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# **Intergenerational estrangement in later life – mental health, sentiments, and coping for older parents**

Industrial PhD dissertation

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>PREFACE.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>LIST OF INCLUDED PAPERS.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>ENGLISH ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>DANISH ABSTRACT (DANSK RESUMÉ).....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND.....</b>	<b>9</b>
Understanding estrangement.....	10
Research on intergenerational estrangement.....	12
Theoretical landscape.....	14
Aims and composition of the dissertation.....	20
<b>CHAPTER 2 METHODS.....</b>	<b>24</b>
Recruitment and data collection.....	24
Measures and analytic methodologies.....	29
<b>CHAPTER 3 RESULTS.....</b>	<b>34</b>
Summary of results from study I.....	34
Summary of results from study II.....	35
Summary of results from study III.....	36
<b>CHAPTER 4 SUPPLEMENTARY ANALYSES OF CROSS-SECTIONAL DATA.....</b>	<b>38</b>
Demographic variables.....	38

Estrangement variables .....	41
Open-text responses .....	47
<b>CHAPTER 5 EXPLORING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE STUDIES.....</b>	<b>51</b>
Associations between mental health and sentiments of sorrow (studies I and II) .....	51
Exploring sentiments of sorrow and ambivalence (studies II and III) .....	54
<b>CHAPTER 6 DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>61</b>
Contributions to research and theory .....	61
Discussion of results .....	62
Implications for clinical practice.....	64
Limitations and caveats.....	65
Conclusions.....	67
<b>Epilog Intergenerational estrangement in the future .....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>STUDY I.....</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>STUDY II.....</b>	<b>118</b>
<b>STUDY III.....</b>	<b>149</b>
Declaration of co-authorship (study paper I) .....	181
Declaration of co-authorship (study paper II).....	183
Declaration of co-authorship (study paper III) .....	185

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## PREFACE

*Parents love their children and are in some strange way addicted to having contact with them, almost regardless of the nature of this contact... To lose them is to lose the most important part of oneself, maybe especially if this loss means that you become discarded and forgotten* (Holm, 2019, pp. 17-18). These are words from a letter written by an older mother who was estranged from her adult daughter. The mother's distress from not having contact with her daughter is evident, and similar stories were what led me on the path of exploring intergenerational estrangement in later life.

The idea came through practice, from working with interventions aimed at reducing loneliness for older people (Nikolajsen & Hedelund, 2016). One such intervention was life story telling to promote social relationships among older people. Here it became clear that behind the facade some older people had stories of estranged relationships with their children that caused rumination and worry and contributed to feelings of loneliness. Other common reasons for loneliness were also prominent, such as chronic loss of sensory function and mobility and loss of a spouse, friends, and siblings to death or disease (Savikko et al., 2005). However, loneliness due to intergenerational estrangement differs from these other causes because the condition is reversible; at least in theory. Whereas loneliness due to the loss of a spouse calls for grief work with the aim of reorientation into the social world (Stroebe & Schut, 2008; Vedder et al., 2022), intergenerational issues have the potential to be mitigated and reconciled, making it a compelling avenue of exploration.

Another motivation for looking into intergenerational estrangement in older age came from collaborations with actors in the professional field of gerontology and municipal care of older people in Denmark. Experiences from professionals in nursing homes and other forms of residential

care for older people, and especially preventive health care professionals doing home visits in non-assisted living, pointed to frequent observations of lack of contact with adult children, to the detriment of the well-being of older parents. Here, intergenerational estrangement was identified as problematic and frequent among older people and a need was expressed for insights as well as ways of helping older parents navigate in this situation.

A search for literature on intergenerational estrangement in a Danish setting only yielded a few news articles (Jacobsen B., 2013; Zahle & Strange, 2019), addressing the problem from different angles. Additionally, two publications from the clinical self-help literature were found. One addressed how to make peace with older parents (Bechsgaard & Krebs, 2012) and the other how to make peace with adult children (Krebs & Bechsgaard, 2015). No academic literature from Denmark or other Scandinavian countries was found. A lack of research that, although not entirely absent, would prove to be echoed in the international research community (Blake, 2017).

All together an investigation into intergenerational estrangement in older age appeared to have both scientific and clinical prospects, the phenomenon seemed to have relevant volume, professional interest, and a need for insights seemed evident. I therefore set out to explore the phenomenon of intergenerational estrangement from the perspective of older parents to shed light on an under-researched problem affecting many people, and to possibly lay foundations for future development of interventions or other structured ways to help estranged families in later life (Coleman, 2021; Pillemer, 2020).

## LIST OF INCLUDED PAPERS

### **Paper 1**

Nikolajsen, A., Larsen, L., Christoffersen, M., Holstein, B. E., & Swane, C. E. Estrangement Between Older Parents and Adult Children: Associations with Mental Health. *Under review at Journal of Social and Personal Relationships.*

### **Paper 2**

Nikolajsen, A., Larsen, L., M., Holstein, B. E., & Swane, C. E. Sorrow and Ambivalence of Intergenerational Estrangement in Later Life. *Submitted to Ageing International.*

### **Paper 3**

Nikolajsen, A., Larsen, L., M., Holstein, B. E., & Swane, C. E. How Older Parents Cope with Estrangement from Adult Children: A Qualitative Study. *Under review at Journal of Aging Studies.*



## ENGLISH ABSTRACT

**Background.** As one of the most loving and enduring social bonds, the relationship between parents and children is celebrated. But sometimes parents and children become estranged in adulthood due to conflict or dissent. Little is known about this occurrence, especially how estrangement from children affects parents in older age.

**Aim.** The overall purpose of this dissertation was to explore intergenerational estrangement from the perspective of older parents: To examine if living with estrangement was associated with mental health of older parents, to understand the sentiments that older parents hold towards estrangement, and to explore what older parents do and think to cope with being estranged.

**Methods.** The main body is comprised of three studies. **Study I** used cross-sectional data to compare 75+ year old estranged older parents with a comparison group of non-estranged older parents on mental health measures for well-being, sense of purpose, depression, and loneliness. **Study II** exclusively used the cross-sectional dataset of estranged older parents to examine their sentiments towards estrangement categorized as sorrowful, ambivalent, or relieved, and to explore associations between sentiments and factors regarding the parents and the estrangements. **Study III** used qualitative interviews with a selected group of estranged parents from the cross-sectional studies. Thematic analysis was carried out to identify and describe how older parents coped with estrangement. All participants were recruited, and all data was collected for this project exclusively, via a purposive sampling design developed in the project.

**Results.** **Study I** found significant associations between being estranged and poorer mental health scores on all four measurements, well-being, sense of purpose, depression, and loneliness. Well-being demonstrated the strongest association, followed by depression, then loneliness, and lastly sense of purpose. **Study II** found sentiments of sorrow and ambivalence, but not relief, to be

prominent among older estranged parents. Sentiments of sorrow was found to be significantly associated with gender, with mothers being more prone to sorrow, with adult children having initiated the estrangement, and with higher numbers of estranged children. Sorrow was found to be negatively associated with estrangement from all children. **Study III** identified two main coping orientations 1) reconciliation-oriented coping (ROC), aimed at reestablishing contact with children, and 2) acceptance-oriented coping (AOC), aimed at coming to terms with estrangement. ROC-responses were identified as: Exploring the past, repeated contact attempts, and seeking information about children. AOC-responses were identified as: Pride, projecting responsibility, financial retribution, and coming to terms with estrangement. Avoidance was identified as an additional third coping orientation. Avoidant coping responses were characterized by refraining from thinking about the estrangement and what had caused it.

**Conclusion.** Findings from these three studies show that intergenerational estrangement is associated with adverse mental health for older parents, that sentiments of sorrow represent how some parents feel towards estrangement, but that ambivalence and mixed feelings are also prevalent, and that factors about parents and their estrangement can function as predictors for their sentiments. Furthermore, it is shown that older parents use coping responses that can promote reconciliation or function to accept the estrangement. Overall, this dissertation concludes that estrangement from adult children is associated with negative outcomes for older parents, that intergenerational estrangement in later life is an important avenue of further exploration, and that there is a need for development of interventions that can help estranged families.

**DANISH ABSTRACT (DANSK RESUMÉ)**

**Baggrund.** Forholdet mellem forældre og børn er blandt de længste, vigtigste og tætteste forhold for de fleste mennesker. Men for nogle fører konflikter og uenigheder til brudte intergenerationelle relationer i voksenlivet. Der vides kun lidt om disse brud, og især om, hvordan brudte relationer til voksne børn påvirker gamle forældre.

**Formål.** Det overordnede formål med denne afhandling var at udforske intergenerationelle brud set fra gamle forældres perspektiv: At undersøge om der findes en sammenhæng mellem brud til voksne børn og mental sundhed blandt gamle forældre, at forstå hvordan gamle forældre er følelsesmæssigt påvirket af bruddene, og at udforske hvad gamle forældre tænker og gør for at håndtere brudte relationer til voksne børn.

**Metoder.** Grundstammen i afhandlingen består af tre studier. **Studie I** anvendte tværsnitsdata til at sammenligne gamle forældre på 75+ år, som havde brud til voksne børn med en gruppe af gamle forældre, som havde intakt kontakt med deres voksne børn. De to deltagergrupper sammenlignedes på fire mentale sundhedsmål; trivsel, meningsfuldhed, depression og ensomhed. **Studie II** brugte samme data, men udelukkende for forældre med brud til at analysere, hvordan de følelsesmæssigt var påvirket af bruddet kategoriseret som sorg, ambivalens eller lettelse. Det analyseredes dernæst, om faktorer omkring forældrene og bruddene hang sammen med deres oplevede følelser. **Studie III** brugte kvalitative interviews med udvalgte deltagere fra tværsnitsstudierne. Gennem tematisk analyse blev gamle forældres måder at håndtere bruddet på identificeret og beskrevet. Alle deltagere til **studie I, II og III** blev rekrutteret, og data indsamlet, eksklusivt til dette projekt via et formålssamlingsdesign, der blev udviklet i projektet.

**Resultater.** **Studie I** fandt signifikante sammenhænge mellem brud og nedsat mental sundhed på alle fire mentale sundhedsmål, trivsel, meningsfuldhed, depression og ensomhed. Trivsel udviste

stærkest sammenhæng, efterfulgt af depression, derefter ensomhed og til sidst meningsfuldhed.

**Studie II** fandt, at følelserne sorg og ambivalens, men ikke lettelse, var fremtrædende følelsesmæssige oplevelser af brud. Sorg udviste signifikante sammenhænge med mødre frem for fædre, og med at voksne børn havde initieret bruddet, samt med et højere antal brud. Sorg udviste negativ sammenhæng med brud til alle sine voksne børn. **Studie III** identificerede to fremtrædende håndterings-orienteringer 1) forsonings-orienteret håndtering (FOH), rettet mod genetablering af kontakt med voksne børn, og 2) accept-orienteret håndtering (AOH), rettet mod at acceptere bruddet og komme videre. FOH-responser blev identificeret som: Udforskning af fortiden, gentagende kontaktforsøg og at opsøge information om voksne børn. AOH-responser blev identificeret som: Stolthed, fralæggelse af ansvar, finansiell gengældelse og at forlige sig med bruddet. Undgåelse blev identificeret som en tredje orientering. Undgåelses-responser var kendetegnet ved at afstå fra at tænke over bruddet og dets årsager.

**Konklusion.** Fundene fra de tre studier viser, at intergenerationelle brud er forbundet med nedsat mental sundhed hos gamle forældre, og at brud ofte vækker følelser af sorg, men at ambivalente og blandede følelser også er udbredt. Derudover er der fundet sammenhænge mellem forældres følelsesmæssige påvirkning og deres køn, at barnet tog initiativ til bruddet, antal brud samt brud til samtlige børn. Det blev desuden fundet, at gamle forældre anvender håndterings-responser, som enten retter sig mod forsoning eller med accept af bruddet. Overordnet konkluderer afhandlingen, at brud til voksne børn er forbundet med negative udfald for gamle forældre, at intergenerationelle brud i alderdommen er et vigtigt felt til yderligere udforskning, og at der eksisterer et behov for udvikling af interventioner, som kan hjælpe aldrende familier med brudte relationer på tværs af generationerne.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

*'One is always inclined to lay the blame on external circumstances, but nothing could explode in us if it had not been there' (Jung, 2014, p. 25)*

This dissertation explores how older parents are influenced by and experience estrangement from their adult children. The focus is broken intergenerational relationships from parents' perspectives nearing the end of life, to uncover a hidden issue of physical absence but psychological presence.

The relationship between parents and children is widely renowned and celebrated. From the beginning of time to present day, the intergenerational relationship has been, and is, among the most important, longest, and most intimate social connections for almost everyone. To have children and to become a parent is a point of no return that brings love, hardship, sacrifice, joy, and reward, not only in the beginning, but through all stages of life. But intergenerational relationships are complex, and some parents and adult children experience conflicts so severe that intergenerational break-ups, going by the term *estrangement*, occur. With ageing populations, family life enters a culturally new situation where prolonged intergenerational relationships encounter new challenges.

Older age is a specific context for analysis of family convulsions. For many older people the social world becomes smaller and only the most important relationships occupy their social space. This is often reserved for children and grandchildren who bring joy, love, company, and assistance. The intergenerational relationship is generally strong (Szydlik, 2023). In Denmark, which is the geographical setting for the current project, studies show that family continues to be at the core of how older people understand themselves and what makes them happy (Skafte, 2023), and that children are important contributors of assistance both practically and socially (Rostgaard & Matthiessen, 2019; Siren & Larsen, 2019). Additionally, parenthood has been linked to better well-

being and reduced risk of loneliness in older age (Siren et al., 2018). To miss such important intimate social relationships is bound to have an impact on parents' lives. The questions are what the impact is – and how it this dealt with.

### **Understanding estrangement**

Generally, estrangement means some kind of split or rift in formerly close and intimate social relationships (Blake et al., 2019; Coleman, 2021; Gilligan, 2014). The term is mostly used in cases where family members, often siblings or children and parents, are no longer on speaking terms. Yet, there is no common definition, which makes estrangement an ambiguous term that encompasses a variety of relational constellations, with the overarching theme being emotional distance with a legacy of conflict (Blake, 2022). Emotionally distant, yet frequent, contact and a total year-long cessation of contact, both fit under this conceptual umbrella, making estrangement pluralistic and difficult to define precisely.

An attempt to establish a specific definition was made by Conti and Ryan (2013) who proposed a four-criteria definition in response to definitional inconsistencies: 1) A complete communication cutoff between relatives with no intentional communication. Indirect communication may occur through other family members. 2) The communication cutoff is maintained deliberately. 3) The estranged relatives know how to contact each other, and neither is considered missing. 4) At least one of the persons involved claims that something specific about the other person justifies the estrangement. Although meant to assist the operationalization of estrangement for research to become more consistent, these criteria have yet to gain traction; perhaps because each of the four criteria can be difficult to determine in an estrangement situation.

Instead, the understanding of estrangement in this project, is inspired by the work of Kylie Agllias, who describes estrangement as physical distancing and loss of affection between family members

due to conflict or disagreement (Agllias, 2011c). Following this viewpoint, estrangement implies physical distance, lack of emotional intimacy, an unsatisfactory relationship, intermittent conflict and avoidance, and a belief that there can be no resolution. Inspired by these criteria, the present project defines estrangement as *conflict-driven disruption of direct contact*. Hence, estrangement is defined by the simultaneous presence of both an emotional component (often conflict) and a physical component (absence of contact).

### *Prevalence*

Labelled a silent epidemic of the social world (Coleman, 2021), and a problem hiding in plain sight (Pillemer, 2020), a growing number of scholars estimate that intergenerational estrangement impacts a substantial number of people in Western societies. A national representative study of approximately 2,000 persons in the UK found that eight percent had cut contact (Stand Alone, [www.standalone.org.uk](http://www.standalone.org.uk)) (Blake, 2022). A similar representative study of the prevalence of intergenerational estrangement found the number to be 10 percent in the US, while another American study found that 17 percent experienced estrangement in the nuclear family, e.g. sibling and parent child relationships (Conti, 2015), with estrangement from fathers being the most frequent form, accounting for 54.7 percent of nuclear family cases.

In Denmark, no scientific literature on prevalence exists. The best estimate of intergenerational estrangement in a Danish context comes from a survey conducted for a Danish newspaper (Zahle & Strange, 2019). Of the 1,204 adult respondents, 18 percent had initiated estrangement to a close family member, of which 32 percent to a parent and 12 percent to a child. This adds up to just shy of eight percent experiencing intergenerational estrangement, resembling the results from the UK and the US. Although the newspaper survey does not have scientific credibility, it does offer an indication of a high prevalence of intergenerational estrangement in Denmark.

Some researchers find estrangement to be less widespread (Szydlik, 2023), although they still consider it a relevant issue. A large ongoing longitudinal study of intergenerational relations in Switzerland reports that, while about 30 percent of adults feel ‘occasionally’ estranged from their parents, only about four percent consider themselves ‘completely estranged’ (Isengard, 2023, p. 111-132). This categorization of estrangement as ‘occasional’ and ‘complete’ is a testament to inconsistent operationalization of the concept, as estrangement is more frequently treated as a dichotomous estranged / not estranged condition (Agllias, 2011a; Blake, 2015; Conti, 2015). This is also the case in the current project.

### **Research on intergenerational estrangement**

The three studies that make up the main body of this dissertation draw on and discuss existing estrangement research. The following section presents an overview of the scientific state of the art for the research field of intergenerational estrangement.

Empirical research exploring estrangement is mainly recent (Blake, 2017). Most research has been done since 2010, and papers often describe the phenomenon as overlooked and under-studied (Carr et al., 2015; Conti, 2015; Dattilio & Nichols, 2011; Nolte et al., 2022; Scharp et al., 2015).

Attention, however, seems to be growing and newer publications, describing different aspects of family estrangement, keep appearing (Barcham, 2022; Barnwell, 2024; Becker & Hank, 2022; Blake et al., 2023; Hank & Steinbach, 2023; Nolte et al., 2022; Reczek et al., 2023). For the most part, the studies are qualitative, exploring lived experiences of estrangement, e.g. reasons for cutting ties (Agllias, 2016a; Carr et al., 2015), effects and implications on the lives of both estrangers and estrangees (Agllias, 2011b; Agllias, 2018), and how discourses of family influence the meaning-making of estrangement (Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019; Scharp & Thomas, 2016). These studies have explored both parents’ and adult children’s perspectives and reveal a tendency for parents to be



impacted by sorrow and grief and to be more negatively affected by estrangements than adult children. They reveal how parents can feel punished by children (Agllias, 2015), and how especially estranged mothers feel ostracized and stigmatized as failed parents (Agllias, 2013). Although not strictly about estrangement, an older Danish publication discusses how older parents feel disappointment in the lack of contact with adult children, and that they have lost the care capital saved up in their children to be reserved for old age (Munk, 1999). The fewer quantitative studies have investigated questions such as prevalence, predictors (Becker & Hank, 2022; Conti, 2015), and societal attitudes and stereotypes (Rittenour et al., 2018). Research on causes find divorce, disagreements over money, conflicts with in-laws, unmet relational expectations, divergent values between generations, and adverse childhood experiences of the estranged child to be common themes (Coleman, 2021; Nolte et al., 2022; Pillemer, 2020). Among other notable observations, estrangement has been found to more frequently involve fathers than mothers (Becker & Hank, 2022) and more frequently sons than daughters (Reczek et al., 2023). Additionally, there is evidence that adult children are more often the initiators of estrangement (Blake, 2015).

Intergenerational estrangement should be distinguished from parental alienation, with the latter referring to young children being separated from one parent via the actions of the other, usually in the process of separation or divorce (Bernet et al., 2020; Scharp et al., 2020). Intergenerational estrangement on the other hand always occurs in adulthood, making it at least to some extent a phenomenon of later life. Intergenerational estrangement as a gerontological phenomenon is addressed when research engages the parent perspective (Agllias, 2011b; Agllias, 2013; Gilligan, 2014; Gilligan et al., 2022; Pillemer, 2020). Here it is also generally concluded that estrangement is an emotionally painful and shameful experience, leaving parents with grievances and frustration over the loss of contact with children. It follows that estrangement from this perspective is a tragic family event that affects the parties negatively and should ideally be prevented. Consequently, some

authors give advice on how to achieve reconciliation to circumvent the estrangement (Coleman, 2008, 2021; Gilbertson, 2020; Pillemer, 2020).

Another position offers an alternative interpretation of estrangement as potentially positive (Scharp & Thomas, 2016). Often taking the perspective of adult children, it is argued that estrangement can be a healthy solution to an unhealthy problem or social environment (Scharp, 2023). It is argued that sometimes ending the intergenerational relationship can benefit both parents and children, but dominant societal ideas of the importance of biological ties prevent healthy break-ups. This perspective emphasizes the plurality of family relationships and argues for nuances in the ways we construe the concept of family (Blake, 2022).

However, this dissertation is primarily formed by the notion that estrangement is a negative event. As indicated by the aims and scopes of **studies I, II and III**, hypotheses are derived from and guided by observations of healthy intergenerational relationships as important for psychological well-being.

### **Theoretical landscape**

Parallel to the scarce research on intergenerational estrangement, theoretical underpinnings of the concept seem under-developed. This called for creativity in how to apply theoretical perspectives in the three studies. Here the theoretical field of intergenerational relations in adulthood was found to be a good match for the issue of estrangement. During the project, through **studies I, II, and III**, theoretical considerations became increasingly prominent, resulting in greater use of theory as the project developed. In the following, central theoretical concepts are presented and discussed.

*Emotional cutoff in Bowen's Family Systems Theory*

The Bowen's family systems theory and the subsumed concept of emotional cutoff is often cited as a theoretical underpinning for the understanding of estrangement (Agllias, 2011b; Blake, 2017; M. Gilligan et al., 2015; Scharp et al., 2015). Emotional cutoff is the process by which family members, most often adolescent children, separate themselves from their families of origin (Bowen, 1993). It is theorized as providing a pseudo-solution for the adolescent or young adult who is unable to manage the unresolved attachment to their parents. It happens as a consequence of the young adult's lack of individuation or differentiation to become emotionally independent from the family system. Instead, the adult child experiences a psychologically unhealthy fusion understood as a blurring of emotional boundaries between family members. In response, the adult child initiates cutoff to break free. Bowen's family systems theorists suggest that the immediate effect of cutoff is relief from conflict and anxiety (Agllias, 2013; Bowen, 1993). Cutoff is hence understood as an emotional phenomenon, meaning that children distance themselves from the family unit by becoming dismissive and distant in their communication. Only sometimes does the condition evolve to result in cessation of contact. Although widely used in estrangement studies, the theory has found limited use in the present project for two main reasons. 1) While the theory provides rich descriptions of how family dynamics can lead to the unfavorable outcome of cutoff, it is restricted to focus on families with children entering young adulthood and the developmental processes involved in this stage of life. Issues concerning fusion and differentiation can also play a role for families in later life, but other themes such as conflicts involving children-in-law, grandchildren, or inheritance might be more pertinent for families in later life. 2) As the name suggests, emotional cutoff is primarily an emotional construct. The element of direct communication or contact is not a necessary ingredient. This makes cutoff difficult to differentiate from other forms of family conflict that might also include periods of cold and avoidant communication. Contrarily, the phenomenon of

estrangement as defined and operationalized in this project, considers the element of no contact to be essential. As will be evident throughout this dissertation, none of the estranged parents who participated experience emotional cutoff without terminated contact. Emotional cutoff therefore only accounts for one of two necessary elements of estrangement. For these reasons, and although the concept of cutoff is widely used in estrangement research, it only found use in **study I**.

### *Ambiguous loss*

Ambiguous loss as described by author and family therapist Pauline Boss (Boss, 2009) presents another theoretical source often cited in estrangement research (Agllias, 2011b; Blake, 2017; Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2017). According to Boss, ambiguous loss is “loss that has no closure. Unlike with death, families have no official verification of their loss; this lack of congruence between absence and presence remains” (Boss, 2019, p.1). It is the loss of a close relationship where an element of psychological attachment remains. This resembles estrangement as it describes physical absence, but psychological presence (Agllias, 2013). The concept of ambiguous loss can therefore act as a theoretical framework for understanding how estrangement might be experienced by older parents. Other events that might induce this experience are kidnappings or wars where loved ones disappear physically with no trace, but also cases where loved ones slowly fade psychologically as in the case of progressed dementia (Boss, 2009). Estranged parents are likely to experience feelings of ambiguity and ambivalence akin to the unresolved and emotional immobility and chronic grievances captured by the term ambiguous loss. Contrary to the concept of cutoff, ambiguous loss always implies some kind of rupture of contact, but also always contains an emotional component. This makes the construct congruent with the definition of estrangement held by this project. Furthermore, ambiguous loss has an inbuilt ambivalence that makes the perspective somewhat congruent with the intergenerational ambivalence perspective (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998) that is applied in **studies II** and **III**.

*Intergenerational solidarity*

Other theoretical developments that were found useful in the analyses of estrangement, were theories on intergenerational relations in adulthood, specifically the intergenerational solidarity perspective, and the intergenerational ambivalence perspective.

The intergenerational solidarity perspective can be considered a dominant theoretical perspective for research on intergenerational relations in adulthood (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010), and it has proved a reliable and valid tool (Blieszner & Voorpostel, 2016). The perspective posits that intergenerational relations should be understood and investigated on dimensions of solidarity and that solidarity is the primary sentiment between generations (Bengtson & Robert, 1991). Solidarity – understood as support, sympathy, and closeness between generations – is the basis for social bonding in families (Roberts et al., 1991). After critiques of being normative and missing conceptualizations of negative aspects of family relationships (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998), six dimensions of solidarity and conflict were defined: 1) Intimacy and distance denoting *affectual solidarity*. 2) Agreement and dissent referring to *consensual solidarity*. 3) Dependency and autonomy also called *functional solidarity*. 4) Integration and isolation called *associational solidarity*. 5) Opportunities and barriers for interaction called *structural solidarity*. 6) Familism and individualism called *normative solidarity* (Bengtson et al., 2002; Blieszner & Voorpostel, 2016). The perspective thus provides an overarching framework for the study of intergenerational relations in adulthood. Furthermore, the perspective argues against emerging and sometimes apocalyptic ideas of post-familialism where family is no longer considered a primary social structure of high-income, first-world societies (Douthat, 2020; Popenoe, 1993a, 2020). Instead, the solidarity perspective promotes the understanding that family and the intergenerational bond remains a fundamental social structure, adapting to social, political, and demographic changes in societies.

Estrangement through the lens of the intergenerational solidarity perspective entails a collapse of solidarity, as solidarity is what keeps the family unit together. With the family unit torn by estrangement, solidarity is no longer present between estranged family members. As is usually the case in applications of the solidarity perspective, only one or a few of the six solidarity dimensions are applied (Blieszner & Voorpostel, 2016). For estrangement, all but structural solidarity denoting opportunities for interaction due to geography etc., seem relevant. The dimensions of affectual solidarity describing the degree of emotional closeness, and associational solidarity describing frequency and patterns of interaction are, however, particularly relevant in the study of estrangement. **Study II** uses the solidarity perspective to argue that older parents are hypothesized to express sentiments of sorrow towards estrangement.

### *Intergenerational ambivalence*

The intergenerational ambivalence perspective is an alternative theoretical take on intergenerational relationships (Lowenstein, 2007; Luescher & Pillemer, 1998). The fundamental claim is that intergenerational relations are primarily ambivalent as they take form in constant tensions between contradictory forces, such as unity and individuality, identification and separation, or intimacy and boundaries. Rather than *either* positive or negative, the ambivalence perspective proposes that *both* positive and negative sentiments exist simultaneously (Gilligan et al., 2015). Although not as widespread as the solidarity perspective, the theory has been recognized as a heuristic tool for explorations of people's experiences (Bengtson et al., 2002; Blieszner & Voorpostel, 2016). The concept of ambivalence has, for example, proved useful as an analytical tool in studies of family caregiving, where family carers might be torn in their perceived caregiving responsibilities (Pillemer et al., 2019; Pine & Steffen, 2019). Ambivalence can be seen as an especially pertinent analytical tool where family relationships are not just positive and supportive, but where rift or

conflict challenges the intergenerational relationship. This is explicitly the case for estrangement, and the ambivalence perspective therefore serves as a theoretical lens in both **studies II** and **III**.

#### *Dual process model of coping with bereavement*

Relevant for **study III**, the Dual Process Model of coping with bereavement (DPM) (Stroebe & Schut, 2010) constitutes an additional theoretical perspective in the project. Whereas the concept of ambiguous loss addresses how older parents might experience estrangement, the DPM presents a framework for understanding how older parents might cope with their estrangement. The DPM presents coping with bereavement as a dual process oscillating between *loss-oriented coping* characterized by feelings of sorrow and grief, thinking of, and missing the lost person, and *restoration-oriented coping* characterized by adjustment to life without the deceased, for example by planning the future and taking on new roles and responsibilities (Schut, 1999). The theory was developed to describe a pathway through successful coping with bereavement and has been expanded to also address how coping patterns can lead to maladaptive grieving (Stroebe & Schut, 2008). The model has been found to both adequately represent the grieving experience and to be a promising framework for the development of interventions (Fiore, 2021). With estrangement also implying loss of loved ones, albeit not to death, the DPM presents a theory of coping that might have parallels to how older parents oscillate or experience ambivalence between wanting to reconcile with children and accepting the lost relationship. The DPM therefore functions as a partial theoretical foundation for **study III**.

#### *Intergenerational stake hypothesis*

A secondary but pertinent theoretical concept for this dissertation is the intergenerational stake hypothesis (Bengtson & Kuypers, 1971). This hypothesis claims that parents favor the intergenerational relationship more than adult children do. The constellation of asymmetrical

attachment is believed to have impacts across the intergenerational dynamics in adulthood. Instrumental, financial, and emotional support has consistently been found to move from senior to junior (Lee, 2020; Wong et al., 2020). Parents have been found to rate emotional intimacy and relationship quality higher than adult children and conversely downplay the importance of conflicts and disagreements compared to adult children (Giarrusso et al., 1995). The hypothesis has a long tradition of exploration, and studies have continued to support its claims (Birditt et al., 2015; Birditt et al., 2012; Giarrusso et al., 2004; Hwang et al., 2023), making it a well-established perspective in research on intergenerational relations in adulthood. Regarding estrangement between older parents and their children, the intergenerational stake hypothesis can be argued to lead to two primary assumptions: 1) That older parents, due to the strong attachment to adult children, would be negatively emotionally impacted by estrangement, and 2) that parents would be less likely to initiate estrangement both because of stronger attachment and devaluation of conflicts. Although the intergenerational stake hypothesis does not take center stage as a theoretical concept in this dissertation, it is used in **study I**, and is generally useful as a perspective on the asymmetrical constitution of the relationship.

### **Aims and composition of the dissertation**

The three studies of this dissertation addressed three different aspects of intergenerational estrangement for older parents. The dissertation takes a funnel-shaped structure. Starting with a broader exploration, the studies gradually move from generalizable measurements of mental health through investigations of parents' quantifiable sentiments, ending with an in-depth qualitative examination of older parents' subjective experiences.

**Study I** explored associations between estrangement and mental health for older parents. The study was based on cross-sectional data that included a comparison group to be able to isolate



estrangement as a factor for the mental health. Knowing that causal relations are not obtainable in cross-sectional studies, **study I** aimed at establishing a starting point for evaluating intergenerational estrangement as a territory for further exploration to promote mental health in older age.

Research question for **study I**: *Are there an association between mental health and estrangement form adult children for older parents?*

The study hypothesized that older parents who are estranged from one or more of their children present poorer mental health by both being less likely to experience *well-being* and *sense of purpose* and being more prone to *depressive symptoms* and to experience *loneliness*.

**Study II** investigated older parents' sentiments towards estrangement, attaining insights into how they relate to the issue. Again, building on cross-sectional data, but now only from the group of estranged parents, **study II** aimed at exploring older parents' perceived emotional impact of estrangement. **Study II** included sentiments sorrow, ambivalence, and relief, to get three broad sentiment categories. Additionally, the study aimed at exploring how certain predictors regarding the parents and their estrangements were associated with their sentiments.

Research questions for **Study II**: *What sentiment do estranged older parents hold towards the estrangement?* and *do demographical variables and estrangement variables predict parent sentiments?*

Giving the existing literature's emphasis on the negative impacts of estrangement, it was hypothesized that older estranged parents predominantly expressed sentiments of sorrow. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that sentiments of sorrow would be predicted by high age, by motherhood, short duration of estrangement, child initiative of estrangement, estrangement from more children, and estrangement from all children.

**Study III** explored how older parents cope with being estranged. Through qualitative interviews with older estranged parents, the study identified and described actions and thoughts directed towards estrangement to manage negative emotions.

Research question for **study III**: *What do estranged older parents think and do to handle being estranged and what themes of self-protection are brought on by the emotional burdens of the estrangement?*

The analysis explored how coping is associated with *intergenerational ambivalence* and the *dual process model of coping with bereavement*. The aim was to learn more about older parents' coping responses and to better understand the dynamics of intergenerational estrangement – laying the ground for ideas of how to support older parents and their families affected by it.

**Supplementary analyses of cross-sectional data** are presented in **chapter 4**. The cross-sectional dataset contained additional variables that did not fit the aim of the three studies, but that can provide valuable insights into the environment and circumstances of estrangement for older parents. These included demographic characteristics of the estranged parents, e.g. parent gender, marital status, family situation, as well as socio-economic status, and estrangement variables, e.g. number of estrangements, estrangement from grandchildren, thoughts about reconciliation, and estrangement duration. Although some of these variables are presented in **studies I** and **II**, the aim of the supplementary analyses was to explore these additional variables further to learn more about what it entails for older parents to be estranged from adult children.

**Exploring relationships between the studies** are presented in **chapter 5**. The chapter consists of two analyses. The first examines associations between mental health (**study I**) and sentiments towards estrangement (**study II**). The analysis is included because a question of this association

emerged as a missing link between these two studies. The hypothesis is that lower mental health could be associated with sentiments of sorrow.

The second analysis explores sentiments of sorrow (**study II**) and ambivalence (**study III**). Here the qualitative data from **study III** opened the possibility to explore whether the sentiment variable from **study II** was consistent with how parents expressed their perspectives in the in-depth interviews. The question arose whether parent sentiments as either sorrowful or ambivalent would correspond to their viewpoints and feelings towards estrangement in the qualitative data.

The aim of the first analysis was to examine the association between mental health and sentiments, because such an association could have clinical implications. The aim of the second analysis was to assess the validity of the sentiment variable from **study II**.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODS

The methodologies reflect efforts to find eligible participants, retrieve relevant information from them, and to choose applicable analytical methods to fit the data and research questions for each study.

#### **Recruitment and data collection**

Recruitment resulted in a final sample of 271 older parents 75+ years old. 75 estranged older parents with a mean age of 82.1 and 196 non-estranged older parents with a mean age of 82.3 for the comparison group. A purposive sampling design was developed for the project. The principal preliminary question was of how to find eligible older estranged parents for participation. This issue has different aspects. Firstly, estranged older parents had to be located and identified, secondly, a method of recruitment needed to be developed that was both valid, meaning that participants complied with recruitment criteria, and ethically sound.

The solutions came through thoroughly planned and coordinated collaboration with a nationwide association that represent municipal preventive health professionals, SuFo (Landsforeningen for ansatte i Sundhedsfremmende Forebyggende hjemmebesøg). They carry out home visits with older citizens as a mandated part of the Danish legislation. All older citizens 75+ years in Denmark are offered visits, and as a result the preventive health professionals encounter a numerous and diverse group of potential participants. Adding to this, preventive health professionals are trained in having conversations about sensitive topics and thus were likely to be able to gain the trust of eligible participants and motivate them to participate.

Recruitment took place across Denmark. Preventive health professionals from 30 of the 98 Danish municipalities contributed to the total sample of both estranged older parents and the comparison group. Participants from different environments, rural and urban, are represented in both groups. Recruitment instructions were provided to preventive health professionals via webinars, in-person meetings, and a recruitment manual developed for the project. The same recruitment procedure was used for both estranged- and the comparison group. Recruitment criteria included a lower age limit of 75 years to ensure that parents would belong to the older population. Criteria excluded pronounced cognitive impairments and present acute problems such as severe illness, current bereavement, alcohol abuse, or other pronounced turmoil. This was done as an ethical precaution not to add insult to injury by asking the most vulnerable older parents to confront a potentially painful topic.

The issue of identifying when a parent could be considered estranged was tricky. At face value the question, when a relationship is broken, can seem simple; but many factors should be considered in the understanding of intergenerational estrangement. Who is for example to be considered children? What about stepchildren? What about adoptive children? What about children that parents never knew? What about duration? Is there a lower limit of how much time should have passed for the broken relationship to be considered estrangement? Is it considered no contact if parents, although rejected or ignored, continually attempt to reach out to their child? An attempt to incorporate these dimensions in the recruitment procedure was done, but swiftly abandoned, because of feedback from the preventive health professionals who found it too complicated. In collaboration with the preventive health professionals a simpler model was adopted. Here, estrangement was identified when parents explicitly stated that they had no contact with their children, either by bringing up the issue themselves or when asked by the preventive health professional. Estrangement as the

eligibility criteria was hereby contingent on older parents' subjective appraisals. After determining this 'no contact' criteria, they were asked if they wanted to participate.

Upon receiving participant contact information, the questionnaire was sent either by mail including a prepaid return envelope or via an online secure survey service (SurveyExact). The questionnaire had a structure and layout to best accommodate potential poor eyesight and physical frailty of participants. This included a large font, clear and precise questions, and a limited length. The questionnaire was reviewed by preventive health professionals to ensure that wordings and layout would fit the target population.

Data collection proved difficult. The first and most punishing obstacle was poor timing. Nationwide COVID-19 lockdowns struck just as recruitment was about to commence. This meant that the preventive health professionals did not have access to potential participants, and from early 2021 to early 2022 lockdowns and restrictions hindered a consistent flow of participants. Additionally, the project was double struck because persons 75+ years were a high-risk group for COVID-19. This made the target population less accessible – and understandably more wary and cautious even after restrictions were lifted. Recruitment was also difficult for the preventive health professionals. Via ongoing dialogue and feedback during the recruitment phase it became clear that the theme of problematic relations with children was a delicate matter to bring up. Occasionally, the preventive health professionals had to abandon the cause in conversations with older parents to preserve their alliance with them. Other times they found the issue unethical to bring up. Even when an estrangement case was identified, convincing the older parent to participate could be difficult. Hesitancy from estranged parents was mainly due to the risk of ripping up old wounds. Overall, the obstacles resulted in prolongation of the planned data collection period. It took place from early 2021 to mid-2022.

Data collection for **study III** proved simpler. As part of the questionnaire, participants were asked if they were willing to participate in a future interview if it became relevant. Of the 75 estranged older parents, 60 agreed to a possible future interview by adding their contact details to their responses. One caveat to this procedure, however, was that some participants had fallen too ill by the time of the interview study, demonstrating the fragility of the target population. Still, the situation provided the opportunity to carefully select interview participants to fit the scope of the qualitative methodology of thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). 15 interview participants were selected for **study III**. Here one aim was to achieve an analytical framework that cuts across interviews by identifying common themes. To this end, an abundance of potential interview participants made it possible to get a range of perspectives represented in the study. Participant selection was thus done to have different parent perspectives in terms of demographics, mental health status, and estrangement situations included in the study.

#### *Response rates and non-responders*

Studies that use questionnaires are often susceptible to issues with low response rates (Gliksman et al., 1992), especially when the questionnaire is mailed. Response rates for the group of estranged older parents and the comparison group were calculated separately to control for intergroup response rate bias. Response rates were calculated as the percentage of returned surveys from the total number of recruited participants. For estranged older parents the response rate was 73.5 percent, 75 responses of 102 recruited. For the comparison group the response rate was 76.2 percent, 196 responses of 257 recruited. The lower response rate among estranged parents was expected, as they were confronted with a present and potentially painful and shameful topic. Still, both response rates are relatively high for mailing based survey studies (Goyder, 1985) and the difference of 2.7 percent between study groups was not considered a cause of concern. The high

response rates could be explained by a careful recruitment process, the relevance of the issue for participants, and the credibility of the preventive health professionals.

Despite thorough recruitment instruction, a few completed responses were omitted due to the minimum age limit of 75 years (one in the comparison group aged 73 and three in the estrangement group aged 70, 71 and 71). Three more participants were omitted due to other responder related issues (one in the comparison group and two in the estrangement group).

The sensitive nature of intergenerational estrangement opens possibility of skewness due to dropout in the group of estranged older parents, as non-responders might represent the group most negatively affected by the estrangement. This concern was supported by feedback from the preventive health professionals. A non-responder's analysis was therefore conducted to determine if the responses were affected by the research design or other systematic factors pertaining to the theme of estrangement (Abrahamsen et al., 2016). The analysis focused on determining if participants' failure to respond on the survey was due to random factors such as not noticing the survey in the mail, forgetting about it, or not wanting to spend the time to participate - or if non-responders did not respond because of factors pertaining to estrangement (Hazell et al., 2009). While random causes for non-responding is somewhat anticipated, it can be a problem if drop-out is caused by the factors in the project and/or research design.

A total of 27 of the initially recruited 102 estranged parents were counted as non-responders. Of these, six actively revoked participation either by phone or by returning an unfilled survey with a letter stating that they did not want to participate. Of these six, four stated regrets as the reason, one stated that poor physical health meant that she could not overcome ripping up old wounds, and one wrote a note saying that the project would not be able to help him with the problem.



The 21 non-responders, who did not actively revoke their participation, were contacted via phone, when a phone number was available, between five and 10 months after initial consent. 11 attempts were unsuccessful either because they did not answer repeated phone calls or because it was not possible to retrieve phone numbers. 10 phone calls were successful. The conversations explored reasons for drop-out. These 10 non-responders were reluctant to have the phone conversation. Two did not want to comment on the project or their participation, one was deemed cognitively not fit to respond, and six (age 80-90) gave explanations for non-response that all had to do with the strenuous, hurtful, and private nature of their estrangement story. It can be speculated that non-responders, who did not want to comment, had similar reasons for drop-out.

Summed up, the non-responder analysis confirmed the suspicion that the theme of estrangement affected response rates negatively, i.e. that non-responders were unwilling to participate due to negative emotional effects of the estrangement. When it was possible to retrieve non-responder feedback, reasons for drop-out can therefore be attributed to factors pertaining the estrangement such as shame and sorrow.

### **Measures and analytic methodologies**

Different analytic methodologies were chosen and utilized for each of the three studies to fit the respective scopes and rationales. In this section, the measures and analytic methodologies for each of the three studies are described.

**Study I** analyzed *responses from estranged and non-estranged older parents*. Due to missing values on the dependent variables, *list wise deletion* was adopted for the final analysis. This resulted in a reduced sample size of estranged older parents (n=67) and older parents with intact relationships with children (n=167). The two participant groups were compared on four mental health measures that make up the *dependent variables* in **study I**:

- 1) *Well-being* was measured via *The World Health Organization Five Well-Being Index* (WHO-5). WHO-5 consists of five questions to give an overview of a sense of wellbeing (Topp et al., 2015). The index is widely used and has proved to have a high level of validity. It has seen use on the older population in Denmark (Larsen et al., 2020; Siren & Larsen, 2019).
- 2) *Sense of purpose* was measured by *The Purpose in Life – Short Form test* (PIL-SF), which is a shortened version with four items. PIL-SF has been found useful in predicting psychological distress and offers a psychometric measure of meaning (Schulenberg et al., 2011).
- 3) *Depression* was measured by *The Common Mental Disorders Questionnaire* (CMDQ), subset for depressive symptoms. The CMDQ depression subset has six items, high validity, and is useful as a diagnostic aid tool to assess mental health in general practice (Christensen et al., 2005). It has also been used to assess depression among older recipients of psychotherapy in a Danish context (Larsen et al., 2020).
- 4) *Loneliness* was measured via *The Three Item Loneliness Scale* (UCLA-3). The scale has three items and is a short version of the original UCLA-loneliness Scale (Hughes et al., 2004; Lasgaard, 2007). UCLA-3 has been adopted as the golden standard for measuring loneliness by the Danish Health Authorities (Danish Health Authority, 2022).

Analysis for **study I** also included a list of covariates to control for confounding effects (Pourhoseingholi et al., 2012). These were *age, self-rated health, years in school, number of children, gender, living alone, divorce, and widowhood*.

Descriptive statistics and independent samples t-test was used to get an overview of covariates and their associations with estrangement. The statistical model chosen for the main analysis in **study I** was MANCOVA (multivariate analysis of covariance). This statistical model can examine differences in means between groups on two or more, in this case four, dependent variables, while

controlling for possible confounding variables. MANCOVA is a statistical test in the ANOVA (analysis of variance) family. It produces an F-value that is a measure of the ratio between the variance within each group and the variance between groups. Higher F-values equal stronger associations. Other statistical models such as multiple regression could also work, but MANCOVA was deemed a more precise fit because it addresses differences in variances.

**Study II** only used data from the group of *estranged older parents* (n=75). In this study, the sample size was restored, as the new dependent variable did not have issues with missing data. The *dependent variable* for **study II** was a *single item variable on estranged older parents' perceived emotional impact of estrangement*. This variable was developed for this study and is therefore neither validated nor used elsewhere. The perceived emotional impact item was developed to capture estranged older parents' sentiment towards estrangement. Participants were asked "Are you affected by the broken relationship?" Response options were 1. "I feel sorrow" 2. "I feel sorrow and relief" 3. "I feel relieved" 4. "I don't know". Response options 2 and 4 were pooled to signify ambivalence, leaving three response categories for analysis: Perceived negative emotional impact, i.e. sorrow; perceived ambivalence, i.e. sorrow and relief and don't know; and perceived positive emotional impact, i.e. relief.

The first part of **study II** mapped estranged parents' adherence to sentiments of sorrow, sentiments of ambivalence, and sentiments of relief. In the second part of **study II**, the dependent variable was coded as a binary sorrow/not sorrow variable to test how a set of independent predictor variables were associated with sentiments of sorrow. The independent predictor variables were parent demographics *gender* and *age*, and the estrangement variables of *estrangement duration*, *child initiative of estrangement*, *estrangement from all children*, and *number of estrangements*.

Statistical analysis using frequency statistics was used to uncover parent adherence to categories of sentiments towards estrangement. Descriptive statistics was used to generate an overview of results, and multiple logistic regression was used to analyze how the independent predictor variables, i.e. parent demographics and estrangement variables, were associated with the sentiment of sorrow. Multiple logistical regression was chosen, as this statistical test can predict a binary dependent variable from a set of independent variables.

**Study III** used qualitative interview data. It therefore adhered to a different analytical paradigm than **studies I** and **II**. In **study III** the research questions were explorative aiming to shed light on older parents' coping with estrangement. Here, non-quantifiable themes replace variables. Using purposive sampling aimed at attaining width in parent perspectives, 15 interview participants were chosen. The purposive sampling strategy resulted in the following composition of participants: Eight mothers and seven fathers, and a mean age of 83, ranging from 77 to 90 years. Seven parents were divorced, four were currently married, seven were widowed, and 11 lived alone. Four were estranged from all their children, six were estranged from one of more children, and five from two, three or four of more children. Estrangement duration ranged from 2 to 22 years with a mean of 10.7 years. Most parents considered the child to have initiated the estrangement. Five had good mental health, four moderate, and six poor mental health – as measured by well-being, sense of purpose, depression and loneliness.

Interviews were conducted in participants' homes. The length of interviews ranged from one to two hours. The interviews were transcribed into a total of 554 pages. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to code the interviews into themes (Jackson et al., 2019).

The analytic method chosen for **study III** was thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). In this qualitative analytical method themes are identified through coding where patterns of meaning

emerge. Thematic analysis involves six analytical steps: 1) *Familiarization*, getting to know data and noting first impressions, 2) *generating initial codes*, examining data and extracting text, 3) *generating themes*, identifying patterns across codes, 4) *reviewing themes*, analyzing and comparing themes, 5) *defining and naming themes*, describing and analyzing the meaning of each theme, 6) *creating the report*, writing and synthesizing results (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis considered the relationships between themes of parent coping responses, and the theoretical concepts of the DPM-inspired dual framework of reconciliation- versus acceptance-orientated coping responses, and the intergenerational ambivalence perspective.

## CHAPTER 3

## RESULTS

The following sections summarize the main results from **studies I, II and III**.

### Summary of results from study I

**Study I**, examining associations between intergenerational estrangement and mental health for older parents, found that estrangement was associated with poorer mental health. The MANCOVA yielded statistical significance, Pillai's  $V = .094$ ,  $F(4,221) = 5.716$ ,  $p < .001$ . The effect size of  $\eta_p^2 = .094$  was moderate, following conventions for partial eta squared effect size interpretation (small effect = 0.01; medium effect = 0.06; and large effect = 0.14) (Cohen, 2013; Richardson, 2011). Descriptive statistics revealed poorer mean scores for estranged parents on all four mental health measurements as seen in *table 1*, as estranged parents were found to have lower scores on the positive states of well-being and sense of purpose and higher scores on the negative states of depression and loneliness.

**Table 1** Means, standard errors, and standard deviations for estranged parents and the comparison group, and ANCOVA results for well-being (WHO-5), sense of purpose (PIL-SF), depression (CMDQ), and loneliness (UCLA-3), ( $N = 234$ )

Measure	Estranged parents (n=67)		Comparison group (n=167)		$F(1,224)$	$p$	$\eta^2$
	$M(SE)$	$SD$	$M(SE)$	$SD$			
Well-being	58.21 (2.650)	21.690	72.74 (1.245)	16.094	18.400	<.001	.076
Sense of purpose	19.82 (.610)	4.994	22.23 (.295)	3.816	5.587	.019	.024
Depression	6.07 (.654)	5.349	2.72 (.261)	3.374	17.578	<.001	.073
Loneliness	4.88 (.244)	1.996	3.95 (.097)	1.253	9.042	.003	.039

The findings support the hypothesis that estrangement from children is associated with a poorer mental health as measured by *well-being*, *sense of purpose*, *depression*, and *loneliness* for older parents. The covariates *age*, *self-rated health*, *years in school*, *number of children*, *gender*, *living alone*, *divorce*, and *widowhood* did not confound results, leading to the conclusion that estrangement had explanatory strength for the significant difference found on the combination of mental health measurements. As seen from the effect sizes, partial eta ( $\eta^2$ ) in *table 1*, well-being demonstrated the strongest association, followed by depression, then loneliness, and sense of purpose showed the weakest association.

### **Summary of results from study II**

**Study II**, examining estranged older parents' sentiments towards estrangement, found sentiments of sorrow and sentiments of ambivalence, but not sentiments of relief to be prevalent. 49.3 percent of estranged parents reported sorrow, 46.7 percent reported ambivalence, and four percent reported relief. Results for the multiple logistic regression (*table 2*), that tested the predictive strength of parent demographics, found that parent *gender*, but not *age* significantly predicted sentiments of sorrow. Mothers were found to significantly more often report sorrow. Results for significance for the estrangement variables (*table 2*) found *child initiative of estrangement*, *estrangement from all children*, and *number of estrangements*, but not *estrangement duration*, to predict sentiments of sorrow.

**Table 2** Multiple logistic regression predicting sentiments of sorrow towards sstrangement

Predictors	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>OR</i>	95% <i>C.I.</i>	
					<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
Gender	1.311	.586	.025	3.710	1.176	11.701
Parent age	-.014	.063	.827	.986	.872	1.116
Duration	-.005	.028	.855	.995	.943	1.050
Child initiative	1.157	.574	.044	3.179	1.032	9.788
Estrangement from all children	-1.631	.713	.022	.196	.048	.792
No. estrangements	1.104	.553	.046	3.016	1.021	8.914

Child initiative was found to be positively associated with sorrow. A positive association was also found for number of estrangements, with a higher number of estranged children found to significantly predict sorrow. The significant association found for estrangement from all children, however, demonstrated an inverse relationship with sentiments of sorrow. Instead, estrangement from all children was found to be associated with sentiments of ambivalence and relief classified as *not sorrow* in the analysis.

### Summary of results from study III

**Study III** found that estranged older parents' coping responses were dividable into the two main coping orientations of *reconciliation-oriented* coping and *acceptance-oriented* coping. These themes were found congruent with the Dual Process Model of coping with bereavement (DPM). However, *avoidance-oriented* coping was found to be a third coping-orientation, that did not fit the dual theoretical model. *Reconciliation-oriented* coping responses were identified as *exploring the past*, *repeated contact attempts*, and *seeking information about children*. These themes of coping



responses were all oriented towards reestablishing contact or understanding their relationship with estranged children to facilitate reconciliation. *Acceptance-oriented* coping responses were identified as *pride*, *projecting responsibility*, *financial retribution*, and *coming to terms with estrangement*. These responses were analyzed to directly or indirectly work against reconciliation and instead towards continued termination of the relationship. *Avoidance-oriented* coping responses were identified as *avoidance* and *defensive ignorance*. These were classified when parents refrained from thinking of or acting upon the estrangement and instead pushed it aside and diminished reasoning behind it. Estranged parents were found to oscillate between the three coping-orientations, supporting the assumption derived from the intergenerational ambivalence perspective that estrangement evokes ambivalences that are discernible in the ways older parents cope with it. Additionally, some parent statements were in themselves saturated with ambivalence, for example when both wanting and not wanting to reconcile and attain a future relationship with the estranged child.

## CHAPTER 4

### SUPPLEMENTARY ANALYSES OF CROSS-SECTIONAL DATA

The cross-sectional data produced additional results that reveal insights into estrangement, that was not included in **studies I** and **II**. In the following, these results are presented and discussed. The demographic variables presented in *table 3* are also found in **study I** but discussed at greater length in this section. Note that the slight inconsistencies in results between **study I** and the results presented below are due to listwise deletion in **study I** because of missing values among items on the mental health measurements.

#### Demographic variables

Presented here is the total sample of 271 participants: 75 estranged and 196 non-estranged parents. *Table 3* shows demographic variables for both parent groups. Variables were collected to clarify comparability between groups and as control variables to test their influence on differences between groups on the mental health measurements in **study I**. The two study groups had similar demographic characteristics on the variables *age*, *gender*, and *widowhood*. Given the lower age limit of 75 years, it is difficult to presume much about why no *age* difference was found, but the similarity reinforces the comparability between groups. The similarity between groups for *gender* is surprising, as other studies have consistently found higher estrangement frequencies for fathers (Becker & Hank, 2022; Blake, 2015; Conti, 2015; Reczek et al., 2023). This sample's failure to replicate the gender difference could be speculated to be caused by diminishing differences in higher ages, and/or that estranged fathers have a shorter life expectancy. Studies that find gender differences are based on samples from younger populations. Another explanation could be that the sample size is not large enough to detect the difference.

**Table 3** Demographic characteristics of estranged parents ( $n=75$ ) and comparison group ( $n=196$ )

Characteristic	Estranged parents ( $n=75$ )		Comparison group ( $n=196$ )		Independent Samples $t$ -test
	$M$	$SD$	$M$	$SD$	$p$
Age	82.11	4.4	82.27	5.2	.809
Self-rated Health	3.31	0.8	2.95	0.8	.001
Years in school	8.84	1.9	9.21	2	.176
Number of children	2.65	1	2.51	1	.302
	$n.$	$\%$	$n.$	$\%$	$p$ ( $\chi^2$ )
Gender					.934
Female	49	65.3	127	64.8	
Male	26	34.7	69	35.2	
Living alone					.015
Yes	58	77.3	121	61.7	
No	17	22.7	75	38.3	
Divorced					<.001
Yes	25	33.3	19	9.7	
No	50	66.7	177	90.3	
Widowhood					.954
Yes	42	56.0	109	55.6	
No	33	44.0	87	44.4	

*Note.* Self-rated health is measured by a single item asking participants to rate their physical health on a five-point scale ranging from 1) excellent to 5) poor. Higher scores indicate poorer self-rated health;  $\chi^2$ = chi-squared statistic.

Looking at the  $p$ -value in *table 3* of .934 for the Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test, this latter explanation seems unlikely. *Widowhood* was included as a variable, since this life circumstance has particular social

salience for the age group and would be relevant to control for, as it has been found to be associated with loneliness and depression (Carnelley et al., 1999; Kristiansen et al., 2019; Silva et al., 2008). Additionally, estrangement has been speculated to be associated with dramatic family events such as the death of a spouse and parent (Coleman, 2021) and stressors during life stage transitions such as the death of close relatives (Sucov, 2006). Widowed parents could therefore be more prone to also experience estrangement, but the results from the comparative analysis on this sample did not support this assumption. The variables *years in school* and *number of children* were not significantly different between groups, but *p*-values were not convincingly high either, leading to suspicion that larger sample sizes could have yielded significant differences on these variables. The mean number of years in school is lower for estranged parents, which could be understood as congruent with research demonstrating how low socioeconomic status is associated with poorer family cohesion (Conger et al., 2010). Likewise, a higher number of children could be speculated to be associated with a higher probability of estrangement, both because the number of possible estrangements are naturally higher and because higher numbers of children have been theorized to put strain on families, as described by the resource dissolution model (Downey, 1995).

Significant differences between estranged and the comparison group were found on the variables *self-rated health*, *living alone*, and *divorce*, with more estranged parents scoring poorer health, living alone, and being divorced. The difference on divorce is especially notable, as it presents a frequency for estranged parents more than three times that of the comparison group. This association between parent divorce and estrangement from children is reproduced in psychologist Joshua Coleman's research (Coleman, 2021). He reports that roughly 75 percent of the 1,600 estranged parents that participated in his study were divorced, and that divorces happened prior to estrangement. Based on his clinical work, Coleman hypothesizes that parent divorce can cause children to reexamine loyalties and obligations, leading to favoritism and support of one parent over

the other. The adult child's perception of the family as a single unit diminishes, and in time so does the sense of affiliation with one parent. Another possible explanation for the association between parental divorce and intergenerational estrangement in adulthood is emulation of parental emotional regulation strategies (Woodward & Viana, 2018). Divorce is cutting family ties as a strategy for regulating emotion. Initiating estrangement from parents can be seen as an emulation of this strategy. Estrangement resulting from parental divorce is also associated with parental alienation syndrome (Baker, 2007; Baker et al., 2020), where one parent turns the children against the other or works to deny contact with the other parent. As seen from the analysis of qualitative interviews in **study III**, this condition is reflected in some divorced parents' perceptions of what caused their estrangement. Divorce could also explain why significantly more estranged parents were found to *live alone* in this sample. The lower scores for *self-rated health* could be explained by a lack of support from children, leading older parents to have less access to health care which, although free in Denmark, can be difficult to navigate. Collectively, the results for demographic variables indicate that estrangement could be associated with more precarious living conditions. However, the associations found do not reveal the causal directions, or how other variables might moderate or mediate such associations.

### **Estrangement variables**

Data for nine additional variables on estranged parents' appraisals of estrangement were collected. These included 1) *number of estrangements*, 2) *who initiated estrangements*, 3) *if they spoke openly about their estrangements*, 4) *wishes for reconciliation*, 5) *if they believed that reconciliation could happen*, 6) *if they were estranged from grandchildren*, 7) *the duration of the estrangement*, 8/9) *the onset ages when the estrangement happened for both parents and children*. The variables were collected to learn how parents understood and felt about their estrangement and to better understand the conditions that parents were living with. Some data used in **studies I** and **II** are also included

among these variables. Note again that the slight inconsistencies in results between **study I** and the results presented below are due to listwise deletion in **study I**.

**Table 4** *Frequencies and descriptive statistics for estrangement variables (n=75)*

Characteristic	% (n=75)	Characteristic	% (n=75)	
<b>Number of estrangements</b>		<b>Wish for reconciliation</b>		
1	73.3	no	8	
2	21.3	don't care	6.7	
3	4	yes, maybe	28	
5	1.3	yes, very much	34.7	
		don't know	22.7	
<b>Who took the initiative</b>		<b>Belief in reconciliation</b>		
parent	5.3	it is impossible	13.3	
child	65.3	it is difficult	53.3	
both	5.3	it will happen	6.7	
other	2.7	don't know	26.7	
just happened	14.7			
don't know	6.7			
<b>Speak about estrangement</b>		<b>Estrangement from grandchildren</b>		
never	9.3	yes	41.3	
only reluctantly	9.3	no	58.7	
with close people	46.7			
often	26.7			
don't know	8			
		<b>Duration in years</b>	<u>10.7</u>	<u>9.3</u>
		<b>Parent age of onset</b>	71	10.5
		<b>Child age of onset</b>	45	10.3

*Number of estrangements*

As seen in *table 4*, most parents were estranged from one child. This prompted the question of whether there was an association between number of children and number of estrangements. A Spearman correlation analysis did yield significance when looking at this association:  $r(73) = .245$ ,  $p = .034$ . These variables would, however, naturally correlate to some extent because parents cannot be estranged from more children than they have. Only 9 percent of estranged parents in the sample have just one child, 37 percent have two, 36 percent have three, and 13 percent have four or more children. These percentages do not resemble the distribution for the variable ‘number of estrangements’ in *table 4*, leading to the conclusion that most parents are estranged from one of two or more children. This is noteworthy, because the presence of non-estranged children in parents’ lives is likely to mitigate some of the potential hardship associated with estrangement from other children.

*Who took the initiative*

As seen in *table 4*, the parents in the sample primarily considered their children to have initiated the estrangement. With a percentage of 65.3, the frequency is more than four times the rate of ‘just happened’, which at 14.7 percent makes up the second highest response frequency. The finding align with the *intergenerational stake hypothesis* that describes parents to be more invested in the intergenerational relationship (Giarrusso et al., 2004; Giarrusso et al., 1995), making them less likely to cut ties. The distribution found for child initiation in this sample is therefore not surprising. The second highest frequency, the idea that estrangement ‘just happened’, is more surprising. With the primacy of intergenerational relationships, it seems strange that ties just happened to dissipate. Although it might be experienced as something that just happened, there is likely to be more to the story. Karl Pillemer describes the occurrence of estrangees abstaining from deeper reflections on

what caused their estrangement *defensive ignorance*, as it signifies a protective position of not wanting to know (Pillemer, 2020). Defensive ignorance is analyzed as an avoidant coping response in **study III**. When parents responded ‘just happened’ it could be an expression of defensive ignorance. It is also noteworthy that some parents deemed themselves the initiator of estrangement. These parents are a testament to the nuances of family estrangement and indicate that estrangement may be preferable for parents in some cases (Scharp, 2019).

### *Speak about estrangement*

Research underscores the shame and embarrassment associated with estrangement (Agllias, 2011a, 2011b; Barcham, 2022). Including a single item variable on parents’ willingness to speak to other people about their estrangement was therefore expected to yield results that would demonstrate estrangement to be taboo. As illustrated in *table 4*, this was not the case. Instead, parents responded that they do speak to others about the estrangement. These “others” are most often people close to them (46.7 percent), but a substantial proportion also often speak to other persons who are not close (26.7 percent). One possible explanation for this result is that estranged parents are motivated to address the issue because they feel powerless to change the situation, but that it is urgent for them to do so. These feelings might subdue feelings of shame and embarrassment. However, sampling biases, as another possible explanation, could play a role. For a study focusing on sensitive and personal topics, it is expected that primarily persons who are willing to address the topic consent to participate. This assumption is supported by the non-responder’s analysis, where it was concluded that reasons for withdrawing participation were shame and privacy concerns. Considering these biases makes this variable contentious, and hence it was not used in any of the three studies.



*Wish for reconciliation*

Data on parents' wish for reconciliation was collected to gain insights into preliminary motivations to participate in possible future interventions. Here findings indicate that the majority of parents wish to reconnect with their children. 62.7 percent of parents responded 'yes, very much' or 'yes, maybe'. Although even higher frequencies were anticipated, findings correspond with overall expectations (Coleman, 2008, 2021). 22.7 percent responded 'don't know' to the question, which suggests ambiguous or ambivalent feelings towards the prospect of reconciliation.

*Belief in reconciliation*

Succeeding the *wish for reconciliation* variable, parents were asked if they *believed* in reconciliation. The majority of 53.3 percent of the parents believed it would be difficult, and although a more bleak picture regarding reconciliation prospects are painted with this variable, a Spearman correlation analysis between wishes and belief did produce significant results:  $r(73) = .311, p = .007$ . It can be argued that the weak to medium correlation coefficient of  $r = .311$  is noteworthy, and the positive correlation does suggest that parents who wish for reconciliation are also more likely to deem it somewhat possible.

*Estrangement from grandchildren*

About 41 percent of the sample were estranged from grandchildren. This is substantial, also given that not all participants can be expected to have grandchildren, and it suggests that estrangement from children comes with the added risk of also losing contact with grandchildren – a liability especially salient in older age. Relationships between grandchildren and grandparents often have great importance on both sides, and activities such as playing with grandchildren have been found to benefit the mental health of grandparents (Sudirham et al., 2024). A recent study concluded that estrangement from grandchildren leads to negative well-being outcomes (Avieli & Levy, 2023).

With data for mental health measurements, Spearman correlation analyses of associations between estrangement from grandchildren and mental health were conducted. Results yielded no significant correlations between estrangement from grandchildren and any of the four mental health measurements: WHO-5:  $r(73) = .035, p = .767$ . PIL-SF:  $r(73) = -.010, p = .932$ . CMDQ:  $r(73) = -.128, p = .274$ . UCLA-3:  $r(73) = -.147, p = .208$ . The sample hereby failed to replicate the findings from previous studies. There are many possible reasons for this. One is that mental health has already been impacted by estrangement from children whereby the effects of estrangement from grandchildren are too minute to discover with the available measurements and sample. Another possible contributor is that negative mental health effects of estrangement are stronger for parents with no grandchildren, hereby diluting the difference that estrangement from grandchildren makes in the sample.

### *Duration*

The operationalization of estrangement as *parents' subjective appraisal of no contact* opens the possibility of a limited duration to the extent that actual estrangement is questionable. This is because it can be argued that a lower time limit exists (Conti & Ryan, 2013). Apart from giving an indication of the temporal dimension, the duration variable thus also functioned as a control mechanism to determine whether participants could be considered ineligible due to too short duration. The duration item was open-ended providing participants with the opportunity to respond with a timeframe of their own choice. This resulted in minimum duration responses of 6 months and a maximum of 41 years. No participants were omitted due to short duration. As seen in *table 4*, mean duration was 10.7 years. This is higher than what has been found in other studies (Blake, 2015; Gilligan, 2014). Higher duration could be linked to the higher age in this sample. However, in this sample of older estranged parents, a Spearman correlations analysis found no significant

association between age and duration:  $r(73) = -.059, p = .614$ . Although very small, the correlation coefficient even indicates a negative association.

### *Onset ages of parents and children*

Winding up *table 4* are the variables' means and standard deviations for the ages of parents and adult children when the estrangement began. As suggested by the insignificant correlation between parent age and estrangement duration, mean onset ages of 71 years for parents and 45 years for adult children also point to estrangement occurring later in life. This is different from the understanding that children's young adulthood marks the most volatile period in the intergenerational relationship (Fang et al., 2021; Reczek et al., 2023). Instead, these findings suggest that many estrangement that occurs in the transitional phase when children become adults may be reconciled later in life, whereas a new volatile period emerges when parents become old. Contrary to findings that intergenerational ties tend to strengthen in older age (Silverstein et al., 2006), this suggests that later life also presents difficulties for intergenerational relationships that can lead to estrangement.

### **Open-text responses**

The 75 estranged parents were given three options to write open-text statements about their experiences with the estrangement. Such open-ended response options, have the benefit of providing authentic and unexpected feedback that can highlight nuances in a given phenomenon (Rouder et al., 2021). The downside is that their status of being neither strictly qualitative nor quantitative data results in a lack of clear analytical methodology (O'Cathain & Thomas, 2004). They therefore become difficult to include in a way consistent with the rest of the data. Some were, however, used in the discussion in **study II**.

The open-text response options were *statements on initiative*, *statements on cause*, and *statements on general thoughts*. Responses were optional. 62 parents provided a total of 105 responses

#### *Statements on initiative*

A total of 10 parents provided statements regarding their perspective on initiative. This open-text question was presented as an option to elaborate after participants had ticked off a response options for the initiative variable. Apart from retrieving possible additional information on initiative, this aimed to test whether response options were sufficient. The 10 written statements did not provide additional information on the subject.

#### *Statements on cause*

A total of 57 parents gave statements on what they believed to be the cause of the estrangement. The question of causation is liable to specific biases. As is the case for the issue of initiative, matters the realm of partiality when only one side of the story is heard. Furthermore, every estrangement has its own specific etiology that broader categorizations of causes are likely to violate. Nevertheless, responses gave some valuable insights. A few themes were recognizable from other studies (Carr et al., 2015; Nolte et al., 2022). 10 parents ascribed the estrangement to poor relationships with children-in-law to have caused the estrangement. Nine parents stated that they did not know or understand the cause, four ascribed it to issues regarding money, four associated it with their divorce from the other parent, and another four stated family turmoil resulting from the death of a family member, mostly the other parent. One example from each of these themes are presented:

Children-in-law. *My son's wife has always sowed seeds of conflict in the family. When my wife got ill, our daughter-in-law began to say to the grandchildren that grandmother will die soon. It was too much for us (Father, age 89).*

Not knowing. *Don't know what caused it. He has had a rough life. He just suddenly cut all contact one day (Mother, age 83).*

Money. *When I was sick and had my eye operation, my granddaughter took care of the finances. It turned out she stole from me. A lot of money. My daughter absolutely thinks that it is my fault, so she doesn't want to have contact with me ever again (Mother, age 78).*

Divorce. *She was more attached to her father, and I cheated on him in the last part of our marriage. We married in 1967 and got divorced in 1995 (Mother, age 82).*

Death in the family. *I feel like my daughter distanced herself from me following the deaths of my son and my husband. She disagreed with the way I handled the mourning (Mother, age 84).*

#### *Statements on general thoughts*

A total of 38 parents provided additional remarks after completing of the questionnaire. With no specific theme, this open-text response option was included with the intention of giving parents a chance to add whatever they wished. This allowed parents to identify new issues that were not captured in the questionnaire (O'Cathain & Thomas, 2004). Two dominant themes emerged from the 38 responses; 1) *elaborations on the estrangement*, often expressing frustration of feeling powerless to change the situation, and sometimes criticism stating that the questionnaire did not capture the complete picture of their experiences, 2) *arguments for their responses* on the four mental health measurements, often presenting life circumstances that could explain low scores. One response from each theme is presented here:

Elaboration on estrangement. *I have often thought about what could be done to reestablish contact with my son. It bothers me, but he did not even attend his father's funeral in 2018. Difficult. Sorry about the handwriting. My hand is shaking (Mother, age 80).*

Argument for poor mental health. *Everything feels worse because of COVID-19. There are no possibilities to do all usual the social stuff and activities. I am normally very active, and that makes me happy. I love music and to sing (Mother, age 77).*

These statements conclude the presentations of additional data collected for the cross-sectional study.

## CHAPTER 5

### EXPLORING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE STUDIES

Links between the three studies play an important role for the overall understanding of the project.

In the following, analytical and methodological links between the three studies are presented.

Firstly, links between **studies I** and **II** and subsequently between **studies II** and **III**.

#### **Associations between mental health and sentiments of sorrow (studies I and II)**

One analytical link concerns the possible association between the mental health measurements as presented in **study I**, and older parents' sentiments towards estrangement as measured by perceived emotional impact in **study II**. **Study I** found a significant association between intergenerational estrangement and reduced scores of mental health measured by well-being, sense of purpose, depression, and loneliness and suggested that estrangement can have negative implications that reach beyond subjective appraisals of it. **Study II** found older parents' subjective appraisals in terms of sentiments towards estrangement to be predominantly sorrowful and ambivalent. Due to the existing evidence that estrangement involves negative feelings (Agllias, 2016b), and theory suggesting that lack of intergenerational solidarity has negative outcomes (Yilmaz et al., 2018), it could be hypothesized that poor mental health is associated with sentiments of sorrow towards estrangement among estranged older parents. The following will provide an analysis of the link between these findings from **studies I** and **II**.

#### *Method for the analysis*

To analyze the association between mental health and sentiments towards estrangement, *analysis of variance (ANOVA)* was conducted for each of the mental health measurement, well-being (WHO-5), sense of purpose (PIL-SF), depression (CMDQ), and loneliness (UCLA-3) as *dependent variables* as in **study I**, and a dichotomous 'sorrow/not sorrow' coding as the *independent variable*

like used in **study II**. The listwise deleted dataset from **study I** was used for the analysis.

*Descriptive statistics* were conducted to get an indication of the direction of potential differences in mental health between sorrow and not sorrow on each measurement.

#### *Results from the analysis*

As seen in *table 5*, mean differences for three of the four measurements, well-being (WHO-5), depression (CMDQ), and loneliness (UCLA-3) indicated tendencies towards poorer mental health for estranged parents with sentiments of sorrow, whereas the measurement for sense of purpose (PIL-SF) showed an inverse relationship. Results for the ANOVAs revealed significant associations for depression:  $F(1,66) = 4.13, p = .046, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .060$ , and loneliness:  $F(1,66) = 4.60, p = .036, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .066$ . No significant associations were found for well-being and sense of purpose.

Results thus partly supported the hypothesis that poorer mental health were associated with sentiments of sorrow. Despite a small sample size ( $n=67$ ) analysis was able to detect significance.



**Table 5** Descriptives and ANOVA statistics for associations between estranged parents sentiments (sorrow / not sorrow) and mental health measurements

Measurement	Sentiment	N=67	M	SD	ANOVA		
					F	p	$\eta^2$
Well-being	Sorrow	33	55.06	21.35	1.47	.230	
	Not sorrow	34	61.45	21.88			
Sense of purpose	Sorrow	33	20.32	4.77	.70	.407	
	Not sorrow	34	19.30	5.24			
Depression	Sorrow	33	7.35	5.31	4.13	.046	.060
	Not sorrow	34	4.76	5.14			
Loneliness	Sorrow	33	5.38	2.16	4.60	.036	.066
	Not sorrow	34	4.36	1.69			

### Discussion of results

The significant results for depression and loneliness support the hypothesis of an association between poor mental health and sorrowful sentiments towards estrangement. The results hereby suggest a connection between the mental state of the older estranged parents and how they feel about the estrangement. This connection is important because it establishes a link between a somewhat objective and abstracted measurement and the subjective appraisal of the emotional impact of the specific phenomenon of estrangement. The implications for the project of these results are three-fold. *Firstly*, the results tie **studies I** and **II** together by revealing how the outcome variables from the two studies are connected. *Secondly*, the results add credibility to the unvalidated, perceived emotional impact variable that was constructed for this project by demonstrating how it captures hypothesis driven associations. *Thirdly*, results can be argued to have

potential clinical implications, because it is suggested that the way parents feel about estrangement is associated with how they feel in general, at least when it comes to depression and loneliness. In a clinical setting aimed at relieving emotional pain, this information can be useful because it makes addressing the emotional appraisal of estrangement relevant for the improvement of clients' general mental well-being.

### **Exploring sentiments of sorrow and ambivalence (studies II and III)**

The somewhat surprisingly high proportion of participants who had *ambivalent sentiments* towards estrangement, found in **study II**, raises new questions of the thoughts and feelings behind such ambivalences. A supplementary analysis of the qualitative interviews can shed light on what sentiments of sorrow and sentiments of ambivalence entail. Specifically concerning the construction of ambivalence as a response category, it can be explored if the 'don't know' response did in fact entail mixed feelings classified ambivalence as argued in **study II**, or for indifference, which could be argued to delegitimize the construct. Although **study II** does use open ended qualitative responses from the questionnaire to verify the classification, a more thorough analysis can be made using qualitative interview data. Furthermore, these interviews enable a closer look at what the 'sorrow' response entails. Whether it is an expression of unidimensional feelings akin to sorrow such as sadness, despair, and hopelessness, or if other more ambivalent and mixed feelings lurk beneath the surface.

The following is thus an analysis of the fit between the dependent variable of **study II**, parents' perceived emotional impact i.e. their sentiments towards estrangement, and participants' thorough descriptions of their experiences of the estrangement in in-depth interviews from **study III**. The two questions are, 1) can participants who answered 'don't know' legitimately be classified as

ambivalent? And 2) do parents who responded ‘sorrow’, express their thoughts and feelings congruent with this emotional valence?

### *Method and analysis*

Out of 15 interview participants, four were classified as ambivalent on the perceived emotional impact variable. Three of these responded ‘don’t know’ and one responded ‘sorrow and relief’. The remaining 11 responded ‘sorrow’. Evidently, this distribution is not ideal for the analysis and not representative of the sample from the cross-sectional study. It does however provide an opportunity to make a preliminary analysis of the two questions. The inquiry should thus be considered a kind of post-hoc analysis considering the available data.

### *Question one: Can participants who answered ‘don’t know’ be classified as ambivalent?*

Three participants were available for this inquiry. The following will present and discuss excerpts to illuminate how the ‘don’t know’ response is compatible with ambivalence.

One is an 87-year-old, widowed father living alone and estranged for six years from one of three sons. He can’t say for certain who initiated the estrangement, he is angry with his son, and neither he nor his son have made attempts to contact each other. He feels betrayed and has no intentions to initiate reconciliation. When asked what the estrangement means to him, he answered:

*I don’t feel anything... I don’t think it affects me, and it does not mean anything to me. I would, however, have preferred that it did not happen. I would not say it is his fault, but he was strongly complicit in me losing my driver’s license. He contacted my doctor and everything. Nothing will change, that I have realized. If you accept it, it won’t change, and I am not going to do anything to change it.*

This excerpt can be argued to support the null hypothesis that ‘don’t know’ responses can be an expression of indifference. The participant expresses how he is emotionally distanced from the estrangement, and that it does not mean anything to him. This perspective contradicts most theory

and evidence on the importance of intergenerational relationships (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997; Skafte, 2023; Szydlik, 2023). Taken at face value it is, however, his unequivocal statement.

Two other fathers also belonged to the ‘don’t know’ category. One of them, is a 90-year-old father living with his 93-year-old wife. They are both estranged from one son out of two children. He describes how the estrangement happened after money quarrels over family property that ended in legal action taken by the son. Like the first father, he is still angry with his son even though 14 years have passed since it all happened. He explains:

*I will not take the initiative and contact him. For that I'm still too angry. I think it is sad, but we could not have done anything different. I think he has been totally unreasonable in his distancing from us... Luckily, we have the money we need. And it is not like we think of it daily. We did for a long time, but we have gotten used to it. It is the way it is.*

For him, the ‘don’t know’ response does not seem to be an expression of indifference. He is angry, disappointed, sad, and bitter. He feels that his son has been unjust, and he is not ready to approach him. However, the issue is not as pressing as it once was. In his case the ‘don’t know’ response could be interpreted as evidence that the perceived emotional impact variable with the other response options ‘sorrow’, ‘sorrow and relief’ and ‘relief’ does not encompass his emotional valence. Evidence for ambivalence is not prominent in his descriptions, but neither is indifference; rather he appears consistently angry.

For the third and last of the available ‘don’t know’ participants, ambivalence is however observable. He is 83-year-old and divorced from the mother of his four children. He has contact with his three sons, but not his daughter, who he lost contact with following a conflict involving a tenant in his house with whom the daughter was a friend. It has been six years, and the participant has tried multiple times to approach his daughter to ‘clear the air’, but to no avail. He feels rejected by her. In the following excerpt he explains his stance towards reconciliation:

*I want to say that I don't want to see her again. She has been vile towards me. I know it is an ugly thing to say, I know that. But I don't want to see her. It is so ugly the way she acted, what she has done to me, and I don't even know what I have done to her. If it were ever to happen, she must come to me. And if she came, I would definitely embrace her. That is for sure. I would, and then we wouldn't talk anymore about it.*

From one sentence to the next, this father goes from not wanting to see his daughter to being sure that he would embrace her if she ever came to him. The ambivalence is pronounced and presents evidence congruent with the conflation of the 'don't know' response into the category of ambivalence.

*Question two: do parents who responded 'sorrow', express their thoughts and feelings congruent with this emotional valence ?*

Narratives from 11 parents can provide insight into question two. Here, the presence of ambivalence would be considered to support the null-hypothesis. Given the looser definition of ambivalence adopted by this project, than proponents of the term otherwise advocate (Pillemer et al., 2007; Pillemer & Luscher, 2004), there is a risk of overinterpretation when searching through interviews. To prevent this, ambivalences must be prominent and pervasive to be considered. Reading through the transcripts, it is evident that most, but not all 'sorrow' participants do *not* express pronounced ambivalence towards estrangement. Instead, they convey sentiments towards estrangement that are coherent with feelings of sorrow such as sadness and despair. One 81-year-old father living with his wife, and estranged from one of two children, says:

*I'm sad about it. Not angry, that would not be helpful. He should not be punished for it. I'm not out for revenge... Otherwise I'm good, but this is the greatest sorrow in my life.*

To him the experience is one of sorrow and feelings akin to it. Not much else. His feelings thus seem coherent and not ambivalent. The same is true for an 85-year-old, widowed mother, also estranged from one of two children. In her case disagreements with her daughter-in-law played a

vital role in the estrangement, which also includes estrangement from grandchildren. To her, feelings of sadness are predominant and ubiquitous. She explains:

*It means so much to me. I am often very sad about it, and I think about them all the time. I must attend all kinds of things in the church, otherwise I would think of them... I really want to talk to Claus (the son). To tell him that I'm sorry for everything, and that I love them all very much. I really do.*

Most of the 11 'sorrow' participants express similar unidimensional emotional responses supporting the classification from **study II**. Some however do express ambivalence to a pronounced extent. For these parents, sorrow remains a central component in their experience, however other feelings or orientations coexist, sometimes making them confused as to how to understand the situation. An example comes from an 86-year-old mother estranged from all of her four children:

*I'm heartbroken. I'm sad that they don't say 'hi mom, happy birthday, come to our house for Christmas'. We always used to spend Christmas together. That's how it has always been... I won't reach out to them. I have become stubborn, and I think I'm in the right to say 'screw them, I'll do without them'. But it is rough, especially during Christmas season. It is awful. Sometimes I want to jump off a bridge.*

The sorrow is conjoined with bitterness and stubbornness, as she wants to move on from her children. Here emotional valences seem more multifaceted than among the other parents addressed above. Perspectives approximating ambivalence are also observable with a 79-year-old father who is estranged from two of his three children.

*On one hand I wish to reconcile with them, but on the other they can kiss my a\*\*. They have done that for long already. But I have to say that I have become more doubtful with age... I'm not that keen on seeing them, but I might become curious, give it a chance, and say let's meet.*

Again, there is an oscillation between wanting to reconcile and wanting to give it up and let go. This is akin to the dual process model of coping and the ambivalence of *restoration-* and *loss* oriented

coping (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Thus, there seems to be evidence of ambivalence among some parents from the ‘sorrow’ response category.

### *Discussion of the analysis*

Whether analysis that connects data across different methodologies is at all tenable is open to debate (Schoonenboom, 2023). One point of criticism could be that qualitative data will in all likelihood contain enough complexities to support any hypothesis. Testing a hypothesis derived from a gap in a cross-sectional dataset with qualitative data, as is this analysis, is thus susceptible to bias, as it would be possible to find evidence for the opposite hypothesis using the same qualitative dataset. While this objection has merit, the present analysis does offer some useful insights that are less objectionable by demonstrating tendencies in parent responses that are worth discussing.

Analysis of both questions indicates issues with the perceived emotional impact variable’s ability to capture sufficient complexities. This is a problem that can be held towards many cross-sectional studies, especially those that try to illuminate subjective perspectives with unstandardized measures. In further explorations a more elaborate item on ambivalence should be utilized (Suitor et al., 2011).

Analysis related to *question one* indicates that ‘don’t know’ responses can be expressions of indifference. The analysis also reveals that ‘don’t know’ responses could be an expression of the other response options being insufficient. This is the case for the father, who consistently expressed anger as his emotional valence. Finally, and coming to the defense of the classification in **study II**, none of the three participants expressed sorrow as a persistent emotional valence in the interviews. This means that the binary classification of sorrow / not sorrow used in the second part of **study II** might be somewhat viable.

Analysis related to *question two* found indications of ambivalence among some participants who answered ‘sorrow’. Other feelings, especially anger, were prominent throughout the interviews. It is

not clear if the mix of anger and sorrow can be encompassed by the term ambivalence. As the theory of intergenerational ambivalence describes, ambivalences are contradictions and not merely ambiguities (Pillemer & Lüscher, 2003). Anger has been described as a natural part of the grieving process and can therefore be argued not to be separate from feelings of sorrow (Cerney & Buskirk, 1991; Eaton, 2016). If ambivalence only pertains to emotional contradictions, i.e. negative versus positive, it can be questioned whether parents' sentiments, in this study are expressions of ambivalence or variations of sorrow.



## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION

In this chapter findings from across **studies I, II and III** will be discussed, how they relate and add to the existing literature on estrangement, and how the applied theoretical perspectives were used. The chapter also discusses results, possible implications for future research and of findings for practice and for future development of interventions to address estrangement. Subsequently, the methodological limitations and caveats of the project at large are discussed.

#### **Contributions to research and theory**

Overall, the findings from the **studies I, II and III** correspond with most of the existing literature on integrational estrangement by demonstrating estrangement to primarily be associated with negative outcomes for older parents (Agllias, 2011a, 2011b; Agllias, 2016b; Blake, 2015, 2017; Coleman, 2021; Pillemer, 2020). However, the studies add new knowledge. **Study I** was the first study to examine associations between mental health and estrangement, hereby adding a new perspective for the research field. **Study II** was the first study to address how older parents feel impacted by estrangement using quantitative measures, although this came with some caveats regarding the measure of ambivalence as addressed in **Chapter 5**. **Study II** was also the first study to apply theory of intergenerational relations to derive hypotheses about estrangement. Here, both the intergenerational solidarity perspective and the intergenerational ambivalence perspective proved useful theoretical tools. Through the lens of the intergenerational solidarity perspective, estrangement was interpreted as a collapse of solidarity especially regarding the dimensions of *affectual solidarity*, which denotes the degree of emotional attachment between family members, and *associational solidarity*, denoting frequency of social contact (Blieszner & Voorpostel, 2016). Along with the theoretical concept of *ambiguous loss* (Boss, 2009), the intergenerational solidarity

perspective could prove fruitful as a theoretical basis for future research on estrangement. The intergenerational ambivalence perspective found particular use in **study III**, where older estranged parents' experiences of coping with estrangement was addressed. **Study III** added to the existing literature by being the first qualitative study to go beyond experiences of causes and effects and to explore coping with estrangement. Apart from demonstrating the salience of ambivalence in how estrangement is experienced and coped with by older parents, **study III** also demonstrated how coping with estrangement has similarities to coping with bereavement by the productive use of a re-interpretation the DPM-model (Stroebe & Schut, 2010).

### **Discussion of results**

The findings from **study I** suggest an association between estrangement and poorer mental health. As with other cross-sectional studies, associations should not be confused with causation. The association could be an expression of intergenerational estrangement causing poorer mental health, but poorer mental health might also cause intergenerational estrangement. Support for assumptions of both causal directions can be found in the scientific literature (Agllias, 2011b; Allen, 2003; Burke, 2003; Newland, 2015). Although a causal direction cannot be established from **study I**, the findings can be interpreted to suggest that reconciliation could have positive impact on some older parents' mental health regardless of causal direction of the association. The reason is that a healthy relationship with adult children in older age has many benefits (Fingerman et al., 2024). **Study II** added a measure of the way older parents feel impacted emotionally by the estrangement. Here findings demonstrated that many older parents hold sentiments of sorrow towards estrangement. These results can be argued to align with the findings from **study I**. The examination of associations between mental health and sentiments towards estrangement in **Chapter 5**, found associations between sentiments of sorrow and the two measures of depression and loneliness. These associations suggest a connection between older parents' general mental state and how they feel

about estrangement. **Study II** also found an association between mothers and sentiments of sorrow. This finding suggests that fathers may hold more mixed and ambivalent feelings towards estrangement which aligns with previous studies on parent gender and ambivalence (Pillemer et al., 2012). Child initiative was also found to predict sentiments of sorrow. Consistent with other research (Blake, 2015), children were most often deemed the initiators of estrangement. This finding supported assumptions based on the *intergenerational stake hypothesis* (Giarrusso et al., 2004). Although rare in the present cross-sectional dataset, some parents were found to have initiated the estrangement and some were also found to hold sentiments of relief towards estrangement. These outliers prompt the question whether some older parents may in fact benefit from intergenerational estrangement (Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019; Scharp & Thomas, 2018). While this dissertation explores, and concludes, intergenerational estrangement to be a negative phenomenon, the research field would benefit from the nuances of investigations into how estrangement can sometimes be a healthy solution to an unhealthy situation.

A surprising finding from **study II**, sentiments of sorrow was found to be negatively associated with estrangement from all children. It can be speculated that this association is a result of dominance from other feelings such as anger due to intense conflict in cases where older parents are estranged from all their children. As was seen from extracts in the exploration of sentiments of sorrow and ambivalence in **Chapter 5**, anger was revealed as a prevalent sentiment that was not accounted for in **study II**.

Another surprising finding from **study II**, and contrary to assumptions, estrangement duration did not demonstrate an association with sentiments of sorrow. Data on duration demonstrated substantial variance ( $SD=9.3$  years) indicating that the null-finding was not due to missing spread. The null-finding is peculiar because increased time span, especially exceeding five to six years since loss of a loved one, has been found to lead to a decrease in grief symptoms (Feigelman et al.,

2009; Kristiansen et al., 2019). Additionally, extracts from **study III** demonstrate how parents feel less impacted by the estrangement as times has passed.

Findings from **study III** demonstrated two main coping orientations: A *reconciliation-orientation* and an *acceptance-orientation*. The coping responses identified for these two orientations were found to work in opposite directions, as they either worked towards reuniting with adult children or towards accepting the estranged relationship. Repeated contact attempts as a type of *reconciliation-orientated* coping response were, for example, aimed at reestablishing contact, while financial retribution as a type of *acceptance-orientated* coping response, which consisted of denying estranged children inheritance, was a way to materially finalize the estrangement. Although, contrastingly oriented, the two coping orientations were often expressed almost simultaneously by older parents, supporting the assumptions of ambivalence. Results from **study III** could have implications for parents who wish to reconcile, like the analysis in **Chapter 4** demonstrated that most parents in the sample did, because they are likely to in part resort to *acceptance-orientated* coping responses that counteract this goal.

### **Implications for clinical practice**

The findings from **studies I, II and III** are suggested to have implications for different aspects of clinical practice aimed at helping families who struggle with severe intergenerational conflicts and estrangement. While **study I** presents potential benefits for mental health, **study II** presents sentiments of sorrow and ambivalence as important emotional themes, and **study III** outlines coping responses that can both promote and counteract reconciliation. In Denmark, no systematic clinical method aimed at helping estranged families has been developed, and due to the limited research in the area, it can be difficult for professionals to find useful information on the topic. This was echoed throughout the duration of the project as I was contacted by psychologists, family

therapists, and a family lawyer, who – after hearing about the study – wanted to know more and collaborate on the issue.

Overall, the three studies have implications for practice by addressing benefits for mental health, revealing estranged parents' feelings of sorrow and ambivalence, and addressing coping patterns and their orientations regarding reconciliation. Additionally, as presented and discussed in **Chapter 4**, many parents wish for reconciliation but believe it would be difficult to achieve. It can therefore be surmised that a need for help, motivations to get it, and potential benefits from getting it is prevalent among older estranged parents.

### **Limitations and caveats**

The project at large, as well as its methodology, has a range of caveats and limitations to keep in mind. Some of these issues are addressed in the three studies. Others are, however, of a more general character and addressed in the following.

#### *Studying only one side of the issue of estrangement*

The preliminary caveat is first and foremost that the project looks at a specific type of relational issue one-sidedly from the perspective of older parents exclusively. Like every relational topic, intergenerational estrangement is constituted by more than one part, and each perspective contains important information. In this project the perspective of the other part, the adult children, remains missing. If the goal had been to promote reconciliation, missing the perspective of adult children would prove critical. The intention of this project was, however, to thoroughly examine an often overlooked family issue for a particular age group – with the hope that results can lay the ground for future approaches to help for the involved.

*The sample size*

A strength of this project is a thorough recruitment procedure that led to a unique sample. To recruit through the same professionals using the same procedures took a lot of effort and procedure-stringency was prioritized over diversification of recruitment. However, this came with the drawback of a smaller sample size. 75 older estranged parents were sufficient for statistical analysis comparing with the 196 non-estranged parents, as is the case in **study I**. But in **study II** a larger sample size would have benefited the analysis and made it possible to detect more potential associations. Consequently, **study II** is likely to suffer from a type two error, not revealing actual, existing associations.

Thus, a larger sample of estranged older parents would have increased the empirical quality of the project. In hindsight, the stringent sampling strategy should have been abandoned to give way for additional recruitment pathways.

*Sampling biases*

Although the sampling strategy had its advantages, it was also affected by biases. Most notably both estranged and non-estranged parents with pronounced personal and/or social problems were excluded from the project. As estrangement is known to be associated with these kinds of problems (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2021), the strategy is likely to affect the two study groups disproportionately. This meant possible underrepresentation of the most vulnerable parents. Potential implications of this underrepresentation could be that differences between estranged and non-estranged parents were reduced, because substance abuse issues and mental illness are associated with and can lead to family problems such as estrangement (Klingemann & Organization, 2001; Thompson et al., 2009). The bias means that the sample of estranged parents is likely to be skewed towards the higher functioning end of the spectrum. This is unlikely to produce

problems in **study I**, as it would reduce the differences between estranged and non-estranged parents and therefore not produce a type one error. Only providing insights into a more resourceful subpopulation could, however, be problematic for **study II** and **III**. As illustrated by the non-responder's analysis, participants are likely to represent only parents who are willing to address the issue of estrangement. This could possibly produce results that are skewed towards a wish for reconciliation. Parents who are either overwhelmed by feelings of shame and embarrassment, parents affected by other urgent personal problems, and parents who find estrangement irrelevant, would be underrepresented in the sample.

## Conclusions

The overall aim of this dissertation was to explore intergenerational estrangement from the perspective of older parents. The funnel-shaped structure of the dissertation started with a broader examination of associations between intergenerational estrangement and mental health for older parents. Next, it was investigated how older parents felt emotionally impacted by estrangement, and it ended with an in-depth qualitative examination of older parents' subjective experiences of coping with estrangement. Findings from **studies I, II** and **III** contribute with new perspectives both empirically and theoretically to a small but growing body of research on family estrangement.

**Study I** questioned if there is an association between mental health and estrangement from adult children for older parents. It was hypothesized that older parents who are estranged would have poorer mental health as measured by well-being, sense of purpose, depression, and loneliness. Analysis yielded results that supported this hypothesis, leading to the conclusion that there is an association between poorer mental health and being estranged from adult children in later life. This conclusion was in part supported by the analysis of associations between mental health and

sentiments of sorrow in **Chapter 5**. Furthermore, it is concluded that addressing intergenerational estrangement may be beneficial for estranged older parents mental health.

**Study II** questioned how estranged older parents felt impacted by their estrangement on the three broad sentiment categories sorrow, ambivalence, and relief, with the hypothesis that the sentiment of sorrow was predominant. Analysis partially supported this hypothesis, as ambivalence was found to be almost as prevalent, leading to the conclusion that older parents are likely to hold sentiments of sorrow or ambivalence towards estrangement. However, a small sample size of 75 estranged older parents puts the reliability of results into question. Furthermore, the exploration of sentiments of sorrow and ambivalence in **Chapter 5** found issues with the validity of the perceived emotional impact item as it was, for example, found to lack anger as a response category.

**Study II** also questioned if demographical variables and estrangement variables would predict parent sentiments of sorrow. In support of hypotheses, it was found that motherhood, child initiative of estrangement, and estrangement from more children predicted sorrow, but, contrary to hypothesis, estrangement from all children was found to predict the not-sorrow category. Hence it is concluded that there is evidence to suggest that parent gender and some estrangement factors can predict how parents feel about estrangement, and that more research is needed to address and explain such associations.

**Study III** questioned how older parents cope with estrangement. Two primary coping-orientations were found. Reconciliation-oriented coping aimed at reestablishing contact with children and acceptance-oriented coping aimed at accepting the estrangement and moving on. The two contrasting orientations were found to persist simultaneously, with parents oscillating between them. Based on these findings it is concluded that there is evidence to suggest that ambivalence is



central for understanding coping with estrangement, and that understandings of coping patterns can help parents align their actions with their wishes.

All in all, **studies I, II, and III** found evidence to suggest that intergenerational estrangement is predominantly a negative event in older parent's lives, and that there is good reason to pursue new ideas and initiatives that both illuminate, and help to circumvent, this hidden issue of physical absence but psychological presence.

## Epilog

### Intergenerational estrangement in the future

As this project on intergenerational estrangement in older age has progressed, it has garnered considerable attention from the media, and as a result, observations from the project have been included in a series of articles in news media and magazines (Andersen, 2024; Blenner & Nygaard, 2024; Ditlevsen, 2024a, 2024b; Møller, 2024; Nygaard, 2023, 2024; Piekut, 2024; Quist, 2022a, 2022b). One question that journalists ask is whether intergenerational estrangement is a rising phenomenon. Literature reviews have found no reliable data to answer this question. However, the Danish newspaper article, referenced in the prevalence section in **Chapter 1**, reporting that 18 percent to have initiated estrangement to a close family member, did a comparable survey 10 years prior, in 2009 (Zahle & Strange, 2019). This survey found 10 percent of the population to be estranged from a close family member which led the article to conclude that family breakdowns are on the rise, and that family relationships at large are more fragile than ever before. Whether family estrangement is in fact a growing phenomenon in Western societies is not clear. While some scholars point to individualism, high divorce rates, or low fertility rates as signs of family decline (Gilbert, 2019; Popenoe, 1993b; Sokol et al., 2017), research on international relationships continues to portray family relationships as the primary social structure for the majority of people across all ages (Fingerman et al., 2012; Fingerman et al., 2023).

Some speculations on reasons for the potential rise in intergenerational estrangement are nevertheless warranted. Here, post-family individualistic societal structures can be pointed to as explanations for such a rise (Pillemer, 2020). As freedom ideologies move into the social sphere, people might become less willing to endure straining relationships, and love in the intergenerational relationship is thus no longer unconditional (Gilbert, 2019). The presumption is that dominant ideas

of unbreakable family bonds are replaced by ideas that relationships, should be voluntary and add positively to people's lives (Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019). Following this perspective, to break bonds with family is seen as overcoming cultural ideas of unbreakable family ties and instead protecting oneself from family members' negative evaluations, hereby honoring the desire to live authentically (Dorrance Hall, 2018). This ideological shift from complying with family expectations and responsibilities to seeking self-realization, living authentically, and engaging only voluntarily in family life, could explain the potential rise in intergenerational estrangement.

Another possible explanation is the cultural tendency to place blame and responsibility for the misfortunes of life on older generations (Jensen, 2018). Originating from the determinism of psychoanalytic developmental stages, childhood is seen as a critical period that determines conditions in adulthood (Seligman, 2017; Tarzian et al., 2023). Parents who are estranged from adult children, and adult children who are estranged from parents, have been found to adhere to ideas of parental blame (Coleman, 2008, 2021) and elements of these ideas are echoed in the *reconciliation-oriented* coping response of exploring the past that was found in **study III**. Parents who look for explanations why their children have cut ties might try to find answers in past events, while adult children legitimize the estrangement by pointing to negative childhood experiences. In societies with increased focus on psychological problems and challenges, parents become natural scapegoats which could cause increases in intergenerational estrangement.

A third cultural factor that may contribute to a rise in intergenerational estrangement are the divergent ideas and expectations of parenthood between generations (Zervides & Knowles, 2007). Views of what it means to be a parent and how children should be reared and protected have undergone large cultural shifts in the lifetime of older people (Thelen & Haukanes, 2016). This means that parenting norms from the time when older parents had small children differ greatly from what is considered acceptable parenting today. Such divergence could cause intergenerational

conflict and estrangement as children and parents might differ in what to expect from each other. Studies on reasons for estrangement can be argued to support this claim, having found that divergent relational expectations can be decisive (Agllias, 2016a; Carr et al., 2015).

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## STUDY I

### **Estrangement Between Older Parents and Adult Children: Associations with Mental Health**

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**Abstract**

*Parent-child relationships are among the most important social connections throughout life, and estrangement from one or more children has been shown to evoke feelings of sorrow for parents as they move closer to the end of life. Yet intergenerational estrangement in older age has not garnered much attention in the scientific literature, and associations with mental health remains unresolved. The purpose of the present study was to examine the association between mental health and estrangement from adult children for older parents on measures of well-being, sense of purpose, depression, and loneliness. Survey data were collected from older parents (aged 75+) with estrangement to at least one child (n=75) and a corresponding comparison group of older parents (n=196). Data included measurements of well-being (WHO-5), sense of purpose (PIL-SF), depressive symptoms (CMDQ), and loneliness (UCLA-3). Statistical analysis using multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted to determine differences between participant groups, controlling for demographic variables. Intergenerational estrangement was found to be significantly associated with poorer mental health scores on all four measurements, with moderate effect sizes. Well-being displayed the largest difference between groups. Results indicated a negative association between intergenerational estrangement and mental health for older parents. The study is the first to document multiple, specific, negative psychological and social consequences of intergenerational estrangement for older parents. This points to the importance of intergenerational family relations in later life and the potential for family work in efforts to promote mental health in older age.*

**Key words:** *Family conflict, parent-child relationship, intergenerational estrangement, mental health, aging.*

## Introduction

Estrangement between older parents and their adult children is a unique and important issue (Agllias, 2011b). The phenomenon labelled *intergenerational estrangement* frames the event of loss of contact and/or emotional distancing between parents and children in adulthood. Little is known about how family estrangement interplays with the mental health of older parents (Blake, 2017). This article presents new findings on intergenerational estrangement in older age in a Danish context, specifically looking at associations with mental health for older parents.

Scholars have varied understandings of what estrangement implies, and there is no general consensus. A common point of divergence is whether estrangement signifies the absolute ceasing of contact or if it can include cold and distant relationships (Conti & Ryan, 2013). Gilligan and colleagues (Gilligan et al., 2015), for example, draw on the framework of Bowen's family systems theory (Bowen, 1993) when defining estrangement or *cutoff* as "*managing unresolved emotional problems with family members by substantially reducing contact or remaining in physical contact but maintaining emotional distance*" (Gilligan et al., 2015, p. 909). Whereas this definition promotes a flexible understanding, other researchers suggest a more stringent definition. Conti and Ryan (2013) propose a four-criteria definition: 1) Complete communication cutoff, 2) cutoff is maintained deliberately, 3) relatives must know how to contact each other, and 4) at least one person involved must have a specific reason justifying the estrangement. Although such a definition might be more precise, it presents complicated delineations when it comes to the inclusion of estranged participants. Consequently, the understanding of estrangement in the present study, and the contingent recruitment of participants, is *the older parent's perception that contact with one or more of their children has been cutoff*.



*Intergenerational estrangement in later life*

Later life is a particularly important life stage for examining intergenerational estrangement as it brings changing outlook on what it means to be a parent in practical and psychological terms (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998; Travers et al., 2023). This life stage brings relational shifts when adult children establish their own families, daughters- and sons-in-law, grandchildren and great-grandchildren affect family dynamics, and the frailty of older age begins to affect the parent. These matters bring with them a need for renegotiations of how to be parents and children under the developing conditions in the family (Jerrome, 1994). Consequently, relational vulnerabilities may be exposed and lead to rifts, and old cutoffs may become increasingly painful. Later life therefore presents parents – and often the wider family (Pillemer, 2020) – with specific challenges.

Research addressing intergenerational estrangement is sparse, especially studies using quantitative methods. Existing research has focused on what causes estrangement (Blake, 2017). Discrepancies of values, of relational expectations, and money issues have been pointed out as frequent points of contention (Gilligan et al., 2015; Pillemer, 2020). Qualitative studies looking at the consequences of estrangements in later life have found it to cause emotional pain akin to the experience of bereavement and that it is often absolute and difficult to mend (Agllias, 2011a, 2011b). One study (Agllias, 2013) based on in-depth interviews with estranged parents aged 61–80 years found that participants perceived the estrangement as an ambiguous chronic loss where estranged family members were physically absent but remained psychologically present. Parents' responses to estrangement included emotions of shock, anxiety, anger, and sadness followed by cognitions of disbelief, frustration, and disappointment. Parents also exhibited protest behaviors such as attempts to reestablish contact and seeking out information about their children's lives. Although studies point to initial negative emotional and behavioral reactions, less is, however,

known about complex psychological and social ailments that may be associated with the estrangement.

Consequences of estrangement could reach beyond initial reactions especially affecting parents. It is generally assumed that parents are more invested than adult children in the intergenerational relationship (Albert & Ferring, 2013). One such perspective is the *intergenerational stake hypothesis* that assumes parents to be more apt to have positive opinions about the relationship than do children (Schwarz, 2013). Parents tend to downplay conflicts and rate the quality of the relationship higher than children (Giarrusso et al., 1995). This creates a power dynamic that favors the adult children, possibly amplified in older age, which might mean that the negative consequences of estrangement are generally stronger for parents than children. The impact of estrangement from children can be theorized to have specific significance for older parents, as the relationship, in addition to having an emotional component, also often has a practical and existential dimension due to frailty in old age and thoughts concerning the proximity of death.

#### *Prevalence estimates*

Intergenerational estrangement is often studied under the umbrella of *family estrangement*, which includes estrangement between siblings and even members of the extended family (Pillemer, 2020). It is presumed to be widespread in Western societies, affecting millions of families, leading scholars to call it ‘a problem hiding in plain sight’ (Pillemer, 2020). One American study found that 17 percent had experienced estrangement in the nuclear family (Conti, 2015), of which estrangement from fathers accounted for 55 percent. A larger, more recent American study found that around 10 percent of adults were estranged from a parent or a child (Pillemer, 2020), while an English study established a prevalence rate of 8 percent (Blake, 2022). The best estimate of intergenerational estrangement in Denmark comes from a survey conducted for a Danish newspaper

(Zahle & Strange, 2019), where 18 percent of 1,204 adult respondents had initiated estrangement from a close family member, 32 percent hereof from a parent, and 12 percent from a child. Based on this, intergenerational estrangement can be estimated to affect 8 percent of adults in Denmark.

### *Aging families in Denmark*

Given that the present study is conducted in Denmark, providing some insights into Danish support and family structures in later life is warranted. The Danish welfare state provides different types of assistance for older citizens, including universal old age pension, financial support for decent housing, free and comprehensive health and social care services including preventive and rehabilitation programs (Lomborg, 2019). The aim is to enhance independent living and to promote physical and mental health and wellbeing. As in other countries, family is the central social arena throughout the lifespan in Denmark. According to a recent national representative survey, family relationships are the most important component in older people's lives and happiness (Skaftø, 2023). Although the Danish welfare state does, compared to many other countries, provide a good safety net for older people, assistance from family, specifically adult children, often plays a crucial role (Rostgaard & Matthiessen, 2019). This dimension of the adult intergenerational relationship is under debate in Denmark as an aging population increasingly puts public care for older people under pressure, leading politicians to call for adult children as carers of frail parents. Such scenarios make estranged older parents extra vulnerable.

### *Estrangement and mental health*

Although not previously addressed directly, theory, former research, and clinical observations suggest that intergenerational estrangement could be associated with decreased mental health among older parents (Agllias, 2011a; Agllias, 2016; Titelman, 2014). Measures of mental health associated with intergenerational estrangement could include feelings of depression brought

about by the sorrow and emotional agony of the estrangement. For example, clinical observations grounded in Bowen's family systems theory describe how instability of close family relations in adulthood is associated with the development of depressive symptoms (Allen, 2003). Similarly, researchers and clinical psychologists point to estrangement as emotionally painful and existentially disorientating (Coleman, 2021; Pillemer, 2020). It can thus be surmised that estrangement from adult children could be associated with depression for older parents.

Another mental health measure likely to be associated with estrangement is loneliness. Loss of intimacy often found in the intergenerational relationship could leave parents in perceived isolation, and the shame associated with conflicts with children could lead parents to withdraw from social life. In support of this notion, an Australian study found observations of increased loneliness among patients in palliative care who were estranged from their children (Agllias, 2018).

As well as the increased presence of depression and loneliness, estrangement could be associated with an absence of positive psychological states and emotions such as well-being and sense of purpose. Although having children is known to temporarily decrease parents' sense of happiness, it simultaneously tends to strengthen the sense of purpose; the experience of leading a life saturated with aims, goals, and purpose (Baumeister et al., 2013). Presuming that this association lasts throughout life, estrangement from children could mean a lower sense of purpose for older parents. The experience of sense of purpose may furthermore be especially relevant in old age, as the proximity to end of life leaves limited time to mend the broken bonds, resulting in existential despair (Erikson, 1994a; Pillemer, 2020). In his theory of psychological development, Erik Erikson emphasized intergenerational relations as a main contributor of meaning in all life stages (Erikson, 1994b). Consequently, capsized intergenerational relationships would inhibit ego-integration in older age. Likewise, estrangement might lead to parents' reduced sense of well-being given the importance of relationships to children throughout life and of family among older people

in Denmark (Skaftø, 2023). Thus, the sense of purpose as well as a positive sense of well-being could be negatively associated with estrangement for older parents.

This study is therefore based on the assumption that estrangement from children could contribute to decreased mental health. Although this assumption implies a causal relationship, it should be noted that reverse causation also would be likely, as older parents with poorer mental health can be presumed to have a higher probability of being estranged from their children.

### *The present study*

The purpose of the present study was therefore *to examine the association between intergenerational estrangement and mental health among older parents*. The study uses measurements for *well-being, sense of purpose, depressive symptoms, and loneliness* to see if associations between estrangement and mental health measures could be established and generate the groundwork for the incorporation of a family focus in promotions of mental health among older adults. The study thus hypothesizes that *older parents who are estranged from one or more of their children present poorer mental health by both being less likely to experience well-being and sense of purpose and being more prone to depressive symptoms and to experience loneliness*.

## **Methods**

The study utilized cross-sectional data that included two samples of 75+ year-old parents: An estrangement group (n=75) consisting of parents estranged from at least one child and a comparison group (n=196) consisting of parents with contact to their children. Participants completed a questionnaire containing demographic information as well as the four measures of psychological states: *Well-being, sense of purpose, depressive symptoms, and loneliness*.

### *Recruitment*

Participants were recruited in collaboration with Danish municipal preventive health professionals conducting home visits to older citizens (Vass et al., 2007). As mandated by law, all Danish citizens aged 75 are offered home visits as a health prevention measure. This means that preventive health professionals encounter a wide array of older adults from all walks of life. Recruitment took place in 30 of the 98 Danish municipalities in both rural and urban areas. Estranged parents and the comparison group were recruited by the same preventive health professionals, following identical procedures to minimize between-group recruitment bias. The preventive health professionals were instructed on how to recruit participants and, due to ethical concerns, not to recruit parents who were struggling with acute problems such as severe cognitive impairment or illness, current bereavement, visible alcohol abuse and other types of pronounced turmoil such as being in the middle of moving or having a terminally ill spouse. In cases of uncertainty regarding eligibility, preventive health professionals contacted the corresponding author to deliberate on their participation. Eligibility of estranged parents was determined by questions about family and parenthood. Preventive health professionals identified estrangement by asking: Do you have contact with your children? Or the older parents would bring up the issue themselves. For identification of estrangement, mere conflict was not sufficient: Contact had to in fact be breached. In households with two estranged parents, preventive health professionals were instructed to ask that only one parent answered the questionnaire; which one was determined by the parents.

Recruitment proved to be difficult due to the second COVID-19 lockdown in Denmark just as the recruitment period was initiated in the beginning of 2021. Furthermore, according to the preventive health professionals the recruitment period was also longer than expected because of the sensitivity of the research topic and the poor health status of potential participants. As a result, the recruitment period was prolonged.

*Participants and response rates*

The sample included a total of 271 parents aged 75+ years and living independently, with no pronounced cognitive impairment, severe illness, current bereavement, visible alcohol abuse or other pronounced turmoil. Response rates were calculated as the percentage of returned questionnaires from the total number of eligible participants. For estranged parents the response rate was 74 percent, 75 responses out of 102 eligible. The response rate for the comparison group was 76 percent, 196 responses out of 257 eligible.

Additionally, we conducted a non-responder analysis for the estranged parents to determine if the responses were affected by the research theme and design. Of 27 non-responders, six actively revoked participation either by phone or by letter. Of these, four stated regrets as the reason. One stated that poor health meant that she could not overcome ripping up old wounds. One wrote that the project would not solve his problem.

Non-responders who did not actively revoke their participation were contacted via phone five to ten months after initial consent. The non-responders were reluctant to have the conversation, and all explained that their reasons for dropout concerned the strenuous, painful, and private nature of their experiences with intergenerational estrangement.

*Data collection, data protection and ethics*

Data collection was completed in early 2022. The questionnaire was distributed to participants either by e-mail using the digital survey tool SurveyXact (n=120) or by traditional mail (n=151). Response reminders were sent once.

We carefully considered the structure and layout of the survey to best accommodate potential poor eyesight and physical frailty of the participants. This included a large font, short and precise questions, and a limited length of the questionnaire. Preventive health professionals

reviewed the questionnaire to ensure that wordings and layout would fit the target group. The typical amount of time needed to answer the questionnaire was 20–30 minutes. In a few cases, preventive health professionals assisted participants by reading questions out loud. Due to the sensitive nature of intergenerational estrangement, it was warranted to have specific ethical arrangements in place. These included careful and continuous instruction of recruitment partners and deliberations on participant eligibility. Furthermore, participants were offered follow-up conversation with the corresponding author. Participants were informed about their anonymity and rights to withdraw consent at the time of recruitment and in the forwarded questionnaire. The study complies with national guidelines for data protection. There is no formal agency for approval of questionnaire-based surveys in Denmark.

### *Measurements*

The study included four psychometric measurements to capture a variation of potential differences in mental health between estranged and non-estranged parents: 1) The World Health Organization Five Well-Being Index (WHO-5), 2) The Purpose in Life Test-Short Form (PIL-SF), 3) The Common Mental Disorder Questionnaire (CMDQ) for symptoms of depression, and 4) The Three-Item Loneliness Scale (UCLA-3).

*WHO-5.* The well-being measurement consists of five questions giving an overview of respondents' self-reported sense of well-being (Topp et al., 2015). This index has proved to have a high level of validity, and the Danish translation is often used in population studies, including on the older population (Larsen et al., 2020; Siren & Larsen, 2019). The five questions are posed as statements to which participants declare how often the statement fits their experience during the past 14 days (Topp et al., 2015). Each statement is rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 0 (*at no time*) to 5 (*all the time*). The five statements are: “I have felt cheerful and in good spirits.” “I have felt calm and relaxed.” “I have felt active and vigorous.” “I woke up feeling fresh and rested.” “My



daily life has been filled with things that interest me.” Scores are calculated by totaling answers and multiplying by four, hereby obtaining a scale of scores ranging from 0-100, with 0 representing the lowest and 100 the highest level of well-being. Scores from 50 and above are considered normal, indicating generally good well-being, whilst scores of 35 and below are considered to indicate poor well-being and thus a risk factor for stress and depression (Danish Health Authority, 2022).

*PIL-SF*. The sense of purpose measurement of perceived existential fulfillment in life (Schulenberg et al., 2011). The Danish version has been found to demonstrate reliability and validity and to be associated with, yet distinct from, WHO-5 (Pacak-Vedel et al., 2021). Respondents are asked to rate how well four statements fit how they feel (Schulenberg et al., 2011). Answers are given on a 7-point scale with 1 indicating adherence to one extreme and 7 adherence to the other extreme, and 4 indicating a neutral stance. The four statements encompass 1. to what extent the person feels that they have clear life goals, 2. the experience of life being meaningful, 3. feelings of life goal completion, and 4. having a sense of purpose in life (Xiao et al., 2021). Scores are calculated by totaling the four answers, thus ranging from 4 to 28 with higher scores indicating higher degrees of experienced sense of purpose.

*CMDQ*. The depression measurement is a subset of a larger screening tool designed for medical practitioners to briefly assess psychopathological symptoms (Christensen et al., 2005). It is widely used in a Danish medical context, including studies of older adults (Larsen et al., 2020). The present study only includes the depressive symptoms subset of CMDQ with six items. Participants are asked to rate to what extent they have, during the past four weeks, been bothered by: “Feelings of sadness”, “Feelings of worthlessness”, “Thoughts of suicide”, “Feelings of being caught in a trap”, “Feelings of loneliness”, and “Feelings of self-blame”. Each item is answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very much*). Totalled scores range from 0, indicating no

depressive symptoms, to 24, indicating severe depression. Scores of 4 and below are considered normal (Christensen et al., 2005).

*UCLA-3.* Loneliness is measured by the shortened version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Hughes et al., 2004). UCLA-3 is reduced to three items about respondents' self-perceived social situation. The Danish translation has high reliability and validity (Lasgaard, 2007) and is used to measure loneliness in Denmark (Danish Health Authority, 2022). Respondents rate their self-perceived social situation on three items: 1) "How often do you feel isolated from others?", 2) "How often do you feel a lack of companionship?", and 3) "How often do you feel left out?" Response options are (*hardly ever*) scored as 1, (*some of the time*) scored as 2, and (*often*) scored as 3. Scores are totaled to give a final score ranging from 3 to 9. Scores from 6 and up are considered to indicate loneliness (Hughes et al., 2004).

*Control variables.* Additional demographic and social life information about the parents were collected. This was done partly to get indications of differences between estranged and non-estranged older parents and partly to test for potential moderating effects of such variables on mental health. Participants' self-assessed health status was collected by asking the question, "How do you consider your health all in all?" with five options ranging from 1 (*excellent*) to 5 (*poor*). Higher scores indicate poorer self-assessed health. This method is common in Danish population studies (Danish Health Authority, 2022). Additionally, we collected data for *parent age, gender, number of children, marriage status, if they lived alone and widowhood*. We also asked participants how many *years they had attended school*, hereby getting an indication of education level. Answers were maxed at 13 years as this signifies the maximum number of years of primary and secondary education in the Danish school system.

Data on the *duration* of the estrangement as well as the *number of estranged children* were also collected. Duration was asked as an open-ended question where parents could choose a

timeframe that would suit their situation. Apart from gaining some information on the estrangement situation, the duration item simultaneously served to control for very short durations, such as two weeks or three days, in which case actual estrangement would have been questionable and participants would be removed from the sample. Duration and number of estranged children were, however, not included in the main analysis as inclusion of these two variables would weaken the focus of the study, which was to compare estranged and non-estranged parents.

### *Missing data*

Listwise deletion was utilized to manage missing data. Eight participants in the group of estranged parents were omitted from analysis based on missing values on items for sense of purpose, depression, and loneliness. Seven of the eight had missing values on the sense of purpose index. This could be an indication of this measurement being difficult to respond to; a suspicion supported by participant questions directed at the corresponding author during data collection. Estranged parents had no missing values for well-being or any of the control variables. A total of 29 participants in the comparison group were omitted. This group had missing values across all four outcome measures, but the patterns for the sense of purpose index did not reemerge here as the well-being index had the most missing with 12. The comparison group had one missing for age, two for years in school, and three for widowhood. Participant omission due to missing values resulted in a new total sample of  $n=234$  (estranged parents  $n=67$ , comparison group  $n=167$ ).

### *Statistical analysis*

SPSS was used as statistical software for all statistical analyses. Descriptive statistics were analyzed separately for the two groups. Demographic variables were analyzed with  $t$ -tests or Chi-squared to determine if differences between groups were significant. The main analysis of the four measurements was conducted by way of MANCOVA (Multivariate Analysis of Covariance). This

analytic model fits the study's objective of being able to explore differences on multiple dependent variables while simultaneously adjusting for control variables; in this case differences between estranged and non-estranged parents by comparing the combined means for all four mental health measures. Compared to regression models the MANCOVA is thus proficient in detecting differences between groups on multiple dependent variables adjusting for covariates using just one statistical test, reducing concerns about family-wise error (Field, 2013). After the main analysis, follow-up ANCOVAS (analysis of covariance) were done for each mental health variable to get a representation of the interaction for individual measurements.

## Results

Durations of estrangements ranged from six months to 41 years, with a mean of 10.8 years, a median of 10 years and a standard deviation of 9.3 years. 73.3 percent of the estranged parents were estranged from one child, 21.3 percent from two, and 5.3 percent from three or more children. These findings suggest a relative stability of estrangements and support the preliminary temporal condition that estrangements were not reported for short-lived conflicts. They also showed that most estranged parents experienced estrangement from only one child.

The two participant groups had similar demographic characteristics. As can be seen in *table 1*, no significant differences were found between estranged parents and the comparison group on the variables *age, years in school, number of children, gender, living alone, or widowhood*. Significant differences were, however, found on *self-rated health*, where estranged parents reported poorer health than the comparison group:  $t(232) = -3.32, p = .001, d = -0.48$ . Proportions of *divorce* also showed significant differences.  $X^2(1, N = 234) = 18.35, p = <.001$ . Here estranged parents were more often divorced by a factor of more than three as can be seen by the percentages presented in *table 1*.

**Table 1** Demographics and *t*-tests and chi-square statistics for differences between estranged parents and the comparison Group (*N*=234)

Characteristics	Estranged parents ( <i>n</i> =67)		Comparison group ( <i>n</i> =167)		Independent Samples <i>t</i> -test
	<i>M</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	<i>SD</i>	<i>p</i>
Age	81.78 (.541)	4.427	81.84 (.393)	5.073	.923
Health	3.30 (.100)	0.817	2.92 (.061)	0.787	.001
Years in school	8.96 (.236)	1.934	9.33 (.157)	2.028	.198
Number of children	2.69 (.121)	0.988	2.50 (.078)	1.005	.206
	<i>n.</i>	%	<i>n.</i>	%	<i>p</i> ( $\chi^2$ )
Gender					.886
Female	42	62.7	103	61.7	
Male	25	37.3	64	38.3	
Living alone					.060
Yes	50	74.6	103	61.7	
No	17	25.4	64	38.3	
Divorced					<.001
Yes	23	34.3	18	10.8	
No	44	65.7	149	89.2	
Widowhood					.916
Yes	36	53.7	91	54.5	
No	31	46.3	76	45.5	

*Note.* Self-rated health is measured by a single item asking participants to rate their physical health on a five-point scale ranging from 1) excellent to 5) poor. Higher scores indicate poorer self-rated health;  $\chi^2$ = chi-squared statistic.

### Main analysis

A one-way multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted to test if there was a significant difference between estranged older parents and the comparison group on their

mental health as measured by *well-being*, *sense of purpose*, *depression*, and *loneliness* when controlling for *age*, *health*, *years in school*, *number of children*, *gender*, *living alone*, *divorce*, and *widowhood*.

The MANCOVA yielded statistical significance, Pillai's  $V = .094$ ,  $F(4,221) = 5.716$ ,  $p < .001$ . The effect size of  $\eta^2 = .094$  was moderate following conventions for partial eta squared effect size interpretation (small effect = 0.01; medium effect = 0.06; and large effect = 0.14) (Cohen, 2013; Richardson, 2011). Descriptive statistics revealed poorer mean scores for estranged parents on all four mental health measurements. As seen in *table 2*, estranged parents were found to have lower mean scores on the positive states of well-being and sense of purpose and higher mean scores on the negative states of depression and loneliness. The findings support the hypothesis that estrangement from children is associated with a decrease in mental health. The covariates did not confound results, leading to the conclusion that estrangement was the explanatory factor for the significant difference found on the combinations of mental health measurements.

**Table 2** Means, standard errors, and standard deviations for estranged parents and the comparison Group, and ANCOVA results for well-Being (WHO-5), sense of purpose (PIL-SF), depression (CMDQ), and loneliness (UCLA-3), (N=234)

Measure	Estranged parents (n=67)		comparison group (n=167)		$F(1,224)$	$p$	$\eta^2$
	$M(SE)$	$SD$	$M(SE)$	$SD$			
Well-being	58.21 (2.650)	21.690	72.74 (1.245)	16.094	18.400	<.001	.076
Sense of purpose	19.82 (.610)	4.994	22.23 (.295)	3.816	5.587	.019	.024
Depression	6.07 (.654)	5.349	2.72 (.261)	3.374	17.578	<.001	.073
Loneliness	4.88 (.244)	1.996	3.95 (.097)	1.253	9.042	.003	.039

### *Follow-up analysis*

Follow-up one-way analysis of covariances (ANCOVAS) was conducted to determine degrees of contribution to the statistically significant MANCOVA for each of the mental health measurements. As presented in *table 2*, all four measurements demonstrated significance at an alpha level of .05. *Well-being* and *depression* were found to contribute the most to the significant MANCOVA model, while *sense of purpose*, contributed the least. These results demonstrate that all four mental health measurements constitute meaningful elements to consider in relation to how intergenerational estrangement is associated with mental health for older parents.

### **Discussion**

This study demonstrated significantly lower *well-being* and *sense of purpose*, and significantly more *depressive* symptoms and *loneliness* among estranged older parents compared to the comparison group. The findings supported the hypothesis that intergenerational estrangement may reach beyond initial emotional and behavioral reactions and influence older parents' mental health negatively. The moderate effect size resulting from the MANCOVA emphasizes the relevance of estrangement as a factor for mental health, even when accounting for the eight demographic and social covariates in the study.

Overall results are congruent with the limited existing research and theory on the impact of intergenerational estrangement on older parents. Whereas other studies generally consider intergenerational estrangement to have negative consequences for parents and children (Blake, 2017; Pillemer, 2020), the present study provides estimates of effects on multiple, specific mental health measures.

The present study supports findings in qualitative studies on loneliness among estranged palliative care patients (Agllias, 2018) and the theory that family estrangement is accompanied by

symptoms of depression (Allen, 2003). But whereas the qualitative studies and clinical observations have described how estrangements can have immediate, conscious, emotional effects on parents, the present study reveals how estrangement from adult children is associated with standardized validated mental health measurements. With a mean estrangement duration of 10.8 years, the results also demonstrate a relative permanence of the association with mental health. The experiences of grief and emotional pain that other studies have demonstrated (Agllias, 2016) are hereby supplemented by findings of potential long lasting decrease of mental health among older parents.

### *Discussion of findings*

Although the present study was not designed to measure the prevalence of intergenerational estrangement for different demographic categories, the non-significant result for *gender* was noteworthy, as other studies on intergenerational estrangement do find differences between mothers and fathers, with young adults reporting more frequent estrangement from fathers (Conti, 2015). The current study does not correspond with this research. This incongruency could be interpreted as a result of the large age difference between the study groups, raising the question if the gender of the parent becomes less relevant for intergenerational estrangement in later life? Another explanation could be that estranged older fathers could be at higher risk of early mortality and institutional living, leading them to be underrepresented in the present study. Focus on how parent gender interplay with intergenerational estrangement in older age could be a direction for future research.

Another conspicuous insignificant difference between participant groups concerned the *number of children*. Not only because a higher number of children could mean a higher probability of estrangement, but also because a higher number of children is known to put more strain on the family system. As the resource dilution model states (Downey, 1995), more children often means



less attention to each child, and jealousy, feelings of unequal treatment, and sibling rivalry could lead to conflict resulting in rift. Yet no association was found in this study.

Significant differences between study groups were found on *self-rated health* and *divorce*. Results showed lower self-rated health for estranged parents and is thus congruent with the directions of the findings of differences on mental health. Given the differences found on mental health, it would be surprising if *self-rated health* had been insignificant due to the similarities in reporting on physical health and mental health. In support of this assumption, Spearman's bivariate correlations show significant associations between *self-rated health* and all four mental health measurements. *Well-being*  $r(232) = -.460$ , *sense of purpose*  $r(232) = -.343$ , *depression*  $r(232) = .407$  and *loneliness*  $r(232) = .321$ . All with  $p = <.001$ . The significant difference found for *divorce* aligns with other research emphasizing parent divorce as associated with intergenerational estrangement (Pillemer, 2020). A survey including 1,600 estranged parents of adult children found that 75 percent were divorced (Coleman, 2021). Precise associations between parent divorce and intergenerational estrangement remain unresolved but could be a meaningful theme for future research.

### *Strengths and limitations*

Although results supported the hypothesis, corresponded well with existing literature, and were aligned with expectations devised by theoretical foundation, it should be mentioned that results from a cross-sectional study like the present do not provide evidence of the direction of the associations. That is, based on the analysis and results it is not possible to determine if poorer mental health, as measured by *well-being*, *sense of purpose*, *depressive symptoms*, and *loneliness*, is in fact caused by intergenerational estrangement. We do not know if the older parents would have demonstrated equally poorer mental health prior to estrangement. This reverse causation can be considered likely as it is well known that mental illness among parents can lead to family discord

(Burke, 2003; Sell et al., 2021). Moreover, it is not possible to determine if the association found is caused by unknown variables, as all possible confounders are not controlled for, such as mental disorders or personality traits as well as grandparent status, religion, geography, sexual orientation, and further social contexts.

Another limitation concerns the recruitment procedure as it was prone to possible sampling biases. Preventive health professionals were instructed to bypass older parents with pronounced personal problems, such as struggling with current bereavement, disease, or alcohol abuse etc. This was done to avoid putting extra stressors on already vulnerable older parents. Although the strategy was implemented in both study groups, it comes with the risk of blurring differences between groups because such personal problems could be more pronounced among estranged older parents. It is, for example, recognized that issues with alcohol abuse can be associated with social conflicts and family estrangement (Blake et al., 2019; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2021). Moreover, the results from the current study can be seen to support this hypothesis, as estranged parents did exhibit poorer mental health. The possible sampling bias would decrease statistical differences between groups and increase the risk of type 2 error (Banerjee et al., 2009). Although a flaw in the research design, circumventing this bias is unlikely to lead to different results.

A similar problem of participatory bias in the study relates to the sensitive nature of intergenerational estrangement as it opens the possibility of skewness due to dropout among estranged parents when confronted with the painful theme. That is, non-responders might represent the group most negatively affected by the estrangement. Results can be affected if drop-out is caused by the factors pertaining to the research design or theme. The non-responder's analysis did in fact conclude that parents revoked participation because of their painful thoughts and feelings concerning their estrangement.

*COVID-19 and older estranged parents.* Data collection was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic which is likely to have influenced results. COVID-19 lockdowns in Denmark have been shown to lead to slightly deteriorated mental health among older people (Clotworthy et al., 2021). This deterioration could be more pronounced among estranged parents as fewer available ties were present to supplement the loss of relationships to adult children.

### *Implications*

This study is the first to discover that estrangement is associated with poorer mental health. It emphasizes the importance of lifelong healthy relationship to children and actualizes the relationship as a target for intervention. The findings suggest that intergenerational family relations should be given attention in social and health services – and in policy and practice aimed at improving the quality of life of older adults. This could imply protocols on how health professionals can provide help to older parents in case of conflicts with children. In societies where a present focus is on relieving loneliness, increased attention should be given to family relations in later life and the consequences of conflicts and estrangement between parents and their children.

### *Conclusion*

Results in this study support the hypotheses by demonstrating that estranged older parents are both less likely to experience *well-being* and *sense of purpose*, and more prone to *depressive symptoms* and *loneliness*. With effect sizes being moderate, we conclude that intergenerational estrangement is associated with considerable emotional strain for older parents. These findings support existing qualitative studies on the subject and can be interpreted congruently with theory on cutoff in intergenerational relations as formulated by Bowen (Titelman, 2014). The study highlights the importance and the lifelong gravity of parenthood. This, in turn, points to the potentials of focusing on the intergenerational relationship in efforts to promote mental health among older

adults. Although this study demonstrates the importance of the relationship between parents and children throughout life, more research is needed to address the complexities of intergenerational estrangement.

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**STUDY II****Sorrow and Ambivalence of Intergenerational Estrangement in Later Life**

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**Conflicts of Interest**

None declared.

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**Abstract**

*Recent research has indicated that older parents estranged from children generally exhibit lower scores on mental health. However, it remains to be investigated how older estranged parents relate to broken relationships, and what factors predict these sentiments. This article investigates older parents' sentiments towards broken relationships to children regarding categories of sorrow, ambivalence, and relief. Parent demographics and the estrangement characteristics of duration, initiative, and estrangement proportions are examined as possible predictors of parent sentiments. The study utilized cross sectional data from 75 older estranged parents age 75+ (m=82). Participants were recruited via purposive sampling. Descriptive statistics were used to determine the proportions of parent sentiments, demographics, and estrangement characteristics. Multiple logistic regression was used to test the predictive capacity of demographics and estrangement variables on parent sentiments. Analysis found that sorrow and ambivalence both constituted parent sentiments, but not relief. Gender was found to significantly predict parent sentiments, with fathers leaning towards ambivalence and mothers towards sorrow. Estrangement from all children was found to be significantly associated with ambivalence. This study adds to the literature by demonstrating that apart from emotionally painful effects of intergenerational estrangement, ambivalent feelings should be considered in older parents' experience of intergenerational estrangement. The findings support theoretical emphasis on the intergenerational solidarity and the intergenerational ambivalence perspectives as frameworks for the understanding of intergenerational relations in adulthood and has implications for interventions aimed at reconciliation in family estrangement.*

**Keywords:** *Intergenerational estrangement; older parents; solidarity; ambivalence*

## **Introduction**

Considerable attention has been given to research on intergenerational relations in older age (Suitor et al., 2011; Szydlik, 2008; Umberson, 1992). It is widely recognized that these kinds of relationships are of great importance both on an individual and societal level (Bengtson, 2001). Yet little research has focused on the processes of estrangement between older parents and adult children, and theoretical perspectives are largely absent (Blake, 2017; Clarke et al., 1999; Pillemer, 2020). Guided by leading theories of intergenerational relations in older age, this study investigates how older parents who are estranged from one or more of their children express their sentiments towards intergenerational estrangement, and how parent demographics and pertinent variables on the estrangement predict these sentiments. The study simultaneously aims to embed research on estrangement into the theoretical framework on intergenerational relations, namely the theories of intergenerational solidarity and intergenerational ambivalence (Coimbra et al., 2013).

The study examines how older estranged parents experience estrangement within three broad categories of sentiment: 1) Feelings of sorrow, 2) feelings of ambivalence, and 3) feelings of relief. Based on existing research about the consequences of intergenerational estrangement, the assumption in this study is that estrangement from children involve and promote feelings akin to sorrow and bereavement among older parents (Agllias, 2011a; Agllias, 2016b; Blake, 2017; Nikolajsen et al., 2024). We therefore expect sorrow to be the leading sentiment expressed by older parents. Although it can seem apparent that older parents would hold such feelings toward broken relationships to children given the existential importance assigned to parenthood, it has, to our knowledge, not been investigated directly and therefore remains an empirical question. Theoretical perspectives on intergenerational relations have underscored the complexity of these relations, and contemporary family dynamics put into question the stability and permanency of family relations (Lüscher & Hoff, 2013). In turn, the unconditionality of the intergenerational relationship has been

questioned (Gilbert, 2019), and scholars discuss how post-modern or post-family discourses infiltrate and affect family life (Pillemer, 2020). Some also emphasize the potential benefits of family distancing. Scharp and Thomas (2016) argue that understanding family distancing exposes “the fragility of the hegemonic discourse of biology” (p. 46). Thus, research on family distancing presents avenues for new and more pluralistic understandings of the family (Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2017).

### *Defining estrangement*

Estrangement is an ambiguous term. It is used to encompass a variety of relational constellations with the overarching definition being emotional distance with a legacy of conflict (Blake, 2022). Emotionally distant yet frequent contact and a total year-long cessation of contact both fit under this umbrella, making estrangement pluralistic and difficult to define precisely. The most influential demarcation of the phenomenon is that estrangement means physical distancing and loss of affection between family members due to conflict or disagreement (Agllias, 2011c). Following this viewpoint, estrangement implies physical distance, lack of emotional intimacy, an unsatisfactory relationship, intermittent conflict and avoidance, and a belief that there is no resolution. For this definition Agllias draws on the work of Pauline Boss, a family therapist phrasing the term “ambiguous loss”, describing a state in which loved ones are physically absent yet psychologically present (Agllias, 2011a; Boss & Ishii, 2015). Inspired by this definition, estrangement in the present study implies total and conflict-driven discontinuation of direct contact. This means that estrangement is defined by the simultaneous presence of an emotional component (conflict) and a physical one (absence of contact).

*Theories of intergenerational relations*

The scarcity of estrangement research and the different conceptualizations of the phenomenon result in a lack of consistent theoretical underpinnings. Yet the theoretical landscape of intergenerational relations in adulthood presents well established and well researched positions (Albert & Ferring, 2013). This study draws its hypotheses from on the influential theories of *Intergenerational solidarity* and *Intergenerational ambivalence* (Schwarz, 2013), both describing fundamental structures of the adult intergenerational relationship. The two perspectives have been subject to debate in the academic literature (Bengtson et al., 2002; Lüscher & Hoff, 2013), with the ambivalence perspective branching out from intergenerational solidarity. Although neither theoretical development explicitly states how estrangement should be understood or investigated, the theories present a theoretical starting point on which research on estrangement in older age can build (Agllias, 2011a).

*Solidarity and estrangement*

The most prominent theory on intergenerational relations, *intergenerational solidarity*, posits that parent-child relations in adulthood should primarily be understood as essentially caring, loving, and supportive (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997). It presents a taxonomy of six essential dimensions that characterize the adult parent-child relationship (Bengtson & Robert, 1991). 1. Contact, frequency of communication, and spending time together. 2. Affection, positive sentiments held about each other. 3. Value similarities, concordance of beliefs. 4. Resource exchange, assisting emotionally and physically. 5. Filial obligation, sense of responsibility. 6. Availability, opportunity to fulfill expectations. The existence and degree of these six relational dimensions denote the strength of the intergenerational relationship ranging from tight-knit to detached, with the latter classifying a distant relationship most closely resembling estrangement (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997).

Following the six dimensions, estrangement can be seen as a breakdown of solidarity, presumably leading to emotional pain for the parties involved. While negative associations between estrangement and the solidarity dimensions of contact, affection, exchange, obligation, and availability could be considered self-evident, value dissimilarities have been found to coincide with and identified as reasons for intergenerational estrangement (Pillemer, 2020). In support of this interpretation, one study found daughters' violations of their mothers' norms to be a strong predictor of future estrangement (Gilligan, 2014).

The idea of intergenerational estrangement, understood as a breakdown of solidarity with resulting emotional pain, corresponds with most research on the estrangement experience (Agllias, 2016b; Blake, 2017). Qualitative studies and clinical observations documenting the negative impact of these broken relations found that estrangement was associated with feelings of ambiguous bereavement akin to loved ones being deceased (Agllias, 2011a). A small exploration of issues in intergenerational relations in older age in a Danish context, cites a respondent who articulated the following:

*Parents love their children and are in some strange way addicted to having contact with them, almost regardless of the nature of this contact. They are flesh of our flesh and blood of our blood, and at all ages are the most important thing in our lives. To lose them is to lose the most important part of oneself, maybe especially if this loss means that you become discarded and forgotten. I believe that this is worse than losing a child to death, for in that instance you are at least allowed the conviction that it wasn't the love that died. (Holm, 2019, pp. 17-18).*

The negative impact of intergenerational estrangement on older parents thus leads to the assumption that estrangement as signified by the breakdown of solidarity would warrant sentiments of sorrow among older parents.

*Ambivalence and estrangement*

Scholars on intergenerational relations have increasingly emphasized the ambiguous, complicated, and ambivalent nature of the adult intergenerational relationship (Gilligan et al., 2015; Lüscher & Hoff, 2013). Another guiding theoretical basis for the investigation of older parents' sentiments toward estrangement is thus the theory of *intergenerational ambivalence*. The theory was developed to explain the dynamics of existing intergenerational relationships in adulthood and could offer new understandings of how conflicts give rise to estrangement and where this might leave the parties involved. The main proposition of intergenerational ambivalence is that intergenerational relations exist on the premise of tensions between oppositional emotions, values, and purposes. One example is the tension between autonomy and dependence manifested by parents' need for adult children to become independent while resisting to relinquish authority.

As tendencies toward postponed maturation among young adults become increasingly evident (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018), this dimension of intergenerational ambivalence becomes more relevant. Indeed, the balancing of parent involvement in the adult intergenerational relationship remains pivotal throughout life, as tensions emerging in relation to the independence of adult children reemerge in relation to the dependence of older parents. Ambivalent attitudes in family relations have been observed to have special salience in later life (Pillemer & Luscher, 2004). The context of caring for family members has been observed to evoke ambivalence expressed by feelings of warmth and tenderness while simultaneously having feelings of frustration and resentment (Dressel & Clark, 1990).

*Intergenerational ambivalence* in the context of estrangement means that parties express mixed and contradictory feelings toward the broken relationship. Evidence shows how estrangement is



preceded by conflict, sometimes involving mistreatment (Carr et al., 2015). Thus, even though estrangement is painful, it could simultaneously involve positive feelings of relief or consolation.

### *Estrangement as relief*

It can also be argued that older parents could express solely positive sentiments towards estrangement. As Scharp and Thomas put it: “Parent–child relationship in the context of estrangement problematizes notions that these relationships are ever-lasting and challenges a long history of research that highlights intergenerational solidarity ... without recognizing that it is possibly healthier for some parents to exit toxic relationships” (Scharp & Thomas, 2018, p 305). Expectations about the permanence of the relationship leave people suspended in draining conflicts, with estrangement being the best alternative (Agllias, 2016a; Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2017).

Thus, the perceived inviolability of family relationships can have dire consequences, and to finally be free from long, tiresome, and unresolvable conflict could result in feelings of relief for older parents (Scharp & Thomas, 2018). In fact, this emotional outcome could have special importance in older age where the strain of conflict might be too much to handle. It can therefore be theorized that older parents would express relief as a sentiment toward estrangement. Contrary to the mainstream understanding of estrangement as exclusively negative, the phenomenon must be investigated for its potential promotion of something good as well.

### *Research question 1*

With the probable sentiments of sorrow, ambivalence, and relief, the first research question of this study is *how older estranged parents express their sentiments towards their estrangement within three broad categories: Negative (sorrow), mixed (ambivalent), or positive (relief)?* Giving the existing literature’s emphasis on the negative impacts of estrangement, *we hypothesize that older estranged parents predominantly express sentiments of sorrow.*

*Variables predicting sentiments*

Specific factors about the parent and the estrangement could predict parent sentiments. This study therefore also explores associations between parents' sentiments and parent *age* and *gender*, *estrangement duration*, *initiative*, and *proportion of estranged children*.

*Age*

Research on intergenerational solidarity has found that age is a significant predictor for the intergenerational bond, with the likelihood of detached relationships decreasing in older age as parents begin to need more assistance in their day-to-day lives (Burholt & Wenger, 1998; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997). This pattern of support is reproduced even in the context of a strong welfare state such as Denmark (Rostgaard & Matthiessen, 2019). Furthermore a new study found poorer mental health to be associated with estrangement among older parents (Nikolajsen et al., 2024). Age might therefore be associated with how older parents feel towards estrangements, meaning that high age would predict sentiments of sorrow.

*Older mothers and fathers*

Older mothers and fathers differ in their relationships with children (Burholt & Wenger, 1998; Gilligan et al., 2015; Sechrist et al., 2012). Fathers are considered to have poorer relationship quality with children (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997). A study on intergenerational ambivalence found that older parents also differ on scores of ambivalences toward their children, with fathers found to be more ambivalent than mothers (Pillemer et al., 2012). Closer bonds to children could result in mothers expressing more sentiments of sorrow when estranged from children.

### *Duration*

The duration of time since the estrangement occurred offers another possible predictor of parent sentiments. Evidence suggests estrangement to be relatively stable across time (Gilligan, 2014). One study found the average duration of estrangement from fathers to be 7.9 years whilst estrangement from mothers was 5.5 years (Blake, 2015). As with other loss related phenomena, higher durations of estrangement could lead to less intense negative sentiments.

### *Initiation*

In line with the intergenerational stake hypothesis asserting that parents are more emotionally attached to the intergenerational relationship than adult children (Giarrusso et al., 1995), the consensus is that children tend to initiate estrangements (Blake, 2017). Who initiated the estrangement might impact how older parents feel towards it, leaning in the direction of sorrow when children are the initiators.

### *Estrangement from some or all children*

The existence of other non-estranged children in parents' lives could be a protective factor. Contrarily, estrangement from all children might leave parents in greater states of sorrow. This is because the intact contact to other children might guard the parent against some of the negative consequences caused by estrangement, such as loneliness, loss of contact to grandchildren, and associated social stigma (Nikolajsen et al., 2024; Rittenour et al., 2018).

### *Research question 2*

The second research question was *do parent age and gender and the estrangement variables of duration, initiation, and all or some children are associated with parent sentiments?* It is hypothesized that *sentiments of sorrow would be predicted by high age, by motherhood, short duration, child initiative, estrangement from more children, and estrangement from all children.*

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The study utilized cross-sectional data from a recent study on the consequences of intergenerational estrangement on older parents (Nikolajsen et al., 2024). The sample consisted of 75 parents over 75 years old who were currently estranged from at least one adult child. Inclusion criteria were no pronounced cognitive impairment and no current acute health or social problems such as bereavement, substance abuse, being in the middle of moving etc.

The participants were ages 75–91 ( $m = 82.$ ,  $sd = 4.3$ ), 65 percent were female, 77 percent were living alone, 33 percent were divorced, and 56 percent were widowed. All were living independently (not in nursing homes) and came from urban and rural areas alike. They had an average of 2.7 children, and 8.8 years of schooling.

### *Sampling*

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants. Older parents were actively sought out and asked about their relationships with children. Estrangement was identified by asking parents if they had contact with children. Once estrangement was identified, the older parents were asked if they were willing to share their perspectives on estrangement by answering an anonymized questionnaire. Preventive health professionals doing home visits to older citizens carried out the initial identification and recruitment. Preventive health professionals are trained in having conversations about difficult and sensitive topics with older adults. They assess welfare and life circumstances, including family support and relations, to guide older adults to receive relevant assistance. By law, all citizens in Denmark over 75 years old are offered these home visits conducted by preventive health professionals. As a result, preventive health professionals have access to a representative variety of older adults.

This purposive sampling procedure was used to mitigate sampling biases by engaging participants that did not actively seek out the research theme, which is often the case in online sampling (Van Selm & Jankowski, 2006). The procedure thus has the potential to engage estranged parents for whom estrangement is not a pressing issue, and who might have moved on or even consider estrangement to be a positive event in their lives. The drawback was a smaller sample size.

Recruitment took place across 30 out of a total of 98 municipalities in Denmark with the final sample collected in 2022.

A response rate was calculated by dividing the number received questionnaires from the total number of recruited eligible participants ( $75 / 102 \times 100 = 74$  percent). Non-responders were contacted to investigate reasons for not responding. This was due to the suspicion that reasons were associated with the estrangement, thus potentially influencing results. The non-responder analysis found that these estranged older parents regretted consent as they did not want to re-open old wounds, and that the issues with their children were too painful or shameful (Nikolajsen et al., 2024).

### *Sentiments toward estrangement*

To our knowledge, no validated measurement on sentiments toward estrangement exist. We therefore developed a sentiment item based on the described theories on intergenerational relations to be used in this study. The item was constructed to capture broad categories of how older estranged parents considered their feelings toward estrangement, hereby obtaining an indication of the older parents' general subjective emotional valence on the issue. Response options were formulated to be able to catch negative, ambivalent, and positive emotional sentiments.

The perceived emotional impact item was collected by asking; "Are you affected by the broken relationship?" Response options were 1. "I feel sorrow" 2. "I feel sorrow and relief" 3. "I feel

relieved” 4. “I don’t know”. Response options 2 and 4 were pooled to signify ambivalence, leaving three response categories for analysis: Perceived negative emotional impact, i.e. sorrow; perceived ambivalence, i.e. sorrow and relief and don’t know; and perceived positive emotional impact, i.e. relief.

### *Demographics*

Data for mother- and fatherhood were collected by asking for participant gender. Participant age was collected by obtaining year of birth and subtracting it from year of participation (2022).

### *Duration*

Participants were asked to assess the duration of time since the estrangement took place. The question was constructed as an open-ended item, making it possible to answer according to the time frame that best described the situation, i.e. weeks, months, years. This gave participants the opportunity to also report very short time frames.

### *Initiative*

Data on appraisals of who initiated the estrangement were collected by asking: “Who initiated the broken relationship?” Response options were: “Myself”, “my child”, “us both”, “others”, “it just happened”, and “I don’t know”. Respondents were given the opportunity to choose more than one response option. Data for initiative were compiled into a dichotomous variable consisting of whether the initiative was stated as having been taken by “my child” or not. This was done to test the predictive significance for parent sentiments of the experience of being involuntarily cutoff due to the intent of the child.

*Some or all children*

Participants were asked from how many of their children they were estranged. In addition, a binary variable for estrangement from all children was generated by subtracting participants' number of estrangements from the total number of children.

*Analytic strategies*

All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS (version 28). To answer the first research question, frequency statistics were utilized, giving the number and percentages of adherence to the three categories of perceived emotional impact. To answer the second research question, cross-tabulation statistics followed by multiple logistic regression was conducted to predict categorical outcomes from continuous and categorical predictor variables (Field, 2013). In accordance with the hypotheses, the outcome variable in the multiple logistic regression model was treated as dichotomous to test the independent variables' predictive power of sorrow.

**Results**

Analysis using frequency statistics was used to determine estranged parents' adherence to the three sentiment categories of sorrow, ambivalence, and relief, and to test the hypothesis that sorrow would be the predominant sentiment. Results found that perceived emotional impact tilted toward sorrow and ambivalence. Four percent deemed the estrangement a relief, while 49.3 percent reported sorrow and 46.7 percent ambivalence. The findings demonstrate that parents frequently feel sorrow towards estrangement, but that predominant feelings of ambivalence are almost as frequent. Although existent in the sample, the proportion of parents who reported relief as their overall perceived emotional impact was small.

*Demographics and estrangement variables*

As shown in *table 1*, cross-tabulation statistics found differences for perceived emotional impact for parent gender, with mothers being more prone to sorrow and fathers more prone to ambivalence.

25.3 percent were estranged from all their children. Most, 73.3 percent, were only estranged from one child. The majority, 65.3 percent, considered the child to be the sole initiator of the estrangement. No parents in the relief category considered the child to be the initiator. Durations of the estrangements proved to be substantial, with a mean of around 10 years for all three sentiment categories.



**Table 1** *Cross-tabulation, means and standard deviations for demographics and estrangement variables*

Variable		Perceived emotional impact						Total
		Sorrow		Ambivalence		Relief		
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Gender	M	9	34.6	16	61.5	1	3.8	26
	W	28	57.1	19	38.8	2	4.1	49
Child initiative	No	9	34.6	14	53.8	3	11.5	26
	Yes	28	57.1	21	42.9	0	0	49
Estrangement from all children	No	30	53.6	23	41.1	3	5.4	56
	Yes	7	36.8	12	63.2	0	0	19
No. estrangements	1	27	49.1	25	45.5	3	5.5	55
	2	6	37.5	10	62.5	0	0	16
	3	3	100	0	0	0	0	3
	5	1	100	0	0	0	0	1
			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Parent age		81.8	4.2	82.3	4.7	84.3	3.1	
Estrangement duration		10.8	10.4	10.8	8.6	10	2	

*Predicting parent sentiment*

Multiple logistic regression was used to test the predictive strength of parent *gender* and *age*, as well as *estrangement duration*, *child initiative*, *estrangement from all children*, and *number of estrangements* for *sentiment of sorrow* as the dependent variable.

Preliminary analysis found no issues with multicollinearity between independent variables.

Results for the multiple logistic regression analysis yielded a statistically significant model,  $X^2(6, N = 75) = 15.30$   $p = .018$ , suggesting that it could predict parent sentiment. The model's explanatory strength ranged from 19 percent (Cox & Snell R square) to 25 percent (Nagelkerke R square). It had a correct classification percentage of 69 percent. As shown in *table 2* of the six predictors parent gender  $p = .025$ , child initiative  $p = .044$ , estrangement from all children  $p = .022$ , and number of estrangements  $p = .046$  contributed with significance to the model.

Interpreting the gender odds ratio of 0.270 in *table 2*, as well as cross-tabulations in *table 1*, results support the assumption derived from the existing literature positing that mothers were more prone to sorrow. Consequently, it can be derived that fathers were more prone to experience ambivalence in relation to estrangement. Results for the association between perceived emotional impact and the number of estranged children also supported the a priori assumptions by demonstrating that more estrangements predicted sorrow with an odds ratio of 0.332. Estrangement from all children, however, presented results contrary to the initial assumption that this variable would also be associated with sentiments of sorrow. Rather, estrangement from all children was found to significantly predict not sorrow, meaning ambivalence (and to a small extent relief), demonstrating an odds ratio of 5.108.

With an odds ratio of 0.315 and a significant contributor to the multiple logistic regression model, results for the initiative variable suggested that sentiments of sorrow could be associated with the child having initiated the estrangement, supporting the preliminary assumption. For the remaining two variables of parent age and estrangement duration, no associations were found. Odds ratios for both variables were close to 1.

**Table 2** Multiple logistic regression predicting sentiments of sorrow towards estrangement

Variable	B	SE	p	OR	95% C.I.	
					LL	UL
Gender	-1.311	.586	.025	.270	.085	.850
Parent age	.014	.063	.827	1.014	.896	1.147
Duration	.005	.028	.855	1.005	.952	1.061
Child initiative	-1.157	.574	.044	.315	.102	.969
Estrangement from all children	1.631	.713	.022	5.108	1.262	20.670
No. estrangements	-1.104	.553	.046	.332	.112	.980

*Follow-up analysis*

Including too many predictors in regression models can lead to overfitting. To determine if the significant result on the multiple logistic regression analysis was contingent on the inclusion of the non-significant predictors, a follow-up multiple logistic regression analysis was conducted containing the variables gender, child initiative, estrangement from all children, and number of estrangements.

Again, the analysis yielded a statistically significant model,  $X^2(4, N = 75) = 15.23$   $p = .004$ , confirming that the four variables were able to predict sentiments of sorrow towards estrangement among older parents. This model also demonstrated  $R^2$  values ranging from 18 percent (Cox & Snell R square) to 25 percent (Nagelkerke R square) and had a correct classification percentage of 69 percent. *Table 3* shows that  $p$ -values remained significant for all four variables. Odds ratio shrunk slightly.

**Table 3** *Follow-up multiple logistic regression predicting sentiments of sorrow from gender, child initiative, estrangement from all children, and number of estrangements*

Variable	B	SE	p	OR	95% C.I.	
					LL	UL
Gender	-1.344	.576	.020	.261	.084	.806
Child initiative	-1.169	.559	.037	.311	.104	.929
Estrangement from all children	1.600	.702	.023	4.953	1.251	19.609
Number of estrangements	-1.115	.546	.041	.328	.112	.957

## Discussion

Results found evidence to support the association between estrangement and both the solidarity and ambivalence perspectives. In accordance with the assumption that estrangement results in a breakdown of solidarity leading to negative feelings characterized by sentiments of sorrow, around half of the sample reported sorrow as their perceived emotional impact. However, ambivalence was almost as prominent, as the other half reported mixed feelings construed as ambivalence. This finding exceeded the expected distribution: Based on the existing literature, it was hypothesized that sorrow would be more predominant. Instead, results suggested that many older parents experience complex and contradictory feelings in relation to estrangement from their children. 4 percent of the estranged parents did report relief as their sentiment towards estrangement, supporting the assumption that, although rare, estrangement from children can be a positive event in older parents' lives.

The high proportion of ambivalent sentiments found in the study raises questions about what the conceptualization of ambivalence in relation to estrangement more specifically means. That is, apart

from the broad characterization of sorrow and relief, what other contradictory feelings might be present? Although research predominantly portrays experiences that resemble sorrow, (Agllias, 2013; Blake, 2017), some qualitative research that looks at parents' perspectives also describes experiences that could imply ambivalence (Agllias, 2011b). Parents might for example fluctuate between feelings of resentment and love towards their estranged children, or between wanting and not wanting to reconcile. As results in this study find, many older parents affected by estrangement express nuanced and mixed sentiments; they actualize an exploration of ambivalence in relation to estrangement to more fully understand the possible and common positions present in these types of family rifts. What experiences and perceptions lead older parents to express a combination of positive and negative feelings?

#### *The predictors of sentiments*

The multiple logistic regression analysis was able to identify four variables that significantly predicted sorrow. Results for three of the four variables supported the hypotheses. These were parent gender, child initiative, and number of estrangements. The fourth, estrangement from all children, demonstrated the opposite tendency compared to what was expected, as this variable proved to be negatively associated with sorrow.

#### *Non-significant findings*

Evidence for the two temporal variables of parent age and durations of estrangement did not support the hypotheses as they were not associated with the sentiment of sorrow in this study. Results could be due to the small sample size; however, inspecting the differences in means between sorrow and ambivalence for the variables age and duration as shown in *table 1*, it seems unlikely that more data points would change results. For example, decimals for the rounded means for duration (10.8) were 10.784 for sorrow and 10.771 for ambivalence. With relief only accounting for three participants,

statistics hardly apply here. Age of parents also demonstrated minuscule differences in means, as demonstrated by high  $p$ -values and odds ratios very close to 1, seen in *table 2*.

On the basis on the results from the statistical analysis, we conclude that we do not find evidence to support the hypotheses that high age of estranged parents is associated with sentiments of sorrow. Additionally, we conclude that the duration of the estrangement was not associated with sorrow as was initially hypothesized. This latter null-finding seems especially surprising because the intensity of emotion usually degrades over time. Emotions towards estrangement might be resistant to such degradation, which could be attributed to the lasting importance of the intergenerational bond (Fingerman et al., 2024). Another explanation could be that the perceived emotional impact item was unable to detect temporal effects on sentiments.

### *Gender*

There were indications that parent gender predicted sentiments, with mothers more frequently reporting sorrow. These findings align with previous research on parent gender differences on attitudes towards the intergenerational relationship (Pillemer et al., 2012). Generally, fathers have been found to have weaker relationships with children, to more often feel ambivalence, and to more often be estranged (Becker & Hank, 2022; Blake, 2015). Explanations for this difference has been attributed to gender roles in the family, where women, often mothers, have been described to embody the role of kinkeepers, the ones who strive to maintain family relationships (Gerstel & Gallagher, 1993). Thus, estrangement as a breakdown of solidarity could promote feelings of sorrow to a greater extent in mothers as it simultaneously means unsuccessful kinkeeping.

*Child initiation*

The initiative variable also yielded significant results supporting the hypothesis that older parents' sentiments of sorrow were associated with child initiation of estrangement. This association is demonstrated in the cross-tabulations in *table 2*, where differences in distributions between sentiments of sorrow and ambivalence among parents are clear. This difference corresponds to the assumption that being rejected by one's children would be a negative experience, and that being somewhat involved in the initiative could be accompanied by ambivalence. Descriptive statistics for the initiative variable were congruent with prior findings that the estranged child is most often considered to have initiated estrangement (Blake, 2015). This study demonstrated a child initiation of 65.3 percent and an English study found that 73.5 percent of estranged parents claimed that children were the initiators (Blake, 2015). However, response biases should be considered as respondents might lean towards blaming others for the hardships of the estrangement. Nevertheless, results support the intergenerational stake hypothesis positing that parents are more invested in the relationship and therefore less likely to cut ties (Giarrusso et al., 1995).

*Estrangement proportions*

The other estrangement variables found to significantly predict parent sentiments were the number of estrangements and whether the parent experienced estrangement from all children or not. Both variables were assumed to be associated with sentiments of sorrow. This assumption was supported for the number of estrangements, prompting the argument that it could be more emotionally painful to be estranged from more than one of your children. Peculiarly, the opposite result emerged for the variable of estrangement from all children, meaning that parents with no non-estranged children significantly more often had ambivalent sentiments towards estrangement. The initial assumption for this variable thus not only proved to be wrong, but evidence to the contrary was found. In

conjunction, results for the two estrangement proportions suggest that older parents tend to experience sorrow when estranged from more than one of their children up until they are estranged from all their children, in which case the tendency shifts towards ambivalence. To theorize on the reasons for this tendency is beyond the scope of this article, but it could be that families where all children are estranged from parents have higher conflict intensity, resulting in parents' sentiments being affected by feelings of anger or strain leading to ambivalence. It should, however, also be mentioned that the small sample size, albeit large enough to demonstrate statistical significance, makes results uncertain in this case.

#### *Ambivalence and ambiguity*

The ambivalence category was constructed by recoding the response options 'sorrow and relief' and 'don't know' into one ambivalence variable. This procedure can be argued to misconstrue ambivalence, because not knowing how you feel about something does not necessarily imply ambivalence. In instances where a person has not thought about the issue either because it is new to them or because of its irrelevance, not knowing about how you feel is understandable. In these instances, 'don't know' could be framed as an expression of ambiguity, that is of unresolve or unclarity. However, in the case of parental perspectives on intergenerational relations, to state unresolve or unclarity can be argued to imply some resemblance of ambivalence given the prominence of the relationships to children. It can be argued to be unlikely that choosing 'I don't know' implies irrelevance. The reason for including the response option in the questionnaire was to present older parents with a response option that did not force them to take a stance toward the question at hand if they had not already done so. This, we believe, does not imply the absence of sentiments towards estrangement. Rather, we interpret it to imply that the older parents are torn regarding the question but do not consider their position to be encompassed by the terms sorrow and relief.



Indications to support this assumption come from analysis of participants who answered ‘I don’t know’ on the perceived emotional impact item to their responses on other items to see if there was evidence for ambivalence or indifference. In the questionnaire, participants were given opportunities to answer an open-ended question on their view of what caused the estrangement. 63 percent did so. Here, for example, one father who initiated an estrangement from one of his sons wrote “*I’m angry at him for causing me to lose my driver’s license*”. A mother to a daughter who cut ties with her wrote “*She chose her family-in-law because of money*”. Likewise, a mother estranged from her son wrote “*His wife did not like us*”. Although indifference towards estrangement represented by a ‘don’t know’ response cannot be ruled out, the participant statements as well as theory on, and evidence for, the importance of the intergenerational relationship indicate that this is most likely not the case. It is, however, a drawback that the emotional impact item was developed for this specific study. No validation has taken place, which calls into question the replicability of the results derived. Further research using qualitative methods could be useful to explore how older parents react and think towards estrangement using intergenerational ambivalence as a theoretical underpinning. This could help us to develop better quantitative items in the future.

### *Strengths and limitations*

To our knowledge, this is the first study to explore older parents’ sentiments towards estrangement from children using quantitative methodologies. We believe that the purposive sampling procedure produced a unique and valuable sample, and that results contribute to research on both estrangement and intergenerational relations, adding new insights especially about the ambivalent sentiments older parents might hold. We believe it to be a noteworthy strength that the study embedded explorations of estrangement into the theories of solidarity and ambivalence.

Limitations of the study are noticeable. With a sample of 75 participants the study has limited statistical power. This limits the ability to detect effects and associations. A larger sample would have made it possible to obtain more reliable results and to explore more detailed associations. It would for example have contributed to the study, had the number of ‘relief’ responses been large enough to discern what separated parents who felt relief from other parents. Another limitation is the un-validated emotional impact item that results in uncertainties about how to interpret results. A related but specific issue concerns the significant results for the variable number of estrangements. The observations for more than two estrangements are very limited, as can be seen in the cross-tabulations in *table 2*. Although the variable remained significant in the follow-up analysis, it only barely did so, as can be seen in *table 3* ( $p = .041$ ). Suspicions of overfitting are thus warranted. A solution to this problem was not possible for this study as it would require a larger sample.

A separate critical point to take into consideration when reviewing the evidence of this study is the cultural propensity to understanding parental love as unconditional (Scharp & Thomas, 2018).

When parents are expected to love their children regardless of their behavior, it follows that they would be reluctant to utter positive sentiments toward the termination of the relationship. Positive sentiments could be shameful, leading the older parents in the study to answer in accordance with the cultural expectations of their relationships to estranged children and express sorrow as their sentiment.

### *Implications*

Older parents’ sentiments towards estrangement from children are important when determining motivations to engage in interventions or activities aimed at intergenerational reconciliation. For intervention to make sense and be fruitful, be it family therapy or mediation, the need must first be identified. Results from this study point to the relevance of developing such interventions. Older

parents do predominantly express negative sentiments toward broken relationships, with a substantial proportion of those also being ambivalent. This ambivalence is an important element to consider, as it reveals that older parents do not solely consider estrangement at negative thing, but that it often is accompanied by relief.

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**STUDY III****How Older Parents Cope with Estrangement from Adult Children:  
a Qualitative Study**

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**Abstract**

*Intergenerational estrangement in adulthood is a new but growing field of research. Not much is known about these parent-child estrangements, but studies have suggested that estrangement is associated with negative emotional outcomes, especially for older parents. This study explores how older parents cope with being estranged from one or more adult children. In-depth interviews with 15 older parents (mean=83 years), 7 fathers and 8 mothers, were conducted to gain insights into coping responses. Participants were recruited via purposive sampling. Inspired by the theoretical frameworks of intergenerational ambivalence and the dual process model of coping with bereavement, the study identified two general coping orientations: 1) Reconciliation-oriented coping (ROC), aimed at reestablishing contact with children, and 2) Acceptance-oriented coping (AOC), aimed at coming to terms with the termination of the relationship. Thematic analysis revealed three ROC-responses: Exploring the past, repeated contact attempts, and seeking information about children, and four AOC-responses: Pride, projecting responsibility, financial retribution, and coming to terms with estrangement. Avoidance was identified as a third coping orientation that did not fit the theoretical framework. Avoidant coping responses were characterized by refraining from thinking about the estrangement and what had caused it. Estranged older parents were found to oscillate between all three coping orientations, supporting the proposition of estrangement as saturated with ambivalence.*

**Keywords:** *Estrangement, coping, older parents, ambivalence*

## Introduction

Intergenerational estrangement has a short tradition of exploration (Blake, 2017; Pillemer, 2020). While considered widespread and believed to increase in Western societies (Coleman, 2021), the phenomenon lacks clear-cut theoretical underpinnings. Existing studies have, however, consistently established that intergenerational estrangement is associated with negative outcomes for older parents (Agllias, 2011b; Agllias, 2016; Gilligan et al., 2015; Nikolajsen, Larsen, Christoffersen, et al., 2024). Research has also focused on what causes estrangement and how it is experienced by the parties involved (Scharp et al., 2015; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2021), but coping has yet to be investigated.

This study explores how older parents cope with being estranged from one or more adult children. We ask how older parents think and act to handle being estranged and what themes of self-protection are brought on by the emotional burdens that estrangement from adult children entails. To answer these questions, the study analyzes qualitative interviews with 75+ year-old estranged parents and maps their ways of coping with estrangement. The analysis explores how the phenomenon is associated with the theory of *intergenerational ambivalence* and the *dual process model of coping with bereavement* (DPM). The aim is to learn more about older parents' coping responses and to better understand the dynamics of intergenerational estrangement – laying the ground for ideas of how to support older parents and their families affected by it.

### *Ambivalence in estrangement*

In this study estrangement is understood as comprised of two mutually inclusive parts: 1) Emotional strain or tension in the intergenerational relationship due to a perceived conflict, *and* 2) physical distance, meaning that contact has been terminated (Nikolajsen, Larsen, Holstein, et al., 2024). For estrangement to be present both parts are necessary. The phenomenon has been described as

chronic, meaning that parties involved experience continued preoccupation with the estranged relationship (Agllias, 2011b). This condition can be understood via the theory of intergenerational ambivalence (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998), arguing that the experience of estrangement and the ways to manage it might involve an array of contradictory feelings and behaviors.

The intergenerational ambivalence perspective proposes that contradictory sentiments in the intergenerational relationship exist simultaneously and that ambivalence should be understood as a fundamental feature in intergenerational relationships (Lüscher & Hoff, 2013; Pillemer & Lüscher, 2003). Family members might for example hold simultaneous feelings of aversion and affection towards each other or be torn between a sense of companionship and individuality. The intergenerational ambivalence perspective has found special applicability in research where focus is on tensions in the intergenerational relationship, e.g. research on caregiver burden in later life families (Pillemer et al., 2019; Pine & Steffen, 2019). Ambivalence might therefore also be appropriate as a starting point when analyzing how parents and adult children feel and react to estrangement.

Although pronounced ambivalence in intergenerational relationships is generally considered to be rare (Szydlik, 2023), there are reasons to assume that feelings of ambivalence could be prominent in cases of estrangement. This is because intergenerational relationships are important to most people and breaking the bond is likely to involve negative feelings evoked by conflict, feelings of regret, and a longing for reconciliation (Nikolajsen, Larsen, Holstein, et al., 2024). Thus, estrangement is believed to evoke simultaneous feelings of distance and of closeness, described as a central ambivalence dimension in the literature (Suitor et al., 2011).

Different sources support the subsumption of estrangement under the ambivalence perspective. The ambivalence of estrangement is for example evident in the phrase '*can't live with them and can't*

*live without them*' posited by Pillemer in his exploration of broken family relationships (Pillemer, 2020). In her contributions to estrangement research, Agllias concludes that the concept of estrangement tends to be encompassed by themes of conflict and ambivalence in research on intergenerational relations (Agllias, 2011a). In addition, her understanding of estrangement as a form of ambiguous loss inspired by Boss (Boss, 2009) is described as often resulting in family members holding two opposing attitudes simultaneously: One of possible reconciliation and the other of definitive loss (Agllias, 2011b). This results in a chronic state of ambiguity. Ambivalence has been observed where older parents simultaneously feel love and hate towards estranged children, oscillating between wishing them dead and wanting to regain close relationships (Agllias, 2011b). The definition of ambiguous loss is associated with ambivalence as it describes a condition of simultaneous physical absence and psychological presence. A recent study found ambivalence to be prevalent in older parents' sentiments towards estrangement from their children (Nikolajsen, Larsen, Holstein, et al., 2024). A substantial proportion of estranged older parents were found to have simultaneous feelings of sorrow and relief in relation to estrangement from adult children. These dichotomies contained by estrangement might extend to include the ways older parents cope with it. Thoughts, feelings, and actions related to estrangement can be understood as expressions of orientations toward reconciliation or permanent termination of the relationship.

### *Coping with estrangement*

Coping is a cognitive or behavioral response to a situation or condition that is appraised as personally significant and threatening (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping is initiated when important goals are violated or at stake (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Appraisals are characterized by what are often intense negative emotions, and coping responses are thus initiated in an emotional environment. The major aim of coping is to eliminate these stressful or negative emotions.

Estrangement has been shown to evoke negative emotions such as sorrow, anger, and bitterness in

estranged parents (Agllias, 2011a; Nikolajsen, Larsen, Holstein, et al., 2024). With the experience of estrangement being akin to loss and bereavement, the *dual process model of coping with bereavement* (DPM) (Stroebe & Schut, 2010) presents a promising framework for understanding coping with estrangement. The comparison between coping with estrangement and bereavement extends to the consequences of both phenomena, as both have been found to be associated with declining mental health (Nikolajsen, Larsen, Christoffersen, et al., 2024; Stroebe et al., 2007; Vedder et al., 2022), prompting the theme of coping to be a particularly relevant venue for research. Like estrangement, bereavement places emotional stress on the individual that can be managed in a range of ways, and the DPM describes a framework to explain this process. The DPM defines two categories of adaptation to the bereavement process: A loss-orientation and a restoration-orientation (Stroebe & Schut, 2010), a dichotomy essentially involving ambivalence. *Loss-oriented coping* refers to the process commonly associated with grief, where the bereaved person is preoccupied with feelings of sorrow and longing. *Restoration-oriented coping* describes the process associated with moving on. Here the bereaved person is redefining life without the deceased person, for example by replanning the future, or rethinking one's identity. The DPM defines adaptive coping as involving oscillation between loss- and restoration-orientations.

This dichotomy of coping can be translated into how estranged persons might experience and try to handle the estrangement. However, whereas bereavement is a conclusive phenomenon with no way to reverse the situation, estrangement remains unresolved as the possibility of reunification persists. This means that coping with estrangement cannot go through the same processes from loss-oriented coping on to restoration-oriented coping (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Instead, estrangement is a chronic stressor, containing a continued ambivalence in coping. Coping with estrangement could consist of the dichotomy and possible oscillation between orientations towards 1. continued insistence on the relationship and of possible reconciliation and 2. accepting the loss and moving

on. This forms a framework of two contradictory categories or orientations in how older parents cope with estrangement: *A reconciliation orientation* and an *acceptance orientation*.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative methodology was used to explore how older parents cope with intergenerational estrangement. Data for the study consisted of in-depth interviews as the means to gain insights into older parents' thoughts, feelings, and actions regarding estrangement.

### *Participants*

The study utilized a purposive sampling procedure (Campbell et al., 2020). A total of 15 participants were selected from a pool of 60 estranged older parents 75+ years who, while participating in a cross-sectional study of the associations between intergenerational estrangement and mental health (Nikolajsen, Larsen, Christoffersen, et al., 2024), had consented to be contacted for qualitative interviews. Participants were selected to attain width on the variables: Gender, age, marital status, mental health, and estrangement circumstances, with the aim of achieving a participant-composition that represented different perspectives and experiences.

The selection strategy resulted in the following composition of participants: Eight mothers and seven fathers, and a mean age of 83, ranging from 77 to 90 years of age. Seven were divorced, four were currently married, seven were widowed and 11 lived alone. Four were estranged from all their children, six were estranged from one of more children and five from two, three or four of more children. Estrangement durations ranged from 2 to 22 years with a mean of 10.7. Most parents considered the child to have initiated the estrangement. One father had initiated the estrangement, one mother believed that both herself and the child initiated it, and one mother did not know.

Assessing scores of mental health (Nikolajsen, Larsen, Christoffersen, et al., 2024), five had good

mental health, four moderate, and six poor mental health. Poor mental health participants notably scored high on loneliness.

### *Interview procedure*

The interviews were carried out by the first author in 2023 and followed a brief interview guide with a few opening questions to ensure that essential themes were covered (Bell & Waters, 2014). Questions were open-ended and aimed to explore meanings and subjective experiences of participants in relation to estrangement. No direct questions about coping or ambivalence were included to allow for these themes to occur in the conversation if relevant.

### *Ethical considerations*

Conversations about painful experiences such as estrangement risk evoking substantial emotional pain (McGrath et al., 2019). This presents the interviewer with the dilemma of risking a transgression of emotional comfort to retrieve in-depth information about a phenomenon. Adding to this predicament, the poor physical and/or mental health of some participants made considerations about the duration and structure of interviews salient (Wenger et al., 2003). To circumvent these dilemmas, measures were taken to ensure that the participants felt safe and comfortable with the situation. Measures included initial phone calls to build rapport by thoroughly informing participants about the interview process, what participation entailed, and to clarify whether special considerations were needed (McGrath et al., 2019). All interviews were conducted in the participants' home and structured in a manner to leave them in a calm state of mind. This involved ensuring sufficient time to withdraw from painful subjects, to continuously ask permission to talk about private or shameful themes, respect boundaries when expressed, and to ensure that participants were content and satisfied with the interviews before ending.



### *Data and analytical methodology*

Interviews had a mean length of one and a half hour, ranging from one to two hours. The interviews were transcribed into a total of 554 pages, coded, and analyzed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software (Zamawe, 2015).

Thematic analysis was conducted where transcripts are coded into themes of meaning (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Themes emerge from interview data when statements across participants and situations address the research questions in specific ways. Thematic analysis is useful to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns in qualitative data. It is unbound by specific theoretical positions and is thus a useful tool for explorations of potential fit between phenomena and theoretical ideas; in this case the intergenerational ambivalence perspective and the DPM. Thematic analysis offers flexibility in ways to identify patterns across data to represent participants' lived experiences and perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Data was coded into coping themes when participants expressed thoughts, feelings, and behaviors concerning the estrangement. Extracts encompassing ambivalence themes were noted, and coping themes were successively interpreted in relation to reconciliation- or acceptance-oriented responses. Participants are assigned a participant-number (P 1-15) to distinguish between them.

### **Findings**

Analysis of data from the 15 in-depth interviews found various coping responses to be present among participants. The DPM-inspired dual framework of reconciliation- versus acceptance-orientated coping responses proved useful, but insufficient, as *avoidant* coping responses emerged that did not fit the model. Ambivalence both in the appraisals of estrangement per se and implicit in participants' coping responses were observed.

*Reconciliation-oriented coping*

Reconciliation-oriented coping responses appeared when thoughts and behaviors were directed towards ultimately reestablishing contact. They were expressed in considerations about what had caused the estrangement to happen and direct or indirect actions to reverse it, with the coping related aim of reducing the emotional pain of estrangement. Three themes of reconciliation-oriented coping were identified: *Exploring the past*, *repeated contact attempts*, and *seeking information about children*.

*Exploring the past*

Exploration of past events can be considered a coping response, as it serves to explain the estrangement, or to understand the estranged child, which could help in possible reconciliation. Contrary to the frustration of not knowing the reasons behind the emotional pain accompanying estrangement, these explanations offer parents solace. Episodes from the parents' own upbringing are presented as arguments for the way they managed parenting their own children and for shortcomings that could explain why their children cut contact with them. One 89-year-old widowed mother, estranged for 11 years from one of three sons, explains how she thinks her own childhood failed to provide her with the necessary social skills to meet the emotional needs of her son when he was a child:

*(P 7) I'm from the kind of family where you don't talk. You don't get too close ... I remember one thing that makes me very sad. Once he came home from school with a bouquet of flowers for me that he had picked on the way. He just sat there on the sofa looking at me. I should have given him the greatest hug, but I didn't. I had not learned that from my own mother, so I don't possess the social skills.*

The mother develops a hypothesis where relational histories explain some of the turmoil in her present relationship with her estranged son. Although regret is evident from this extract, causes are

placed in her own childhood and upbringing, making her feel less guilty in the present. For other parents, ideas about busy life circumstances in the estranged child's childhood are prevalent. An 83-year-old widowed mother, estranged for seven years from one of four children, presents the following idea:

*(P 6) I was 40 when I got him. I was busy at the academy. Maybe that is where the neglect began. That I didn't have time for him. Years later I remember him saying: 'Mom, you didn't have time for me, you placed me on the countertop and fed me like a baby bird, you weren't calm'. It is small things like this that caused him to cut ties, I think. Of course, he believes I have neglected him and not cared for him like he does for his son now.*

Likewise, a 90-year-old father, estranged for 14 years from one of two children, explains:

*(P 13) Of course I do know that I was not there enough when he was little. We have discussed that a lot, my wife and I. I blame myself for that. That I wasn't there.*

Locating the origins of the estrangement in the past offers the parents an ambivalence of guilt (Phillips, 2022). While blame is put on themselves, the time that has passed renders them unable to change it. Yet exploring the past seeks to provide them with an understanding of their child's perspective that could be helpful in efforts of reconciliation.

An offshoot of explorations of the past appeared in parents' defense of their parenting. Contrary to the examples of self-blame, parents also upheld ideas of themselves as 'good enough' parents. Generally recognizing that things were not perfect in their children's upbringing, some of them simultaneously felt the need to defend themselves and their parenting choices. This served to preserve positive feelings of self-worth, and to argue against the justification of the estrangement.

A 78-year-old divorced mother, estranged from her only child for two years, recounts:

*(P 8) I think she is being hyperbolic. That we have been bad parents ... There were no limits to how awful we have been. I won't accept that depiction. She had a totally normal childhood. We weren't perfect, but neither is she towards her children.*

Ambivalence emerged in explorations of the past as some parents simultaneously uphold positive depictions of their parenthood while blaming their own parenting for causing the estrangement. Still, explorations of the past were oriented toward better understanding children with the ultimate aim of achieving reconciliation.

#### *Repeated contact attempts*

A direct reconciliation-oriented coping response was parents' attempts to reconnect with a child by trying to contact them. This response involved specific action to mend the estrangement. Actions include writing letters or emails, making phone calls, and unannounced visits. Some actions appeared more intrusive than others, but all were done with the intention to talk things through and settle the conflict. Although attempts proved futile, they had secondary coping rationales by helping parents affirm that they had done something to remedy the situation and confirm a sense of parenthood. For an 85-year-old mother, estranged for four years from one of her two children, it was important to reach out regularly:

*(P 4) I have written letters, offering to pay for them to visit me for a few days, but I don't hear back. Just so we could have a talk ... I have also written emails. It is the only thing I can do, but I don't know if they receive them. I think they have blocked me there as well. I'm totally blocked ... Every time I call him it says the number is unavailable, and he is not on Facebook ... They return presents I send for birthdays and Christmas.*

This mother's estrangement was comparatively short, which could explain her eager attempts to reconnect. Yet she continued with the hope that her son would at some point be ready and able to resolve the conflict. This continuation induced hope and the recognition that something was done, which reduced the discouragement of the estrangement. For the 85-year-old-mother, the need to transmit her thoughts and feelings to her son even extended beyond her death:

*(P 4) I have written many letters. They are placed all around in different drawers. It is so he can read about how I have been when I'm no longer here.*

A pattern of gradually diminishing contact attempts emerges. Just after the estrangements, contact attempts seem to be made quite frequently. But as time goes by, they become less frequent. With 10 years or more gone, parents usually reported that their attempts to reconnect with the child stopped some time ago. Still, it was important for parents to be able to say that they had done something to reconcile. Feelings of ambivalence were also prominent here. Parents were torn between their need for connectedness with adult children and a sense of obligation to respect the wishes of children to not be in contact. This contradiction strikes at the core of the ambivalence between reconciliation and acceptance and was expressed in the following extract from an 81-year-old father, estranged from one of two children. His estrangement had lasted 10 years, and when asked if he would try to contact his son he replied:

*(P 14) Why should I try to contact and annoy them again? I have done that many times, and without success. I don't like getting hurt. But really, if an opportunity arose, I would use it. It is not like I wouldn't try.*

Not all parents in this study made contact attempts following the estrangement. For those who did, however, actions taken to reconcile were at the forefront as a strategy to handle the situation.

#### *Seeking information about children*

To seek information about an estranged child is a coping response that can be categorized as reconciliation-oriented because it implies continued acquisition of details in the child's life, making the child appear closer, as well as providing preparations for a potential reconnection. The idea of estrangement as an ambiguous loss takes on relevance here, as this coping response preserves psychological presence in the absence of physical contact (Agllias, 2016; Boss & Ishii, 2015). Knowing about a child's life appeases the sense of loss and confirms the sense of parenthood.

Three main avenues for acquiring information about estranged children were found. Most prominently, parents asked other family members, grandchildren, or other children who had regular contact with the estranged child. Secondly, parents used the internet, looked for addresses on Google Maps, and scrutinized social media. Lastly, parents who either did not have access to the two other avenues or did not find them satisfactory, sought information by going to the child's home or workplace. A divorced father made occasional trips to his estranged daughter's address. He was 78 years old and estranged from all his five children. The estrangement from his oldest daughter happened nine years earlier and had special significance as it involved lost contact with his only grandchild.

*(P 12) I don't contact them but drive out there and park far away. Then I walk down this trail. Their house is right at the very end of it. I sneak around nice and quietly, just to see if they still live there. If I could see my granddaughter. I haven't seen anyone, and they haven't seen me, but I can ascertain that they still live there.*

Parents used the information to try to piece together a picture of how the estranged child were doing. Confirmations that they were doing well offered solace. The 89-year-old mother estranged from one of three sons used all three information avenues in her meticulously planned approach to getting information about her son:

*(P 7) I still go to eat at his restaurant. It is totally obvious whether he's running the kitchen that day. When it's the other chefs the food is good, but when it's him the food is outstanding ... I have my little collection of information and I keep saying, 'If he is having a good life then it is all good' ... I can use the internet, so I know what his house is worth. You know, it is a mixture of a little here and a little there.*

*Acceptance-oriented coping*

Acceptance-orientated coping responses directly or indirectly worked against reconciliation. Instead, parents sought to legitimize the estrangement, to project guilt and responsibility onto others, or to convince themselves of the inevitability of estrangement. This rendered the parent powerless to change the situation. Acceptance-oriented coping responses were utilized with the intention of coming to terms with the estrangement, understanding that it is final, and that nothing should or could be done to change it. Akin to restoration-oriented coping, in the DPM model (Stroebe & Schut, 2010) the fundamental sentiment builds on the necessity of accepting the loss and moving on without the deceased or estranged person in one's life. Four themes of acceptance-oriented coping response were identified: *Pride, projecting responsibility, financial retribution, and coming to terms with estrangement.*

*Pride*

Pride was found as an attitude that kept parents from reaching out to their children. As a coping response, pride can preserve self-esteem and prevent the risk of humiliation that rejection could imply. Pride was thus especially present in parent's opinions on potential future contact. Many parents felt hurt by what they considered wrongdoings on the part of their children. Consequently, they believed that the child should initiate contact. Furthermore, as evident from reconciliation-oriented coping responses, some parents had tried to get in contact several times already. Now caught in the ambivalence of continuation or termination of efforts to establish contact, pride argues against risking more rejections. An 86-year-old widowed mother who had been estranged from three of her four children for 22 years, explicitly stated how pride and stubbornness meant that she would not make efforts to reconnect:

*(P 1) I won't contact them. I've become stubborn and I think I have the right to say that they should mind their own business and I will mind mine. But it is rough, especially now during Christmas. It is truly awful. Sometimes I just want to jump in front of a train ... I have attended therapy for eight sessions now. We discuss why I don't reach out to them. No, it is my pride. I won't do it. I think they have been so cruel to me, so I won't do it.*

Like her, other parents believed that their children had acted in a way so despicable that they themselves should not try to initiate contact. Rather, they wanted their children to apologize before they would even consider talking to them again. But as the extract suggests, this sentiment does not come without elements of doubt and frustration, as desires for reconciliation sometimes hide behind the pride.

#### *Projecting responsibility*

Anger was a common feeling expressed by the parents. The feeling was especially prominent among fathers (Nikolajsen, Larsen, Holstein, et al., 2024), but also present among mothers, in combination with feelings of sorrow and frustration. Feelings of anger were primarily directed towards the estranged child. However, patterns of blaming others for the estrangement were also evident. Projecting responsibility onto third parties as an acceptance-oriented coping response manifested in two ways. Firstly, estrangement from sons with blame being put on daughters-in-law, and secondly, divorced parents putting blame on ex-spouses due to suspicions about the other parent's active role in the estrangement. This coping response relieved tensions in the direct relationship with the estranged child, making the estrangement less painful; however, it also implied relocating agency away from the parents themselves.

In-law relationships have been found to cause tensions in families (Joiner et al., 2023). This is especially true for relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law (Ayers et al., 2022). Statements from parents in this study are in line with such findings, as daughters-in-law were



portrayed as complicit in estrangements. One 79-year-old divorced father estranged for 22 years from two of three children recounted a pivotal confrontation with his daughter-in-law:

*(P 11) My son's wife was hysterical. She worked at a psych ward, but she should have been a patient herself. One time we apparently bought the wrong toy car for our grandson, he was six. When she saw it, she tore it from his hands. He was too small, she said. Suddenly she lost it and said, 'Get out of my house, get out of my house'. My son just stood there glaring. He was the biggest wimp I've ever seen.*

Other parents speculated how their daughter-in-law might have manipulated their son away from them, as is the case for an 81-year-old father estranged from one of two children, when he explained his and his wife's assessment:

*(P 14) It is called being brainwashed, influenced to have that opinion. It is her thoughts. It must be the way she says ... We actually think he had to make a choice; either her or us ... So, we are inclined to give her a large portion of the responsibility. She is not mentally able to handle not being in charge. She cannot take criticism.*

As this father put it, he and his wife were convinced that their daughter-in-law bore responsibility for the estrangement. Whether this is true or not, the responsibility for the estrangement was projected away from the parents themselves and their child, in turn making them less able to take actions toward reconciliation.

Ex-spouses were also blamed for the estrangement. Research has found that estranged parents are more likely to also be divorced (Coleman, 2021; Nikolajsen, Larsen, Christoffersen, et al., 2024). In this study, the theme of divorce extends to the way parents cope with estrangement. Estranged from her only child for 12 years, a 78-year-old divorced mother is convinced that her ex-husband influenced their son to withdraw from her:

*(P 10) It is unfair. It is freaking hogwash. What the he\*\* is he up to, that stupid kid. To just buy whatever his father tells him. Of course, he is a bitter man because he never stopped loving me. That poor man.*

The estrangement here is portrayed as the ex-husband's punishment of his former wife.

#### *Financial retribution*

A theme with special salience in older age was parents denying estranged children their inheritance. Some parents resorted to this material retribution as a coping response to regain control. Their rationale was to restore a sense of justice – no contact, no money. In some cases, this could be interpreted as punishment. In others, the rationale was expressed as denying children undeserved rewards.

As a coping response, exclusion from inheritance meant that action was taken to preserve agency and self-esteem. The acceptance-orientation is here symbolic, as it finalizes the cut bond between generations. Considerations regarding inheritance were common among the parents in this study. Four (of 15) parents had in fact taken legal measures to deny inheritance for estranged children. For one 79-year-old divorced father estranged from two of three children, not leaving his estranged children anything was important:

*(P 11) If I could remove them totally, I would. Why the he\*\* should they get the money when they want nothing to do with me? I can't see any sense in that ... I would almost rather flush it down the drain than give it to them.*

Whereas this father applies a quid pro quo logic to his thoughts of inheritance, for a 77-year-old divorced mother, estranged from one of three daughters for 17 years, the issue was more about a sense of justice for her other children. In her view, conflicts around money caused the estrangement in the first place:

*(P 5) In my opinion she has already gotten what's hers after me. She has taken that herself. So, I've begun giving to the other two. And I have it on paper that she will get as little as possible.*

Parents feel unfairly punished by their estranged children. To cut the child off from inheriting helps parents cope by restoring a sense of justice. However, it also terminates the material bond, making it acceptance-oriented coping.

#### *Coming to terms with estrangement*

With years past since last contact, some parents begin to discount the possibility of reconciliation. As a result, a sentiment of the necessity of acceptance sets in. With no apparent way to change the situation they reach the conclusion that they must come to terms with the estranged relationship. However, while this coping response might seem final, thoughts of acceptance evoked ambivalence as they seemed unable to let go completely. For an 87-year-old widowed mother who lost contact with her two children following the death of her third adult child 11 years before, accepting the situation is understood as the only alternative. However, the estrangement continues to haunt her conscience:

*(P 9) I don't think of it daily. It is something that exists latently somewhere. Yes, that was it, life is over, and it could have been different, but not with my abilities. My strength didn't suffice for it to be different. It is out of my reach to do it differently. For that I am sorry.*

The ambivalence of ambiguous loss is evident here. Also expressing ambiguous loss, an 81-year-old father estranged from his son compares the estrangement to bereavement, almost wishing that this had been the case:

*(P 14) It means less and less. It's like if he died in a motorcycle accident. Then we would have been spared all of this, but then he wouldn't be alive. But he is, at least we think so, and we are happy about that.*

The ambivalence of not being able to let go completely yet thinking it necessary to do so is also clear in the following statement from an 89-year-old widowed mother estranged from one of three sons. She had deliberately decided that the only way forward was to accept and move on:

*(P 7) Well, that was that. I still want to cry inside, but a long life teaches you something. As my father used to say, 'If you keep picking at the ulcer it is sure to start bleeding'. It is the way it is, and you can't change it. You must accept it. That is the conclusion I've reached.*

To accept their loss presented parents with the dilemma of letting go and still needing to hold on. Even among parents in this study with acceptance as their prevailing sentiment, doubts exist. Yet, the assumption of the impossibility of reconciliation might be true, making the dilemma a chronic challenge.

#### *Avoidant coping*

Not all coping found in this study corresponded to the dichotomous distinction between reconciliation and acceptance orientations. Parents also expressed responses of avoidance where the issue is circumvented, neglected, or ignored. Two themes of avoidant coping were found: *Avoidance* and *defensive ignorance*.

#### *Avoidance*

Avoidance is a well-known phenomenon in the coping literature (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004), and often associated with dysfunction and negative outcomes (Marchlewska et al., 2022).

Avoidance was present as a coping response in the interviews when parents refrained from thinking of or acting upon the estrangement and instead pushed it aside and diminished its significance. Fear of rejection and the stressful experience of processing the estranged relationship promoted this coping response. Looking back, one mother estranged from both of her living children wondered why she did not try to contact them in the years following the estrangement. Reflecting on this, she

is reminded of her fear of their judgement:

*(P 9) I don't know why I didn't try to contact them. I don't know. I've obviously thought a lot about it ... I could have done it, but I didn't. I let it slide. I thought it was the natural thing to do. Our history was over, and they should not be bound to me ... I'm scared to see them, it's too much for me. I don't know how they feel and what they would say. All the things I've done wrong? I would crumple, just now when I've managed to pull through.*

Like other parents in this study, this mother tried, and to some extent successfully, to repress her thoughts about contacting her children, brushing the estrangement off as 'natural'. Yet, when confronting it, she becomes aware of the fears associated with the prospect of seeing her children again.

#### *Defensive ignorance*

A type of avoidant coping response specific to estrangement is a not-knowing stance taken by estrangees when asked why the estrangement happened. Coined by Pillemer in his exposition of family estrangement, *defensive ignorance* refers to a tendency among estrangees to abstain from deep reflections on the reasons behind the broken bond (Pillemer, 2020). Defensive ignorance is characterized by superficial expressions of bewilderment and confusion followed by myriads of potential and probable reasons for the estrangement. As a coping response, defensive ignorance safeguards parents from harsh realizations, sometimes regarding their own role in the conflict. Defensive ignorance thus becomes the default position to be taken when rumination becomes overwhelming. In the following extracts, defensive ignorance is expressed by different parents in this study.

79-year-old divorced father estranged from two of three children:

*(P 11) I'm angry. I really am. I simply don't see why it is like this. I never got it.*

86-year-old widowed mother estranged from three of four children:

*(P 1) If you knew how much I've pondered over what it could be. Have I said or done something wrong? But I can't point anything specific out and say, 'that is why'.*

81-year-old father estranged from two of three children:

*(P 3) I think about it all the time, why won't they come home? Why has this happened? Why did it go so far?*

85-year-old widowed mother estranged from one of two children:

*(P 4) I don't know what caused it. If my daughter-in-law is jealous or whatever it is.*

In the wake of statements like these, the parents went on to elaborate on what had happened, how different people were involved, or how the family dynamics caused the estrangement, as can be seen from extracts in other coping responses. Even when plausible reasons were presented and argued for, sometimes supported by numerous exemplifying recollections of events, parents tended to regress to this not-knowing stance of defensive ignorance.

### *Ambivalences*

Ambivalences were pronounced among most parents. Oscillations between all three orientations – reconciliation, acceptance and avoidance – were found. Of the 15 parents, 11 were found to utilize all three orientations and 14 to utilize both reconciliation and acceptance.

Some statements were in themselves saturated with ambivalence, for example in considerations on a potential future relationship with the estranged child. A 79-year-old widowed father, estranged for 22 years from the two oldest of his three children, exemplified ambivalence in reflections on what he wishes for in the future:

*(P 11) On the one hand, I wish to reconcile with them, but on the other they can kiss my a\*\*. They have done that for long already. But I have to say that I have become more doubtful with age ... I'm not that keen on seeing them, but I might become curious, give it a chance, and say 'let's meet'.*

Caught between ideas of reconciliation and the psychological rift resulting from the years of no contact, this father both expressed a wish for and not wanting contact in the future. Peculiarly, and adding to the ambivalence, the length of time gone by simultaneously draws him closer and pushes him further away from thoughts of reconciliation. Another 81-year-old father who lived with his wife and had been estranged for six years from one of four children, his only daughter, also reveals ambivalence when contemplating future contact:

*(P 15) I want to say that I don't want to see her again. She has been vile towards me. I know it is an ugly thing to say, I know that. But I don't want to see her. It is so ugly the way she acted, what she has done to me, and I don't even know what I have done to her. If it was to happen, she must come to me. And if she came, I would definitely embrace her. That is for sure. I would, and then we shouldn't talk any more about it.*

Ambivalence is distinct in this extract, as the father goes directly from arguing for his unwillingness to reconnect with his daughter to express that he would undoubtedly embrace her if she came to him. Both reconciliation- and acceptance-orientations are present in both extracts. That is, the ambivalence of a simultaneous presence of thoughts and ideas that promote future contact while also arguing against it.

## **Discussion**

This study examined how older parents cope with being estranged from adult children.

Estrangement is defined here as a cessation of contact due to conflict – which in itself can be considered a coping response (Birditt et al., 2009), as the estranger uses the cutoff to attain distance from an unpleasant situation. Intergenerational estrangement is, however, rarely initiated by parents (Blake, 2015; Nikolajsen, Larsen, Christoffersen, et al., 2024), and the question of how parents cope with being estranged was thus addressed in this study.

A total of nine different responses of coping with estrangement were identified. Three coping responses were classified as *reconciliation-oriented*, meaning that they indirectly or directly aimed to resolve the estrangement. Parents would try to gain insights into the causes or family dynamics that led to the estrangement and seek out information about estranged children's present lives, sometimes covertly by going to children's homes. Sometimes parents attempted to contact estranged children, leading to ambivalences due to the risk of rejection. Reconciliation-oriented coping responses could ease negative emotions by evoking feelings of closeness, parenthood, and hope. Four coping responses were classified as *acceptance-oriented*, meaning that they worked towards continued termination of the relationship. These included blaming others, most often daughters in law and ex-spouses, of the estrangement; pride, often evoked by feelings of victimhood; and realizations that they had to come to terms with and accept the estrangement. Some parents also took steps to deny estranged children their inheritance, which also evoked ambivalence as hopes for reconciliation coexisted with actions to terminate material bonds.

The *DPM inspired dual framework*, which describes coping responses as either reconciliation- or acceptance-oriented, proved useful. Two avoidant coping responses were, however, also found, leading to the argument that the dichotomous framework is insufficient to fully understand how older parents cope with estrangement. Whereas themes of avoidance did not fit the initial theoretical proposition in this study, *avoidant coping* has been described in relation to interpersonal tensions (Birditt & Fingerman, 2005; Birditt et al., 2009). Avoidant coping seeks to circumvent the problem, ignore, or downplay its significance and is neither acceptance- nor reconciliation-oriented *per se*. Avoidant coping has been found to increase with age, as older adults utilize such responses to a greater extent than younger adults when they experience interpersonal tensions (Birditt et al., 2009), and because parents, in accordance with the intergenerational stake hypothesis, have been found to downplay problems and conflicts with adult children (Birditt et al., 2015; Giarrusso et al., 2004).



Avoidant coping, especially in the form of *defensive ignorance* as identified in this study, should therefore be considered when exploring how older parents relate to estrangement.

### *Ambivalences in coping*

The presupposition that ambivalences in thoughts and actions would be salient in relation to coping with estrangement was supported by the findings in this study. Like other interpersonal conflicts involving close intergenerational relationships, estrangements evoked contradictory feelings among the older parents that would prove discernable in how they coped with it. Rather than having a unidimensional focus on how to reconcile with children, for example by contacting them, parents could be stricken by feelings of pride, sometimes leading them to abstain from taking action. Ambivalences were evident throughout in the different ways parents coped, and these ambivalences were captured by the reconciliation- and acceptance-orientation framework. The findings contribute to the literature on intergenerational ambivalence in later life by adding a specific ambivalence dimension to the discussion of what constitutes contradictory feelings and behaviors in intergenerational relationships.

### *Limitations*

There are limitations that impact the generalizability and reach of the study. Although in-depth interviewing is a suitable method of data-collection, the qualitative nature of the research questions means that the results cannot be considered exhaustive. Many other themes of coping are likely to emerge if the study were to be replicated with a different sample. Results are thus limited to serve as representations of coping expressed by a specific sample of older parents.

Another limitation concerns the lack of normative implications that can be derived from results.

Rationales behind coping research are assumptions that certain coping responses can be more effective than others when it comes to enhance emotional well-being and address the problems that

cause distress. Such knowledge can be used to design interventions to help people cope more effectively with stress in their lives (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). To determine the effectiveness of the three categories of coping in this study is, however, not possible. Partly because long-term effects of the different responses remain unknown, and partly because short-term emotional benefits are too complicated to discern. It can, for example, be assumed that effective reconciliation-oriented coping would result in actual reconciliation, but this would fail to acknowledge the potential emotional benefits in retaining hope if reconciliation does not occur, and at the same time does not consider the possible emotional pain associated with potential conflict if reconciliation does occur. Whereas research on coping with intergenerational tensions in adulthood segregates coping strategies into destructive versus constructive, i.e. 'good or bad' (Birditt et al., 2009), normative judgements do not fit the coping responses that emerge through the analysis in the current study. This impedes the reach of the study, limiting results to descriptions of different coping responses.

### *Implications*

As demonstrated in other studies, estrangement from adult children is an emotionally painful experience (Agllias, 2011b; Agllias, 2016; Holm, 2019). Thoughts about the relationship and the lives of estranged children continue to haunt parents in later life and to cause rumination. Even after many years since last contact, they express how their mind drifts to thoughts on the conflict and speculations on their child's life. This renders coping a relevant topic on the issue of intergenerational estrangement in later life.

To our knowledge, this is the first study to identify how older parents cope with being estranged from children. The study adds to the new and growing literature on intergenerational estrangement and provides new understandings about what seems to be a growing problem in the modern family. The study furthermore demonstrates how ambivalences permeate older parents' coping responses.

Contradictory feelings make coping with estrangement complicated to navigate, but the identification and recognition of ambivalence can guide clinical interventions aimed at helping to alleviate the emotional turmoil of intergenerational estrangement. While the study does not give answers to the effectiveness of coping responses, it is discussed how different coping responses can be oriented towards reconciliation on the one hand and coming to terms with the estrangement on the other hand. This can be of importance because coping skills are known to not benefit from psychotherapy (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004), but mapping and identifying coping thoughts and behaviors could be helpful in a clinical setting to better align these with the conscious goals of estranged individuals.

### *Conclusion*

This study of older parents' experiences of estrangement from children concludes that coping with intergenerational estrangement can largely, but not completely, be understood as reconciliation- or acceptance-oriented, and that these contradictory orientations can exist simultaneously. Future research on the dynamics of estrangement could benefit from the intergenerational ambivalence perspective as theoretical starting point, hereby imbedding the research field in an existing theoretical frame developed to describe intergenerational relations in adulthood.

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**Declaration of co-authorship (study paper I)<sup>1</sup>**

Date: 24/6/24

This declaration concerns the following article/manuscript:

Title:	Estrangement Between Older Parents and Adult Children: Associations with Mental Health
Authors:	Nikolajsen, A., Larsen, L., Christoffersen, M., Holstein, B. E., & Swane, C. E.

The article/manuscript is:

- Published, state full reference:
- Accepted, state journal:
- Invited for revision, state journal: *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*.
- Submitted
- In preparation

Date of the current version of the manuscript, if not published or accepted: 24/06/24

Please fill out Table 1 regarding contribution to the manuscript for all authors. The respective author has contributed to the elements:

- A. Research idea: Identifying, developing, specifying, and formulating the overarching research question and aim.
- B. Theory: Organizing theoretical perspectives, developing arguments and hypotheses, specifying theoretical model.
- C. Research design: Developing and planning design for test or exploration of the research question.

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<sup>1</sup> Attribution of authorship should be based on criteria a-d adopted from the [Vancouver guidelines](#) (see also [rules and guidelines from Aarhus University](#)) and all individuals who meet these criteria should be recognized as authors. The co-author has contributed:

- a) to the conception or design of the work, or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work, *and*
- b) drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content, *and*
- c) to the final approval of the version to be published, *and*
- d) agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

- D. Data collection: Preparing and organizing data collection, data collection, preparing data for analysis and storage.
- E. Data analysis: Application of empirical techniques to analyze or synthesize study data including providing support for interpretations such as visualizations etc.
- F. Writing: Drafting and revising manuscript presenting the research idea and results

of this article/manuscript as follows:

- 4 Has essentially delivered this part.
- 3 Major contribution
- 2 Equal contribution
- 1 Minor contribution
- 0 Did not contribute to this part.
- N/A Not relevant or not applicable

**Table 1. Individual contributions and signature of each co-author<sup>1</sup>**

Author	Extent of contribution (4-0) per element (A.-F.)						Signature of the author <sup>2</sup>
	A. Research Idea	B. Theory	C. Research Design	D. Data Collection	E. Data Analysis	F. Writing	
Nikolajsen, A.	4	4	4	4	4	4	<i>Andreas Nikolajsen</i>
Larsen, L.	3	2	3	1	3	1	Confirmed by email
Christoffersen, M.	1	1	3	1	3	1	Confirmed by email
Holstein, B. E.	3	2	3	1	3	2	Confirmed by email
Swane, C. E.	3	3	2	3	1	3	Confirmed by email

<sup>1</sup>More rows can be added for additional authors.

<sup>2</sup>All authors must confirm the declaration either by signature or email.

If relevant, you may add more information on the work and collaboration such as open science practices or more detailed specifications of authors' contributions here:

**Declaration of co-authorship (study paper II)<sup>2</sup>**

Date: 24/6/24

This declaration concerns the following article/manuscript:

Title:	Sorrow and Ambivalence of Intergenerational Estrangement in Later Life
Authors:	Nikolajsen, A., Larsen, L., M., Holstein, B. E., & Swane, C. E.

The article/manuscript is:

- Published, state full reference:
- Accepted, state journal:
- Invited for revision, state journal:
- Submitted
- In preparation

Date of the current version of the manuscript, if not published or accepted: 24/06/24

Please fill out Table 1 regarding contribution to the manuscript for all authors. The respective author has contributed to the elements:

- G. Research idea: Identifying, developing, specifying, and formulating the overarching research question and aim.
- H. Theory: Organizing theoretical perspectives, developing arguments and hypotheses, specifying theoretical model.
- I. Research design: Developing and planning design for test or exploration of the research question.
- J. Data collection: Preparing and organizing data collection, data collection, preparing data for analysis and storage.
- K. Data analysis: Application of empirical techniques to analyze or synthesize study data including providing support for interpretations such as visualizations etc.

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- e) to the conception or design of the work, or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work, *and*
- f) drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content, *and*
- g) to the final approval of the version to be published, *and*
- h) agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

L. Writing: Drafting and revising manuscript presenting the research idea and results

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	A. Research Idea	B. Theory	C. Research Design	D. Data Collection	E. Data Analysis	F. Writing	
Nikolajsen, A.	4	4	4	4	4	4	<i>Andreas Nikolajsen</i>
Larsen, L.	3	2	3	1	3	1	Confirmed by email
Holstein, B. E.	3	2	3	1	3	2	Confirmed by email
Swane, C. E.	3	3	2	3	1	3	Confirmed by email

<sup>1</sup>More rows can be added for additional authors.

<sup>2</sup>All authors must confirm the declaration either by signature or email.

If relevant, you may add more information on the work and collaboration such as open science practices or more detailed specifications of authors' contributions here:

**Declaration of co-authorship (study paper III)<sup>3</sup>**

Date: 24/6/24

This declaration concerns the following article/manuscript:

Title:	How Older Parents Cope with Estrangement from Adult Children: A Qualitative Study
Authors:	Nikolajsen, A., Larsen, L., M., Holstein, B. E., & Swane, C. E.

The article/manuscript is:

- Published, state full reference:
- Accepted, state journal:
- Invited for revision, state journal: *Journal of Aging Studies*.
- Submitted
- In preparation

Date of the current version of the manuscript, if not published or accepted: 24/06/24

Please fill out Table 1 regarding contribution to the manuscript for all authors. The respective author has contributed to the elements:

- M. Research idea: Identifying, developing, specifying, and formulating the overarching research question and aim.
- N. Theory: Organizing theoretical perspectives, developing arguments and hypotheses, specifying theoretical model.
- O. Research design: Developing and planning design for test or exploration of the research question.

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- N/A Not relevant or not applicable

**Table 1. Individual contributions and signature of each co-author<sup>1</sup>**

Author	Extent of contribution (4-0) per element (A.-F.)						Signature of the author <sup>2</sup>
	A. Research Idea	B. Theory	C. Research Design	D. Data Collection	E. Data Analysis	F. Writing	
Nikolajsen, A.	4	4	4	4	4	4	<i>Andreas Nikolajsen</i>
Larsen, L.	2	2	1	1	1	1	Confirmed by email
Holstein, B. E.	2	2	1	1	1	2	Confirmed by email
Swane, C. E.	3	3	3	1	3	3	Confirmed by email

<sup>1</sup>More rows can be added for additional authors.

<sup>2</sup>All authors must confirm the declaration either by signature or email.

If relevant, you may add more information on the work and collaboration such as open science practices or more detailed specifications of authors' contributions here: