and emotional reactivity (Allen, 2003; Friesen, 2003). Clinicians recognised estrangement as a significant and traumatic attachment-related loss that activated innate grief and loss responses, such as numbness, and protest behaviours, such as searching (Davis, 2002; Sichel, 2004; Sucov, 2006). However, they rarely referred to the socio-political ideologies that contributed to the experience and exacerbated the impact of such a loss. While grief and loss theories, such as Boss’s (1975) theory of ambiguous loss and Doka’s (1985) notion of disenfranchised grief, were useful in conceptualising the estrangement experience, there was no evidence these had been applied to understanding family estrangement prior to this study. Participants in this study described grief and loss experiences that were more than biological and psychological responses to the loss of a key attachment figure. Rather these experiences were provoked and extended by social expectations, norms, and biases regarding parenting and particularly gendered ideologies of motherhood. They described experiences intricately linked to perceived and experienced social stigma, and their need to manage social activities to avoid a similar rejection in the social realm. This study also highlighted the likelihood of variance in the estrangement experience – something that tended to be viewed and treated as a generic experience in the clinical literature – by studying older parents’ experiences of estrangement and, consequently, discovering that mortality-related cues often reactivated or triggered the grief associated with estrangement for this cohort.
The literature review found that clinicians tended to locate the causes of estrangement in developmental life-span, as well as ecological and family systems, frameworks. A few suggested socio-political causes of estrangement, such as ideologies of individualism, and laws, such as no-fault divorce (Jerrome, 1994; LeBey, 2001). However, family estrangement was generally viewed as an interpersonal process, which might have been influenced by key stressors, such as divorce and impending death, but primarily occurred due to one’s perceived betrayal of, or disloyalty to, the family (LeBey, 2001; Sichel, 2004; Sucov, 2006). It was often portrayed as a process maintained by feelings of hurt and even inadequate communication skills (Kelly, 2003; LeBey, 2001). Prevention of estrangement was not discussed in the literature and intervention was only directed towards the estranged individual.

This study confirmed the culmination of family estrangement appeared to be linked to feelings of rejection and betrayal within an interpersonal dyad or family system. However, it also found a more complex situation, where estrangement appeared to develop over a long period of time in response to a number of conditions and stressors beyond the estranged parties, and was intricately linked to socio-historical and political conditions. It suggested that occurrences such as divorce should not be considered one-off moments of vulnerability within the family system, but should be understood as complex processes that had developed over time, intersected with other stressors, and were often exacerbated by socio-historical and political processes over which families had no control. It suggested points of intervention beyond the estranged pair and the family system.
Findings from this study converged with literature and research that revealed family estrangement as a common family experience affecting the whole family system and one that was not always resolvable. However, it added to the evidence that family estrangement was rarely discussed in public fora as any more than an aberration or weakness within the family system. Combined with this study’s findings about long-term, multi-factorial stressors as contributors to family estrangement, as well as the ideological influences on the grief and loss experiences of older people estranged from an adult-child, this study shifted the focus of estrangement understandings further into the socio-political realm. It built on previous knowledge which had tended towards problematising or pathologising explanations for estrangement and focused on the estranged individual as the sole point of human service intervention. Hence, it provides impetus for a more critical estrangement agenda in both practice and policy realms. This agenda and social work practice implications will be discussed further in Chapter 8.

**Conclusion**

The experiences of family estrangement, and those factors associated with its occurrence, were found to be multifaceted and complex. Research and practice interventions which viewed estrangement only as an interpersonal or intrapersonal phenomenon would only capture or address part of this problem. Rather, the experiences of participants in this study showed it was important to view estrangement as a series of interconnecting biological, familial, psychological, interpersonal, socio-cultural, and historical factors ultimately resulting in intergenerational relationship breakdown. All the participants experienced estrangement as a unique ambiguous loss which was difficult to make meaning of, or
come to terms with. Unlike death, there was no finality to, or final resolution of, estrangement, and this was compounded by the social stigma relating to dysfunctional families. As a result, many participants described a prolonged and difficult period of mourning and unresolved loss. Women found it much more difficult to accept the loss given their strong identities as mothers and parents. What characterised family estrangement was the person’s recognition and acknowledgement of their perceived rejection by the adult-child. In many families, stress and stress pile-up appeared connected to this rejection and maybe resulted in the parent having less time for their child. Parental conflict, divorce and domestic violence also appeared to set up a dynamic in which rejection, avoidance, or withdrawal from the parent could be accomplished by ‘third party alienation’. The findings from this study also advanced current estrangement-related knowledge that primarily situates estrangement as an interpersonal or family systems experience and offered an additional socio-political view of its nature, cause, and experience. The final chapter examines the implications of these findings for social work practice and makes recommendations regarding areas for further investigation.
CHAPTER 8

Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter revisits and merges the major findings from the study, including those about the nature of family estrangement, the factors possibly associated with the development of family estrangement, and the experience of being estranged by an adult-child. It draws on the findings from the literature review and the interview and diary data to discuss the importance of an integrated macro and micro analysis of, and approach to working with people affected by, family estrangement. It concludes that family estrangement is a common but rarely acknowledged family experience, which is often experienced as a traumatic individual or family event, and one which is highly influenced by the historical and socio-political context in which it develops and is experienced. It makes research recommendations about: the collection of estrangement-specific demographic data; the use of quantitative measures to investigate possible correlations between the development of estrangement and various life events; further qualitative investigations of the diverse experiences of family estrangement; and qualitative explorations of social work practice with people experiencing later-life family estrangement. Further, it discusses the implications of these findings for social work practice at the individual, group, community, and policy levels of intervention. It discusses practice in human service agencies engaged with people estranged from family members, and particularly older people in healthcare and residential facilities. Table 8.1 provides a summary of the major findings, research recommendations, and practice implications across these domains.
### Table 8.1. Summary of major findings, research recommendations and practice implications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Findings</th>
<th>Nature of estrangement</th>
<th>Development of estrangement</th>
<th>Experience of estrangement</th>
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|                | Not an uncommon occurrence in families.  
Not always resolvable.  
Affected the whole family system.  
Rarely acknowledged or discussed in the social context or public fora.  
When acknowledged or discussed in the social context, it was usually as an aberration or a sign something abnormal or untoward had occurred in the family. | Family estrangement was the interpersonal culmination of long-term interconnecting biological, familial, psychological, interpersonal, socio-cultural, and historical factors.  
Possibility of adult-child’s perception or experience of rejection or relational devaluation from the parent.  
The adult-child appearing to possess attributes, and behaving in ways, consistent with an avoidant attachment style.  
High levels of family stress, crisis, and stress pile-up, prior to or at the time of the estrangement.  
Third party alienation. | Characterised by lack of choice, clarity, and preparation.  
Experienced as a significant and traumatic loss.  
Violated multiple assumptions and ambitions.  
Reinstating narrative coherence or making meaning of the estrangement was difficult.  
Lack of clarity and ambiguity contributed to a difficult adjustment or prolonged experience of loss.  
Viewed as a significant failure, inducing guilt and shame.  
Perceived or experienced social stigma associated with devalued parenthood, motherhood.  
Stigma positioned the participant for additional rejection.  
Social situations needed to be managed actively to avoid perceived social stigma. |

| Research Recommendations | Disseminate information and educate clients, public, professional groups and policy makers about the prevalence, non-resolvability of some estrangements, as well as implications for client assessments and family policies.  
Practice that assumes estrangement is a common occurrence. Social work practice that challenges existing assumptions about family at all levels of intervention. | Early intervention strategies aimed at increasing family resilience and decreasing likelihood of later family estrangement. Advocating for policies and interventions that provide adequate financial, educational, medical and social resources to families, and protect families from discrimination and inequality. | Social work intervention only when grief is problematic.  
Assessment that presumes the existence of estrangement until disproved. Policy and assessment guidelines that acknowledge and give guidance for all practitioners working with estranged family members.  
Practice that validates, normalizes, and accepts estrangement as a normal occurrence, and workers who build trust through non-judgmental and respectful practice.  
Individual and group work that challenges existing assumptions and facilitates empowerment and mutual support. |

| Practice Implications | Research the rates of estrangement in large samples, and within different cohorts; using behavioural and perceptual measures, to overcome previous definitional challenges.  
Research other family members e.g., siblings, cousins and grandchildren to gain a fuller picture of the impact on family system.  
Research with family members who have reconciled after estrangement. | Quantitative research with adult-children about their perceptions of the causes of family estrangement.  
Quantitative investigations of rates of various stressors such as divorce, domestic violence and parental alienation, in estranged and non-estranged samples.  
Quantitative investigations of attachment styles in estranged and non-estranged samples, and links to various stressors. | Qualitative research with adult-children about the experience of estrangement from parents.  
Comparative qualitative studies of the experience of estrangement across different groups such as age, gender and culture, and causes such as third party alienation and divorce. Use data to inform quantitative measures.  
Quantitative investigations of factors associated with prolonged grief experience in larger samples.  
Quantitative investigations of the health and mental health implications of estrangement in larger samples.  
Data mining and qualitative investigation of social work practice with people experiencing family estrangement including rates of contact, reason for contact, issues for social work, and types of intervention. Initial research with older population. |

| Research Recommendations | Qualitative research with adult-children about their perceptions of the causes of family estrangement.  
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Quantitative investigations of factors associated with prolonged grief experience in larger samples.  
Quantitative investigations of the health and mental health implications of estrangement in larger samples.  
Data mining and qualitative investigation of social work practice with people experiencing family estrangement including rates of contact, reason for contact, issues for social work, and types of intervention. Initial research with older population. |
Major Findings and Conclusions

*Family Estrangement Occurs in a Historical and Socio-political Context*

This study found it was important to view the nature, experience, and the factors associated with the development of estrangement in the historical and socio-political milieu. Indeed, the gendered nature of findings within this study highlighted the connected and interdependent aspects of the macro and the micro spheres, and suggested the utility of critical, and particularly feminist perspectives, in the development, process, and interpretation of future estrangement-related research. Feminism assumes a critical stance on ideologies and practices that differentiate, value, and privilege people on the basis of sex, and suggests “that structures and processes at work in the larger social arena have impact on relations in intimate environments and vice versa” (Fox & Murry, 2000, p. 1160). Such a position has considerable bearing on the interpretation of the findings and their translation into social work practice guidelines.

Existing literature and research about family estrangement tended to overlook or minimise understandings beyond the biological, family, or intergenerational system. In neglecting a macro or structural analysis, these sources tended to collude with, as well as fortify, the notion that the source of family estrangement resided within the individual or family and was caused by personal defects or family dysfunction (Mullaly, 2007). These pathologising ideas pointed to the individual or family as the only points of assessment and intervention, or, in clinical terms, diagnosis and treatment. In contrast, this study provided evidence and impetus for a broader and more critical analysis of the connections between socio-political ideologies about family and relationships within the intergenerational family,
suggesting the utility of social work intervention at the individual, group, community, and policy levels.

This study found that family estrangement was not the result of one conflict, one type of interaction, one type of relationship, one parenting style, or one significant event. It was a complex and socially-situated phenomenon that appeared to be associated with years, and maybe generations, of family stressors, critical events, and relationship breakdowns, that were initiated, supported, and exacerbated by social and structural conditions, and culminated in family estrangement. This finding was consistent with clinical and research literature about the causes of family estrangement (Bowen, 1982; LeBey, 2001; Sichel, 2004; Sucov, 2006; Titelman, 2003c). However, this study added to previous multi-factorial explanations by suggesting there were some common processes, associations, and pathways evident in this sample of participants. First, there were a number of conditions and processes around the time of the estrangement that might have been perceived as parental rejection or relational devaluation by the child or adult-child. There appeared to be some associations between estrangement and family crisis, stress pile-up, avoidant attachment, and third party alienation. Additionally, divorce, high conflict marriages, and domestic violence were regularly connected to these factors and the resultant perceived rejection, or alienation.

These conditions were all acknowledged in the literature as possible causes of, or contributors to, family estrangement. However, they were described discretely, were emphasised differently across disciplines, and were rarely researched en masse specifically in relation to estrangement. For example, divorce was regularly cited as an event that might be perceived as abandonment or rejection by a child (Chung &
Emery, 2010; D'Cruz & Stagnitti, 2009; Wolchik et al., 2002), and research consistently showed divorce had a negative impact on parent-child relationships (Cartwright, 2006; Cartwright et al., 2009; Friendly & Grolnick, 2009), but the relationship between these two concepts was rarely investigated and never in relation to the development of later-life intergenerational family estrangement. Additionally, the focus on the interpersonal results of divorce and domestic violence tended to limit an analysis of the structural factors that contributed to its occurrence in the first place.

A structural analysis might view estrangement as a normal response to distressing and dangerous situations that were created, legitimised, and or maintained by the state. For example, a child’s perceived feelings of rejection and abandonment from his or her father after divorce would be analysed within the historical and socio-political context in which divorce occurred; in this case Family Law that favoured mothers as the primary carers of children, and often limited children’s access to their father after divorce. A child’s decision to alienate his or her mother after she had left the home due to domestic violence, viewed from a feminist perspective, would result from structural factors rather than solely from interpersonal dynamics. Moreover, domestic violence would be viewed as a structurally created and sanctioned form of power and control used by the father to exert power over his partner and children, and one that could be used to alienate one from the other. Viewed through this lens, the findings in this study have the potential to challenge assumptions about family estrangement as an individual deficit or family dysfunction, resulting in a focus on interpersonal dynamic, and serve as a foundation for social work practice to challenge the structures and conditions that negatively impact upon families. It is anticipated that future research on cohort and cultural differences in the nature, causes, and
experiences of family estrangement might also accentuate and give further credibility to this feminist, structural perspective that was largely absent from the literature relating to family estrangement, reviewed in this study (see Figure 7.2).

For example, life-course studies, and particularly cohort analyses, have the potential to highlight the historical and socio-political connections between an individual’s personal experiences of a phenomenon such as family estrangement. The participants in this study grew up, married, and raised children in a period where pre-marital pregnancy and divorce were stigmatised, a gendered division of labour was entrenched by government policies, and nuclear families and motherhood were promoted and idealised. In 2011, the development, realisation, and experience of family estrangement, occurs in a social context which is much more liberal about pre-marital sex, illegitimate births and divorce, and a political context that: (i) promotes parental care and financial obligation beyond separation and divorce; (ii) draws on a social inclusion agenda to encourage and sometimes mandate all parents, including single mothers, to engage in paid work; and (iii) situates the state as the key provider of guidance about ‘good’ parenting, particularly to those identified as falling below such standards (Daly, 2004; Gray & Aglias, 2009; Lindsay & Dempsey, 2009). While there are expectations that both parents’ roles will involve paid work, caring duties, and domestic labour, research continues to show that women take on a greater share of caring duties and domestic labour (Lindsay & Dempsey, 2009).

It is likely that these developments will have implications for the way in which estrangement develops and is experienced in the cohort currently involved in childrearing. For example, it might be hypothesized that men’s greater involvement in caring for children would alter or increase their grief responses to estrangement from
an adult-child. Women’s increased involvement in paid work might alter or decrease their grief responses to estrangement from an adult-child. State regulations requiring both parents to remain involved with children after divorce might reduce the incidence of adult-child estrangement in these families. Regardless of the hypothesis, future comparative cohort research would most likely discover any changes, and provide further evidence for the impact of social structures on the development and experience of family estrangement.

Additionally, this research was conducted with a primarily Anglo-Saxon sample of older people, so it documents the estrangement phenomenon within one cultural group only. There is a norm of individuality in Anglo-Australian elders, sometimes described as ‘intimacy with independence’, where older people participate in mutual exchanges of intergenerational support, but tend to remain independent in terms of housing, personal care, and financial management (Lindsay & Dempsey, 2009). When these needs cannot be met by the older individual, they are primarily assumed by public services, such as in-home care or an aged care facility, and this care is supplemented by family members (Lindsay & Dempsey, 2009). However, one would anticipate that this arrangement might be different across cultures where the interests of the family group were greater than those of the individual, and multi-family households prevail. It is highly likely that such beliefs and practices would impact differently on the development of estrangement within intergenerational families and the experiences that follow. For example, it might be hypothesized that the collective nature of some families would prevent or delay the development of some estrangements, or emotional estrangement might be more common in these families. The impact of an adult-child’s estrangement might be much greater in
cultures where the distribution of care responsibilities and obligations of the adult-child were altered or severed due to family estrangement. Therefore there is considerable scope for additional research into the development and experiences of estrangement in different cultures and family configurations.

**Family Estrangement is a Common Event that Affects the Whole Family System**

The research literature confirmed that estrangement was not uncommon in families. Silverstein and Bengston (1997) and Van Gaalen and Dykstra (2006) analysed later-life family relationships with large samples of adult-children, and each identified a type of intergenerational relationship roughly consistent with definitions of family estrangement. Van Gaalen and Dykstra (2006) categorised 4% of adult-child relationships with their parents as *discordant*, while Silverstein and Bengston (1997) categorised 7% of adult-children as *detached* from their mothers and 27% *detached* from their fathers. Importantly, Van Gaalen and Dykstra (2006) *excluded* 219 or 2.5% of respondents from their study because they reported no contact with a parent in the prior twelve months. These excluded subjects – excluded because of a lack of contact with their families – were the very cases able to reveal and explain the important phenomenon of family estrangement. Unpublished data from the Australian *Dubbo Study of the Health of the Elderly* showed 122 or 4.3% participants had little or no contact with their adult-children (Simons, 9th October, 2007). Qualitative studies of ageing also reported estrangement in their samples (Goodger, 2000; Jerrome, 1994; Weinberg, 2000). These studies all found, but minimised or ignored, family estrangement possibly because of a lack of understanding of this phenomenon and consequent inadequate definitional clarity. The current study added to the accumulating evidence that family estrangement is not an uncommon phenomenon,
through an examination of multiple estrangements in 22 later-life families. Within this study participants also named additional estrangements within their intergenerational family and in families known to them.

Authors claimed that estrangement had a ripple effect across the family system: the behaviour of one person would affect other family members, resulting in compensatory behaviours and adjustments in the family system (Bowen, 1978; Sucov, 2006). Estrangements tended to endure from one generation to the next (Bowen, 1978; Friesen, 2003; Sucov, 2006). Indeed, participants in this study cited many cases of secondary and inherited estrangements across their intergenerational family resulting from the initial estrangement. Several women suggested the estrangement negatively affected their relationships with partners and children, and they were silenced by some relatives or they self-censored to prevent discomfort or embarrassment within the family system. This finding suggests there are a number of estrangement narratives that are absent from this research and further investigation with the adult-child’s other relatives, such as, siblings, the other parent, cousins, and children, might reveal a fuller picture of the effects of estrangement on the entire family system.

The clinical literature suggested family estrangement often defied resolution (Richards, 2008; Sichel, 2004; Sucov, 2006), and this was borne out by the longstanding estrangements described by participants in this study. Indeed, one adult-child had died while estranged from one of the participants. Lack of resolution had considerable implications for the way estrangement was experienced (see *Estrangement as a Significant and Traumatic ‘Situated’ Loss* for further discussion). However, this study also revealed that a number of participants had reconciled with
one or more previously estranged children, which proved that reconciliation occurs in some circumstances. This suggests future research with reconciled family members might offer additional insights into the reasons for estrangement and the conditions necessary for reconciliation.

**Estrangement as a Significant and Traumatic ‘Situated’ Loss**

In accordance with findings from this study, there was some agreement in the clinical literature regarding estrangement being experienced as a significant and sometimes traumatic loss, and characterised by its unpredictable and potentially irresolvable nature (Davis, 2002; LeBey, 2001; Sichel, 2004). Many participants in this study experienced what could only be described as difficult or prolonged grieving, a situation more often attributed to traumatic, ambiguous, and or disenfranchised losses (Boss, 2006a; Doka & Aber, 2002; Neimeyer & Currier, 2008). Many participants from this study said they found it difficult to adapt to the loss due to its ambiguous nature leading to constant questioning: would the adult-child return or not, was the adult-child absent or present, was the child dead or alive? Their experiences were highly consistent with Boss’s (2006a) description of an ambiguous loss where the person’s physical absence but psychological presence contributed to role confusion and an inability to attain closure.

Clinicians suggested the pain of estrangement-related loss was exacerbated because the breakdown of the attachment relationship potentially violated elements of one’s history and sense of belonging (LeBey, 2001; Sichel, 2004). Consistent with findings from this study, authors suggested that estrangement-related loss was often prolonged, and acute feelings of loss could be triggered by a number of attachment-related cues and processes (Davis, 2002; LeBey, 2001; Sichel, 2004). A review of the
literature suggested unresolved estrangement-related loss symptoms could lead to health and social problems, such as emotional disturbances, increased emotional reactivity, and negative impacts on other relationships (Bowen, 1982; Illick et al., 2003; Klever, 2003; Sichel, 2004; Smith, 2003). While participants in this study named and alluded to mental health implications resulting from family estrangement, including suicidal thoughts, prolonged sadness, depression, and anxiety, these constructs were not specifically measured and require further investigation.

This study uniquely highlighted the socio-political impact of parenting and motherhood ideologies on the experience of family estrangement, building on the intra and interpersonal focus of the literature and research reviewed. Findings suggested some participants were particularly affected by their internalised understandings – or stigmatised awareness – of good parenting and particularly the social expectations, roles, and obligations associated with motherhood. These common understandings, particularly when combined with strong ambitions and high expectations for parenting, often contributed to shame and guilt born of perceived parental failure. This was particularly salient for women whose personal identities and family narratives were closely tied to being a good mother and raising a close family. Many perceived that social stigma was associated with being estranged from an adult-child, and some had experienced social stigma directly. Indeed, the grief associated with estrangement was perceived as a disenfranchised grief, consistent with Doka’s (2002) definition where neither the loss of estrangement nor the participant’s grief was recognised by society. There were no social rituals for mourning the loss of an estranged child (Doka, 2002; Sucov, 2006). Perceived or experienced stigma often resulted in social concealment, withdrawal, and isolation, indicating estrangement
might have health implications beyond the immediate loss response. Indeed, research suggested that family and social support remained a key indicator of quality of life as one aged, so any reduction in family and social support would most likely have flow-on health effects (Bowling & Gabriel, 2007; Gabriel & Bowling, 2004; MacDonald, 2007). While participants in this study spoke about mental health impacts of estrangement only one participant suggested it was a precursor to physical ill-health.

While there was no literature about the socio-political processes contributing to the experience of family estrangement, it appeared to be subject to the same social processes and social disapproval as issues such as divorce, abortion, and homosexuality. These phenomena have existed throughout recorded history with varying degrees of tolerance, including periods of vehement non-acceptance in modern Western societies. During these periods, legislative, moral, and religious condemnation labelled these practices as deviant, effectively shaming and silencing many of those affected, and often leading to concealment from mainstream society. At the core of these marginalising and stigmatising processes were social understandings suggesting these conditions posed threats to procreation and the subsequent dissolution of the ‘natural and normal’ family configuration. Human rights – and particularly women’s rights – movements effectively challenged these concepts and made significant social and policy change across time. However, family estrangement appeared to remain in a ‘social and political darkness’ and, compared to the aforementioned issues, was a reality not yet ready to be unveiled or discussed in mainstream society.

Similar to historical views of divorce, abortion, and homosexuality, this study found family estrangement was regarded as unnatural, and a threat to family unity.
However, it remained a unique and ignored social issue due to the individual’s and family’s capacity to conceal it. Unlike divorce and homosexuality, family estrangement was more easily hidden from public scrutiny. It was often concealable because it tended to occur during periods of normative change such as children leaving home, and non-normative change, such as parental divorce within the nuclear family, making it much more difficult for outsiders to recognise it. Consistent with Jerrome’s (1994) findings, society’s current focus on individual success and mobility meant participants were able to disguise their child’s absence in narratives of busyness and distance. Additionally, the increasing development of, and focus on, alternative communication methods, such as texting and email, meant participants could truthfully tell others they had contacted their adult-child, even if there were little communication or emotional connection involved and the interaction was viewed as unsatisfactory by the participant. Unlike abortion, family estrangement did not involve immediate threats to health and the possibility of death for mother and child. In fact, outsiders rarely considered estrangement to be a permanent situation, so it could be dismissed as a non-issue in some instances. Family estrangement’s concealability and perceived resolvability appeared to keep it hidden from public discussion and scrutiny, and estranged family members reinforced this secrecy and silence by choosing not to disclose the situation for fear of negative judgement.

While the participants in this study did not suggest they were financially or practically disadvantaged by estrangement from an adult-child, there might be unidentified consequences for some groups of estranged elders due to a policy context that has increasingly focused on independent and self-reliant ageing over the past 20 years. Examples of this policy focus have been formalised in Compulsory
Superannuation laws, and the Aged Care Reform strategies that capped entry to residential facilities and promoted community-based care services for the frail elderly (Hughes & Heycox, 2010). The result of the shift from universal provision to self-reliance ideologies has effectively located aged care, including the monitoring of health and safety, back in the realm of the family, and particularly with female adult-children (Hughes & Heycox, 2010). Similarly, current generations of older people may have commenced superannuation contributions too late to fully benefit from the scheme, leaving them more reliant on adult-children to supplement their incomes from Government-funded pensions during times of need and crisis. Hence, some categories of older parents, such as those with low incomes, physical incapacity, poor health, and or with fewer children, are more likely to be disadvantaged by estrangement from one or more adult-children. However, the shame and stigma associated with estrangement, combined with its concealability, might make such people invisible to social services and prevent them from receiving adequate care.

The literature review failed to uncover literature or research about the rates or types of social work involvement with individuals who were estranged from a family member. However, clinical and self-help literature suggested that individuals could learn to live with estrangement and possibly reconcile through a number of long-term processes, including: self-care strategies in response to the initial trauma and crisis; self-exploration; close examination of the family system, including roles, myths, and boundaries; learning to distance oneself from attachment-related emotions; building a second-chance family; and taking small steps towards reconciliation or learning to live with estrangement (Davis, 2002; LeBey, 2001; Sichel, 2004; Sucov, 2006).
This was somewhat consistent with the processes discussed by participants in this study, who suggested that over time, they had a better capacity to step back and make less emotional evaluations of the situation, which led to an acceptance of the permanency of the estrangement situation. They took active steps to build a life without the adult-child, or with the emotionally estranged adult-child, which often involved removing triggers for pain, establishing boundaries, and actively pursuing a new life, including new activities, friends or partners, and sometimes relocation. This study also found a number of factors contributing to the increased likelihood of a prolonged or delayed grief response after estrangement, such as being female, unease with ambiguity, and perceived or actual social stigma. Similarly, some factors increased the likelihood of accepting the estrangement more readily and learning to create a new life without the child, such as the capacity to make meaning of the estrangement and less rigid adherence to dominant parenting and motherhood ideologies.

Most of the participants in this study suggested counselling or therapeutic intervention was inadequate in addressing their estrangement-related concerns. Some said they sought and attended counselling because they wanted to know how to fix the estrangement, and were disappointed when counselling could not achieve this. As Bowlby (1980) wrote:

Loss of a loved person is one of the most intensely painful experiences any human being can suffer. And not only is it painful to experience but it is also painful to witness, if only because we are so impotent to help. To the bereaved nothing but the return of the lost person can bring true comfort; should what we provide fall short of that it is felt almost as an insult (pp. 7-8).
Participants who found counselling or group work had been useful, suggested that affirming the parent’s experience, working through loss-related emotions, and acknowledging the parent’s strengths were important elements of successful intervention.

However, these participants had consulted with counsellors and social workers around the time of the estrangement or shortly thereafter, whereas anecdotal evidence from social workers and research literature suggested that previously dormant family estrangement situations often resurfaced at the end of life (Peisah et al., 2006). This could be due to the older person’s yearning to put things in order before death and their consequent desire to contact or reach out to the child just one more time. It could be the return or hopes of return of an estranged adult-child when the older person becomes critically ill or reaches palliative stages of care, or the actual return of the adult-child. Regardless of the impetus, family estrangement issues at the end of life often involve pastoral care staff or social workers and they sometimes result in government intervention through bodies like the Guardianship Board and the Office of the Protective Commissioner in NSW (Peisah et al., 2006). However, there are no practice guidelines for practitioners working with clients estranged from a family member at the end of life, and little guidance about working through the ethical issues arising from this work.

This study found family estrangement to be a significant, traumatic, and sometimes unresolvable personal experience for many participants. It was a process or an event that affected the whole family system, and had the potential to interfere with intergenerational relationships for generations. While estrangement appeared to be a common experience for many families, theories and ideologies that located the cause
of estrangement in individual defect and family dysfunction, appeared to add to its social undesirability. The experience of losing and grieving for an estranged adult-child was often exacerbated by unrealistic personal and societal expectations about the nature of parenting, motherhood, and family, and concealed as a consequence. However, this study found that the factors associated with estrangement, and indeed its experience, were beyond the realm of the family system only, and suggested future research and social work practice should be predicated on, and would be advanced by, an historical and socio-political analysis.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

This study highlighted the need to collect accurate data about the prevalence of family estrangement across the life-course. The most useful existing *demographic research* focuses on the categorisation of intergenerational relationship types, and provides data about the *possible* rates of family estrangement experienced by adult-children from their parents. However, these categories were somewhat inconsistent with the definitions agreed upon in the clinical literature, and in this study. They only measured the adult-child’s perception of estrangement, and the exclusion of some participants in one study made this data inconclusive and unreliable. Research needs to be conducted with large samples and specifically aimed at measuring the prevalence of family estrangement in different cohorts across the life-course. These studies would, therefore, need to enquire about each individual relationship within defined intergenerational boundaries. Intergenerational relationships have been shown to vary across gender, racial, and economic groups (Beaton et al., 2003; Cooney, 1997; Fingerman et al., 2006), so the collection of gender, socio-economic, and cultural information might also capture important patterns across these domains.
Future research would need to include behavioural and perceptual components of estrangement to reduce the weaknesses and biases of previous studies, and to capture estrangement rates more accurately. Behavioural measures would include patterns, rates, and types of contact with each family member under consideration. Consistent with Krause and Rook’s (2003) research recommendations, behavioural questions might be less difficult or less embarrassing for participants to answer than when compared to perceptual questions, and would establish a base for measuring the prevalence of family estrangement. However, these would need to be succeeded by perceptual measures to measure accurately the existence and different types of family estrangement. Perceptual measures would include perceived levels of affection and satisfaction with each relationship. These measurements would assist in identifying and recording emotional estrangements previously overlooked, or not classified as problematic in some studies, due to the contact inherent in these relationships. Perceptual measures would also give a more accurate picture of relationships where parties did not feel estranged or dissatisfied with the relationship, despite a lack of contact.

Researchers suggested that current studies of intergenerational relationships were limited by methodologies which were unable to capture the dynamics of family life. Research primarily focused on one member of the family, and few studies researched multiple family members (Campbell et al., 1999; Pillemer et al., 2007). Indeed, the primary limitation – and strength – of this study was its focus on one generation, so it will be important to supplement this with the ‘other side of the story’. While estrangement makes it unethical – and probably difficult or impossible – to contact the adult-children estranged from the parents who participated in this study, it
will be important to conduct a follow-up qualitative investigation of adult-children estranged from one or more parents. One highly curious aspect of the current study was the participants’ unanimous claim that the adult-child estranged them, and that they saw themselves as having had no agency in the estrangement. It is likely further research would illuminate this finding. For example, might this mean the current study only attracted people who felt wronged in the estrangement situation; might it mean adult-children were more likely to estrange from their parents than the other way round; might estrangement be a normal process of reaching adulthood and forming a new family for some adult-children; or might it have implications about the way participants define the final estrangement outcome?

The literature review did not uncover research which compared the experience of physical and emotional estrangement, or comparative studies across age, gender, and culture, let alone the experiences participants attributed to different causes such as third party alienation, child abuse, or divorce. This suggests the need to build on the current qualitative examination of family estrangement to determine differences and similarities across cohorts, between specific demographic groups, and in relation to particular aspects or perceived determinants of estrangement. One group that appears to be under-researched is adult-children, and indeed other family members, who have reconciled after estrangement. It is anticipated this research would provide more nuanced data about the reasons for family estrangement and the conditions that might make reconciliation possible, or not. It is imperative to conduct these types of studies so in-depth and rich data might be collected and used to inform the development of accurate, comprehensive, and well-structured quantitative studies such as those mentioned previously.
Qualitative research, as described above, would reveal variables possibly associated with the development of family estrangement that could be investigated with quantitative measures. For example, this study found variables, such as divorce, domestic violence, and parental alienation that could be tested in large samples of estranged and non-estranged adult-children. Similar studies could be undertaken to determine frequencies of different attachment styles in estranged and non-estranged samples. It would also be important to measure other possible contributors, as identified in the literature, but which were rarely found in this study such as child abuse and mental illness. These studies would advance understandings of the impact of various events and processes on the development – and maintenance – of emotional or physical estrangement across large samples, offering practitioners empirical evidence about the processes and periods that pose increased risk for later estrangement across diverse groups and cohorts.

This study also found factors which were positively and negatively associated with the likelihood of a prolonged or delayed grief response after estrangement. It would be important to further define these constructs and measure their occurrence in larger samples, as well as to determine associations between the length of the grief response and participants’ perceived distress. While there was some evidence in the literature about the effects of social isolation and the loss of particular relationships on health and illness, there was little research which specifically focused on the health and mental health implications of estrangement, so research in this area would be important. Findings might have implications for social work practice with individuals experiencing difficult responses to family estrangement and also contribute knowledge to improve human service practices and policies which unwittingly do not
take into account the negative aspects of the estrangement experience. For example, ageing-related policies tend to assume that family members are readily available and supportive during times of illness and crisis.

It is important to commence research which measures the rate and extent of social work involvement in family estrangement-related issues, and which investigates the types of issues that estranged family members address through social work intervention. The most likely arenas for social work contact and ongoing involvement might be in community aged services such as Aged Care Assessment Teams, Guardianship Board, residential facilities, and palliative services and facilities. For this reason it is recommended that initial research, examining social work practice with individuals estranged from a family member, commences with a later-life cohort. Data mining of clinical records might be a non-invasive way of capturing rates of estrangement in this population, but anecdotal evidence suggests this method might underestimate the rates of estrangement due to underreporting by allied health and pastoral care staff. However, data mining might capture the rates of, and reasons for, referral to social work when estrangement issues arise at the end of life.

A qualitative examination of social work interventions with individuals and families affected by estrangement-related issues at the end of life would be useful. This would be the most salient way of uncovering the variety of estrangement-related issues social workers encounter, any ethical issues arising during contact, and the current knowledge, skills, and practices social workers use in these situations. These findings would build a foundation for further empirical research about social work practice with people experiencing family estrangement during different periods across
the life-course, such as during adolescence, or connected to specific events, such as divorce or major illness.

Family estrangement is an under-researched area of human experience. As a whole-of-family experience and one marked by definitional complexity, it is an area that requires an incremental approach to future research. This study provides definitional criteria and boundaries that could be readily used to map the prevalence of family estrangement in participant samples. So it would be recommended that research be conducted within or alongside existing longitudinal studies involving particular intergenerational cohorts. The implementation of qualitative studies with different cohorts and particular samples, would be the next step in establishing a fuller understanding of the dynamics of the development and experiences of estrangement. The most logical step would be to commence this research with adult-children who were estranged from their parents. It is expected that these studies would illuminate variables which could be possibly associated with the development of family estrangement, which could be further validated with quantitative investigations with large samples of estranged and non-estranged people.

**Implications for Social Work Practice**

Like any complex human interaction, family estrangement does not have one cause or one solution. Interventions aimed at improving the general wellbeing of a family were likely to be most useful in preventing intergenerational conflict and estrangement. When families have access to adequate financial, educational, medical, and social resources, they will be better prepared for times of normative and developmental stress. When laws and policies protect family members from discrimination, inequality, and violence, and accessible and effective services are provided to support
families in times of need, families will be better prepared to address non-normative stressors, such as disability and domestic violence. By educating social workers and human service providers about the possible long-term effects of family stressors, including family estrangement, a greater emphasis might be placed upon the implementation of early intervention strategies to reduce the long-term negative impacts on intergenerational relationships.

There is a significant role for the social work profession to research and disseminate findings in order to raise social and political consciousness about family estrangement. Evidence of the existence and rates of family estrangement would contribute to the education of practitioners, policy makers, and society, as well as establish a foundation to advocate for those negatively affected by this experience. Social workers could draw attention to instances where estrangement from family is indicated as a reasonable and sensible response to family abuse, conflict, and relationships that interfere with or prevent personal freedom and development. They could challenge the stigma associated with family estrangement by drawing attention to, and normalising, this phenomenon, as well as challenging and deconstructing the ‘taken-for-granted’ cultural beliefs of parenthood and motherhood inherent in its construction. By naming and educating about the prevalence of family estrangement and the non-resolvability of some estrangements, policy-makers will be forced to revise normative policies – particularly those which relate to ageing – and to challenge current assumptions regarding unswerving family allegiance and support.

Family estrangement has broad implications for families and public or community service provision as people grow older in a policy context of independence and self-reliance. Social workers will often be involved with the
assessment of older people when they come into contact with health and support services. Part of this assessment usually involves the evaluation of family and social support in relation to mobility, care, and isolation. However, this study found that many participants felt they were the only person or family experiencing estrangement and were embarrassed if they had to disclose their estrangement from an adult-child resulting in concealment in social situations. If this concealment translates into the professional healthcare context, then it is potentially problematic for the older person, who may not be offered adequate services and support due to the presumption of family support.

Therefore, social work practitioners cannot assume that family estrangement does not exist and need to use assessment tools and questions to determine if it does. Shame, stigma, and the capacity to conceal estrangement indicated the need for specific questions about estranged family members when conducting assessments or completing genograms. It is important for these types of questions to become part of the organisational culture and to formalise them in assessments and documentation employed by frontline staff, practitioners, and allied health professionals: “Institutional support for disclosure is embedded in the culture, climate, practices, and policies of the organisation or community . . . in symbolic and instrumental forms” (Ragins, 2008, p. 205). Guidelines and practices with assumptions about absent and deceased family members continuing to influence (or not) the family system, run the risk of exacerbating the problems arising from family estrangement. Therefore, social workers need to ask questions about: (i) contact and collegiality with, rather than simply the presence of, family members; (ii) the existence of estranged family
members; and (iii) the influence or impact of estranged family members on the family system as well as the presenting issue. Sample questions are in Table 8.2.

Social workers might encounter estrangement and estrangement-related issues while undertaking an assessment for another issue or it might be the client’s main presenting issue. When clients reveal they are experiencing estrangement it would be important to consider this against their assessment of the situation, making no assumptions about estrangement as a negative experience. During initial consultation, it would be important for the social worker to ask further questions to ascertain the client’s assessment of the impact of estrangement across life domains, how this might be connected to the presenting issue, and whether this was an area the client wished to address in some way. When clients suggest estrangement has been experienced as a loss, it would be important to remember that grieving is an individual process and defining boundaries and placing time limits on the grief process pathologises this common and normal experience. Grief does not necessarily require intervention. Indeed, Neimeyer and Currier’s (2008) review of the effectiveness of grief therapy found that universal interventions for grieving clients were minimally effective and that a targeted focus on clients who were experiencing problematic grief produced more effective outcomes. Therefore, social workers should be alerted and vigilant when the client describes an estrangement-related loss they have struggled with for months or years and when their grief reactions:

are characterized by intense and persistent yearning for the [estranged], intrusive and troubling thoughts regarding the [estrangement], a sense of inner emptiness and hopelessness about the future, trouble accepting the reality of the loss, and various other difficulties moving on with life (Neimeyer & Currier, 2009, p. 352).

These are the primary indicators for social work intervention. However, there may
Table 8.2. Sample assessment questions about family estrangement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Example questions and dialogue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normalising</td>
<td>I need to take some details about the people in your family. It is quite normal for some families to have family members with whom they find it difficult to interact, or whom they no longer see, but it is useful to include these people in the assessment. Are there people in your family to whom this applies?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enquiring about estrangement</td>
<td>I am wondering if we have forgotten anyone or whether there were any absent or estranged family members we should include in this assessment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is there anyone you have not mentioned because you no longer see them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How often do you have contact with Person A? or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How long has it been since your last contact with Person A?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How do you feel when you are with Person A when you do have contact?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What are you most likely to do and discuss when you are with Person A?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does Person A assist or support you in any way? Explore.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you think you could call upon Person A to support you? Explore.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessing impact</td>
<td>How does the estrangement affect you emotionally?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How does the estrangement affect your other family relationships?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How does the estrangement affect your social relationships?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How does estrangement affect social activities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How does estrangement affect your daily activities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are there other ways in which the estrangement affects you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How might estrangement affect or impact on [the presenting issue]?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How have these effects changed over time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who else knows about the estrangement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How do you compensate or make up for the effects of estrangement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing client requirements</td>
<td>You have described the impact of estrangement on your life: Is this a particular issue you would like to discuss further?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is this an issue that you would like to dedicate some time to during our future meetings and interactions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How important is the estrangement issue in relation to [the presenting issue]?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Where would you place estrangement in order of importance?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How would you like to proceed?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
also be a role for social work in the early stages of family estrangement to prevent the onset of prolonged grief responses.

Building trust is important in the individual therapeutic relationship or group work context. Initial and ongoing normalisation, in combination with validation of the client’s feelings about or way of relating to the estrangement, creates a basis for the development of trust. It must be remembered estrangement may or may not be experienced as primarily negative, and feelings of relief must also be validated. Additionally, what might be considered socially unacceptable responses, such as anger and revenge towards one’s child, may be difficult to express in a therapeutic relationship, and are more likely to emerge in a non-judgemental environment.

Participants in this study said they had rarely told their complete story to another person outside of the family, and they often felt silenced and unheard by others. Clinicians have long heralded the benefits of ‘talking’ and evidence continues to show the expression of distressing thoughts and feelings can improve mental and physical health (Bergin & Garfield, 1994; Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 2001; Lepore, Ragan, & Jones, 2000). Talking or engaging in expressive tasks might assist people to understand their responses, increase insight, and assist in the regulation of emotion and in constructing or reconstructing a coherent narrative related to the stressful event or issue (Lepore, Fernandez-Berrocal, Ragan, & Ramos, 2004). Lepore et al. (2004) suggested that “individuals may be able to interpret stressors in personally meaningful terms, integrate threatening or confusing aspects of the experience into a coherent and non-threatening conceptual framework, and reach a state of emotional acceptance” (p. 342).
Research found that expressing distressing thoughts and responses was much more beneficial when the participant was challenged about these responses, than when they were listened to without challenge (Lepore et al., 2004). This might be especially relevant in work with clients experiencing family estrangement, where finding meaning in the experience – or making sense of it – is often hindered by assumptions and stigma. Remennick (2000) suggested the ability to resist stigmatisation was determined by one’s capacity to assume a critical stance about dominant ideologies and disconnect from the prevailing discourse, so a critical social work approach would seek to draw attention to dominant social ideologies and encourage clients to critique their personal narratives or rewrite their life stories to accommodate their estrangement experience. While meaning-making and reinstating narrative coherence was often difficult for participants in this study, many remained proud of their child and their child’s achievements. This might indicate one avenue for reviewing the role of parenting and the definition of successful parenting, e.g., might successful parenting be associated with, and evaluated by, multiple factors, such as the adult-child’s independence, happiness, and success rather than parental association only. There might also be some potential for social work intervention to include externalising techniques, such as those used in narrative therapy, to reposition blame away from individual family members and towards the factors contributing to the estrangement such as divorce, illness, and domestic violence.

Additionally, some of the participants spoke about numerous experiences of stress, loss, and trauma throughout their lives. Experiences of loss and inequality are often cumulative across the lifespan, and can be particularly detrimental when they have been previously unacknowledged or unaddressed. It would therefore be
important to situate any family estrangement intervention in relation to previous grief and loss experiences, and especially those losses that involved feelings of rejection and abandonment.

An appropriate early intervention strategy to complement individual work might be an educational support group. Participants in this study were often denied acknowledgement, advice, and support as a direct result of concealing their estrangement. Some had searched for support groups, to no avail. Acceptance, warmth, and simple human kindness are significant contributors to wellbeing, all of which can be cultivated in a well-designed and facilitated group (Andersen, Saribay, & Thorpe, 2008). A support group could help participants to redefine and think about the core messages, labels, and stigma associated with family estrangement, with longer-term goals of empowerment and advocacy. People often experience relief “when they meet others who are experiencing life challenges similar to their own. When a group develops some cohesion, isolation is diminished, humour is rediscovered, and a sense of belonging is felt” (Bergart, 2003, p. 39). When people conceal a part of their identity, they might be disinclined to integrate positive feedback about ‘self’ because they might not view it as a true evaluation, so feedback from group members, who are fully aware of the estrangement, might be received more readily. Bergart (2003) also suggested that groups with stigmatised populations created a space where members could see that others looked normal, which increasingly normalised participants’ experiences and contributed to positive self-evaluation. By hearing other’s stories, participants might be able to view their own situation from an observer’s perspective leading to a more objective understanding of the estrangement situation (Lau, Moulds, & Richardson, 2009). Ragins (2008) also
suggested that the development of trusting and supportive alliances and relationships might provide the impetus, security, and courage needed for people to disclose their stigma – in this case estrangement – in other areas of their life.

Participants in this study said that social work, or counselling intervention was often inadequate to address their primary requirement: reconciliation with the adult-child. However, some suggested the experience was beneficial when it affirmed their experience and assisted them to work through their loss. This chapter suggests a number of strategies – drawn from the participant’s narratives – to assist the therapeutic experience. Findings suggest social workers initially might need to identify estrangement because clients may not offer this information, then create an environment to promote trust through the normalisation and validation of the client’s estrangement-related experiences, and facilitate client critique of social and personal narratives placing blame solely on the individual or family. Beyond this, group work might be indicated as a way of challenging members’ negative views of self, providing support, and advocacy. At a macro level, social workers can research and disseminate information to draw attention to the commonality and experience of family estrangement, as well as influencing family policy development at an institutional and government level.
Conclusion

This study contributes primarily to the fields of social work, family studies, and ageing. As a rigorous qualitative exploration of intergenerational family estrangement it provides rich and detailed description of the experience of being estranged from an adult-child. It adds to the area of later-life intergenerational relationships, which has focused on the categorisation of relationship types through measures of solidarity, ambivalence, and conflict, but has rarely focused on the concept of estrangement within these categories. It gives voice to older people who have experienced family estrangement and raises interdisciplinary awareness of later-life family estrangement through the ongoing dissemination of findings as conference presentations, seminars, and journal articles.

As a preliminary study, this research provides a foundation for a longer-term research and policy agenda addressing family estrangement. This agenda is consistent with ideas expressed by one participant who said:

[Estrangement has] happened always and you know you go back through families and histories there's always been somebody that was cast aside or felt unwanted and dragged themselves aside and wanted to be doing something different (Elizabeth-interview 2).

In terms of a social work response this is consistent with a concerted effort to highlight and normalize the commonality – and in some cases the importance and utility of – family disagreement, conflict, and estrangement. The core of this agenda coheres with Rabinow’s (1986) advice that:

We need to anthropologize the West: show how exotic its constitution of reality has been; emphasize those domains most taken for granted as universal . . . make them
seem as historically peculiar as possible; show how their claims to truth are linked to social practices and have hence become effective forces in the social world (p. 241).

This means acknowledging and challenging existing social arrangements that stress and distress family systems, and those ideologies that place undue expectations on parents and particularly mothers to take full responsibility for the upbringing of children. It further entails social work intervention which shifts the blame from individuals and families experiencing estrangement and locates it within the social structures that contribute to its existence and maintenance.
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Appendices
Appendix A: Media release
MEDIA RELEASE

February 9 2009

No longer on speaking terms - researcher focuses on family rifts

It may be surprising to learn that around 1 in 25 people have stopped contact with at least one family member. A new study aims to investigate and highlight the experiences of older people who are estranged from their adult-children.

Kylie Agllias, Associate Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Newcastle, said, “Family estrangement is a common, and sometimes distressing experience, that is often overlooked in current society.”

“Estrangement has occurred when family members have not spoken to each other for months or years, they have lost trust in each other, and they feel sad or distressed about the loss of the relationship.”

“The causes of estrangement vary, but include differences of opinion over family values and expectations, concerns over choice of marriage partners, and disputes over inheritances. Some people may estrange after significant conflict, while others may drift apart over time.”

“The effects of estrangement for older people may include lack of physical and emotional support, feelings of loss, and being unable to see their grandchildren.”

This study will examine the experiences of people aged 65 years and over who are estranged from an adult-child. Participants are currently being sought.

“This is an important area of research because it is such a common experience that has been largely neglected by researchers to date. Estrangement has significant impacts on individuals and families that need to be better understood if we are to help those affected”, Ms Agllias said.

For more information about being involved in the study, please contact Kylie Agllias on 49217035 or Kylie.Agllias@newcastle.edu.au.

For interviews: Kylie Agllias on 02 49217035 or 0407367503
Appendix B: Media outlets that publicised the research
Media outlets that publicised the research

Interviews and talk shows

2NUR-FM - Interview

ABC Mid North Coast - Interview

ABC Newcastle - Interview dayshift program

NEWS interviews

2 HD

2NUR-FM

ABC Newcastle

ABC Central Coast

ABC North Coast

ABC Upper Hunter

Newspapers

Herald (Newcastle)

Herald - Jeff Corbett - opinion piece

Telegraph (Newcastle)

Maitland Mercury

Star

Post
Appendix C: Information statement for participants
Information Statement for the Research Project:

Every family: The experience of family estrangement in later life.

Researchers: Professor Mel Gray
Mrs. Kylie Agliias

You are invited to participate in the research project identified above which is being conducted by Professor Mel Gray from the Institute of Advanced Study for Humanity, and Mrs Kylie Agliias from the School of Humanities and Social Science at the University of Newcastle. The research is part of Kylie Agliias' studies at the University of Newcastle, supervised by Professor Mel Gray.

Why is the research being done?

The purpose of the research is to gather data about the lived experience of people living with family estrangement in later life. This is considered an important topic due to the effects that estrangement may have on daily living and the fact that research around this topic is rare. It is hoped that the results of this research will inform human service workers such as social workers, counsellors and nurses to work more effectively with individuals who may be experiencing family estrangement.

Who can participate in the research?

We are seeking people aged 65 years and over who are currently experiencing estrangement from an adult-child or children.

What choice do you have?

Participation in this research is entirely your choice. Only those people who give their informed consent will be included in the project. Whether or not you decide to participate, your decision will not disadvantage you.

If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw from the project at any time without giving a reason and have the option of withdrawing any data which identifies you.
What would you be asked to do?

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to do the following. However, you will not be required to agree to all parts of the research. You will be required to participate in the initial interview, but you may choose whether to use a journal and/or participate in a second interview.

- Participate in an interview, which will be tape recorded
- Keep a journal to jot down any additional thoughts or experiences relevant to the research. A copy of this journal will be made and kept by the researcher however, you will keep the original.
- Participate in a second interview approximately 4-6 months later, which will be tape recorded. You will be given feedback about the preliminary findings at this interview.

How much time will it take?

- The initial interview will take between 60 and 90 minutes
- The journal is optional and you can choose to use this as much as you like or not at all. You will have the journal for the period between the first and second interview (4 - 6 months)
- The second interview will take approximately 60 minutes

What are the risks and benefits of participating?

We cannot promise you any benefit from participating in this research. The nature of family estrangement means that this research could bring up some unpleasant and emotional reactions for some people. However, you are not obliged to talk about anything you do not wish to. On the other hand, some participants might experience benefits from speaking about their family estrangement to the researcher.

How will your privacy be protected?

Any information collected by the researchers which might identify you will be stored securely and only accessed by the researchers unless you consent otherwise. There are limits on assurances of confidentiality as research data/records may be subpoenaed by law.

Your confidentiality will be ensured by the removal of any names and identifying details from interview transcripts. Names will be replaced with numerical codes. No information or quotes that could identify you will be released in written material such as a thesis or journal articles.
**How will the information collected be used?**

**Audio taping.** The interviews will be audio recorded and then transcribed. You will be able to review the recording and/or transcripts to edit or erase your contribution.

The data gathered will be reported in the student researcher’s (Kylie Aglias) thesis, presented at conferences and documented in journal articles. Participants will not be identified in any reports or presentations arising from the study. You will receive a summary of the final research report.

**What do you need to do to participate?**

Please read this Information Statement and be sure you understand its contents before you consent to participate. If there is anything you do not understand, or you have questions, contact the researcher.

If you would like to participate, please complete and return the attached Consent Form in the reply paid envelope provided. You will be contacted to arrange a time convenient to you for the interview. The interview may be held in your home or at the University of Newcastle, depending on your preference.

**Further information**

If you would like further information please contact:

Kylie Aglias on (02) 49217035 or Kylie.Aglias@newcastle.edu.au, or

Mel Gray on (02) 49217322 or Mel.Gray@newcastle.edu.au

Thank you for considering this invitation.

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**Professor Mel Gray**  
*Project Supervisor*

**Kylie Aglias**  
*Researcher*

**Complaints about this research**

This project has been approved by the University’s Human Research Ethics Committee, Approval No. H-2008-0323. Should you have concerns about your rights as a participant in this research, or you have a complaint about the manner in which the research is conducted, it may be given to the researcher, or, if an independent person is preferred, to the Human Research Ethics Officer, Research Office, The Chancellery, The University of Newcastle, University Drive, Callaghan NSW 2308, Australia, telephone (02) 49216333, email Human-Ethics@newcastle.edu.au.
Appendix D: Participant consent form.
Consent Form for the Research Project:

Every family: The experience of family estrangement in later life.

Researchers: Professor Mel Gray
Mrs. Kylie Agllias

I agree to participate in the above research project and give my consent freely.

I understand that the project will be conducted as described in the Information Statement, a copy of which I have retained.

I understand I can withdraw from the project at any time and do not have to give any reason for withdrawing.

I consent to the following:

• participating in an interview and having it recorded  YES / NO
• using a journal to record any additional thoughts or experiences  YES / NO
• participating in a second interview and having it recorded  YES / NO

I understand that my personal information will remain confidential to the researchers.

I understand that I can review and edit the recording of my interview, and that I can withdraw any information that I have provided.

I have had the opportunity to have questions answered to my satisfaction.

I am aged 60 years or over  YES / NO

Name: ________________________________________________________________
Address:________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
Phone contact:________________________  Email contact:_____________________
Signature:____________________________________Date:____________________
Appendix E: Interview schedule
Interview Schedule - Sample questions

Introductions
Give participant a brief overview of the study. Reiterate information about confidentiality, and withdrawal from the study. Ask for oral consent to participate in the study.

Background
Would you like to tell me a little bit about yourself?
Why did you choose to be a part of this study?

Family
Could you please tell me about the people who are in your family? (might use a genogram to map this if appropriate).
Are there people who are estranged from this family?

Estrangement
Can you please tell me about the estrangement(s)?
   - When did it happen?
   - Why do you think it happened?
   - Who was involved?
   - Were there problems before this? Was this the first time you have been estranged?

Experience of Estrangement(s)
How did it feel when the estrangement(s) happened?
Has this changed over time?
How do you feel about this now?
How has the estrangement affected your life?

Do you have any further comments? Are there other things you would like to say or add to your story?

Concluding Information
Reiterate information about the diary, and follow up interview. Ask the participant if they would like to keep the diary. Remind the participant that they do not have to use the diary, and may withdraw from the study at any time. Remind participant about the services (list in information package) they may contact if they wish to speak about this issue with a counsellor. Thank you.