

# Patterns and Processes of Intergenerational Estrangement: A Qualitative Study of Mother–Adult Child Relationships Across Time

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## Abstract

Drawing from the life course perspective, we explored patterns of estrangement between mothers and their adult children across time, and the processes through which these ties remained estranged, or moved in or out of estrangement. We used a prospective design in which data were collected in face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 61 older mothers about their relationships with their 274 adult children at two time points 7 years apart. We began by examining the patterns of stability and change in intergenerational estrangement and identified movement in and out of estrangement across time. Qualitative analyses of the processes underlying estrangement revealed that movement in and out of estrangement reflected nuanced changes in contact and closeness over time rather than abrupt changes resulting from recent transitions in either mothers' or children's lives. Taken together, these findings illustrate the complexity of patterns and processes of intergenerational estrangement in later-life families.

## Keywords

intergenerational estrangement, intergenerational relations, parent–child relations in adulthood

A growing body of work has been directed toward understanding one of the most problematic intergenerational ties—those in which parents and adult children become estranged from one another (Blake, 2017). Clinicians have emphasized that estrangement is a phenomenon in which family members often distance themselves from each other both physically and emotionally as a way to deal with unresolved issues (Agliasi, 2017; Bowen, 1978, 1982; Titelman, 2003). Thus, estrangement differs from other problematic dimensions of family relationships, such as conflict and ambivalence, in which family members continue to engage despite the presence of tension in the relationships. However, estrangement is similar to other dimensions of problematic family relationships in its decidedly detrimental effect on family members' psychological well-being (Blake, 2017). Scholarship has suggested that intergenerational estrangement is a relatively common phenomenon in later-life families (Gilligan et al., 2015; Pillemer, 2020). In fact, Gilligan and colleagues found that approximately one in ten older mothers in their study were estranged from at least one of the adult children (Gilligan et al., 2015).

One of the most important questions that remains unanswered is whether parents and adult children typically remain estranged across time or become reconciled. This is because previous work on intergenerational estrangement has been limited by cross-sectional designs which precluded following relationships to explore change across time, and identifying the processes through which these ties remained estranged, or

moved in or out of estrangement (Blake, 2017; Gilligan et al., 2015). To our knowledge, only one investigation has examined changes in estrangement using longitudinal data. Studying adolescents across a 3-year period, Kim (2006) found that slightly less than 5% of young adults had become estranged (i.e. had no contact) with one or both of their parents.

Our study extends this work by considering intergenerational estrangement across time in later-life families. In the present study, we focus on the relationships between older mothers and adult children for two reasons. First, members of later-life families experience salient life course transitions that may increase parents' need for support from their offspring and also fuel distress and discord (Gilligan et al., 2017). Second, midlife is a point in the life course when most adult children report that their relationship with their mother is central to their lives (Antonucci et al., 2004; Fingerman et al., 2020). Because of the significance that mothers and adult children have in one

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other's lives, it is important to understand those conditions under which the mother-child bond is threatened.

In the present study, we follow the lead of Gilligan and colleagues in conceptualizing and operationalizing estrangement based on the combination of contact and relationship quality. However, it is important to note that this is one of several ways of defining estrangement. Although some scholars have conceptualized and operationalized intergenerational estrangement solely based on the complete termination of contact between parents and children (Hartnett et al., 2018; Kim, 2006; Pillemer, 2020); others have drawn from clinical work to capture both the physical and emotional distancing that often occurs in intergenerational estrangement (Agllias, 2017; Bowen, 1978, 1982; Gilligan et al., 2015; Scharp, 2019). We chose to adopt Gilligan and colleagues' definition to best capture the complexities in these relationships.

In this paper, we use a prospective design in which data were collected in face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 61 older mothers about their 274 adult children at two time points 7 years apart, as part of a larger random sample survey of mother-child relations in later life, the Within-Family Differences Study. Each mother had at least one child who was estranged at one or both time points; in the analyses we draw from mothers' discussions of both their estranged children ( $n = 74$ ) and their other children who were never estranged ( $n = 200$ ). We address two specific questions: 1) to what extent do patterns of estrangement between mothers and their adult children change across time? and 2) what role do changes in older mothers' and adult children's lives play these processes across time?

## The Role of Changes in Mothers' and Children's Lives in Estrangement

The life course perspective emphasizes change in individual and family development (Elder, 1985, 1994; Moen & Hernandez, 2009; Settersten, 2006). Life course scholars hold that family members' lives are inextricably linked; therefore, life events experienced by one individual affect the lives and relationships of others in the family (Moen & Hernandez, 2009). The dynamic dimension of this conceptualization makes it especially well-suited to studying changes in family relations over time. In particular, the life course perspective suggests that alterations in estrangement between parents and adult children would most likely follow life events or transitions experienced by either role partner. In this paper, we consider how changes in both mothers' and children's lives affect patterns of estrangement.

### *Changes in Older Mothers' Lives*

Theory and empirical research on life course transitions have emphasized the ways in which salient life events alter both positive and negative dimensions of parent-adult child relations (Suito et al., 2015) and thus are likely to be applicable to estrangement processes as well. Specifically, we consider two

transitions that mothers are likely to experience in later life and that have been shown to change relationships within the family: 1) widowhood; and 2) major health events for which mothers require care. By T2 of the Within-Family Differences Study the mothers in the sample were on average in their late 70s which is the age at which the risk of both widowhood and major health events increases significantly for older adults in the United States (Gurrentz & Mayol-Garcia, 2021; McGrath et al., 2019).

To consider the roles of mothers' widowhood and major health events in estrangement, we draw on Carstensen's Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (Carstensen, 2019; Charles & Carstensen, 2010), which posits that when individuals experience events that lead them to perceive that their time to achieve goals is limited, they tend to enhance their focus on socioemotional goals and reduce their focus on instrumental goals. Socioemotional Selectivity Theory was originally developed to explain changes in individuals' goals as they entered their later years; however, empirical tests of the theory have shown that such a shift in the salience of socioemotional and instrumental foci is also likely to occur under certain circumstances at other stages of the life course. In particular, individuals tend to increasingly emphasize socioemotional dimensions of their lives after experiencing "priming events" that shift their perspective regarding the time still available to them, regardless of their place in the life course (Fung & Carstensen, 2006). Although this argument is generally used when considering individuals' perspectives regarding the finitude of their own lives (Carstensen, 2019; Charles & Carstensen, 2010), we suggest that the same principles can be applied to mothers and adult children following mothers' widowhood and major health events. Thus, we draw from socioemotional selectivity theory to consider the role of mother's widowhood and major health events in intergenerational estrangement across time.

*Widowhood.* Widowhood is a major life transition that has been found to shape mothers' relationships with their adult children in later life (Fuller-Thomson, 2000; Ha & Ingersoll-Dayton, 2008; Khodyakov & Carr, 2009; Suito et al., 2014) and that we propose may play a role in the process of intergenerational estrangement across time. Previous research has shown that married mothers are less likely to have estranged adult children than are mothers who are not married (Gilligan et al., 2015). This finding suggests that fathers may promote contact between older mothers and adult children. In addition, fathers may serve as a buffer to ease tensions between mothers and their adult children. As such, mother-child dyads that were already tense and strained prior to the death of a father may be more likely to become estranged following widowhood because fathers are no longer present to facilitate contact and mothers may choose to avoid relationships with adult children whom they have a previously problematic relationship. Alternatively, older mothers' widowhood may promote reconciliation between older mothers and their adult children. Research has demonstrated that widowhood generally increases positive feelings between older parents and adult children (Hammersmith, 2019). In the first few years following

widowhood, mothers and adult children report greater closeness, and children both increase support to their mothers and are more likely to respond to mothers' preferences for care (Fuller-Thomson, 2000; Khodyakov & Carr, 2009; Suito et al., 2014). Although research has not examined the role of widowhood in intergenerational estrangement, findings suggest that the first few years following widowhood may be a time that mother-child dyads are the most likely to resume contact because this major life event can increase both mothers' and adult children's awareness of life's fragility and motivate them to make amends with one another.

*Recent major health events requiring care.* A similar argument can be made regarding major health events for which mothers need assistance. Research on the role of mothers' health in parent-adult relationship quality is limited, and the results of this research are mixed. Most reports from adult children suggest that declines in parents' health often increase tension between mothers and their adult children (Allen et al., 2000; for an exception see Fingerman et al., 2007; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998; Wilson et al., 2006). When mothers experience major health events, either mothers or their offspring might withdraw from the relationship to avoid the increased tension.

However, studies based on mothers' reports suggest an alternative expectation. In fact, most reports based on data collected from mothers found no changes in relationship quality when older mothers experienced worsened health (author citation; Fingerman et al., 2007; Hammersmith, 2019). Further, Fingerman and colleagues found that older mothers tended to focus on the positive aspects of their relationships with their adult children in the face of major health concerns (Fingerman et al., 2007). Thus, it is possible that mothers' declining health may serve as a "priming event," that increases both adult children's and their mothers' awareness that their time together is limited (Carstensen, 1992; Carstensen et al., 2003), resulting in the parent-child bond becoming increasingly salient.

### *Changes in Adult Children's Lives*

Theory and research suggest that characteristics and behaviors of adult children play an even more central role in stability and changes in intergenerational relationships than do mothers' characteristics, particularly in changes across time (Hammersmith, 2019; Rurka et al., 2018; Suito et al., 2013; Swartz, 2009). The theoretical literature on interpersonal relations more generally, as well as on intergenerational relations, proposes that adult children's social structural characteristics, both across time and at any single point, play an important role in relationship quality; however, the specific patterns have varied. For example, children's job loss, even during the Great Recession in the 2000s, was found to have a detrimental effect on mother-adult child relationship quality (Gilligan et al., 2013). Similarly, adult children's problematic marriages have been found to have a negative impact on parent-child relations (Dorrance Hall, 2017; Gilligan et al., 2015); however, children's divorces have been found to have both negative and

positive effects, depending on the circumstances surrounding the transition (Hammersmith, 2019; Suito et al., 2015).

The inconsistencies in the impact of changes in children's lives may, in part, be explained by the fact that the effects of normative and nonnormative transitions experienced by offspring appear to be conditioned by mothers' interpretations of those events (Gilligan et al., 2015). This particularly is the case when considering estrangement; Gilligan and colleagues' (2015) study revealed that life course transitions only affected patterns of estrangement when these events were perceived as violations of mothers' expectations. Thus, for example, although becoming married is generally associated with a decrease in conflict and ambivalence (Pillemer et al., 2007, 2012), children were more likely to become estranged when the mothers considered the new marital partners to be inappropriate choices. Similarly, Gilligan and colleagues found that divorce increased children's risk of estrangement only when mothers viewed this transition as violating their values and expectations for their offspring. Based on this research, we anticipated that adult children's transitions would increase the risk of becoming estranged across time only when mothers perceived that these changes violated their value expectations.

A consequence of transitions in children's lives may be that children's values become less similar to those of their mothers. Classic theories of interpersonal relations proposed that similarity of values is highly salient to the stability and maintenance of both dyads and larger social groups (Feld, 1981; Homans, 1950, 1961; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954; Merton & Merton, 1968). Consistent with these theories, empirical research has shown that individuals tend to terminate relationships with associates who no longer share their core values and beliefs (Burt, 2000; Feld et al., 2007; Gilligan et al., 2015; Pillemer, 2020). The applicability of principles of similarity to intergenerational relations is evidenced by the prominent role of value similarity as a core component of intergenerational solidarity (Bengtson, 2001; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997). Both cross-sectional and panel studies have found perceived similarity to be one of the best predictors of the quality of parent-adult child relations using both between-family and within-family designs (Suito et al., 2013, 2015). Most germane to the current study, research has shown that adult children whose mothers reported that they were more dissimilar to them were substantially more likely to become estranged than adult children whose mothers reported that they shared a similar outlook on life (Gilligan et al., 2015). Similarly, Scharp and Thomas' (2016) examined estrangement narratives using communication analysis and uncovered value differences as a major factor in terminating contact.

Based on this evidence, we expected that stability and changes in mothers' perceptions of value similarity to their adult children would shape patterns of estrangement between T1 and T2. Specifically, we anticipated that adult children would be less likely to become estranged when mothers perceived them as remaining similar or becoming more similar to them across time, and adult children would be more likely to

become estranged when mothers perceived them as becoming less similar to them between T1 and T2.

The broader literature on deviance and family relations has shown that adult children's violation of serious societal norms, particularly deviant behaviors that result in formal legal sanctions or place that child at risk for such sanctions, creates tension between role partners both within and between generations (Condry, 2007; Green et al., 2006; Greenfield & Marks, 2006). There are bases, however, upon which to argue that either new deviance or the continuation of deviance from earlier points in adult children's lives would affect changes in patterns of estrangement. Previous work has shown that children who engage in deviant behaviors in adolescence are more likely to become estranged from their parents in early adulthood than children who have not engaged in these types of behaviors (Kim, 2006).

There is reason to expect that mothers may have even stronger negative reactions to middle-aged children's deviant behaviors. In particular, deviant behaviors are far less common in middle age than young adulthood (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Moffitt, 1993) and are tolerated to a much lesser extent in society, making them more deviant both statistically and socially.

There is also evidence that adult children's termination of deviant behaviors in midlife improves intergenerational relations. Suitor and colleagues (2013) found that adult children who stopped engaging in deviant behaviors in adulthood were more likely to be named by their mothers as those to whom they were most emotionally close, even over offspring who had never engaged in such behaviors. Taken together, previous research suggests it is important to consider the role of adult children's deviant behaviors in intergenerational estrangement processes across time.

Based on this combination of theoretical arguments and empirical evidence, we examined two research questions: 1) to what extent do patterns of intergenerational estrangement change across time? and 2) what role do transitions in older mothers' and adult children's lives play in processes of intergenerational estrangement across time. Specifically, we anticipated that transitions in mothers' lives such as widowhood and major health problems would shape patterns of mother-adult child estrangement across time, as would transitions in adult children's structural positions (e.g., employment and marital status), value similarity to their mothers, and deviant behaviors.

## Method

The data used in the present analyses were collected as part of the Within-Family Differences Study. The design of the study involved selecting a sample of mothers 65 through 75 years of age with at least two living adult children and collecting data from mothers regarding each of their children. (For a more detailed description of the study design, see <https://web.ics.purdue.edu/~jsuitor/within-familydifferences-study/>.) The first wave of interviews took place with 566 women between 2001 and 2003. The original study was expanded to include a second wave of data collection from 2008 through 2011. For the follow-up study, the survey team attempted to contact each

**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of the Analytic Sample at T2.

	Means, SD, % ( <i>n</i> = 61)
<b>Mothers</b>	
Age in years ( <i>SD</i> )	77.4 (3.1)
Race/Ethnicity (in %)	
White	54
Black	44
Hispanic	2
Marital Status (in %)	
Married	23.4
Cohabiting	1.5
Divorced/Separated	23.3
Widowed	50
Never Married	1.8
Education (in %)	
Less Than High School	25.6
High School Graduate	37
Some College	17.2
College Graduate	20.2
Number of Children ( <i>SD</i> )	5.37 (2.1)
<b>Adult Children</b>	
	( <i>n</i> = 274)
Age in years ( <i>SD</i> )	49.8 (6.1)
Daughters (in %)	53.3
Married (in %)	51.5
Parent (in %)	70.4
Education (in %)	
Less Than High School	12.2
High School Graduate	37.2
Some College	9.3
College Graduate	41.3

mother who participated in the original study. At T2, 420 mothers were interviewed. Of the 146 mothers who participated at only T1, 78 had died between waves, 19 were too ill to be interviewed, 33 refused, and 16 could not be reached.

For the present analysis, we used an analytic sample of families in which mothers were interviewed at both T1 and T2 and were estranged from at least one adult child at one or both time points. There were 74 mothers with at least one estranged child at T1, however, they were not included in this analysis because 20 of these mothers had died between waves and three of the mothers were not interviewed at T2. The final analytic sample consisted of 61 mothers and their reports on their relationships with each of their 274 adult children. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 61 mothers and 274 adult children included in the analytic sample.

Data were collected from the mothers in face-to-face semi-structured interviews lasting 1–2 hours in which respondents were encouraged to talk in-depth about their relationships with each of their children, as well as respond to closed-ended questions regarding the quality of these relationships and structural characteristics of the mothers and adult children. The mothers' interviews were audio-taped in almost all cases and were transcribed by a research team of nine students. In the few cases in which interviews were not taped, extensive field notes

were compiled by the interviewers and were used in place of transcripts.

## Analytic Plan

The analyses focused on patterns of intergenerational estrangement, and processes involved in changes and stability in intergenerational estrangement across time. We classified estrangement based on a measure used by Gilligan et al. (2015). In that study, a holistic approach was taken to conceptualize and operationalize intergenerational estrangement, based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative assessments on a case-by-case basis taking into consideration both frequency of contact and relationship quality.

Following Gilligan and colleagues' lead, we began by classifying a child as estranged if he or she met either of the following criteria based on the mother's reports that: a) She did not have contact with the child—either face-to-face or via the telephone—in the last year; or b) she had contact of any type with the child less than once a month and reported a score of 4 or lower in response to the question, “using any number from 1 to 7, where 1 is very distant and 7 is very close, what number would you use to describe the relationship between you and [child's names] nowadays” (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Although a score of 4 on this emotional closeness item may at first seem like a generous threshold of poor relationship quality, other studies that have used this item have shown that its distribution was highly skewed toward positive relationship quality (Suitor et al., 2011). In fact, in the full Within-Family Differences Study sample, only 12% of mother-child dyads reported scores between 1 and 4, even taking the children classified as estranged into consideration. Thus, cases in which mothers report such low levels of closeness to a child fall outside of the normative range.

Next, also consistent with the approach taken by Gilligan and colleagues (2015), the first and second authors examined the complete transcripts of each the 61 mothers to determine the validity of our classification of cases based on the quantitative data. Interviews were completely transcribed including spontaneous comments mothers made to closed-ended questions. To validate our classification of estranged cases, we paid particularly close attention to mothers' spontaneous comments regarding the amount of contact they had with each of their adult children.

Mothers often provided additional information to explain why they had not had contact with a child in the last year (e.g. “This is very painful. I don't know where he lives. I haven't seen him in years.”). In other cases, mothers of children classified as estranged provided explanations for recent contact because they wanted to clarify that this contact was not typical with this particular child (e.g. “She called on Christmas and let her children thank me for the gifts but she did not speak to me.”). It is important to note that mothers were not asked directly if they were estranged from adult children. Based on mothers' reports on all their adult children we categorized each child as: a) estranged at T1 only ( $n = 23$ ; 7%); b) estranged at

**Table 2.** Mothers' and Adult Children's Life-Course Transitions T1–T2 (in %).

Mothers	( $n = 61$ )
Changes in Marital Status	
No Change	93.1
Became Widowed	6.9
Change in Health Status	
No Change	36.9
Experienced Major Health Event	63.1
Adult Children	( $n = 274$ )
Changes in Marital Status	
No Change	80.3
Became Married	10.9
Divorced/Separated	8.8
Changes in Parental Status	
Remained Childless	29.6
Had Children T1 & T2	68.2
Had First Child Between T1–T2	2.2
Changes in Deviant Behaviors	
Not Deviant at T1 or T2	77.7
Deviant T1 Only	8.4
Deviant T2 Only	3.3
Deviant T1 & T2	9.1
Don't Know	1.5
Changes in Employment	
Employed T1 & T2	58.4
Unemployed T1 & T2	7.6
Unemployed T1 Only	14.6
Unemployed T2 Only	12.7
Don't Know	6.6

T2 only ( $n = 30$ ; 9%); c) estranged at both T1 and T2 ( $n = 21$ ; 6%); or d) was not estranged at either T1 or T2 ( $n = 200$ ; 78%).

To examine the pattern and processes of intergenerational estrangement across time, the first and second authors employed the “immersion/crystallization” method to code the qualitative data (Borkan, 1999). We used a consensus approach based on the group interactive analysis component of Borkan's (1999) *immersion/crystallization* method for analyzing qualitative data. Themes were developed as data preparation continued rather than established prior to the coding process. Any themes that were not consistent between the two authors were discussed until consensus could be reached. Saturation was reached when neither of the two authors identified any new themes (Saunders et al., 2018). We selected examples to illustrate these processes. All names used in the qualitative section are pseudonyms.

We began by examining mothers' complete transcripts at T1 and T2, focusing on transitions in older mothers' and adult children's lives. Table 2 presents information regarding mothers' and adult children's life-course transitions from T1 to T2. Because no mothers became divorced or married between T1 and T2, nor had substantial improvements in health, we conceptualized and operationalized these transitions in mothers' lives as becoming widowed and experiencing health declines.

We also considered changes in adult children's marital status, parental status, employment and deviant behaviors. In some cases, mothers were not able to provide information regarding changes in their lives of their estranged adult children as indicated by the "don't know" category in the table. However, when mothers responded "don't know" to closed-ended questions they often also provided additional contextual information that we also considered (e.g., "He didn't have a job the last time I talked to him but that was years ago.").

We also paid attention to a series of open-ended questions that were included to examine differences within families. The following are examples of these questions: In the same family, children's personalities may differ. How would you describe the differences in your children's personalities? Which of your children do you feel the most emotional closeness to? With which of your children do you have the most disagreements or arguments? Taking all things together, with which child have you been the most disappointed? In addition, at both waves mothers were also asked about problems or difficulties that their children may have experienced as children or adults (e.g., emotional or psychological problems, health concerns, problems with the law or police, problems in school or with friends). Mothers were also asked to describe any other major or events problems that their child experienced.

## Results

### *Patterns and Processes of Intergenerational Estrangement Across Time*

In the following sections we examine the role of transitions in older mothers' and adult children's lives in the processes of estrangement across time. Below we present findings for the following three themes: 1) The Role of Transitions in Mothers' Lives, 2) The Role of Transitions in Adult Children's Lives and 3) The Role of Nuance in Understanding Changes in Estrangement.

#### *The Role of Transitions in Mothers' Lives*

We had anticipated that transitions in mothers' lives, such as having become widowed or having experienced a major health event, might play a role in processes of intergenerational estrangement across time. Consistent with previous research (Gilligan et al., 2015), the presence or absence of fathers played a role in changes in estrangement between mothers and their offspring. In some families, mothers became estranged from adult children following the death of fathers, but in these cases mothers reported a history of tension and strain in their relationships with these adult children prior to fathers' deaths. For example, Mary, who became estranged from her daughter between T1 and T2 described the relationship between her husband and her daughter as separate from her relationship with her daughter. Mary described her husband as "very forgiving" and reported that her husband had forgiven their daughter before he died. In contrast, Mary stated "I personally have

severed my relations with [my daughter] because of the pain she has caused, caused in the past. And that's the way I feel."

Further, it appears that renewed contact between mothers and estranged children surrounding the deaths of fathers did not result in enduring reconciliation. For example, Diana, a mother of five children, was classified as estranged from her youngest son Robert at both T1 and T2. At T1, Diana described her relationship with Robert, as "more or less estranged." When asked how often she gets together with Robert, she responded that this year was a bit unusual because Robert and his family attended the funeral for his deceased father but prior to the event she had not seen Robert for several years. Although Robert attended the funeral, at T2, Diana continued to define her relationship with her son as "estranged."

None of these mothers who had experienced a major illness or injury for which they needed help in the 2 years prior to the second interview reported having reached out to their estranged children for support. In contrast, these mothers relied on support from other children in the family with whom there was no history of estrangement. For example, in the case described above, at T2 Diana explained that her son Robert came to a family event during the previous year, but Diana described the interaction as very unpleasant. In the year between that event and the second interview, Diana developed health problems. She expressed that she appreciated her daughter Joyce's constant support, "Especially since her dad passed away [ . . . ] she does everything she can to help me out, everything."

At T1, Judy, a mother of three, was estranged from her oldest daughter, Allison. By T2, Judy had experienced an injury in the previous year for which she needed help. Judy and Allison had slightly more contact with one another, but Judy's description of the relationship was far from reconciled. Judy reported receiving help from her middle child, Thomas, and she indicated that she preferred help from Thomas because he had provided help to her in the past. When asked if she thought that any of her children should have helped her more when she had her injury, Judy responded that she thought Allison should have helped more—but Judy had not shared these feelings with Allison. Thus, it appears that serious health issues did not typically lead to reconciliation; more often, mothers relied on the help of another child with whom they had a more positive relationship.

#### *The Role of Transitions in Adult Children's Lives*

Next, we examined the role of transitions in adult children's lives in the processes of intergenerational estrangement across time. Interviews with mothers whose children became estranged between T1 and T2 revealed serious concerns regarding their children's life course transitions (e.g., martial transitions, educational, and career changes) at T1, even though these transitions did not result in estrangement until later points. For example, at T1, Donna, a mother of four, stated that she was disappointed that her son, Phil, did not finish college. She also felt that he had children too early and did not put enough effort

into his marriage. Donna described Phil as, “Kind of shaky and irresponsible.”

At T2, Donna’s expressed that she felt slightly less close to Phil than she had at T1, resulting in their relationship being classified as estranged. She said, “Phil is my stranger.” Donna’s responses indicated that she was still very upset by Phil’s previous failed achievements. In particular, when asked why she reported Phil as the child in whom she was the most disappointed, she explained, “I think because my son is very smart and capable but did not reach a level of personal success that he could have.” Further, she indicated that she was upset that his troubled marriage had ended in divorce.

Our analysis revealed that life course transitions only influenced patterns of estrangement when these events were perceived as violations of the mothers’ values. Janet, a mother of two daughters, articulated clearly how important it was to her that her daughters had become parents; however, she also revealed that her daughters’ parenting styles were even more important than simply becoming mothers. At T1, Janet reported that she felt the most emotional closeness to her oldest daughter, Rebecca, because Rebecca had children—“I guess I can identify with her as a mother.” Janet explained that she did not live in close geographic proximity to Rebecca and therefore had in-person visits with her less than once a month, but talked with her on the phone at least two to three times a month. By T2, the amount of phone contact between Janet and Rebecca diminished to less than once a month. The decrease in emotional closeness between Janet and Rebecca was more notable than was the decrease in contact.

By T2, Janet described her relationship with Rebecca as “difficult” and reported that she had disagreements with Rebecca regarding parenting. In fact, Janet described Rebecca’s children as having “horrendous problems.” According to Janet, “I think Rebecca’s life is full of a great deal of stress and it is hard for me to relate to that.” In contrast, by T2, Janet’s other daughter, Elizabeth, had also become a mother, but was managing parenthood in a manner that better reflected Janet’s value expectations. In fact, Janet stated that she was the proudest of Elizabeth because, “Elizabeth has handled her professional life and her family in a good balance.” Not surprisingly, given these changes in her evaluation of her daughters’ management of their lives, at T2 Janet explained that she “feels more [of an emotional] bond” with Elizabeth than Rebecca.

We did not find any cases in which mothers reconciled with adult children following transitions in the adult children’s lives. Instead, many of the mothers described being upset by transitions children had made earlier in the life course, such as leaving school or becoming divorced. These life-course transitions were particularly upsetting when mothers perceived the transitions as violating their beliefs and expectations for their adult children. These issues continued to disturb the mothers many years later regardless of the time that had elapsed since they occurred, often because these events were irreversible.

### *The Role of Nuance in Understanding Changes in Estrangement*

We found no evidence that transitions in either mothers’ or adult children’s lives played a role in whether ties moved in or out of estrangement. This led us to question whether changes are abruptly triggered by particular events, or instead are the result of subtle differences in mothers’ and children’s interaction or closeness that, albeit sufficient in magnitude to result in being reclassified, do not reflect major shifts in the quality of their relationships. Further analyses of these cases indicated that, in fact, this appears to be the case.

For example, at T1, when Loretta, a mother of four described her relationship with her youngest daughter, she said that she had to choose her words carefully with Brenda and described her as “loud” and “quick to get angry.” Despite this tension in their relationship, at T1 Loretta talked with Brenda on the phone a few times a month and made sure to remind Brenda to take her medicine for a chronic condition. By T2, however, Loretta explained that she did not have any contact with Brenda:

Brenda’s a monster. She’s a monster. She’s something else. I don’t see her. She don’t have a phone. She doesn’t come around me too much. So, me and her relationship is not too well. She don’t call me. I don’t call her. I don’t think she loves me. I don’t think she knows what love is. She’s mean to me, but I love her. I don’t love her ways, but I love her is my daughter. And how she love me, she might not love me, I don’t know.

Although Loretta’s description indicates greater difficulty in her relationship with Brenda by T2, the shift is in intensity rather than the development of new tensions. Thus, although there was a clear reduction in contact, and the quality of the relationship had declined, it was at least somewhat tense at both times.

Next, we turned our attention to mother-adult child dyads that moved out of estrangement between T1 and T2. These mothers reported increased contact with their children between T1 and T2, however, this contact was often irregular, tense, and even sometimes unwanted. Although technically these relationships could be classified as “reconciled,” the mothers’ descriptions of these relationships at T2 do not appear to reflect a true reconciliation. For example, at T1, Rose, a 74-year-old widowed mother of five, had not had contact with her son, John, in several years and defined their relationship as very distant. When asked to describe the differences in her children’s personalities at T1, Rose responded that John was “really for himself.”

By T2, Rose stated that although she now had infrequent contact with John, she still had not seen him in almost 20 years. John sent Rose cards on her birthday and sometimes called her on the telephone; however, Rose found this occasional contact more disruptive than comforting. In particular, Rose did not like it when John called her when he had been drinking because he became rude and hurtful. In fact, Rose was so offended by

John's behavior on the telephone that she often hung up on him during conversations:

I don't like when he calls if he's been drinking. And he's nasty when he's drinking. I hang up. I know it's not nice, but I can't tolerate it. I think no matter what . . . he just doesn't think . . . when you talk to your mother you show respect.

Similar to Rose, who avoided contact with her son because she was so deeply offended by his behavior, several other mothers expressed anxiety when their children contacted them unexpectedly. In particular, mothers described feeling upset when children who lived in close proximity showed up at their house unannounced.

In the case described above, at T1, Judy, rarely saw her daughter Allison despite the fact that they lived fairly close to one another. When asked to describe Allison's personality, Judy said, "To me, she's jealous. I don't know why. All her downfalls, she blames me for them."

By T2, Judy and Allison had slightly more contact with one another, but Judy's description of their relationship was far from fully reconciled. In fact, Judy reported less closeness in their relationship. Further, Judy described a conscious effort to maintain distance in her relationship with her daughter. According to Judy, "Allison is a very strange person. I just leave . . . she doesn't listen to me . . . so I just leave her alone."

A few of the mothers of continuously estranged children described reaching out to their children. However, these attempts at contact were unsuccessful because the children did not reciprocate. At T1, Barbara, mother of two daughters, described very little contact with her oldest daughter, Sarah. According to Barbara, "Sarah will not communicate. If I call her on the phone, she hangs up. This has been going on for 10 years." Barbara described the same pattern of contact with Sarah at T2. "If I call her on the phone, she hangs up on me, she has been doing this for years."

In summary, transitions in mothers' and adult children's lives played a smaller role in processes of estrangement across time than anticipated. When mothers needed support when experiencing widowhood or major health events, they often relied on other adult children with whom they had an established history of support. Mothers were often upset by adult children's life course transitions that had occurred in young adulthood and early age, many of which led to events or circumstances that were essentially irreversible. It appears that mothers were upset by these life course transitions when they initially happened, and that this frustration only amplified across time. Further analyses revealed that movement in and out of estrangement reflected nuanced changes in contact and closeness over time rather than abrupt changes resulting from recent transitions in either mothers' or children's lives. Mothers with offspring who were estranged at either wave typically described tension in their relationships with these children at both time points; however, there were noticeable increases in tension across time. Finally, in almost all cases, either the mothers or the adult children would occasionally try to contact each other; however, this contact was not welcomed or reciprocated.

## Discussion

In this paper, we drew from the life course perspective, which emphasizes the "linked lives" of family members in different generations to examine changes in intergenerational estrangement between older mothers and adult children across a 7-year period. We examined patterns of stability and change in intergenerational estrangement and identified movement in and out of estrangement across time. We also examined the role of life-course transitions in both mothers' and children's lives in processes of estrangement across time.

Transitions in mothers' lives such as becoming widowed and developing serious health problems played a smaller role in the processes of estrangement across time than we anticipated. The findings suggested that when mothers experienced widowhood or serious health events they typically did not reconcile with estranged children, and instead relied on support from adult children with whom they had a sustained history of exchanging support. This finding is consistent with other work that demonstrates that older mothers prefer assistance from adult children who have been reliable sources of support in the past (Suitor et al., 2013). Thus, later-life intergenerational estrangement may reduce the size of the potential network of family members to provide care to parents as they age, possibly increasing stress for other adult children in the family as well as increasing the risk for unmet needs for care.

Transitions in adult children's lives also appeared to play a small role in changes in estrangement across the period of the study. However, it was common that transitions had, in fact, precipitated estrangement when the offspring were in young adulthood and early middle age (e.g., marital transitions, poor decisions regarding their educations and careers). This finding is consistent with previous work that has shown that events in adolescents' lives are predictive of intergenerational estrangement later in early adulthood (Kim, 2006). Further, the qualitative data revealed that adult children's life course events and transitions played a role in patterns of estrangement only when these events violated mothers' values and expectations. This finding is consistent with other research that has shown that mothers assess their children's successes and failures based on their own personal beliefs and values (Gilligan et al., 2015; Ryff et al., 1996; Ryff et al., 1994).

Previous research has shown that older mothers often express disappointment in adult children, however, this disappointment does not necessarily result in intergenerational estrangement. For example, Gilligan and colleagues found that older mothers were not more likely to become estranged from adult children who had engaged in deviant behaviors (e.g. problems with substance abuse or the law). Instead, these mothers often reached out to those adult children and provided them with additional support (Gilligan et al., 2015). Similarly, work by Suitor and colleagues showed that mothers sometimes favored reformed deviants over all of their other offspring. Further, a recent qualitative article from the same group (Kincaid et al., 2021) revealed such cases of "prodigal children" occurred only when adult children desisted from their



deviant behaviors and showed appreciation for their mothers' support in helping them overcome these problems. However, mothers in the current study did not report such changes in their relationships with any of the offspring from whom they were estranged at T1.

The findings revealed fluctuations in the levels of contact and emotional closeness in the mother-adult child dyads across the 7-year period; however, these fluctuations were quite nuanced. Although some contact may have resumed over time, it appeared that this was despite the continuing presence of issues that had troubled the relationships in the past. As such, family members may have emotionally distanced themselves from each other even when they engaged in contact. We did not uncover any cases in which the mothers felt they had achieved a full reconnection. Our findings suggests that the process of moving out of estrangement is unlikely to reflect the depth of reconciliation desired by many individuals experiencing estrangement (Agllias, 2017; Coleman, 2009; Pillemer, 2020). Thus, family practitioners working with later-life families should be aware that reconciliation may not be the desired outcome for older mothers or their adult children.

This study contributes to a growing literature showing the relative stability in parent-adult child relations across the middle and later years. Although research on parent-child relations when offspring are adolescents and young adults has shown substantial changes across time (De Goede et al., 2009; Lefkowitz, 2005), research on adulthood has demonstrated considerable continuity once children reach middle age and parents enter the later years (Rurka et al., 2018; Schenk & Dykstra, 2012; Suito et al., 2013). Similarly, our findings suggest that despite some nuanced changes, there is a relatively high degree of stability in intergenerational estrangement in later-life families. Mothers often articulated a theme that the overall dynamics in their relationships with estranged children had continued for several years, and in many cases for decades. However, because the data were collected 7 years apart, we were not able to consider all the potential changes that may have taken place across these 7 years. Future research should collect data on intergenerational estrangement across multiple time points with brief lags to better capture the smaller changes that later-life families may experience.

Further researchers should also consider intergenerational estrangement in the context of the larger family network. If a mother is estranged from one of her adult children, is that child also estranged other siblings in the family? Does having an estranged child in the family affect the pattern of relationships among the siblings, compared to families in which there is no estrangement? The current study examined estrangement in families with multiple children. Are the processes of estrangement different in families in which there is only one adult child? Further, this study explored estrangement between older mothers and their adult children. Future research should consider older fathers' estrangement from their adult children. Finally, research has shown that there is substantial transmission of closeness and conflict between parents and adult

children (Birditt et al., 2012). Research should explore whether there is also transmission of estrangement across generations.

Future research should also examine estrangement from multiple family members' perspectives. In particular, obtaining qualitative data from multiple family members would facilitate a deeper understanding of the processes underlying this complex phenomenon (Reczek, 2014). The current study identified mother-child relationships as estranged based primarily on the reports of the mothers. However, it is important for future research to consider whether other family members identify the relationship as estranged. Consistent with Bengtson and Kuypers's (1971) classic work on the intergenerational stake, mothers' and their adult children's reports of their interaction patterns and relationship quality often differ (Suito et al., 2006).

In the Within-Family Differences Study mothers provided the contact information for their adult children; however, most mothers did not have this information for their estranged adult children. As a result, few of the estranged children in the present study were interviewed (approximately 10%), preventing us from confirming mothers' reports of estrangement with very many of those offspring directly. It would be especially beneficial to examine whether adult children identify themselves as estranged and to seek their perceptions of the estrangement.

The life course perspective emphasizes continuity and change in family relationships across time (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). These findings from this article illustrate the processes embodied in the life course perspective on family relations by exploring the nuanced ways in which family relationships evolve across time. This study contributes to a growing body of scholarly literature on intergenerational estrangement between mothers and their adult children, revealing that these relationships reflect the continuity found in other studies of parent-child relations across time in later-life families (Rurka et al., 2018; Schenk & Dykstra, 2012; Suito et al., 2013). Taken together, the findings from this work indicate that intergenerational estrangement is a complex phenomenon that warrants future research.



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