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## Estrangement Between Mothers and Adult Children: The Role of Norms and Values

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### Abstract

Relationships between mothers and their children are expected to be lifelong and rewarding for both members of the dyad. Because of the salience of these ties, they are likely to be disrupted only under conditions of extreme relational tension and dissatisfaction. In this work, the authors drew on theoretical arguments regarding societal norm violations and value similarity to examine the processes that lead to estrangement between mothers and adult children. To address this issue, they used quantitative and qualitative data on 2,013 mother–adult child dyads nested within 561 later life families, including 64 in which mothers reported being estranged from at least 1 of their children. Value dissimilarity was found to be a strong predictor of estrangement, whereas violation of serious societal norms was not. Qualitative data revealed that value dissimilarity created severe relational tension between mothers and adult children leading to estrangement.

### Keywords

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

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Relationships between mothers and children are typically the strongest ties within families, and it is assumed that these relationships will be lifelong and highly rewarding for both members of the dyad (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Suitor, Gilligan, & Pillemer, in press). Nevertheless, research on families in the middle and later years has shown that there is substantial variation in closeness, support, and interaction between mothers and adult children even within the same family (Suitor et al., in press; Suitor, Sechrist, Plikuhn, Pardo, & Pillemer, 2008). In fact, clinical literature suggests that in some cases the mother–child tie is even disrupted in adulthood (Bowen, 1978, 1982; Titelman, 2003). Family system theorists propose that this type of withdrawal can be a way for family members to deal with unresolved emotional issues with one another (Bowen, 1978, 1982; Titelman, 2003). However, Boss's (1999) work suggests that the ambiguous nature of the loss associated with estrangement may pose particular threats to well-being because the stressful situation cannot be resolved.

Given the substantial distress experienced by parents and adult children who have become estranged from one another (Coleman, 2008; Sichel, 2004), it is surprising that little scholarly attention has been paid to this topic. In fact, with the exception of the estrangement that often occurs between fathers and their children following divorce, there has been virtually no consideration of the phenomenon of estrangement between mothers and their offspring in adulthood (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Kalmijn, 2007).

In this study, we built on theoretical arguments of societal norm violations and value similarity to examine the processes that lead to estrangement between mothers and adult children. In defining *estrangement*, we drew from the work of Bowen (1978, 1982), who conceptualized estrangement, or “cut-offs,” as managing unresolved emotional problems with family members by substantially reducing contact or remaining in physical contact but maintaining emotional distance. We applied this definition to explore the ways in which both violation of societal norms and value dissimilarity increase adult children’s risk of becoming estranged from their mothers. In doing so, we followed House’s (1981) recommendation to consider both macro and micro influences on interpersonal relations.

We took a within-family approach that allowed us to address the question of why some adult children become estranged from their mothers whereas others do not. Specifically, we used a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collected on 2,013 mother–adult child dyads nested within 561 later life families, including 64 in which mothers reported being estranged from at least one of their children.

## Explaining Patterns of Estrangement

### Violation of Serious Societal Norms and Intergenerational Estrangement

Durkheim’s (1893) classic treatises on norm violation and estrangement focus on the consequences of violating norms that are embraced by the broader societies within which individuals are situated. One of the reasons that such violations often lead to estrangement is that adherence to societal norms is considered necessary for the stability of ties between group members; thus, members are inclined to feel that deviants should be sanctioned.

Research has shown that sanctions may take the form of harsh criticism or withdrawal of support, in the hope that deviant individuals will begin adhering more closely to group norms. However, when less severe sanctions do not produce the desired result, or when the norm violation is extreme, group members may ostracize the individual (Orcutt, 1973). Furthermore, even if an individual is not ostracized by the group, he or she may withdraw to avoid further negative sanctions (Durkheim, 1893; Homans, 1950, 1961; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954; Merton, 1968). Although Durkheim’s theories focus primarily on groups with a relatively large number of members, theorists writing in the middle and later 20th century noted that the processes of societal norm violation and sanction may occur in dyads as well as other groups (Coser, 1991; Homans, 1950, 1961; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954; Merton, 1968).

Mothers may attempt to ignore children’s minor violations of societal norms, because to do otherwise would contradict the norms of parenting, which discourage overly harsh discipline

of children (Kotchick & Forehand, 2002). However, in some instances the norm violations are so extreme that they stretch beyond the limits that mothers can continue the relationship in any normal fashion. We suggest that this point is likely to be reached when the deviant behaviors result in formal legal sanctions or when the behaviors place the child at risk for such sanctions.

Mothers may find it difficult to accept serious societal norm violations because of the effects these violations have on parents. Both theory and empirical evidence suggest that failures of adult children have numerous consequences for parents. This line of scholarship indicates that children's problems have been associated with negative effects on a variety of parental well-being outcomes (Condry, 2007; Green, Ensminger, Robertson, & Juon, 2006; Greenfield & Marks, 2006; M. Gilligan, Sutor, & Pillemer, 2013). In addition, mothers often experience feelings of shame and disappointment in themselves when their adult children engage in deviant behaviors (Green et al., 2006). Ryff and colleagues (Ryff, 1996; Ryff, Lee, Essex, & Schmutte, 1994; Ryff, Schmutte, & Lee 1996) have argued that parents' psychological well-being is affected by their children's achievements and failures because parents perceive themselves as being responsible for their offspring's ability to succeed as adults. Furthermore, other individuals often hold parents responsible for their children's failures, resulting in parents experiencing social sanctions from others for their children's behavior (Condry, 2007). To minimize these psychological and social consequences, parents may sanction deviant children in an effort to reform the children's behaviors and protect themselves from these unwanted consequences. Therefore, we hypothesized that mothers would be more likely to become estranged from children who had violated these serious societal norms because of the social and emotional consequences that these violations have on mothers. Although we are emphasizing the actions mothers may take in response to their children's violations of societal norms, it is also possible that children may initiate this process in anticipation of their mothers' sanctions.

### Value Similarity

Classic theories of interpersonal relationships point to the importance of value similarity in the development and maintenance of intimate ties (Homans, 1950, 1961; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954; Merton, 1968). Consistent with this argument, research has shown that individuals are most likely to terminate relationships with associates who no longer share their core values and beliefs (see the review by Burt, 2000). The applicability of these principles to intergenerational relations is evidenced by the prominent role of value similarity as a core component of the intergenerational solidarity model (Bengtson, 2001; Lawton et al., 1994; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997).

Value similarity may play an especially salient role in estrangement between mothers and their adult children because of the strong emphasis that women place on value congruence in their relationships. Classic theories of gender development argue that mothers are heavily invested in reproducing their values in their offspring (Chodorow, 1978; C. Gilligan, 1982; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Consistent with this argument, the literature has shown that similarity is a strong predictor of mothers' relationships with their adult children (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Sechrist, Sutor, Vargas, & Pillemer, 2011; Sutor, Gilligan, & Pillemer, 2013a).

Furthermore, panel studies have revealed that perceived value similarity between mothers and adult children at one point predicts greater closeness at later points (Suito et al., 2013a). Most relevant, value similarity has been found to be the strongest predictor of mothers' differentiation among their adult children; specifically, mothers tend to report the greatest closeness to adult children who share their values and the greatest conflict with, and ambivalence toward, adult children who do not (Suito et al., in press). Thus, we hypothesized that if a particular child was perceived as holding values that were dissimilar from the mother, that child would be at greater risk of becoming estranged than would those whom the mother perceived as being more value similar.

### **Additional Sources of Within-Family Variations Predicting Estrangement**

**Individual-level within-family variations**—Up to this point, we have been discussing factors that we feel tend to “push” adult children toward estrangement. However, we propose that some factors create tighter bonds and thus tend to “pull” mothers and children closer, reducing the risk of estrangement. In particular, there are two dimensions of within-family structure that we anticipate would play a role in estrangement: (a) children's gender and (b) birth order. Children's gender has been found to be one of the most consistent predictors of both affective relations and support exchange between parents and adult children (Suito et al., in press). In particular, the mother–daughter tie has generally been found to be the closest, most enduring, and mutually supportive of all parent–child gender combinations. Research on within-family differences in later life has also revealed that mothers report being most emotionally close to last-born children (Suito et al., 2013a; Suito & Pillemer, 2007). Thus, we hypothesized that mothers would be less likely to become estranged from daughters and last-born children. Other factors that have been found to predict mothers' differentiation include the child's marital status and residential proximity (Suito et al., 2013a). In addition, adult children's psychological problems have been shown to affect the quality of their relationships with their parents (Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2011). Thus, we included these factors in the analysis.

**Between-family characteristics**—In this study we posed a within-family research question: What factors lead particular children within a family to become estranged from their mothers? Nevertheless, it is possible that family-level characteristics also affect patterns of intergenerational estrangement. Therefore, we examined the association between intergenerational estrangement and mothers' race, marital status, depressive symptoms, and number of living children. First, on the basis of the literature on later life families, which has shown closer intergenerational ties in Black than in White families (Suito et al., in press), we anticipated that Black mothers might be less likely to become estranged from their children. Second, because parent–child relations tend to be more stable when both parents are present (Shapiro & Cooney, 2007) it is important to take mothers' marital status into consideration. Third, given that maternal depression has been shown to interfere with parent–child relationships, we also considered the effects of mothers' psychological well-being on risk of intergenerational estrangement (Burke, 2003). Finally, mothers who have a larger number of children may be more likely to have an estranged child simply because the risk of having a child become estranged is greater as the size of the group increases.

## Method

The data for this study were collected as part of the Within-Family Differences Study I (WFDS). The project was designed to provide data on within-family differences in parent–adult child relations in later life. The design involved selecting a sample of mothers 65–75 years of age with at least two living adult children and collecting data from mothers regarding each of their children. A further decision was to include only community-dwelling mothers in the sample, to reduce the likelihood that the women would be in need of extensive caregiving, thus allowing for the study of relationships outside of the context of caregiving. (Portions of the descriptions of the methods have been published previously in Suitor & Pillemer, 2006).

## Sampling

Massachusetts city and town lists were the source of the sample. Massachusetts requires communities to keep city/town lists of all residents by address. Town lists also provide the age and gender of residents. The first step was to randomly select 20 communities from the total of 80 that were available. With the assistance of the University of Massachusetts, Boston, the first and third authors drew a systematic sample of women ages 65–75 from the town lists from 20 communities in the greater Boston area, specifically the Census-designated Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area. Once communities had been selected and appropriate town lists obtained, an equal number of women in the target age group were selected from each community. A letter of introduction was sent to each woman describing the study and explaining that an interviewer would contact her from the Center for Survey Research in Boston to screen her to determine her eligibility for participation and attempt to schedule a face-to-face interview if she met the study criteria.

The design called for interviewing 550 mothers. The interviewers began contacting potential respondents and continued until they had reached the target number of cases. Because interviews were conducted simultaneously by several individuals who coordinated only once daily, a slightly larger number of interviews was completed than originally planned. Data were collected from 566 mothers, which represented 61% of those who were eligible for participation. The interviews were conducted between August 2001 and January 2003.

## Sample Characteristics

The mothers' and adult children's demographic characteristics for the analytic sample are presented in Table 1. It is important to note that although the mean number of living children in this subsample is higher than would be found in a nationally representative sample of women in this age group, this is due primarily to the criterion that all participants must have at least two living adult children. The mean number of children of women in the full sample is similar to that found in national samples, such as the National Survey of Families and Households (Sweet & Bumpass, 1996), when compared specifically to mothers in the same age group who have two or more children.

## Measures

**Mother–adult child estrangement**—Estrangement was measured by combining frequency of contact and poor relationship quality. A child was classified as estranged if he or she met either of the following criteria based on the mother’s reports: (a) She did not have contact with the child—either face-to-face or via the telephone—in the past year (38.2% of cases classified as estranged) or (b) she had contact of any type with child less than once a month and reported a score of 4 or lower in response to the question, “Using any number from 1 to 7, where 1 is very distant and 7 is very close, what number would you use to describe the relationship between you and [child’s names] nowadays?” (61.8% of cases were classified as estranged). To be sure that the absence of contact was not due to circumstances beyond the respondents’ control (e.g., child’s military deployment, etc.), we examined the mothers’ transcripts and determined that this was not the case in any family; although some children faced obstacles to interaction due to incarceration or military duty, they were able to maintain contact.

A score of 4 on the seven-item closeness measure may at first seem to suggest that the case falls in the middle of the range of relationship; however, other studies that have used this item have shown that its distribution is highly skewed toward positive relationship quality (Suitor, Gilligan, & Pillemer, 2011). In fact, in the full WFDS sample, only 12% of mother–child dyads were reported as falling within the range of 1 and 4. Thus, cases in which mothers reported such low levels of closeness to a child fell outside of the normative range.

On the basis of this classification system, 76 adult children, nested within 64 families, were identified as estranged. In 53 of the families (83%) there was only one estranged child; in 11 families (17%) there was more than one estranged child. In 10 of the 11 cases of multiple estrangements, there were only two estranged children, and in one case three of five offspring were estranged. In one 2-child family, both offspring were estranged. Thus, there were 64 families with at least one estranged child within the full sample of 566 families.

**Children’s serious societal norm violations**—To measure children’s societal norm violations, mothers were asked whether each of their adult children had experienced any of a series of problems that individuals might face as adults. We created a measure of adulthood deviant behavior by combining (a) children’s “problems with drinking or drugs” in adulthood and (b) “problems with the law” in adulthood. In most of these cases mothers reported that their children’s problems with these behaviors were ongoing. As a result, rather than measuring the exact number of instances with these problems, we created of a binary measure of children’s societal norm violations (0 = no societal norm violation in adulthood; 1 = societal norm violation in adulthood). Fourteen percent of the adult children were coded as having engaged in serious societal norm violations.

**Value dissimilarity**—We measured value dissimilarity by asking mothers their perceptions of the degree to which each of their children’s global outlook was similar to their own:

Parents and children are sometimes similar to each other in their views and opinions and sometimes different from each other. Would you say that you and

[child's name] share: 1) very similar views; 2) similar views; 3) different views; or 4) very different views in terms of general outlook on life?

The mean was 2.23 ( $SD = 0.84$ ).

**Other child-level characteristics**—Child's marital status was coded as currently married, 0 = child not married, 1 = child married. Proximity was measured as distance the child lived from the mother in terms of travel time by ground transportation. Categories were (a) 2 or more hours away, (b) more than an hour but less than 2 hours, (c) 30–60 minutes away, (d) 15–30 minutes away, (e) less than 15 minutes away, (f) same neighborhood, and (g) same house. Each child was coded as first born, middle born, or last born on the basis of the mothers' reports of the children's ages. Gender was coded as 0 = sons, 1 = daughters. On the basis of the mothers' reports, children were coded 0 = did not have serious psychological/emotional problems in adulthood, 1 = had serious psychological/emotional problems in adulthood.

**Mother-level characteristics**—Race was measured by asking the mothers to select from a card listing several races and ethnicities (e.g., White, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latina, and Asian). They were instructed that they could choose more than one race or ethnicity. Although the literature on later life families has shown closer intergenerational ties in racial/ethnic minority families than in White families, the evidence also indicates differences between intergenerational relations Black and White that suggest it is better to examine these groups separately (Suitor et al., in press). Given the small number of Hispanic and Asian families in the WFDS, we chose to include only Black and White families in the current analysis. We coded race as White (0) or Black (1).

Family size was measured using the number of living adult children in the family ( $M = 3.9$ ,  $SD = 1.8$ ). Mother's marital status was coded as currently married, 0 = mother not married, 1 = married. To measure depressive symptoms, we used the seven-item version of the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (Ross & Mirowsky, 1988). The items composing the scale are as follows: (a) "Everything I did was an effort," (b) "I had trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep," (c) "I felt lonely," (d) "I felt sad," (e) "I could not get going," (f) "I felt I could not shake off the blues," and (g) "I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing." In this analytic sample, the scale for mothers ranged from 7 to 28, with a mean of 11.22 ( $SD = 4.07$ ) and an alpha coefficient .79.

### Analytic Plan for Quantitative Data

Throughout the multivariate analyses the mother–child dyad, rather than the mother, was the unit of analysis. In other words, the 2,013 children who were the units of analysis were nested within the 561 families on whose reports the present analysis was based; thus, the observations are not independent. To take this factor into account, we used multilevel logistic regression. This technique is well suited to our research question, which asked: "What factors led particular children to become estranged from their mothers whereas others did not?" Furthermore, multilevel techniques allowed us to consider the role of mothers' characteristics, in addition to children's characteristics.

The final analytic sample included 2,013 mother–child dyads nested within 561 families for which complete information on all variables of interest was available. Listwise deletion was used to handle missing data on the independent variables because there were fewer than 5% missing on any variable in the analysis (cf. Allison, 2010).

### Qualitative Data

Combining quantitative and qualitative data has become increasingly common in research on families across the past decade (Carr, 2005; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2010; Neal, Hammer, & Morgan, 2006; Plano-Clark, Huddleston-Casas, Churchill, Green, & Garrett, 2008). Although quantitative analyses can identify patterns of relationships among variables, such analyses are less fruitful for pursuing the processes underlying statistical relationships (Morgan, 2007; Neal et al., 2006; Umberson & Montez, 2010).

The aims of this study were particularly well suited for such an approach; specifically, our central aim was to identify differences among children in the same family that would lead a mother to be estranged from one child but not from her other offspring. We began by testing the statistical associations between adult children’s risk of estrangement from their mothers and societal norms and value dissimilarity. Next we used the qualitative data to attempt to explain these patterns. In particular, because the mothers were asked to discuss their relationships with each of their children in detail, the data provided an opportunity to explore such within-family differences in depth.

Each of the mothers was interviewed for 1 to 2 hours. More than 90% of the interviews were taped and fully transcribed. Field notes were prepared for each interview that was not fully taped. A research team of six students transcribed the interviews and prepared detailed case summaries of each family. Codes were developed for the open-ended items as data preparation continued rather than established prior to the coding process. In contrast to having coders working independently and calculating kappas based on coders’ consistency, we used a consensus approach based on the group interactive analysis component of Borkan’s (1999) *immersion/crystallization* method for analyzing qualitative data. Each week the first author surveyed all of the open-ended coding that had been completed during the previous week. Approximately 90% of the coders’ original decisions were in agreement with those of the first author; any coding that was not in agreement with her assessment was discussed by the entire group at weekly team meetings until a consensus could be reached. All names used in the qualitative section are pseudonyms.

## Results

### Descriptive Findings

Using the operational definition of *estrangement* described above, 64 families were classified as having at least one estranged child. Thus, approximately 11% of the 566 families in the full sample for the WFDS mothers reported being estranged from at least one of their adult children.



## Multivariate Analyses

We began the multivariate analyses by examining the variance explained by the mother-level characteristics. We ran an intercept-only model, which provided the variance components to calculate the interclass correlation coefficient (Heck, Thomas, & Tabata, 2012). The intraclass correlation coefficient was .01, indicating that the mother-level factors accounted for only 1% of the variance in intergenerational estrangement. Although the amount of mother-level variance was small, we included mother-level characteristics in the multilevel analysis that might account for the between-family variance.

In Table 2 we present the results of the multilevel logistic regression predicting adult children's risk of estrangement. The first rows show the odds ratios (ORs) for the effects of mother-level characteristics on risk of estrangement. The only mother-level characteristic to predict estrangement was mothers' marital status; mothers who were married were less likely to have an estranged child than were mothers who were not married (OR = .42,  $p < .00$ ). To determine whether this finding was driven by the effect of parental divorce, we conducted a separate analysis that allowed us to consider divorce and widowhood separately. This analysis revealed that both divorced and widowed mothers were more likely to have estranged children than were married mothers.

Next, we turned to the question of which characteristics and behaviors led particular adult children to become estranged. Value dissimilarity was a strong predictor of adult children's risk of estrangement. Adult children whose mothers reported that they were dissimilar to them were substantially more likely to become estranged than adult children whose mothers reported that they shared a similar outlook on life (OR = 3.07,  $p < .00$ ). Another way to interpret this association is that the probability of adult children's estrangement is only .03 if they hold values that are very similar to their mothers, whereas, the probability is .49 if they hold values that are very dissimilar to their mothers. In contrast, adult children's engagement in serious societal norm violations did not predict risk of estrangement from their mothers.

Other within-family characteristics also predicted adult children's risk of estrangement. Last-born children were less likely to become estranged from their mothers (OR = 0.43,  $p < .01$ ). Greater proximity was associated with decreased risk of estrangement (OR = 0.57,  $p < .00$ ).

As noted above, in approximately 17% of the families mothers were estranged from more than one child. To determine whether the predictors of estrangement varied by the presence of multiple estranged children in the family, we conducted a separate analysis on the 53 families with only one estranged child. The findings of this analysis mirrored those in which the full sample was used (tables not shown.)

Taken together, these findings indicated that value dissimilarity was a strong predictor of adult children's risk of estrangement; specifically, children who did not share their mothers' values were more likely to be estranged. In contrast, serious societal norm violation did not predict estrangement.

## Using Qualitative Data to Explain the Association Between Value Similarity and Estrangement

Finally, using the transcripts of the mothers of the 74 children who were identified as estranged, we turned our attention to the qualitative data to explore the role of value dissimilarity in estrangement between mothers and their adult children. Although the mothers were not asked questions specifically pertaining to this issue, almost all of the mothers with estranged children spontaneously raised this topic. The mothers highlighted the relative importance of value similarity over societal norm violations when discussing their relationships with their children.

For example, Ruth, a 75-year-old devout Catholic mother of two sons and one daughter, described in detail how her middle child, Mark, had violated her expectations by divorcing his first wife:

Up until his difficulty in his [first] marriage and his divorce, we were very similar. After that it became a matter of both religion and social differences. It's a difficult situation. Now he has remarried and made a new family. So it's painful for me to be judgmental, but I have religion in the way and my own morals and social ideas.

Ruth reported that the changes in her relationship with Mark since his remarriage had translated into far less contact, fewer exchanges of support, and a clear decline in her closeness with him.

In contrast, although Ruth's other son and daughter, Ann, and Paul, had both violated societal norms, these behaviors had not changed her relationships with them. She reported that both of them had been arrested in adulthood for driving while intoxicated and had a history of chronic substance abuse; however, she did not show any indication of being especially bothered by these problems. Furthermore, Ann had been divorced, but because she had not remarried Ruth did not consider her to have violated Church rules. Finally, despite her youngest son's history of substance abuse and problems with the law, when asked to describe the differences in her children's personalities she said that most mothers would say that Paul was "perfect." Her basis for this assessment became clear when reporting her children's marital statuses: "Paul is married—he's my success story!"

Thus, Ruth's divergent descriptions of her children highlighted the greater weight that she placed on the violation of her most closely held values—those of adhering to Church doctrine regarding remarriage—rather than to societal norms, which would have deemed Ann's and Paul's transgressions to be far more serious than Mark's.

Beverly, a 70-year-old mother of mother three, also drew particularly vivid contrasts between her estranged child and her other children. Beverly described Robert, her second son, as being successful in terms of his financial stability, marriage, and parenthood. Despite these accomplishments, Beverly reported that her relationship with Robert as very difficult, because he violated one of her core values: "Ah, okay, I'll tell ya. Because sometimes, he's not very truthful. I don't like, you know, I don't like for people to say things that aren't true. It upsets me." In fact, these deceptive behaviors became so disturbing that she cut herself off from Robert and did not even know where he was working at the time of the interview.

In contrast, Beverly spoke fondly about her oldest son, David, who was in prison at the time of the interview, had a history of drug abuse, and was the father of multiple children with different women, none of whom he had married. She went to great lengths to maintain contact with him, although he was incarcerated several hours away. She also sent him money, despite her limited resources. Although she was very disappointed in David, she was far more sympathetic than critical:

He's a very smart young man, he has such a terrific education ... But he just got himself mixed up with the wrong people, wrong company, and that's why he's where he is today ... And not around to help raise his children. He disappointed me so much, but I love him.

Taken together, these two cases illustrate a pattern common among the families in the study, in that the mothers emphasized the role of value dissimilarity as the major source of strain in their relationship with their estranged children. In contrast, some of their other children had engaged in deviant behaviors, yet the mothers tolerated these behaviors without serious damage to their relationships with these offspring.

Judy, a 68-year-old mother of three, focused more broadly on the ways in which the choices made by her estranged daughter, Ruby, violated Judy's core values. Judy, who had raised her children for the most part on her own, highly valued her determination to care for herself and her children rather than becoming dependent on others. In contrast, she viewed Ruby as irresponsible, especially regarding her partner choices and care of her children:

[When Ruby was 16] she met that [man] ... She ran away and when she came back she went and stayed with his sister and she married him. And he never provided a place for her to stay ... I think he abused her some terrible. I tried to get her to leave, but she just stayed right there and took care of him. He didn't work. And she got evicted, she had to come back to me and ask me to let her stay here with me. She stayed [with me] about three or four months and saved her money and got another apartment with that man. She was on welfare with those kids but she wouldn't spend the money on the kids. I bought the kids clothes because she split her money with him. He left [her] when the welfare and the food stamps left. But see, I didn't share my money with no man. I saved my money. When I worked, I worked two jobs 29 years. And uh, she resents it. She won't say it, but she is really jealous of me. I never miss my rent.

Given Ruby's clear disregard of values that Judy felt were a core part of her own identity, it is not surprising that Judy reported that she rarely had contact with her daughter, despite attempting to maintain a relationship with Ruby's children.

In contrast, both of Judy's sons had also disappointed her, but their relationships had remained intact. For example, both of her sons dropped out of school, one to get married very young, and the other to "run the streets." However, despite these disappointments, Judy continued to feel very close to both of her sons, and even said that she would prefer one of them as her future caregiver.

Taken together, these families illustrate a common theme that emerged from the qualitative data regarding the salience of value dissimilarity in estrangement. First, mothers described their relationships with their estranged children differently from their other children, especially regarding the extent to which their values diverged from those of their estranged children. Second, the qualitative data revealed that violations of mothers' most strongly held values translated into strain in the mother-child relationship. If that strain became too great, mothers and adult children withdrew from one another. Finally, in many of these families children who were not estranged from their mothers had engaged in societal norm violations, but these behaviors alone did not appear to be sufficient to substantially increase the risk of estrangement.

## Discussion

The findings we have presented in this article shed new light on both the patterns and predictors of estrangement between mothers and their adult children. First, in approximately 11% of the 566 families in the full sample for the WFDS, mothers reported being estranged from at least one of their adult children. Thus, even though only 4% of the mother-child dyads in the study were estranged, more than 1 in 10 mothers experienced such problematic relationships with at least one of their offspring. Thus, the prevalence of mother-adult child estrangement reflected the concerns expressed in the clinical literature (Coleman, 2008; Sichel, 2004). Second, the findings highlight the salience of value similarity in predicting which adult children were at greatest risk of becoming estranged from their mothers. Third, contrary to our hypotheses, violation of serious societal norms did not predict adult children's risk of estrangement.

The patterns shown by the qualitative data validated the findings of the quantitative analysis regarding the relative impact of value dissimilarity and societal norm violations. In fact, even in families with children who had violated societal norms, the risk of estrangement appeared to be greater for children who did not share their mothers' values. These findings are consistent with those of Kalmijn and de Graaf (2012) in suggesting that the greatest effects occur when the problematic behaviors violate the parents' values.

We are not suggesting that violating societal norms never plays a role in estrangement; however, the societal norm violations we considered were not of the most egregious nature. For example, even the adult children who had been incarcerated had not been convicted of the most serious violent crimes, such as rape or murder. Thus, our findings regarding societal norms might well have been different had the children engaged in far more serious criminal behaviors.

The findings of the present study suggest several directions for future research. First, because we examined intergenerational estrangement from the perspective of the mothers only, it is difficult to know how the adult children would have described the processes that led to their estrangement. Consistent with other studies of multiple generations (Kalmijn & Liefbroer, 2010), few of the offspring who were reported by their mothers as estranged participated in the study, making triangulation impossible. This is a concern that deserves

further attention; future studies could use data collected from the perspective of the adult children.

Second, future research should expand this line of inquiry to explore whether the prevalence of estrangement varies by parent gender. The literature on intergenerational relations has shown consistent differences in adult children's relationships with their mothers and fathers (Suitor et al., in press), with ties to fathers typically being more tenuous than those of mothers. Furthermore, mothers are generally more supportive and tolerant of their children than are fathers, whereas fathers are more likely than mothers to be actively critical of their adult children and to express feelings of ambivalence toward them (Pillemer, Munsch, Fuller-Rowell, Riffin, & Suitor, 2012). Thus, fathers may be more likely than mothers to become estranged from their adult children, even in intact families.

The predictors of estrangement may also differ for fathers and mothers. For example, studies have shown that fathers hold more traditional beliefs than mothers regarding their adult children's achievements (Birditt, Fingerman, & Zarit, 2010; Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009). Thus, societal norm violations may play a more important role in adult children's estrangement from fathers than from mothers. We hope that future research on estrangement will explore these gender differences.

The importance of taking fathers into consideration in the study of intergenerational relationships is highlighted by the finding that mothers' divorce or widowhood was associated with higher risk of estrangement. In many respects, this finding is surprising given that, in the short run, widowhood tends to increase closeness and contact between mothers and adult children, after which the quality of mother-child ties typically reverts to previous patterns (Suitor, Gilligan, Johnson, & Pillemer, 2014). Furthermore, although divorce is generally associated with worse relations between fathers and adult children, these effects appear to be much less strong and consistent for mothers and their offspring (Shapiro & Cooney, 2007). We suggest that the decreased risk of estrangement for mothers who are married may be a result of a buffering effect of fathers' presence. Although there has been attention to the consequences of the loss of mothers' kin-keeping roles upon their death or divorce (Kalmijn, 2007), our finding suggests that perhaps fathers also play a kin-keeping role in later life families that has not been widely acknowledged.

Third, future research should take into consideration the effects of mother-child estrangement on other dynamics within the family, including the quality of the relationships between mothers and their other children, relations among siblings, and parents' marital quality. Furthermore, estrangement between mothers and children may also affect the well-being of both members of the dyad as well as other members of the family.

The present analysis is also limited by the cross-sectional nature of the data. Although retrospective reports of both behaviors and relationship quality are common in family studies (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Suitor et al., 2009), using data collected at only one time point precludes the possibility of assessing the accuracy of recalled events and feelings. Thus, it is not possible to demonstrate definitively that, for example, value dissimilarity led to estrangement. Although the qualitative data suggest that value dissimilarity fueled

estrangement, it is possible that mothers retrospectively reinterpreted their earlier relationships with their children. Therefore, it is essential that future research on estrangement collect data that permit looking at the patterns leading to estrangement across time.

We also hope that future research on estrangement, as well as on other dimensions of intergenerational relations, will use a combination of quantitative and qualitative data in their investigations. The use of such mixed-methods approaches have been found to be especially useful in helping to understand the processes that underlie statistical relationships in the study of interpersonal relationships by revealing patterns that could not be identified using quantitative approaches alone (Morgan, 2007; Neal et al., 2006; Sutor, Gilligan, & Pillemer, 2013b; Umberson & Montez, 2010).

Consistent with the broader literature on the role of value similarity in interpersonal relations, the findings presented here underscore the importance of value similarity in adult children's risk of becoming estranged from their mothers. Thus, these findings contribute to a growing literature demonstrating the ways in which adult children's attitudes and actions affect their relationships with their parents.

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**Table 1**  
**Demographic Characteristics of the Analytic Sample**

Characteristics	<i>M (SD) or %</i>
Mothers' ( <i>n</i> = 561)	
Married	46
Number of children	4.64 (2.18)
Race (Black)	30
Age	70.86 (3.08)
Adult children's ( <i>n</i> = 2,013)	
Daughters	50
Education	
High school or less	38
Some college	18
College grad	44
Parent	70
Married	56
Age	43 (5.92)

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**Table 2**  
**Multilevel Logistic Regression Predicting Estrangement (N = 2,013)**

Predictor	Odds ratio	95% CI
Between-family characteristics, mother level		
Family size	0.95	[0.86, 1.05]
Married	0.42**	[0.25, 0.70]
Race (Black)	0.77	[0.47, 1.27]
Depressive symptoms	1.05*	[1.01, 1.10]
Within-family characteristics, adult child level		
Last born	0.43**	[0.23, 0.83]
Eldest	1.00	[0.60, 1.66]
Proximity	0.57**	[0.49, 0.66]
Daughters	0.71	[0.45, 1.10]
Psychological problems	1.55	[0.85, 2.85]
Married	0.74	[0.47, 1.17]
Value dissimilarity	3.07**	[2.37, 3.98]
Societal norm violation	1.61	[0.96, 2.69]
Model statistics		
Log likelihood	435.33	
AIC	461.51	
BIC	534.22	

Note. CI = confidence interval; AIC = Akaike Information Criterion; BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .