

ESTRANGEMENT

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ESTRANGEMENT

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Sociology, Philosophy, Family Studies

1. Core Definition

Estrangement is fundamentally defined as a state characterized by an increased distance--emotional, psychological, and often physical--from oneself or from others with whom a close connection previously existed. It marks a significant deterioration in the quality of an **interpersonal relationship**, moving from intimacy and frequent interaction to detachment, reduced contact, or even outright avoidance. This condition is not merely a transient disagreement but represents a profound **relational breakdown**, signifying a severance of bonds that were once sources of stability, affection, or shared identity. The estrangement process is typically gradual, evolving through phases of miscommunication, chronic conflict, and unresolved grievances, culminating in a conscious or tacit decision by one or both parties to withdraw connection and investment from the relationship, leading to profound feelings of loss and isolation.

In psychological terms, the core experience of estrangement involves a deep sense of **emotional distance** and alienation. While the dictionary definition often emphasizes a decrease in physical contact, the affective and cognitive components are central to its definition in social sciences. Individuals experiencing estrangement often report feelings of sadness, guilt, anger, and complex grief, mourning the loss of the relationship as it once was, even if the current distance is deemed necessary for self-protection or emotional stability. The distance created is often maintained by specific behaviors, such as limiting communication, withholding emotional information, and avoiding shared social spaces, thereby solidifying the structural separation between the parties involved.

Distinguishing estrangement from simple disagreement or temporary withdrawal is crucial; estrangement implies a persistent, sustained pattern of disengagement where the fundamental premise of closeness or mutual investment has been abandoned. This relational state contrasts sharply with conflict, where engagement, albeit negative, is still present. Estrangement is characterized by a lack of engagement--a state of apathy or active avoidance that suggests the relationship has moved past repair or that one party no longer deems the connection viable or beneficial. Understanding this definition requires recognizing both the subjective experience of distance felt by the individual and the objective observation of diminished behavioral contact between individuals or groups.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term "estrangement" derives from the Old French verb *estranger*, meaning 'to remove' or 'to

treat as a stranger,' which itself originates from the Latin *extraneare*, meaning 'to treat as an outsider' or 'to exclude.' This etymological root highlights the essential nature of the concept: the transformation of a familiar, intimate entity (a person, a group, or even oneself) into something unfamiliar, foreign, or other. Historically, the concept gained its greatest philosophical weight in the German tradition, where it became closely intertwined with the term **alienation** (German: *Entfremdung*).

The philosophical development of estrangement is inseparable from the work of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who used *Entfremdung* to describe the necessary process by which Spirit (or consciousness) externalizes itself into the world, thereby becoming momentarily foreign to itself before achieving higher self-awareness. However, it was Karl Marx who popularized and revolutionized the concept, applying it critically to socio-economic structures. In **Marxist theory**, estrangement, or alienation, describes the condition of workers under **capitalism** who are separated from the product of their labor, the act of production, their fellow workers, and ultimately, their own human essence (species-being). This provided a powerful framework for analyzing societal distance and the dehumanizing effects of industrial organization.

Following its philosophical and sociological grounding in the 19th century, the concept was integrated into psychology and family studies in the 20th century. Psychologically, estrangement shifted focus from the macro (society, labor) to the micro (family, self). Clinicians began to study how persistent psychological distress or trauma could lead to **self-estrangement**, where an individual feels disconnected from their own emotions, values, or bodily experiences. Concurrently, family researchers adopted the term to describe the painful and often protracted severance of ties between family members, particularly between parents and adult children, becoming a significant area of study in modern relationship dynamics due to its increasing prevalence in Western societies.

3. Forms of Estrangement

Estrangement manifests in various forms, depending on the locus of the disconnection, ranging from the highly personal to the broad societal level. Recognizing these distinct categories is essential for academic analysis and targeted intervention, as the underlying causes and emotional consequences often differ substantially across forms. The most commonly studied forms involve the self, the immediate family unit, and broader social institutions.

Self-Estrangement (Psychological Alienation): This internal form refers to a state where an individual feels disconnected or unfamiliar with their own identity, values, beliefs, or emotional life. It is often a symptom of severe psychological stress, trauma, or chronic dissociation. Self-estrangement involves a feeling of inauthenticity, where the individual acts contrary to their genuine self or feels unable to access their true feelings, often leading to deep existential

dissatisfaction or depression.

Familial Estrangement (Interpersonal Distance): This is perhaps the most widely recognized form, involving the voluntary or involuntary cessation of contact and communication between family members. This can occur between parents and children, siblings, or extended family members. Causes are diverse but frequently include chronic conflict, divergent values, perceived abuse or neglect, or disagreements over major life choices. Familial estrangement carries unique emotional weight due to the societal expectation of enduring kin bonds.

Social/Societal Estrangement: Operating at the macro level, this form describes the feeling of being disconnected from one's community, culture, political system, or society at large. Often linked back to Marx and Durkheim's concept of anomie, social estrangement occurs when individuals perceive that prevailing social norms, institutions (like the government or workplace), or cultural values are hostile, meaningless, or inaccessible to them, resulting in deep feelings of marginalization and powerlessness.

4. Psychological Dimensions

The psychological toll of experiencing or initiating estrangement is significant and complex, often mirroring the stages of **grief**, even when the estranged party is still alive. Unlike standard bereavement, however, estrangement involves chronic ambiguity; there is no clear social script for mourning a living relative or friend who remains absent. This ambiguity leads to protracted emotional distress, including recurrent feelings of profound sadness, isolation, shame, and intense, sometimes debilitating, **ambivalence** regarding the decision to maintain the distance or attempt reconciliation.

For the person initiating the estrangement (the "cutter off"), the decision is often preceded by years of emotional exhaustion, boundary violations, or abuse, meaning the resulting distance is a necessary protective measure. However, even when justified, the psychological consequences can involve guilt, internalized blame, and anxiety about social judgment, as family loyalty is highly valued culturally. For the person being estranged from (the "cut off"), the experience frequently involves shock, intense anger, obsessive rumination over the relationship's failings, and profound feelings of helplessness, often leading to significant **mental health implications** such as depression, anxiety disorders, or complicated grief reactions.

Furthermore, psychological research highlights the role of identity management in estrangement. For adult children who estrange themselves from their parents, the act is often an attempt to assert an autonomous, healthy self that the parental relationship stifled. Conversely, those who are estranged often struggle with fragmented identity, questioning their role and value within the family structure and society. Therapeutic intervention in these cases frequently focuses on processing the traumatic events that led to the split, managing the feelings of loss, and rebuilding a stable sense

of self outside the original relational framework, whether or not reconciliation is ultimately pursued.

5. Sociological and Philosophical Contexts

Sociologically, estrangement functions as a critical indicator of societal health and relational stability. As articulated by classical theorists, when large segments of the population feel estranged from key social institutions--the political process, the economic system, or collective moral frameworks--it suggests systemic failure. This macro-level disconnection can fuel social fragmentation, cynicism toward authority, and the rise of extremist groups, as individuals seek belonging and meaning outside conventional structures that have failed to validate them.

Philosophically, estrangement often intersects with concepts of authenticity and freedom. Existentialists, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, explored how modern life necessitates estrangement from traditional sources of meaning (religion, objective morality), forcing individuals into a state of ontological alienation. This perspective views estrangement not merely as a negative relational outcome but as an inevitable feature of human consciousness operating in a meaningless universe. The human struggle, therefore, is to confront this **existential isolation** and create subjective meaning, rather than falling back into 'bad faith' (inauthentic living).

The concept also informs studies in criminology and public health, where high levels of social estrangement--characterized by **social isolation**, lack of trust, and perceived marginalization--are correlated with negative outcomes such as higher rates of drug use, violence, and poor health outcomes. In this context, estrangement is a failure of social integration, demonstrating that the health of individuals is intrinsically linked to their perceived connectedness and acceptance within their immediate social environment and broader community.

6. Causes and Antecedents

The pathways leading to estrangement are highly individualized but frequently share common antecedents rooted in relational trauma, fundamental value conflicts, and cumulative failures of communication. Understanding these causes is critical for researchers attempting to map the trajectories of relational breakdown.

Abuse and Trauma: Histories of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, or severe neglect, are among the most common reasons for adult children to seek permanent distance from parental figures. Estrangement, in these cases, is not a choice made lightly but an act of self-preservation to escape ongoing psychological damage or chronic emotional unavailability.

Chronic Conflict and Communication Breakdown: Long-term patterns of hostile interaction, characterized by constant criticism, shaming, or gaslighting, erode trust and intimacy. When efforts to resolve these issues fail, the only remaining option for one or both parties is often withdrawal,

transforming **chronic conflict** into persistent estrangement.

Divergence of Core Values and Lifestyle Choices: Significant differences in deeply held beliefs (e.g., political, religious, moral) or disapproval of major life decisions (e.g., choice of partner, career, or sexuality) can lead to irreconcilable differences. When one party feels unable to accept or respect the other's fundamental choices, the relationship may fracture due to ideological distance.

Boundary Violations and Entitlement: Repeated disregard for personal boundaries, coupled with an entitled expectation of access or control, often drives the recipient of the violation to establish hard boundaries through physical and emotional distance. The inability of one party to respect the autonomy of the other is a potent precursor to formal estrangement.

7. Intervention and Resolution

Addressing estrangement requires sensitive and specialized therapeutic approaches, as traditional couples or **family therapy** models often presuppose a mutual desire for reconciliation, which may not exist. Intervention must first clarify whether the goal is **reconciliation** (restoring the relationship) or acceptance (processing the loss and moving forward healthily without the relationship).

When reconciliation is the goal, the process requires intensive work addressing the core issues--often historical abuse or severe conflict--with a high degree of emotional risk. Therapeutic techniques might involve structured communication exercises, learning conflict resolution skills, and often, individual therapy preceding joint sessions to ensure emotional preparedness. Mediation may be used to establish safe, contained communication parameters, particularly when legal or financial issues complicate the emotional distance.

Crucially, therapy for estrangement must validate the emotional experience of the "cutter off," acknowledging that distance might be a necessary, protective measure, rather than pathologizing the separation. For those suffering the loss, intervention focuses on grief counseling, helping the individual manage the ambiguous loss, reduce self-blame, and develop coping strategies that do not rely on the presence of the estranged party. Ultimately, successful resolution often involves achieving emotional peace with the reality of the distance, regardless of whether physical proximity is ever restored.

Further Reading

[Hegel, G. W. F. - Wikipedia Entry](#)

[Durkheim, É. - Anomie Concept](#)

[Mediation and Conflict Resolution](#)