

Estrangement likely when adult child does not share mother's values, study finds

May 19 2015



Credit: Marty from Manitou Springs, USA. Via Wikipedia.

There is a strong bond between mothers and children that when severed is often the result of a difference in values. That is the finding of a new study published online in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

Megan Gilligan, lead author and an assistant professor of human

development and family studies at Iowa State University, says mother and adult child estrangement is more common than most people might think. Gilligan and colleagues J. Jill Suitor, Purdue University, and Karl Pillemer, Cornell University, found one in 10 families had an estranged child, but it was the reason why that really stood out to Gilligan.

"I was surprised it wasn't a big event or that the child did something illegal. You might expect that if a child is incarcerated or in some type of legal trouble that [mothers](#) might be ashamed and that would lead to estrangement," Gilligan said. "Instead, we found mothers were upset about other issues that related to their core values and beliefs."

The study looked at two factors – differences in values, as reported by the mother, and violations of societal norms – to understand how each predicted estrangement. Violations included alcohol and substance abuse or criminal behaviors, but not serious violent crimes, such as rape or murder. While a difference in values between mothers and children was a strong predictor, societal norm violations did not increase the risk for estrangement.

Researchers defined estrangement as mothers who had no contact with their child (38.2 percent) and mothers who had very little contact with their child and described their relationship as very emotionally distant (61.8 percent). The data used were collected as part of the Within-Family Differences Study, a project funded by the National Institute on Aging and based at Purdue University. A total of 566 families met the research criteria – mothers 65 to 75 years old, with at least two living adult children – and 64 were estranged.

Mother hurt by divorce, not drunk driving

In their paper, researchers included narratives from interviews with mothers describing how their son or daughter violated their trust or

expectations, related to their values. For example, one 75-year-old mother, a devout Catholic, explained how her one son's divorce and subsequent remarriage led to far less contact and support. Here is part of her narrative:

"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."

Through the interview, researchers learned the woman's other two children both had been arrested for [drunk driving](#) and had a history of [substance abuse](#). However, she was not bothered by these problems. In fact, she considered her son with the arrest record to be her success story because he is married.

Mother's marital status matters

In a majority of the cases, there was only one estranged child. However, in one case the mother's only two children were both estranged. In addition to [core values](#), researchers found the mother's [marital status](#) was also a predictor. Mothers who were divorced or widowed were more likely to have an estranged child than mothers who were married. Gilligan credits the role of the father.

"An explanation for this might be that fathers are maintaining contact with the child. Even if the relationship between the mother and adult child is strained, it's less likely to become estranged because of the father's pull," Gilligan said.

Researchers considered children's gender, but did not find any difference between sons and daughters risk of estrangement from their mothers. Birth order was a predictor as last-born children were less likely to be estranged, Gilligan said.

The study is based from the mother's perspective, but researchers were often able to verify the nature of the estranged relationship through interviews with other siblings and in some cases the estranged child. Gilligan is interested in exploring how children would describe what led to their estrangement in future research.

"Mothers are upset about these events, but I don't think they're always the ones cutting off the relationship," Gilligan said. "In some cases the mother may be upset and voice her opinions, but the child is the one pulling away in reaction to the mother's criticism."

Gilligan believes this paper has practical implications because it suggests that intergenerational estrangement is a more common experience. "Professionals working with families should pay attention to value dissimilarity between mothers and [children](#) because these differences in value appear to have severe, long-term consequences," she said.

More information: Within-Family Differences Study:
web.ics.purdue.edu/~jsuitor/wi...y-differences-study/

Provided by Iowa State University

Citation: Estrangement likely when adult child does not share mother's values, study finds (2015, May 19) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-05-estrangement-adult-child-mother-values.html>

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