Article

"You're Not Welcome Here": A Grounded Theory of Family Distancing

Communication Research
2019, Vol. 46(4) 427–455

DOI: 10.1177/0093650217715542
journals.sagepub.com/home/crx
SAGE

Kristina M. Scharp[1]

Abstract

A constructivist grounded theory of family distancing emerged from the narrative accounts of 52 adult children in the process of estrangement from their parents. The grounded theory conceptualizes estrangement as a continuum comprised of eight components: (1) communication quality, (2) communication quantity, (3) physical distance, (4) presence/absence of emotion, (5) positive/negative affect, (6) reconciliation/desire to be a family, (7) role reciprocity, and (8) legal action. In addition, 10 communicative behaviors are identified that can help family members move along the estrangement continuum toward greater distance or maintain their position. Together they interplay to constitute a holistic picture of the estrangement process. Scholarly uses, theoretical implications, and practical applications will be discussed.

Keywords

family estrangement, discourse dependence, relationship dissolution, parent-child relationships

> I just said you need to pack up your things and you know, if you want to head home that's fine or get a hotel room but you're not welcome here . . . You need to leave.
>
> —Mandy (Interview 16)

[1]Utah State University, Logan, USA

Corresponding Author:
Kristina M. Scharp, Assistant Professor, The Director of the Family Communication and Relationships Lab, Department of Languages, Philosophy, and Communication Studies, Utah State University, 0720 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT 84322, USA.
Email: kristina.scharp@gmail.com

A family is forever. This belief pervades the cultural imaginary and yet, a new study suggests that family estrangement might be common as divorce (Conti, 2015). Defined as a process where at least one family member seeks to distance himself or herself (i.e., limit interaction and decrease interdependence) because of an ongoing negative relationship (see Scharp, 2016a), a random sampling of 550 mothers reveals that over one in 10 reported being estranged from at least one of her children (Gilligan, Suitor, & Pillemer, 2015). Given that parent-child estrangement occurs most frequently with fathers, a significant percentage of adult children and their parents might be suffering from this major family disruption (Conti, 2015).

Despite beliefs that all parents, especially mothers, are nurturing, loving, and would sacrifice anything for their children (see Hays, 1996), Agllias (2016) found that adult children reported abuse, poor parenting, and betrayal as the main reasons they initiated the estrangement process. Carr, Holman, Stephenson-Abetz, Koenig Kellas, and Vagnoni (2015) also have added mental illness, unsupportive behavior, toxicity, and drug/alcohol abuse to the list of attributions for why adult children seek distance. Unfortunately, the severe reasons adult children report are not the only disruptions they might need to address. Indeed, the estrangement process itself is traumatic (Dattilio & Nichols, 2011). Unlike other types of relationship dissolution that might end in a formalized divorce or breakup, parent-child estrangement is often marked by an on-again/off-again pattern for which the members do not perceive support and for which their grief is disenfranchised (Agllias, 2013, 2016). Furthermore, participants report a potential link between their estrangement and deleterious outcomes such as extreme negative emotions (Agllias, 2011), decreased ability to self-regulate, and heightened physiological response patterns (Friesen, 2003). Taken together, the causes, process, and outcomes of parent-child estrangement paint a dire picture for those who experience it, especially in light of speculation that only one out of four people ever seeks clinical help (Dattilio & Nichols, 2011).

With the exception of Agllias's (2011, 2016, 2017) as well as Scharp's (2016b; Scharp & McLaren, 2017; Scharp & Thomas, 2016; Scharp, Thomas, & Paxman, 2015) bodies of research, social scientific studies about parent-child estrangement are virtually nonexistent and what little we know about estrangement largely emerges from an amalgam of court reviews, popular press articles, and personal accounts (e.g., Drozd & Olesen, 2004; Friedlander & Walters, 2010; Lally, 2015; LeBey, 2001). Thus, it might come as no surprise that there is not an official conceptualization of estrangement, articulation of its components, or detailed understanding of the process. The ramifications of this are manifest; without an understanding of what estrangement is and how it is accomplished/maintained, clinicians might struggle to effectively counsel, scholars cannot systematically research antecedents/outcomes, and those intimately affected by it might not have the language to ask for help or work toward creating healthier family relationships. Toward addressing these issues, and guided by a constructivist grounded theory approach, 52 narrative interviews were conducted to elicit parent-child estrangement experiences and the communicative behaviors adult children enacted to create distance with their parents. Based on these data, a grounded theory of family distancing emerged that characterizes an estrangement continuum

and explains the communicative practices people enact to move along that continuum. By taking this constitutive approach to studying estrangement, this article contributes to an understudied but important turn toward illuminating what it means to be a family.

Relationship Dissolution and Parent-Child Estrangement

Despite similarities such as a desire by at least one party to decrease interdependence, parent-child estrangement likely differs from other types of relationship dissolution (see Baxter, 1984) and distancing processes (see Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2017). Unlike friendships or romantic relationships, parents and children are considered to be in nonvoluntary relationships, or those where members believe they have no viable choice but to maintain the relationship (Hess, 2003). Indeed, communication scholars (e.g., Afifi, Olson, & Armstrong, 2005) suggest that parents and children cannot exit their relationships due to the tight constraints of their involuntary bonds. Thus, given the default assumption that parents and children are in never-ending relationships, family distancing poses unique obstacle for its members. For example, dissimilar to married couples who can legalize their dissolution in divorce, adult children often lack the structural means to finalize their desire for distance. Moreover, unlike a divorce that is often accepted over time, research suggests that social network members (immediate family, extended family, and friends) are unsupportive, continuously refusing to understand adult children's desire for distance and making multiple unwanted attempts to reconcile the relationship regardless of the reasons for the distance (Agllias, 2011; Scharp et al., 2015).

Because of the cultural belief that family relationships are nonvoluntary (Hess, 2003), the ebb and flow of the estrangement process (Agllias, 2016), and the ongoing need for adult children to maintain distance (Scharp et al., 2015), estrangement is not a binary condition where one is estranged or not. Indeed, there is no such thing as "post-dissolution" for family members. Thus, it might be more accurate to describe adult children as somewhere "in the estrangement process" (Scharp et al., 2015, p. 331). Parent-child estrangement, then, might be better articulated as a *continuum*, where adult children can be more or less estranged.

Because estrangement is a unique distancing process, it becomes important to conceptualize it and understand it as such. Before estrangement scholars embraced it as a continuum (Agllias, 2016; Scharp et al., 2015; Scharp & Thomas, 2016), previous researchers have conceptualized estrangement as a decrease in emotional closeness (Bowen, 1982; Gilligan et al., 2015), lack of communication (Carr et al., 2015; Conti, 2015), or characterized by components such as physical distance (Agllias, 2011). Yet, these components lack boundaries (i.e., how much of a decrease, how long, how far away? etc.) and reflect researchers' a priori beliefs about a binary relational state. Baxter and her colleagues (2009) argue that garnering a lay perspective (e.g., perspective from someone who experiences a phenomenon) is critical for anyone seeking to argue for a constitutive approach to family (defined on p. 5). Thus, it is not only important to understand the components of the estrangement continuum because it is different

from typical relationship dissolution and more accurately reflects the process, but also because adult children's perspectives can influence the ways scholars, clinicians, and social network members make decisions about recruiting participants, recommending treatment, and providing support.

Taken together, understanding what components constitute the estrangement continuum based on accounts from those who intimately experience the process makes possible a conceptualization that could (1) help counselors diagnose estrangement and identify areas in which family members might need support, (2) help individuals in the distancing process both recognize and articulate their experience (which might help them seek support), and (3) provide network members with more details to match their support with what the individual needs. These possibilities, if realized, might help alleviate distress and increase well-being based on the large body of social support research that suggests that receiving support is associated with a myriad of positive health outcomes and is more effective when providers can match their messages to the type of support desired by the seekers (see MacGeorge, Feng, & Burlseson, 2011). Consequently, the following research question is posed:

> **Research Question 1 (RQ1):** What components constitute the parent-child estrangement continuum from the perspective of adult children in the estrangement process?

Discourse Dependence and Family Distancing

To date, taking a constitutive approach to studying family construction has largely corresponded to Galvin's (2006, 2014) discourse dependence perspective. This perspective fits within a social constructionist framework in its articulation of a constitutive view of language. Taking a constitutive approach requires a belief that relationships get spoken into (non)being as opposed to an alternative where communication resides "in" our relationships (Baxter, 2004).

Specifically, Galvin's discourse dependence perspective emphasizes the importance of communication in *constructing* family identity. As part of the construction enactment, Galvin (2014) argues that discourse dependent families have to regularly establish what it means to be a family to each other by engaging in the following strategies: (1) naming—choosing names/titles for nonbiologically related kin, (2) discussing—talking about the ties that bind family members together, (3) narrating—telling stories about the family's identity, and (4) ritualizing—involving members in family enactments. Furthermore, she argues that family members feel compelled to perform a variety of discourse practices to create, maintain, and disconfirm relationships.

To reinforce the family identity to the outside world, Galvin argues that discourse dependent families engage in these four strategies: (1) labeling—creating titles or positions to show how people are connected, (2) explaining—helping others understand the relationship, (3) legitimizing—invoking the law to justify the validity of a relationship, and (4) defending—justifying the relationship against attack. Taken

together, these strategies help families, especially those without blood or legal ties, communicate their identity.

In addition to family construction, Galvin (2014) hints that discourse also has the power to *deconstruct* family relationships. She argues,

> When one or more family members act in ways contrary to the beliefs or values of other members, or are viewed as unwelcome for a myriad of reasons, offended members may enact communicative deconstruction practices, assertively or reluctantly, in an attempt to remove such persons from family membership. (p. 30)

For Galvin, a deconstruction strategy is one that is deliberate and enacted with the intent to dismantle the familial bond because of an extremely negative relationship. She continues to suggest that deconstruction practices might take several forms (e.g., direct rejection messages) but only speculation exists as to how family members gain distance from one another. Indeed, even Galvin's original typology, and related family construction perspective, was proposed instead of based on a set of participant accounts.

Illuminating the distance practices that move family members along the estrangement continuum is an important endeavor. Research suggests that the ways people communicate during and after distancing dissolution directly influence how long individuals are distressed and their overall well-being (see Baxter, 1984; Koenig Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, & Cheng, 2008; Lambert & Hughes, 2010). Even though, and perhaps because estrangement is ongoing (i.e., no postdissolution communication), understanding the communicative behaviors that define the process might be even more important for scholars who seek to link them with specific outcomes. For example, Bachman and Guerrero (2006) have linked the communicative practices disengagers employ in dating relationships to satisfaction and commitment. In sum, these research studies, suggest that *how* (i.e., the communicative practices through which) individuals distance themselves matters, not only that the relationship dissolved. Thus, the second research question is posed:

> **Research Question 2 (RQ2):** How do adult children move along or maintain their position on the estrangement continuum (i.e., what are the communicative practices)?

Method

Constructivist Grounded Theory

Constructivist grounded theory emphasizes the inductive, comparative, emergent, and open-ended components designed to illuminate *a plausible relationship proposed among (sets of) concepts* (Charmaz, 2014). To develop a constructivist grounded theory, researchers should simultaneously engage in theoretical sampling and constant comparison. Theoretical sampling involves (1) adapting protocols to garner additional

information and (2) returning to raw data with new insight, that is, pursuing the collection of new data. Constant comparison is a process of comparing units of data both across and within the data corpus. To illuminate the relationships between the emergent concepts, the final research question is posed:

> **Research Question 3 (RQ3):** How do the components of estrangement (RQ1) and the enacted communicative practices (RQ2) interplay to form a constructivist grounded theory of family distancing?

Pilot Study

According to Charmaz (2014), grounded theorists should practice interviewing when dealing with sensitive topics to mitigate mistakes during later interviews. Thus, six adult children participated in a pilot study to determine their comfort with the interview protocol as well as to guide initial analysis. Consistent with theoretical sampling practices, two additional questions and an additional data collection technique were added as a result (see "Data collection" section).

Data Collection

Recruitment. To participate, adult children had to be at least 18 years old and have distanced themselves from a parent(s) because of a negative relationship. Because of the stigma surrounding estrangement (Agllias, 2013), the words "estranged/estrangement" were not used in the research call. Of the 52 adult children, 46, however, referred to themselves as "estranged" and the remaining six participants detailed an ongoing negative relationship with their parents. These participants were recruited via a listserv research call at a large Midwestern University.

Participant demographics. Most adult children were estranged from one parent ($n = 32$), some were estranged from both parents ($n = 18$), and a couple of adult children ($n = 2$) reported being estranged from both their biological parents and their stepparents. Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 66 years with a mean age of 35.73 years ($SD = 11.05$), with 36 identifying as women (70.6%), and 15 identifying as men (29.4%). The majority of participants identified as White ($n = 48$, 94.1%). Generally, participants reported that they initiated the distance with their parent because of some sort of psychological, physical, and/or sexual abuse/maltreatment as well as gross neglect. Because adult children and their parents often engage in on-again/off-again relationship patterns (see Table 1 for more demographics information), there was not one attribution that corresponded with each participant. Instead, adult children provided numerous and various reasons for wanting distance over time. These reasons provided a catalyst for adult children to make adjustments on the estrangement continuum detailed below.

Table 1. Participant Information.

ID No.	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Estranged parent	Contact	Length	Counseling	Interview time
1	Allison	50	Woman	White	Both	Hardly any	18 on/off	Yes	43 min, 31 s
2	Betty	28	Woman	Hispanic	Dad/stepmom	Hardly any	16 on/off	Yes	75 min, 30 s
3	Andy	23	Man	Hispanic/White	Mom	Hardly any	3	No	23 min, 35 s
4	Connie	50	Woman	White	Mom	No	10	Yes	49 min, 24, s
5	Diana	35	Woman	White	Mom	No	5.85	Yes	81 min, 03 s
6	Eva	42	Woman	White	Dad	Regular	40 on/off	Yes	75 min, 05 s
7	Braxton	21	Man	White	Dad	Some	3	Yes	49 min, 54 s
8	Faith	55	Woman	White	Mom	Some	37	Yes	56 min, 39 s
9	Georgia	29	Woman	Hispanic	Dad	No	4 on/off	Yes	50 min, 20 s
10	Harley	58	Woman	White	Mom	Some	39 on/off	Yes	28 min, 22 s
11	Iliana	33	Woman	White	Mom	No	5	Yes	70 min, 34 s
12	Janey	29	Woman	White	Both	No	4	Yes	47 min, 43 s
13	Caleb	39	NA	NA	Both	No	12	Yes	81 min, 22 s
14	Kayla	20	Woman	Hispanic/White	Dad	No	4	Yes	62 min, 57 s
15	Lily	20	Woman	White	Dad	No	6	No	46 min, 27 s
16	Mandy	43	Woman	White	Mom	Some	23	No	67 min, 36 s
17	Nadia	66	Woman	White	Both	No	26	Yes	58 min, 54 s
18	Dave	39	Man	White	Dad	Hardly any	10 on/off	No	48 min, 01 s
19	Ezra	37	Man	White	Both	Hardly any	0.75	Yes	29 min, 42 s
20	Olive	27	Woman	White	Both	No	10	Yes	22 min, 21 s
21	Fred	35	Man	White	Both	Hardly any	12	Yes	59 min, 42s
22	Greg	35	Man	White	Mom	Regular	10 on/off	Yes	47 min, 21 s
23	Phoebe	55	Woman	White	Both	Some	30	Yes	42 min, 41 s
24	Roxy	36	Woman	White	Both	Some	6.1	Yes	60 min, 33 s
25	Sophie	29	Woman	White	Dad	No	13	Yes	112 min 19 s

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

ID No.	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Estranged parent	Contact	Length	Counseling	Interview time
26	Trisha	24	Woman	White	Both	Some	6	Yes	50 min, 06 s
27	Uma	26	Woman	White	Mom	No	1	Yes	42 min, 34 s
28	Vera	46	Woman	White	Mom	Some	10	Yes	46 min, 42 s
29	Horace	39	Man	White	Dad	Some	19	Yes	52 min, 51 s
30	Whitley	29	Woman	African American	Both	Hardly any	1	Yes	38 min, 06 s
31	Xenia	46	Woman	White	Mom	No	1	Yes	47 min, 34 s
32	Zoe	25	Woman	White	Both	No	4	Yes	21 min, 07 s
33	Adeline	28	Woman	White	Both	No	9	Yes	51 min, 14 s
34	Barb	54	Woman	White	Dad	Some	30 on/off	Yes	47 min, 59 s
35	Cassidy	26	Woman	White	Both/stepmom	No	9	Yes	84 min, 47 s
36	Ian	51	Man	White	Mom	Some	3	Yes	46 min, 22 s
37	Devina	21	Woman	American Indian/White	Mom	No	3 on/off	Yes	25 min, 26 s
38	Jon	33	Man	White	Both	No	15	No	47 min, 17 s
39	Ellie	37	Woman	White	Both	Some	19	Yes	47 min, 41s
40	Fiona	20	Woman	Asian/White	Both	No	0.6	No	21 min, 48 s
41	Gwen	48	Woman	White	Dad	No	33	Yes	30 min, 09 s
42	Hannah	30	Woman	White	Mom	Some	12 on/off	Yes	63 min, 09 s
43	Kevin	34	Man	White	Dad	Hardly any	15	No	30 min, 20 s
44	Lucas	35	Man	White	Both	No	8	No	28 min, 22 s
45	Ilene	40	Woman	White	Dad	No	15 on/off	Yes	43 min, 51 s
46	June	24	Woman	White	Both/stepdad	No	21	Yes	29 min, 05 s
47	Max	30	Man	White	Mom	Some	13 on/off	Yes	44 min, 24 s
48	Kristy	42	Woman	White	Mom	Some	9	Yes	40 min, 51 s
49	Nolan	24	Man	White	Dad	Hardly any	NA	Yes	33 min, 31 s
50	Lucille	39	Woman	White	Both	Some	14 on/off	Yes	39 min, 57 s
51	Owen	38	Man	White	Dad	Some	20	No	24 min, 22 s
52	Patrick	36	Man	White	Dad	No	25	Yes	16 min, 15 s

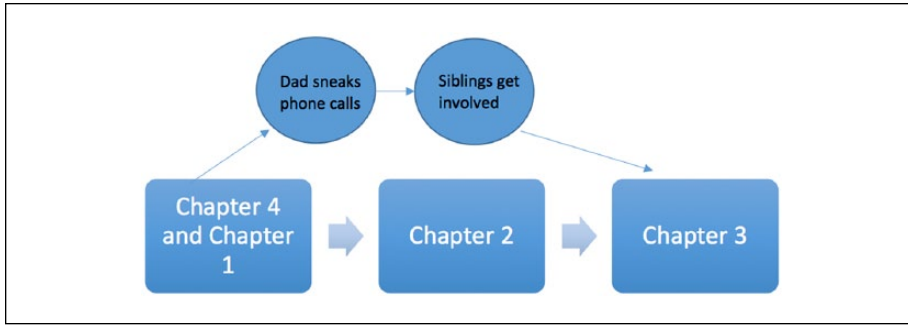

Figure 1. Storyboard from Interview 27.
Note. Chapter 1: Silence and Calm; Chapter 2: The Christmas From Hell; Chapter 3: Taking Sides; Chapter 4: MS and Mental Illness (participants named their own chapters). Uma's story began when she stopped communicating with her mother. She labeled Chapter 1 "Silence and Calm" because after she intentionally stopped talking to her mom, she claimed "it has reduced my stress 90% so at this point I feel good about it." Sibling relationships and secret communication with her father became complicated when Uma was unsure whether she was invited for Christmas. Based on peer pressure from her siblings to attend, Uma showed up on Christmas for dinner. Conflict erupted and Uma described it as The Christmas from hell. Siblings started to take sides. When asked if there was anything she wanted to add, edit, or amend, Uma said she forgot to say that the silence and calm resulted from her mother's long history of mental illness and recent diagnosis of multiple sclerosis (MS). She explained it was important to know that her mother behaved like a "small child" and had a "very emotionally abusive childhood." Finally, she concluded by saying she just wished for peace and that she was able to maintain her distance from her mother until the holidays came again and the cycle continued. Thus, she found that she cycled through Chapters 1 through 3 every year and realized she had not achieved a satisfying solution.

Collection and analysis. Adult children first completed a demographic questionnaire after consenting to participate. Adult children were asked to think of themselves as an author of a novel and share their estrangement story (see Holmberg, Orbuch, & Veroff, 2004). This technique, also known as narrative interviewing (Langellier, 1989) is the most unstructured type of interview. Based on the pilot study, participants were also given the opportunity to draw a storyboard of their estrangement experience (see Figure 1). They were instructed,

> As you tell your story, please stop at the beginning of each chapter and let's come up with a word or phrase to represent that chapter. Then you can write your words and phrases—or anything else—on this piece of paper so we can chart your journey.

Finally, adult children were asked a series of semistructured open-ended questions to garner more evocative details about components of their estrangement story. The initial collection resulted in three types of "elicited documents": (1) demographic information, (2) narrative interviews, and (3) storyboards (Charmaz, 2014, p. 47).

Interviews resulted in 682 pages of single-spaced text and lasted, on average, 47 minutes (range = 15-112 minutes). The transcription process included replacing all identifying information with pseudonyms and, per institutional review board (IRB) protocol, all locations were replaced with place markers. At the end of the interview,

adult children were asked if they would be willing to be contacted again to discuss the emergent results. Of the 52 participants, 49 agreed to be contacted again.

Theoretical sampling. One of the most important processes to conducting grounded theory is the simultaneous sampling and analysis of the data corpus (Charmaz, 2014). Of note, although these processes are discussed separately for the sake of clarity, they occurred simultaneously. Theoretical sampling first began during the pilot study. Based on adult children's responses, two questions were added to the interview protocol: "Did you feel like you got the support you needed?" and "Do you ever see yourself reconciling?" By interview 15, the following questions were added, "Did doing X behavior accomplish what you wanted? and the follow-up, "What else, if anything, did you do to get the distance that you wanted?" These questions were important during the theoretical coding process (see section below).

Charmaz (2014) contends that, in addition to asking new questions, theoretical sampling also includes returning to the data with a fresh perspective. RQ1 and RQ3 were first analyzed in 2015 and again in 2016 resulting in an additional component for RQ1. In 2013, data pertaining to RQ2 were initially categorized as distancing actions that were *active, passive*, or *mediated by a third party*. In 2014, a second analysis of these data coalesced into *declarative, one-time*, and/or *continuous practices*. Finally, the data were reanalyzed in 2016 and again in 2017.

The last component of theoretical sampling includes gathering more data throughout the process. Regardless of the different iterations of analysis, *saturation* was consistently reached at Interview 25. Interview 25 was particularly evocative, insightful, and the longest interview of the corpus. To provide an additional set of data to which to compare the original analysis and because saturation can only be determined in retrospect (at Interview 26 in the present study), an additional 26 interviews were collected 2 weeks after the initial collection. The gap facilitated simultaneous data analysis and the additional data served as a verification procedure known as *referential adequacy*. Referential adequacy requires the researcher to collect enough data so that the first half of the data can be compared with a second half. This comparison helps confirm that no new categories emerge (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To verify RQ1 and RQ2, two other verification procedures were conducted: (1) member checking and (2) peer debriefing. Of the 49 participants who agreed to participate, 10 were randomly selected to review the findings. All the participants who checked the analyses commented that the findings resonated with the majority of their experience, often stating that the interpretations were "spot on" and "reflect my sentiments well." Detailed notes were also made available to two other trained interpretive researchers; one who reviewed RQ1 and the other who reviewed RQ2. This process is known as *peer debriefing* and is a form of investigator triangulation. To aid in the present analysis (2016 and 2017), five additional participants were contacted to verify the relationships between concepts proposed in RQ3. These responses provided evocative details about both the components of the estrangement continuum and usefulness of the grounded theory. A third trained interpretive researcher verified the present analysis through peer debriefing. Throughout the entire process, detailed notes were kept as part of the *audit trail*.

Constant comparison. Constructivist grounded theory is a two-step process of initial coding followed by focused coding (Charmaz, 2014). This method guided the present (2016/17) analyses. First, initial codes emerged through line-by-line reading of each transcript (32 of which the author transcribed and the remainder transcribed by a research assistant). During open coding, utterances emerged as freestanding codes from both the interviews and the storyboards. As Charmaz (2014) suggests, these utterances were coded with gerunds for RQ2 (e.g., delegitimizing) as opposed to topics (e.g., delegitimation). This focuses the researcher on the actions and processes important to theorizing. Next, these codes were synthesized into coherent categories. This step served as the beginning of theorizing the data corpus as a whole. Throughout this step, each code was compared with the next to check for conceptual likeness or difference. Next, as categories emerged, they were constantly compared with each other. After the analysis of each story and to ensure the analytic process was inductive, categories were then compared with Galvin's (2006, 2014) discourse dependence strategies to determine commonality and difference. Finally, the remaining categories were explored in relationship to one another as part of the theorizing process. For example, the estrangement continuum gained meaning from the ways the findings from RQ2 and RQ3 interplayed. This step of theoretical coding illuminated the relationship between the categories as it coalesced into a grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014).

Findings

Through multiple iterations of theoretical sampling and constant comparison, a grounded theory of family distancing emerged. Eight distance continua coalesced to characterize the overall estrangement continuum (see Table 2 and Figure 2). Next, 10 communication behaviors provide insight into how adult children can move along or maintain their position on the continuum (see Tables 3 and 4).

RQ1: Components of the Estrangement Continuum

Constant comparison of the data revealed eight components or distance continua that constitute the estrangement continuum: (1) communication quality, (2) communication quantity, (3) physical distance, (4) presence/absence of emotion, (5) positive/negative affect, (6) reconciliation/desire to be a family, (7) role reciprocity, and (8) taking legal action (see Table 2). These distance continua are listed in alphabetical order to convey that no one continuum is more valuable than the others but rather it is the combination and severity of these components that matter. Ultimately, these eight distance continua coalesce to form the whole estrangement continuum (see Figure 2). Toward building the grounded theory, each distance continuum can be thought of as a sliding scale where zero is the least severe and 10 is the most severe. Added together, they form the entire estrangement continuum, which is anchored at zero and 80.

Specifically, communication quality encompasses whether interactions were satisfactory and intimate. Sometimes, the adult children noted that quality pertained to what topics they were willing to discuss with their parent(s). Other times, quality

Table 2. Characteristics of Estrangement.

Distance continuum	Less severe estrangement Lower end of the continuum	More severe estrangement Upper end of the continuum
Communication (quality)	"When I talked to them it was only about certain topics." (Interview 44)	(No communication)
Communication (quantity)	"I just went to lunch with him today." (Interview 6)	"They would never come visit me. They lived literally a 4-hour drive but they would fly all the way out to [state], which is like 19 hours, to visit my brother. No contact" (Interview 35).
Physical distance	"It's funny 'cause we live in a small town and we live in the same town." (Interview 32)	"I have moved and she does not know that address." (Interview 12)
Presence/absence of emotion	"Lack of communication, its more than that. It's a lack of sentiment. Uh, an absence of feeling." (Interview 13)	"I don't like his personality. I don't like who he is. Uh, and it quite, it, I feel poisoned when I'm around him" (Interview 29).
Positive/negative affect	"Um, but she's a good woman. She's just difficult." (Interview 22)	"I'm physically distanced, but I still was carrying around so much hate, and anger, and sadness." (Interview 7)
Reconciliation/ desire to be a family	"I kind of feel like we have reconciled to the point where I want us to be, and where I still consider us to be estranged, it's a polite estrangement." (Interview 24)	"Soon as we had enough money saved we moved out. I told her flat out, 'uh, you need to pick' and she said 'you can't tell me what to do' and I said, 'you will never see me or your granddaughter again.'" (Interview 38)
Role reciprocity	"But I was 16 and I had gotten a job, so she got me the car—the stipulation was that I had to pay for the car insurance." (Interview 26)	"I would never ever ask him for advice, I would never ever ever ask him for anything. Uh, he doesn't have anything for me." (Interview 21)
Taking legal action	"And we drafted both the durable power of attorney. And then in my living will I explicitly wrote him out." (Interview 25)	"So when I was 17, I had myself declared an emancipated minor." (Interview 1)

pertained to the depth within a given topic. Of note, this distance continuum is unique because as the estrangement becomes more severe, the quality communication becomes less frequent. Thus, adult children who were most distant on this continuum did not speak with their parents and thus, had no communication quality. Communication quantity, more straightforwardly, captures presence and absence of

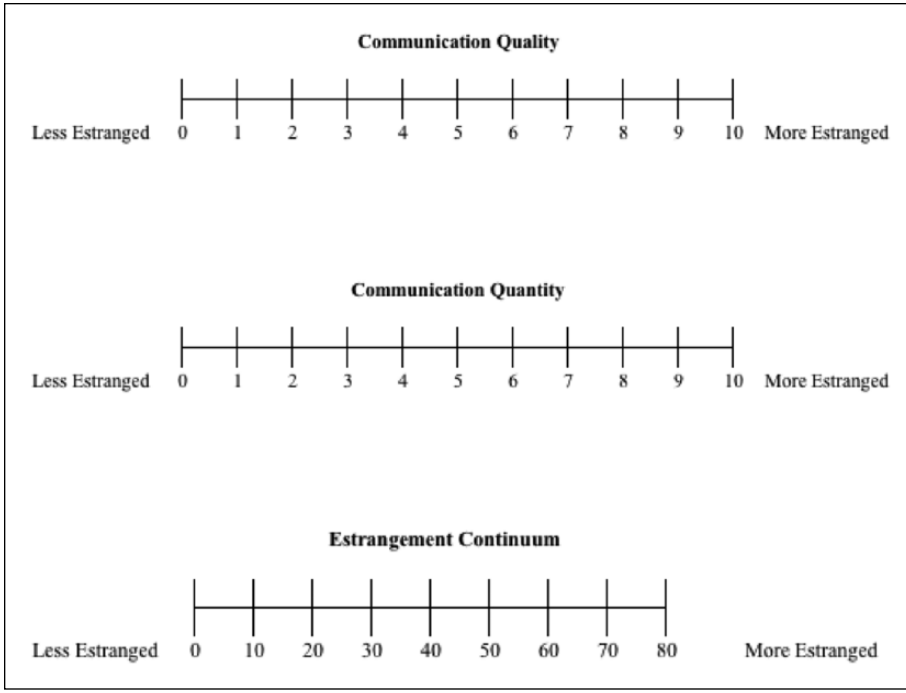

Figure 2. Distance continua and severity.
Note. Eight distance continua constitute the estrangement continuum. An example of the communication quality and communication quantity distance continua are pictured above. Therefore, a person could fall anywhere on an estrangement continuum that ranged from 0 to 80.

Table 3. Movement and Maintenance Practices.

Distance continuum	Movement	Maintenance
Communication quality	Decreasing meaningful contact	
Communication quantity	Reducing amount of contact	
Physical distance	Moving away	Staying away
Presence/absence of emotion	Decreasing feeling	
Positive/negative affect	Increasing negative affect	Holding on to negative affect
Reconciliation/desire to be a family	Reducing relationship effort	
Role reciprocity	Ignoring role expectations	
Taking legal action	(De)legitimizing	

contact. Whereas some adult children spoke with their parent(s) frequently, others had little to no contact for extended periods of time. Physical distance pertains to the proximity of the parents and children. For example, some children lived thousands of

Table 4. Movement and Maintenance Exemplars.

Practice	Exemplar
Decreasing meaningful contact	Lucille: I think the communication just became very superficial. It was about um, I stopped talking about my personal life, I stopped talking about my friends. (Interview 44)
Reducing amount of contact	Connie: I swam, I was involved in sports, and I tried to have as much involvement outside of the home as I could. (Interview 4)
Maintaining reduced contact	Nadia: I really didn't answer phone calls for a long while. I would get regular, almost daily . . . weekly phone calls from my mom. I didn't answer them because I knew, I mean I had caller ID before I had a cell phone, and I'd just be like, "Ok, it's my mom, don't need to answer it . . . don't need to." (Interview 47)
Moving away	Lucas: Uh, it got the point where I was just done so I moved to [city]. I moved away. (Interview 44)
Staying away	Harley: And when we want to get together for holidays, I'll just come up with, Oh sorry, I've already gotten this planned or whatever. (Interview 10)
Decreasing feeling	Dave: Eventually there is going to come a time where you just stop. And you are not going to care anymore and you are going to walk away. (Interview 18)
Increasing negative affect	Georgia: So, it became very extreme very quickly. I was basically kidnapped in the house I grew up in. And they took the phones out of the house, cut me off from all of my friends, I mean really scary stuff. And at some point, it was really the breaking point for my father . . . Really scary time for me. (Interview 9)
Holding on to negative affect	Diana: You still have those deep-rooted feelings, that anger and resentment. And it never gets resolved. (Interview 5)
Reducing relationship effort	Xenia: When I get that reaction, that sort of surprise or judgmental reaction, like you can't say that about your mom . . . I say, "Let me tell you what I went through so you can understand why this person is not my mom and I don't have to respect her and love her like that." (Interview 31)
Ignoring role expectations	Gwen: My family called, he died at some point. And I remember my family calling and asking me if I was going to go to the funeral, he was sick and in the hospital for two weeks, and they said he was asking for me and I did not go. And then they called and asked if I was going to go to the funeral and I did not go. The fact that they even asked . . . (Interview 41)
Taking legal action	Sophie: When I turned 18 maybe a week after that, mom knew I wanted to change my name and she gave me US$114 dollars, took me to the courthouse, and I changed my name and I took her last name. And that was awesome. (Interview 25)

miles away, whereas other still lived in the same house. Similar to the communication components, presence/absence of emotion was about the quantity of emotion adult children felt for their parents, whereas positive/negative affect has to do with whether

those feelings were good or bad. Next, adult children varied on the extent to which they desired to include their parents in their families. This means that although some participants desired reconnection, others adamantly did not want or consider their parents to be considered "family." Role reciprocity describes whether or not adult children perceived that they and their parents were fulfilling typical child/parent roles such as providing social support or financial aid. Finally, adult children, unable to relinquish their blood ties, took legal action in various ways to decrease their interdependence. For example, some participants legally emancipated themselves while others changed their durable power of attorney. Put simply, adult children used these eight distance continua to characterize what they meant when they talked about distancing themselves from their parents.

RQ2: The Mechanisms of Movement (Moving Toward Greater Distance and Maintenance)

Although identifying the distance continua can be helpful in understanding how experiences can vary widely yet still fall under the same process, RQ2 begins the first step in exploring the interplay of concepts. Because adult children found themselves in the on-again/off-again pattern indicative of estrangement, they often had to negotiate movement along the distance continua: sometimes toward greater distance and sometimes recalibrating to become closer to their parent(s). Yet, movement was not always the goal for the adult children. Indeed, sometimes, participants discussed the communicative practices they engaged in to simply maintain the distance they were able to create. What is particularly complicated is the extent to which two adult children could engage in the same behavior to accomplish distance and maintenance, respectively. In other words, a distance behavior for one person could be a maintenance behavior for another. Thus, the following 10 communicative behaviors (see Tables 3 and 4) suggest that movement toward greater distance and maintenance along/on the continuum are sometimes the same behavior in varying degrees, whereas other components of the distance continua correspond with both degree and individual behaviors.

Decreasing meaningful contact. Corresponding to the communication quality continuum, movement and maintenance can be accomplished by decreasing meaningful contact. Decreasing meaningful contact includes limiting the breadth of information discussed, the depth of information discussed, and de-identifying with the parent. Although broader, decreasing meaningful contact, in some ways, is akin to what Galvin (2014) articulates as *describing*—where family members discuss the ties that bind them. To maintain the "surface" communication, family members did not need to engage in different behaviors per se, rather they struggled to not increase the quality of their communication. For example, Betty described,

> When I was in AP English, I started going to him for some guidance and help and then in 12th grade I remember getting his advice, so I remember calling him and explaining my

> assignment and he would answer my questions, you know, it was like having a tutor or something. He was like a TA. So it wasn't like a father-daughter relationship.

In this example, Betty said that she was able to have a somewhat functional relationship when she stopped treating her father as a parent and interacted with him as an academic acquaintance. Stripping parents of their role, in some ways, also corresponds to the internal boundary practice of *naming* (Galvin, 2014). As Galvin (2006) argues, "naming plays a significant role in the development of internal family identity as members struggle to indicate their familial status" (p. 12). Thus, instead of being mom or dad, the person is de-identified and renamed "Sarah." In sum, decreasing meaningful contact required adult children to communicate with someone they have had a long relational history with as though that history did not exist.

Reducing amount of contact. Perhaps the most pervasive communicative practice depicts the importance of communication in maintaining relationships regardless of whether they are traditionally thought of as nonvoluntary. Specifically, this practice emphasizes that parent-child communication is not inherent, but rather a choice by both parties. To reduce contact, many adult children made declarative statements about the relationship that correspond to what Baxter (1984) labels "Fait Accompli" or "an explicit declaration to the other party that the relationship was over with no opportunity for discussion or compromise" (p. 37). Others went a less overt route and either expressed their dissatisfaction with the relationship or simply stopped communicating with their parents. Braxton described,

> I went to college and just realized that unlike at home I'm free to make my own choices so, I guess, the first easiest thing I did was that I would never text or call him. I would always do that with my mom and they're still married, they still live together so obviously he noticed and that bothered him. So that's the first thing I did.

Similarly, Lucas and Zoe recounted (respectively), "I mean, we don't talk to each other, we don't, I mean there is no communication at all, with him at all, whatsoever" and

> I mean I don't call her. I don't, I don't have any kind of contact with her at all. You know, I didn't contact her on Mother's Day or her birthday was in March and I just, I didn't do anything to contact her.

By not visiting on holidays, many adult children discussed being able to maintain limited contact.

Moving and staying away. To gain greater physical distance, however, requires family members to both move away (e.g., move out of shared residence, move to different state, etc.) and stay away (e.g., do not return for holidays, avoid functions with family member, etc,) from other members. For some, this meant going to live with another parent, one who was ostensibly divorced from the residential parent. Cassidy recounted,

> My mom would completely fall apart and would tell me she was going to end her life if I left her and that she couldn't live without me, couldn't breathe without me, all those things, which was really difficult for me to deal with and in my perception, as like a twelve or thirteen year old, my dad's house seemed more stable to me because he had gotten married and settled down. And so, I told my mom that I was leaving and I did.

Cassidy explained that the content of her mom's communication was distressing and that the lure of a "normal" family with a mom who cooks, cleans, and does laundry persuaded her to leave. In the end, Cassidy made the decision to move in with her dad and stepmom, which helped create physical distance from her biological mother and established some stability. For these participants, it is likely that nonresidential parents served as a safe haven for those who might have otherwise felt compelled to stay in an unhealthy relationship.

Moving away was not enough for these participants and arguably much easier than staying away. Most often, adult children had to create boundaries such as making it difficult for their parents to find them or not returning home for holidays. For example, Georgia explained,

> Um, I think I've stayed away. I grew up in [city] and I have very rarely visited, and that goes back to when I was 18 and moved away. Undergrad, after high school, I don't go back much, I don't like to go back much, I don't want to bump into people in the grocery store, I don't want to, it's hard for me to be there still to be there in those places. I fear that he [her dad] is going to see me and rage at me and I don't want that in my life. So I physically don't go back much, maybe once a year for a couple days at this point. And when I do, I don't go to the area where my parents live, that's for sure.

In addition to avoiding their parents' homes, adult children frequently discussed purposefully refraining from attending gatherings and holidays (arguably the inverse of Galvin's *ritualizing*). Staying away was not only a way for adult children to avoid their parents, but also is particularly meaningful because of the role rituals play in constituting a family.

Decreasing feeling. Adult children related that over time, they felt less and less for their parents. Often a product of not experiencing or perceiving love, some adult children shared,

> Eva: So, um, it's been hard to have a really, it's hard to say we're not close but I don't feel that close to him. I don't think that he realizes it but I don't feel that close to him. Because he was not a very loving, and caring dad, and all the typical things.

Another participant, Owen, described, "I don't have any feelings, really one way or the other, for my father. So there were no feelings there to deal with. So the emotions were less." Although perhaps decreasing feeling does not sound particularly difficult, maintaining "decreased feeling" was particularly difficult. Eva continued,

> It's just years of, it's a constant kind of back and forth kind of thing. I wish I could just put my own feelings aside and suck it up and just deal with it, not be embarrassed that he stinks [does not bathe].

Although unsuccessful, Eva conveyed that emotion is not something you can turn off once and it stays off; rather, participants had to manage their emotions to try and feel less (negatively). Mandy expanded,

> I guess in my mind in some ways I've kind of tried to turn off any kind of feeling or interaction you know, or feeling toward her that you know I should behave a particular way because she's my mother.

Thus, even when adult children limited their communication and physical distance, emotion was an important tie that they had to negotiate to maintain their desired amount of distance.

Increasing negative affect and holding on. In addition to decreasing the amount they felt for their parents, adult children also had to negotiate the valance of their emotion. In some instances, the emotional void was replaced with negative emotion. Although it was rare an adult child came out and said he or she simply hated his or her parent, he or she, more often than not, did not harbor good will. Caleb described, "In some cases that absence can be replaced by negative feeling, negative sentiment. Sometimes hatred. Definitely." Furthermore, Xenia relayed, "My mom is, is, um, really vindictive. Um, very angry. Um, very manipulative. Very hateful." Adult children expressed that increasing their negative feelings was important because they often used these feelings to gain distance and maintain it. Thus, it was not enough to increase negative feelings; adult children also described having to hold on to those feelings. Betty shared, "I still feel like I carry the pain of that experience with me," and Kayla shared, "I'll write about the situations he put me through and things like that and then I see, I can't let up now because this happened." Thus, maintaining negative affect helped adult children reenter an unhealthy relationship.

Reducing relationship effort. Adult children largely discussed this theme in relationship to reconciliation. Often, they found themselves having to avoid or outright refuse attempts to reconnect. In holding steadfast, adult children expressed their desire not to be a family and reduced their effort. For example, Max explained,

> I see sometimes one of my uncles tries to put less distance between my mom and I because he'll be like, "Oh, your mom needs a ride out, I'll pay for the gas to go to [state] . . . you could come with, or if you could drive your mom that'd be great!" And I'm like, "I can't really endure a two and a half hour car ride with her, I'd really prefer not to." (Interview 47)

Although often painful, reducing relationship effort with parents often meant the adult children also had to distance themselves from other family members. Furthermore,

adult children discussed that a family can be a choice as opposed to an obligation. Nadia articulated,

> Family life isn't rich if there are tensions like that and you hear so many people talk about how they hate the holidays 'cause they have to go to so-and-so's house who they hate. And to me I'm thinking I have family life with my daughter, with my husband, with his two sons, I don't need to just make nice to have family life and I don't understand why people are willing to accept really bad relationships where something is better than nothing because to me, that's just absolutely a falsehood. Something is not better than nothing, a healthy realization of where your life is and to make your own life is far better than accepting something so negative. Your life is what you make of it. And with that being said, it took about 20 years to get there. So, it didn't happen overnight. (Interview 17)

As suggested throughout the data corpus, adult children alluded to the time it takes to find a comfortable place on the distance continua. Prior to Nadia's realization, her family of origin would make multiple attempts to reconcile the members until Nadia decided she no longer wanted to or needed to make the effort. This category, in particular, illustrates the misconception that families are inherently enduring and do not require effort to maintain.

Ignoring role expectations. Adult children explained that not only did their parents fail to behave like parents (e.g., abusing them), they also did not fulfill roles typically enacted by children. Specifically, Mandy reported,

> Various things have happened over the past year that, some people might interpret as me being cruel or unfair but she was in the hospital for more than a week, due to pancreatitis, which can be very serious and um, she is a diabetic who has chosen not to treat her diabetes. So, she was in the hospital and in the past if something like that would happen, I would have rushed back. I would have been at her bedside. I would have been her defender and protector and you know, whatever and this time I decided just to, I didn't have time for one thing. I mean, I'm in school. (Interview 16)

In this example, Mandy alluded to the idea that children should visit their parents if they are sick and care for them as they get older. Indeed, multiple participants discussed that struggle of *continually* ignoring tasks and roles they felt were part of the "job" of being children.

(De)legitimizing. Most similar to Galvin's practice of legitimizing, participants sometimes used legal means to negate or neutralize their familial ties. Although not prevalent, some adult children wanted to make sure that official ties between themselves and their parents were broken. Thus, one of the most extreme actions was legal emancipation. Instead of remaining with her parents or returning to state custody Allison described,

> I went down to the police station and they said we can put you back into the system or you can have yourself declared an emancipated minor so that's what I did, instead of

> going back to the foster care system, which is something I had already been in . . . So when I was 17, I had myself declared an emancipated minor. (Interview 1)

In this example, Allison was given the choice to return to the foster care system or have herself declared an emancipated minor. Given the choice, she declared herself an emancipated minor and was able to create independence from her biological parents. More often, (de)legitimizing took the form of changed legal documents. One way adult children did this was to change their last name. For example, one adult child contended,

> Ellie: So much as a feminist as I am, I chose to take my husband's last name and I did that very purposefully because I did not want his name anymore. Um, and so while I never openly discussed that with him and I, I assume he would have not ever understood that piece of it, um, it was a very deliberate thing for me to distance that I was no longer this name anymore. Um, it was sort of liberating I guess. (Interview 39)

By legally changing her name, Ellie was able to shed the some of the connection with her father. Adult children who took legal action illuminate the seriousness of "being trapped" in an unwanted familial relationship. As long as adult children did not reverse their legal action, then maintenance was accomplished; probably the easiest action to maintain.

RQ3: A Grounded Theory of Family Distancing

The last research question illuminates the relationships between the continua and the communicative practices that emerged in RQ1 and RQ2. Although one continuum is no more important than the others as they all can contribute to the estrangement continuum holistically, adult children's positions on certain continua sometimes related to their positions on others. For example, adult children who physically distanced themselves and/or took legal action against their parents often were those who had little communication quantity. Alternatively, those who had a strong desire to be family and/or adult children who engaged in acts of role reciprocity tended to have more (positive) feelings toward their parents than those who did not (i.e., presence/absence of emotion and positive/negative affect). Perhaps counter intuitive, adult children who expressed that they did not talk frequently with their parents did not necessarily also have the worst quality communication. Sometimes, those who talked infrequently became a little closer through their distance; likewise, those who talked more often sometimes had the poorest communication quality as engaging with their parent provided more opportunities for conflict and abuse to persist. Taken together, the relationships between the continua suggest that movement along one continua might influence movement along others but with no guarantee. In this regard, the combination of the salience of each continua and the degree to which they experience each component determines where a person might be on the estrangement continuum. The degree to

which adult children experience each continua, however, might be easier or more difficult depending on which continua or which combinations are salient.

In addition to the relationships between the continua, the communicative practices adult children enacted to gain or maintain distance were ostensibly easier and harder to accomplish depending on the combination of the practices. For instance, ignoring role expectations and reducing relationship effort were often easier after adult children moved away and stayed away. Of note, adult children discussed that moving away was much easier than staying away. Perhaps the most difficult communicative behavior for adult children was taking legal action. Those who invoked the law discussed their (non)relationship with their parents with more confidence and finality. One reason for this confidence could be that the culture at large values the authority of the law. Indeed, this is the closest adult children came to the same type of relationship dissolution seen in romantic relationships (i.e., divorce) and perhaps carries with it the greatest stigma. Although some patterns did emerge, it is important to emphasize that a strict hierarchy of estrangement enactment did not manifest. Put simply, part of the reason that the estrangement process is complex is that there are few rules and many exceptions. Despite the lack of processual parsimony, researchers, clinicians, and network members who embrace the chaos of estrangement can ultimately better serve the people who might be suffering in it.

Even though there were no concrete patterns between the continua and between the communication practices, respectively, as detailed in Table 3, the communicative practices did correspond to each of the eight distance continua broadly. For both communication continua, decreasing meaningful contact and reducing the amount of contact were simultaneously ways of gaining more distance and maintaining distance. Put another way, so long as adult children did not increase their meaningful contact or contact their parents more frequently, they were able to maintain their position on the continua. Physical distance, however, required two separate actions. Adult children not only had to physically remove themselves but also avoid shared family gatherings and holidays by staying away. Similar to communication quantity, those who wanted to reduce their affect discussed not letting their parents "get to them." It is important to note that these adult children did not simply will their emotions away, but rather decreased their feeling by refusing to take responsibility for their parents actions. By doing so, adult children focused on their own lives and as a by-product felt less for their parents altogether. Albeit a bit surprising, adult children discussed not only increasing their negative feelings for their parents but also actively holding on to their negative affect. Their ability to hold on to hurt and hate served an important purpose. Because they had to face unwanted attempts at reconciliation and cultural norms that suggest families should be together, these adult children carried around their negative affect to protect them from reentering an abusive relationship with their parents. This finding creates questions as to what healing is possible for adult children in the estrangement process if holding on to negative feelings helps stop the cycle of abuse. Reducing relationship effort was a way for adult children to deconstruct their family and disrupts ideas that families do not have to try to be a family. Thus, adult children discussed not reaching out, not trying again, and ultimately talking about their families

as if their parents did not exist. In concert with a constitutive view of family, by talking their parents out of the family they spoke a new family into being. The choice surrounding whether adult children wanted to be family in some ways corresponds to whether they fulfilled their role expectations. Existing research clearly defines what it means to be a good mother/father/child (e.g., see Hays, 1996) and adult children (and their parents) consciously violated those expectations and continued to violate them. Finally, it is no surprise that (de)legitimizing corresponds to the legal action continua. In sum, the interplay of the continua and communication practices paint a grounded theory of estrangement in action; noting that one person's path to distance is likely very different from another person's estrangement process.

Discussion

Before thinking about estrangement as an ongoing process, scholars suggested that components such as emotion, communication, and distance characterized the estrangement process (see Agllias, 2011; Bowen, 1982; Carr et al., 2015). Results from RQ1 reveal that the story is much more complex. Communication, for example, is not only about the quantity but also about the quality of interaction. Similarly, the valance of affect is meaningful, not just whether the person feels emotion. These examples illustrate how the conceptualization of estrangement becomes clearer when thought of as a continuum.

The emergence of communication and emotion as essential components is not surprising considering the ways family communication scholars define the family. For example, Segrin and Flora (2011) suggest that a transactional definition of family is based on the communication and subjective feelings that arise from interaction. As it happens, the transactional definition is not the only family definition that corresponds to the components of the estrangement continuum. Functional definitions are those that emphasize the tasks family members perform for one another and correspond to adult children's reports that they decreased their role reciprocity. Finally, Floyd, Mikkelson, and Judd (2006) suggest that structural definitions of family rely on the presence of blood and law. Obviously, adult children could not erase their biological connection to their parents but went as far as to legally emancipate themselves. After the age of 18, adult children found different ways to invoke the discourse of law to gain distance as they wrote their parents out of their wills or changed their names. Finally, perhaps one of the most interesting emergent categories was Reconciliation/Desire to be a Family. This distance continuum speaks directly to idea that we can choose who belongs in our families. Often approached as from a family construction perspective (e.g., voluntary kin, see Braithwaite et al., 2010), choice emerged as a component that defies the common saying that we can choose our friends but we cannot choose our family. But with this in mind, no one component is more meaningful than another despite the findings that suggest some grouping of continua might covary with more frequency than others. Thus, the important takeaway is that these eight continua emerged to suggest that it is *the combination* and

degree of the components that determines the extent of the estrangement and not merely their presence or absence.

After the emergence of the eight components, 10 communicative behaviors emerged to help elucidate the ways adult children move along and maintain their position on the distance continua. Noticeably, adult children spent more time discussing the importance of maintenance (with the exception of delegitimizing) as the more difficult set of behaviors. Ultimately, this set of behaviors emphasize that the process of estrangement is ongoing and complex; a process that requires adult children to actively maintain distance on a myriad of fronts. Of note, it is unsurprising that delegitimizing was the easiest to maintain considering people culturally understand the law as non-negotiable, unlike the other discourse practices (e.g., communication quality) that might change from day to day.

Finally, a grounded theory of family distancing emerged when the emergent components of RQ1 and RQ2 were put in conversation with each other. As argued previously, certain patterns emerged between the continua and the ease/difficulty of gaining or maintaining distance was sometimes determined by combination of the salient continua. A generalizable pattern, however, did not emerge and suggests that because the estrangement process is fluid, no one adult child's journey will look exactly like another's experience of family distancing. Based on the fluidity and distinctness of the process, theoretical applications will be discussed.

Theoretical Implications

Problematizing Galvin's discourse dependence perspective. Although many communicative practices resembled Galvin's (2006, 2014) strategies for family construction, new practices emerged and the overall organization of the communicative behaviors did not align particularly well with her current typology of internal and external boundary management practices. For example, although the inverse of *naming* emerged as a way to limit communication quality, whether that process happened within the family or outside of it was not particularly pertinent to the distancing. Furthermore, the practice of delegitimizing, which is presented as an external behavior, was very important for some adult children to renegotiate the internal structure of the family. This blur between internal and external practices corresponds to a study by Scharp (2016b), which revealed that social network members were often physically present to witness to adult children's attempts to distance themselves from their parents. Thus, the communicative practices simultaneously worked to deconstruct the family from the inside and to the outside. Even Galvin's current typology also shares this problem. For example, *narrating* (i.e., telling stories about the family's identity) is considered an internal practice but members of discourse dependent families often share their family stories on public forums to the outside world (see Baxter, Norwood, Asbury, & Scharp, 2014; Thomas, 2014). Consequently, family deconstruction is not merely the inverse of family construction as it inherently complicates the demarcation of internal and external boundaries and serves as a less helpful heuristic. Family deconstruction, then, should be studied as a separate process and not be lumped together with the discourse dependence perspective.

Theoretical applications of a grounded theory of family distancing. As a product of taking a constructivist grounded theory approach, a model of family distancing emerged that scholars can use in a myriad of ways. Scholars might use this theory to better recruit participants, operationalize estrangement, or use it as a heuristic for coding. For example, similar to the ways narrative scholars code stories for coherence (see Baxter, Norwood, Asbury, Jannusch, & Scharp, 2012), scholars could develop a codebook to objectively rate those in the estrangement process. These ratings could be linked to a variety of insightful dependent variables such as psychological well-being, depression, resilience, or general life satisfaction. Operationalized, the distance continua could also serve as dependent variables of existing communication theories such as family communication patterns theory (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990), attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), or relational turbulence theory (Solomon, Knobloch, Theiss, & McLaren, 2016). Alternatively, they also could be used as independent variables that predict concepts such as resilience, self-esteem, or health outcomes such as depression or anxiety. Finally, difference scores could be calculated between current positions and ideals, similar to Caughlin's (2003) Family Communication Standards, and associated with variables of interest.

Questioning the voluntary-nonvoluntary relationship binary. The emergent grounded theory depicts numerous ways adult children can deconstruct a relationship many scholars believe is unbreakable (e.g., Hess, 2003). In this regard, Hess's (2003) definition holds up to a certain extent; nonvoluntary relationships are those where the individuals believe they have no viable choice but to maintain them. The problem with this definition is that not all members believe they have to maintain their family relationships. Clearly, adult children in this study came to a point where they did not act as if they were obligated to their family on the distance continua. Scholars should consider refraining from defining all families as nonvoluntary, especially given the pressure this puts on individual members who desire to leave abusive relationships. In this regard, the present study contributes theoretically by calling researchers to reevaluate whether a (non)voluntary classification is not only useful but also oppressing disenfranchised populations.

Results from this study also provide an alternative way of thinking about the voluntariness of relationships. It is possible that people perceive their relationships to be more or less voluntary depending on their interactions. For example, in the case of parent-child estrangement, the culture would assume that the relationship is nonvoluntary but adult children engage in practices and express beliefs that suggest that they feel torn about their commitment to their parent(s) or completely unobligated. Alternatively, some relationships often perceived as voluntary such as friendships might become nonvoluntary. Consequently, this study challenges the idea that relationships are either voluntary or nonvoluntary, instead suggesting that individuals' perceived obligation to a person might fluctuate along a continuum over the course of their lifetime. Opening this dichotomy might create new opportunities for individuals to talk about different types of kin-like relationships. Thus, conceptualizing relationships on a continuum might be a productive avenue to explore kin making and unmakings.

Reconceptualizing relational maintenance. According to Dindia (2003), there are four purposes of relational maintenance: (1) to keep a relationship in existence, (2) to keep a relationship in a specific state or condition, (3) to keep a relationship in a satisfactory condition, and (4) to keep the relationship in repair. The results from these data clearly problematize these conceptualizations of relational maintenance by challenging the assumption that individuals want to remain close. Indeed, perhaps the closest purpose that is compatible with the present findings is to keep a relationship in a specific state or condition, in this case, a "distanced state." Yet, this definition also implies that maintenance keeps a relationship static, or in an unmoving state. Thus, the definition does not capture the ways adult children employ multiple maintenance practices to not only maintain the desired level of distance but also to move along the estrangement continuum. In addition, Dindia suggests, "maintaining the state of a relationship prevents a relationship from deescalating, and consequently terminating" (p. 3). Thus, definitions of relational maintenance ultimately fail to capture instances when individuals employ discursive practices to maintain distance from a relationship with others. Thus, a key contribution of this study is to reconceptualize relational maintenance to include the possibility that we not only communicatively work to keep our relationships close but also discursively enact practices to maintain distance with unwanted associations. Future researchers should interrogate the functional ambivalence of relational maintenance.

Practical Applications

For clinicians. In addition to the ways scholars might use this grounded theory, clinicians might also find it useful to help counsel someone in the estrangement process. First, clinicians should consider conceptualizing estrangement as a process as opposed to a solidified identity. Conceptualizing estrangement as a process might help clinicians make sense of their clients' repeated desire to revisit, or what Agllias (2011) calls an obsession to think about the estrangement, the events that lead to the estrangement, a potential for reconciliation, or even revenge. When thought of as a process, rumination about a past event might be reconceptualized to be a healthy part of the sensemaking and coping process that accompanies a never-ending process. Given the prominence of Bowen's (1982) work regarding emotional cutoff and the influence that it has had on the ways clinicians view estrangement, reframing family estrangement as a process might have real implications for the ways clinicians make recommendations to their clients seeking help. Consequently, the theoretical reframing of estrangement as a process characterized by multiple continua serves in a practical way, emphasizing that the theoretical is often practical.

For those in and related to the estrangement process. Results suggest that maintaining distance might be particularly challenging for those in the estrangement process. By better understanding which areas (i.e., the distance continua) might warrant movement or maintenance, individuals might be able to ask for social support and network members might be able to provide support that will be perceived as helpful. For example, network members might refrain from inviting both parties to the same event. Although

potentially complicated, understanding preferences regarding the distance continua can help both those in the process and social network members make better decisions about support seeking and provision.

Limitations, Directions for Future Research, and Conclusion

Although serving as a foundation for estrangement research, no study is without limitations. All participants were garnered using a university listserv and collected at or geographically near a large Midwestern University. The majority of participants were also White and women, which might have led to particularized results. Although a large White sample is representative of the state in which the data were collected, future researchers should explore the distancing practices of more diverse populations. Furthermore, certain distance continua might be more or less relevant to women/men. Researchers should determine whether certain distance continua yield particularized results for specific populations. Finally, socioeconomic class might be another factor that should be considered when exploring estrangement. Although these data were not collected explicitly, the data suggest that participants with varying degrees of economic resources might enact different communicative practices more easily than others.

Despite its limitations, this study represents the foundation for a robust program of research on family estrangement; therefore, many directions for future research are possible. One particularly fruitful avenue of research lies in broadening the relationship scope. In other words, future researchers should explore estrangement from the parents' perspective and members of the immediate family who are inherently a part of the estrangement process. Sibling estrangement is another opportunity for researchers to better understand family estrangement.

Taken together, components of the estrangement process coalesced into a grounded theory of family distancing. At the heart of this study, participants illustrated the importance of communication in (de)constructing what it means to be a family. In addition and of note, participants emphasized the importance of communicative maintenance work, suggesting that scholars should not overlook the practices individuals employ during relationship dissolution. Overall, these findings can be applied to help scholars, clinicians, those engaged in the estrangement process, and social network members to make better decisions about recruitment, counseling, help-seeking, and social support provision.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Afifi, T. D., Olson, L. N., & Armstrong, C. (2005). The chilling effect and family secrets: Examining the role of self-protection, other protection, and communication efficacy. *Human Communication Research*, *31*, 564-598.

Agllias, K. (2011). No longer on speaking terms: The losses associated with family estrangement at the end of life. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, *92*, 107-113. doi:10.1606/1044-3894.4055

Agllias, K. (2013). Family estrangement. In *Encyclopedia of social work*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Agllias, K. (2016). Disconnection and decision-making: Adult children explain their reasons for estranging from parents. *Australian Social Work*, *69*, 92-104. doi:10.1080/03124 07X.2015.1004355

Agllias, K. (2017). *Family estrangement: A matter of perspective*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Bachman, G. F., & Guerrero, L. K. (2006). Relational quality and communicative responses following hurtful events in dating relationships: An expectancy violations analysis. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *23*, 942-963. doi:10.1177/0265407506070476

Baxter, L. A. (1984). Trajectories of relationship disengagement. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *1*, 29-48. doi:10.1177/0265407584011003

Baxter, L. A. (2004). Distinguished scholar article: Relationships as dialogues. *Personal Relationships*, *11*, 1-22. doi:10.1111/j.1475-6811.2004.00068.x

Baxter, L. A., Henauw, C., Huisman, D., Livesay, C., Norwood, K., Su, H., . . . Young, B. (2009). Lay conceptions of "family": A replication and extension. *Journal of Family Communication*, *9*. 170-189. doi:10.1080/15267430902963342

Baxter, L. A., Norwood, K. M, Asbury, B., & Scharp, K. M. (2014). Narrating adoption: resisting adoption as "second best" in online stories of domestic adoption told by adoptive parents. *Journal of Family Communication*, *14*, 253-269. doi:10.1080/15267431.2014.908199

Baxter, L. A., Scharp, K. M., Asbury, B., Jannusch, A., & Norwood, K. M. (2012). "Birthmothers are not bad people": A dialogic perspective of online birth mother narratives. *Qualitative Communication Research*, *1*, 53-82. doi:101525/qcr.2012.1.1.53

Bowen, M. (1982). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. New York, NY: Jason Aronson.

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Braithwaite, D. O., Bach, B. W., Baxter, L. A., DiVerniero, R., Hammonds, J. R., Hosek, A. M., . . . Wolf, B. M. (2010). Constructing family: A typology of voluntary kin. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *27*, 388-407. doi:10.1177/0265407510361615

Carr, K., Holman, A., Stephenson-Abetz, J., Koenig Kellas, J., & Vagnoni, E. (2015). Giving voice to the silence of family estrangement: Comparing reasons of estranged parents and adult children in a nonmatched sample. *Journal of Family Communication*, *15*, 130-140. doi:10.1080/15267431.2015.1013106

Caughlin, J. P. (2003). Family communication standards: What counts as excellent family communication and how are such standards associated with family satisfaction? *Human Communication Research*, *29*, 5-40. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.2003.tb00830.x

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Conti, R. P. (2015). Family estrangement: Establishing a prevalence rate. *Journal of Psychology & Behavioral Science*, *3*, 28-35. doi:10.15640/jpbs.v3n2a4

Dattilio, F. M., & Nichols, M. P. (2011). Reuniting estranged family members: A cognitive-behavioral-systematic perspective. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, *39*, 88-99. doi:10.1080/01926187.2010.530169

Dindia, K. (2003). Definitions and perspectives on relational maintenance in communication. In D. Canary & M. Dainton (Eds.), *Maintaining relationships through communication: Relational, contextual, and cultural variations* (pp. 1-30). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Drozd, L. M., & Olesen, N. W. (2004). Is it abuse, alienation, and/or estrangement? A decision tree. *Journal of Child Custody*, *1*, 65-106. doi:10.1300/J190v01n03_05

Floyd, K., Mikkelson, A. C., & Judd, J. (2006). Defining the family through relationships. In L. H. Turner & R. West (Eds.), *The family communication handbook* (pp. 21-42). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Friedlander, A., & Walters, M. G. (2010). When a child rejects a parent: Tailoring the intervention to fit the problem. *Family Court Review*, *48*, 98-111.

Friesen, P. J. (2003). Emotional cutoff and the brain. In P. Titelman (Ed.), *Emotional cutoff: Bowen family systems theory perspectives* (pp. 83-107). New York, NY: Haworth Clinical Practice Press.

Galvin, K. M. (2006). Diversity's impact on defining the family: Discourse-dependence and identity. In L. H. Turner & R. West (Eds.), *The family communication sourcebook* (pp. 3-20). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Galvin, K. M. (2014). Blood, law, and discourse: Constructing and managing family identity. In L. A. Baxter (Ed.), *Remaking "families" communicatively* (pp. 17-32). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Gilligan, M., Suitor, J. J., & Pillemer, K. (2015). Estrangement between mothers and adult children: The role of norms and values. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *77*, 908-920. doi:10.1111/jomf.12207

Hays, S. (1996). *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Hess, J. A. (2003). Measuring distance in personal relationships: The relational distance index. *Personal Relationships*, *10*, 197-215. doi:10.1111/1475-6811.00046

Holmberg, D., Orbuch, T. L., & Veroff, J. (2004). *Thrice told tales: Married couples tell their stories*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Koenig Kellas, J., Bean, D., Cunningham, C., & Cheng, K. Y. (2008). The ex-files: Trajectories, turning points, and adjustment in the development of post-dissolutional relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *25*, 24-48. doi:10.1177/0265407507086804

Lally, M. (2015, November 29). Estrangement from family at Christmas: "How we cope." *The Telegraph*. Available from http://www.telegraph.co.uk

Lambert, A. N., & Hughes, P. C. (2010). The influence of goodwill, secure attachment, and positively toned disengagement strategy on reports of communication satisfaction in non-marital post-dissolution relationships. *Communication Research Reports*, *27*, 171-183. doi:10.1080/08824091003738123

Langellier, K. M. (1989). Personal narratives: Perspectives on theory and research. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, *9*, 243-276. doi:10.1080/10462938909365938

LeBey, B. (2001). *Family estrangements: How they begin, how to mend them, how to cope with them*. Atlanta, GA: Longstreet Press.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

MacGeorge, E. L., Feng, B., & Burlseson, B. R. (2011). Supportive communication. In M. L. Knapp & J. A. Daly (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of interpersonal communication* (4th ed., pp. 317-354). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Ritchie, L. D., & Fitzpatrick, M. A. (1990). Family communication patterns: Measuring intrapersonal perceptions of interpersonal relationships. *Communication Research*, *17*, 523-544. doi:10.1177/009365090017004007

Scharp, K. M. (2016a). Family estrangement. In C. Shehan (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of family studies*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell. doi:10.1002/9781119085621.wbefs458

Scharp, K. M. (2016b). Parent-child estrangement: Conditions for disclosure and perceived social network member reactions. *Family Relations*, *65*, 688-700. doi:101111/fare12219

Scharp, K. M., & Dorrance Hall, E. (2017). Family marginalization, alienation, and estrangement: A review of and call for research that questions the nonvoluntary status of family relationships. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, *41*, 28-45. doi:101080/2380898520171285680

Scharp, K. M., & McLaren, R. M. (2017). Uncertainty issues and management in adult children's stories of their estrangement with their parents. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/0265407517699097

Scharp, K. M., & Thomas, L. J. (2016). Family "bonds": Making meaning of parent-child relationships in estrangement narratives. *Journal of Family Communication*, *16*, 32-50. doi:10.1080/15267431.2015.1111215

Scharp, K. M., Thomas, L. J., & Paxman, C. G. (2015). "It was the straw that broke the camel's back": Exploring the distancing processes communicatively constructed in parent-child estrangement backstories. *Journal of Family Communication*, *15*, 330-348. doi:10.1080/15267431.2015.1076422

Segrin, C., & Flora, J. (2011). *Family communication* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Solomon, D. H., Knobloch, L. K., Theiss, J. A., & McLaren, R. M. (2016). Relational turbulence theory: Explaining variation in subjective experiences and communication within romantic relationships. *Human Communication Research*, *42*, 507-532. doi:10.1111/hcre.12091

Thomas, L. J. (2014). "Once a foster child . . . ": Identity construction in former foster children's narratives. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, *15*, 84-91. doi:10.1080/17459435.2014.955596

Author Biography

Kristina M. Scharp is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Utah State University where she is also the Director of the Family Communication and Relationships Lab. Her research program coalesces around difficult family transitions and a variety of processes families engage in to cope with those difficult transitions. She is especially interested in the family estrangement process and implications for the whole family system.