DEFINING AND MEASURING ESTRANGEMENT

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Abstract

The term estrangement has been used in both the scientific and popular literature to describe a variety of behaviors. The paper reviews the various definitions and contexts in which the term estrangement is used, and instruments designed to measure the various constructs. An attempt is made to arrive at a behavioral/operational definition suitable for studying the phenomena.

Keywords: estrangement, alienation, relationships

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Recurring interaction is integral to family functioning (Emlen, 1995). Despite volumes of scholarly work on family transitions such as separation, divorce, remarriage, and adoption, researchers have noted that family estrangement, a communication cut-off between family members, is a relatively neglected topic (Galvin, Bylund, & Brommel, 2008; LePoire, 2006; Turner & West, 2006; Ungar, 1999; Vangelisti, 2004). The purpose of this paper is to review the literature on estrangement and arrive at an operational definition suitable for use in research with families.

Estrangement in Popular Culture

The phenomenon of estrangement dates back to ancient times. The Old Testament refers to several estrangements. For instance, brothers Jacob and Esau were estranged after their mother, Rebekah, told Jacob that Esau was planning to kill him (Genesis 27: 43, American Standard Version). In another example, God instructed Satan to remove Job from his family as a test of faith as Job states, "He has put my family far from me, and my acquaintances are wholly estranged from me" (Job 19: 13, American Standard Version).

In current popular culture, family estrangement is the subject of many self-help books (Boss, 1999; Davis, 2003; Herst & Padwa, 1998; LeBey, 2001; Lieberman, 2002; Richards, 2008; Sichel, 2004; Sucov, 2006; Tannen, 2001) and is often depicted in literary works and film. A current Google search listed 2.2 million estrangement related citations and 1.5 million citations dealing specifically to family estrangement.

Defining Estrangement

We found that in the literature, the meaning of the term estrangement is used inconsistently, and the term describes a range of relationships. In some *so-called* estrangements, the involved persons are still directly communicating, albeit in a strained manner. Many authors use the term family estrangement when they simply mean family discord (Campbell, 2005; Davies & Forman, 2002; Hook, 2002; Jerrome, 1994; Kim, 2006; Kruk & Hall, 1995; Weller & Luchterhand, 1977; Wilkes, 1985). For instance, LaSala (2000) uses the term estrangement to describe a family's vague adverse reaction to a member who is gay, lesbian, or transsexual, without the complete communication cut off. Furthermore, the term estrangement describes lovers or marital partners who are separated but have not filed separation papers (Pam &

Pearson, 1998), especially when the separation and tension leads to violence (Ellis & Wight, 1997), stalking, or the murder of the former intimate (Buss, 2005). The term estrangement has also been applied to non-familial social contexts. For example, social estrangement is said to occur when one feels separated from valued group interaction (Weiss, 1973). Cultural estrangement (Seeman, 1991) occurs when an individual rejects dominant social values. The term has been used to refer to the emotional estrangement of married couples who continue to live together under the same roof long after true intimacy has died (Flowers, Robinson, & Carroll, 2000; Kayser, 1996; Neal & Collas, 2000). Emotionalestrangement also refers to a more general and chronic lack of intimacy beyond marriage, as when unpartnered persons lack any significant others to provide emotional closeness and a sense of importance (Weiss, 1973).

Some authors use the term estrangement to mean a complete communication cut off. This seems to be the popular meaning of the term (Boss, 1999; Davis, 2003; Herst & Padwa, 1998; LeBey, 2001; Lieberman, 2002; Sichel, 2004; Sucov, 2006; Tannen, 2001). Ungar (1999) operationally defined a communication cut-off as "all situations in which there was a conscious attempt by at least one family member to limit or eliminate contact" (p. 36). Bowen (1978) used the term emotional cut-off to describe the "process of separation, isolation, withdrawal, running away, or denying the importance of the parental family" (p. 382). For Bowen, a communication cut-off can include actual physical separation, emotional isolation, or a combination of both, with the pattern repeating itself in subsequent relationships. Kerr and Bowen (1988) further elaborate that cut-off and distance are the same and in the earlier work by Bowen (1978), the between generational cut-off implied the concept of emotional distance. Kerr and Bowen clarify that "cutoff was made a separate concept in the theory to emphasize its importance for explaining the intensity of the emotional process in a nuclear family and its importance in the conduct of family psychotherapy" (p. 271). Benswanger (1987) described a cut-off as "a condition of estrangement between family members that prevents them from confronting or resolving conflicts" (p. 191). Benswanger further elaborates that such cut-offs may be deliberate or unconscious, may occur between family members who are living together or apart, and are more commonly directed toward one's parents. Galvin et al. (2008) described family estrangement as a physical and/or psychological separation resulting from unresolved conflict within the family. Also, *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (1994) defines estrangement as "to remove from customary environment or associations . . . to arouse mutual enmity or indifference where there had

formerly been love, affection, or friendliness" (p. 397), including the final consequence of separation or divorce. Merriam-Webster's definition is generally consistent with the popular notion, but its focus on internal experience is problematic as an operational definition.

The term estrangement is sometimes used to describe intrapersonal rather than interpersonal events. Andersson (1986) uses the term self-estrangement to indicate a separation from one's true self, and psychodynamic theorists like Federn (1952) use the term estrangement to describe a symptom of ego disturbance within a single person. However, for the most part the literature uses the term to describe an interpersonal event.

A closely related term, alienation, consistently comes up when searching the estrangement literature. In general, alienation refers to the experience of disconnection from a variety of things, including work (Erikson, 1986; Roberts, 1987; Wahba, 1980). Seeman (1959) uses self-estrangement as one of five dimensions of alienation.

Measuring Estrangement

A literature search for scales or inventories claiming to measure estrangement or alienation revealed only a handful of measures. The few measures available actually assess a variety of so called estrangements. Kayser (1996) developed the *Marital Disaffection Scale* for assessing emotional estrangement in marriage. The *Cultural Estrangement Inventory,* developed by Cozzarelli and Karafa (1998), measures the extent one fits into mainstream American culture.

Seidel and Vaughn (1991) developed the *Social Alienation from Classmates Scale* for use in educational settings,and Lane and Daugherty (1999) adopted it for use with college students. Gireesan and Sananda (1991) developed a construct-specific alienation scale measuring five components: (a) powerlessness, (b) meaninglessness, (c) normlessness, (d) isolation, and (e) self-estrangement. However, we were unable to find any instruments that directly measured family estrangement. Table 1 provides an overview of the various definitions and measures of estrangement and the context in which they are used.

A Proposed Definition of Family Estrangement

Benswanger (1987), Bowen (1978), Kerr and Bowen (1978, 1988) and Ungar (1999) use the term estrangement to indicate a pernicious interpersonal problem, significant, ongoing, and difficult or impossible to resolve; usually among family members. Family estrangement is a distinct phenomenon, different from emotional estrangement, social estrangement, self-

estrangement, structural estrangement, and alienation. Although family estrangement was illustrated in several of the aforementioned case descriptions, no operational definitions of estrangement appeared in the literature. Since operational-behavioral definitions are required only in systematic research, it is not surprising to find an absence of such definitions of family estrangement. Thus, the present authors propose the following definition of family estrangement:

1. A complete communication cut-off between relatives, which means absolutely no intentional direct communication between the estranged parties. Indirect communication may occur, for example, through other family members or lawyers.

2. The communication cut-off is maintained deliberately or intentionally by at least one person.

3. The estranged relatives know how to contact each other. Neither is considered missing. Consequently, the cousin you simply have not spoken to in many years is not estranged. People who have unintentionally fallen out of touch are not estranged.

4. At least one of the persons involved claims that something specific about the other person justifies the communication cut-off, like something the other person did, does or failed to do.

Conclusions

The term definition may refer to a statement of the exact meaning of a word, as we have attempted to arrive at here. It may also refer to a statement or description of the nature, scope, or meaning of something. We propose estrangement will remain incomplete in this second sense, until it is integrated with various explanatory theories. The past decade has seen a burgeoning of research on angry rumination (Denson, 2012). Angry rumination increases the intensity and duration of the anger experience (Rusting & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998) and increases aggressive behavior (Bushman, 2002; Caprara, 1986; Collins & Bell, 1997; Denson, Pedersen, Friese, Hahm, & Roberts, 2011) of which estrangement is an instance.

An evolutionary view of estrangement as angry rumination places it in cultural context with cultural anthropological research on blood revenge (Boehm, 1987). Blood revenge occurs when one group, such as a member of a family or tribe, is harmed. In estrangement, that member gathers a share of the family into a coalition in-group, and estrangement is their way of seeking retribution (cf., Boehm, 1987). In many ways, vengeful, provocation-focused rumination-estrangement is the opposite of forgiveness (e.g., McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001). Consequently, the integration that will expand the definition of estrangement might begin with Forgiveness Theory (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000; Worthington, 1998,

2005), Grudge Theory (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998), or the Social Distance Theory of Power (Magee & Smith, 2013). Our developing theories of estrangement are rooted in established social psychology theories. These theories suggest those involved in estrangement may be more likely to experience systematic bias in empathic accuracy, reduced motivation for affiliation with others, or experience social-engagement emotions with lower frequency or intensity or experience social-disengagement emotions with greater intensity or frequency. The study of estrangement is likely to benefit from testing established social psychology theories as they might relate to it.

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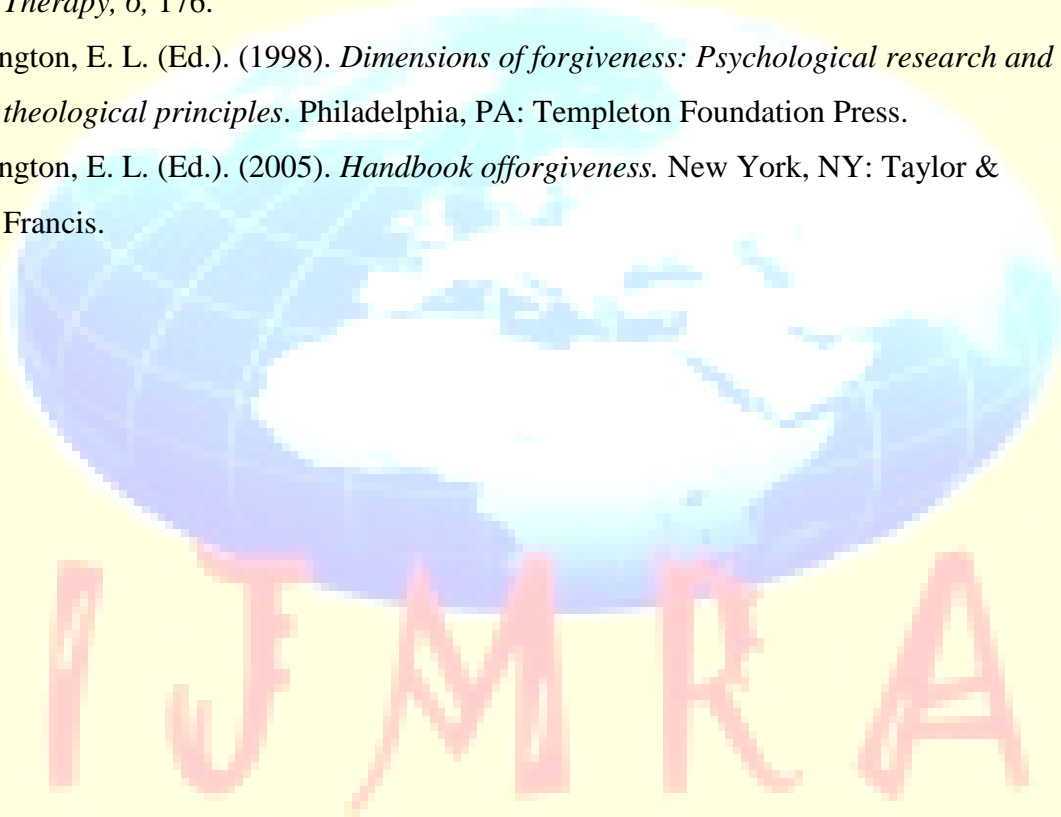Worthington, E. L. (Ed.). (2005). *Handbook offorgiveness.* New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.

Table 1

Definitions of Estrangement

Author(s)	Type	Definition
Andersson (1986)	Self	A separation from the true self.
Benswanger (1987)	Emotional	Deliberate or unconscious estrangement between family members.
Bowen (1978)	Emotional	Physical or emotional separation from parental family.
Cozzarelli & Karafa (1998)	Cultural	Adopting to mainstream American culture.
Erikson (1986)	Work	Disconnections from work assignments.
Federn (1952)	Self	Ego disturbance
Gireesan & Sananda (1991)	Self	Alienation from self and others.
Kayser (1996)	Emotional	Disaffection in marriage.
Merriam-Webster (1994)	Physical	To remove from customary environment or associations.
Seeman (1991)	Cultural	An individual's rejection or sense of removal from dominant social values.
Seidel & Vaughn (1991)	Social	Alienation from classmates.
Ungar (1999)	Emotional	A conscious attempt to limit or eliminate contact with family members.
Weiss (1973)	Social	The feeling from being separated from groupinteraction.
	Emotional	Experienced lack of intimacy