

Family Estrangement and the Unseen Work of *Not Doing* Family

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Abstract

Family estrangement is a common yet understudied phenomenon, especially in the sociology of family and personal life. In societies where norms about ‘the family’ have moved on considerably to include non-biological kinship, blended families, chosen families and so on, an emphasis on close bonds and family rituals is often resilient creating stigma for those who are distant from family. In this article, I offer a sociological analysis of experiences of family estrangement reported via a qualitative survey, and explore three of the family practices involved in maintaining these ‘absent present’ relationships. This research contributes to and extends literature on family practices, family display and the notion of *doing family*, by looking at the family practices that are kept off display and the often unseen work that goes into *not doing* family. In doing so, it speaks to a growing interest in the constitutive role of absent, silenced or hidden aspects of social life, and attending questions about the impacts of such omissions.

Keywords

difficult relationships, emotion work, family estrangement, family practices, qualitative survey

Introduction

The term ‘family estrangement’ evokes a cut, an absence, a loss of relation. The etymology of ‘estrangement’, from the late 15th-century French ‘*estrangier*’ means ‘to alienate’, and from vulgar Latin ‘*extraneare*’, means ‘to treat as a stranger’. From these roots, estrangement infers an intimacy lived and then revoked. The flip of this relation is even starker in *family* estrangement, when the one we treat as a stranger is familiar in the strongest sense; or when the bond to break – ‘family ties’ – is considered given rather

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than chosen. While an estrangement from a friend brings grief, and is indeed also an under-acknowledged phenomenon, the ingrained ideas around familial relationships often make family estrangements especially fraught. One's kinship ties are considered irreplaceable. Even when such ties are frayed they remain part of a received biography and may carry a sense of obligation (Finch and Mason, 1993; Towers, 2023). A wider network of relatives keeps the estranged in proximity; and despite significant progress in challenging conservative family models (Bourdieu, 1996; Gabb, 2008; Smart, 2007; Weston, 1997), resilient norms about family – as close, perpetual and worthy of sacrifice – still elevate social pressures to preserve these relations, and generate stigma for those who cannot do so (Tyler, 2020). In this article, I offer a sociological analysis of experiences of family estrangement reported via a qualitative survey, and explore the often unseen family practices involved in maintaining these 'absent present' relationships (Gordon, 2008). This research speaks to a growing interest in the constitutive role of absent, silenced or inscrutable aspects of social life (Bottero, 2023; Gabb, 2011; Lahad and May, 2021; Scott, 2018; Smart, 2011), and attending questions about the impacts of omission.

There is an emerging interdisciplinary field around family estrangement, but surprisingly little sociology of family research into this topic (Hanks and Steinbach, 2023). The existing field is dominated by psychology, and a focus on therapeutic paths to reconciliation (Conti, 2015). This emphasis is evident in titles from books written by academics for people experiencing estrangement, for example *Rules of Estrangement: Why Adult Children Cut Ties and How to **Heal** the Conflict* (Coleman, 2021); *Fault Lines: Fractured Families and How to **Mend** Them* (Pillemer, 2020); *Reconnecting with Your Estranged Adult Child: Practical Tips and Tools to **Heal** Your Relationship* (Gilbertson, 2020); and *I Thought We'd Never Speak Again: The Road from Estrangement to **Reconciliation*** (Davis, 2003). However, with a stark commonality, many respondents to my survey noted their frustration when professionals, family members and friends encourage reconciliation as a default reaction to estrangement. Instead of mediation or family therapy, respondents often wanted sociological rather than psychological interventions. Two main concerns emerged. First, respondents felt they lacked genuine social recognition and support for the challenges of living with (rather than resolving) estrangement, and second, they longed to see less idealised representations of family life and to feel less social stigma for diverting from such ideals.

Here I address these two concerns using a sociology of personal life lens and in the tradition of research on 'family practices' or 'doing family' (Morgan, 2011). My analysis builds on studies into the hidden work involved in managing difficult family interactions (Davies, 2022; May and Lahad, 2019), by showing the hidden work that is also involved in what, from the outside, might look like abstaining from difficult family interactions. With sociological attention to the constitutive nature of unseen aspects of family life (Gabb, 2011; Lahad and May, 2021; Scott, 2018), we can recognise that *not* 'doing family' generates its own set of family practices (Morgan, 2011) and emotion work (Hochschild, 2012 [1983]: 68–75). To explore the labours of estrangement, I outline three of the ongoing yet unseen family practices that are involved in an estranged relationship – managing disclosure; checking on; and dealing with reminders. I consider how these practices respond to normative social narratives about family life, and argue that

closer attention to lived experiences of estrangement might help us to de-stigmatise people's choices around family structure.

On Not Doing Family

Outlining a specifically sociological approach to family estrangement, this article converses with research on family practices and family display but argues to see these phenomena in relief, revealing the hidden practices that keep some aspects of family life *off* display. As Morgan (1996, 2011) has argued, families are not simply 'given' but are created through 'family practices' that mark their relations as familial, such as naming practices, living arrangements, financial inheritance and so on. Morgan's work drove a shift from thinking about simply *being* a family to actively *doing* family. Finch built on this concept to argue that family practices become family displays when people show how they are doing family in social settings (Finch, 2007; see also Dermott and Seymour, 2011). In performing practices and creating displays, families interact with their specific family members but also with wider social narratives about what a 'family' is and what they do – the families we 'live with' and the families we 'live by' (Gillis, 1996). Studies of family display have explored what family memorabilia is put on the mantle or given as keep-sakes (Holmes, 2019; Hurdley, 2006), what photographs get posted online (Barnwell et al., 2023) or which ancestors feature in our family trees (Kramer, 2011). But equally interesting is what gets left out.

The question of what is *not* displayed in families is picked up by Gabb (2011: 39) in her critical reading of the concept, where she argues that, '[w]e should not only focus on displaying families but should be mindful of what is happening at the edges and behind the scenes of the narrative on display'. In this vein, there is a growing interest in the active role of 'absent' aspects of social life, experiences that have tended to fall out of social *and* sociological focus. Scott's (2018) work on the sociology of nothing is useful here in steering attention towards the constitutive role of paths not taken, relationships not pursued, events not attended and so on. Smart (2011) similarly writes about the structuring power of the unspoken in families, and Kinneret Lahad and Vanessa May (2021: 1002) describe the 'caution, avoidance, and self-restraint' that can be involved in families' 'hidden displays'. There is compelling research on negative or 'difficult' relationships and why we endure them (Smart, 2007; Smart et al., 2012). But there has been less attention to severed or suspended ties. Work on tense, fragile or ambivalent relations helps to conceptualise practices that do not necessarily qualify for affirming family displays. For example, Davies' (2022) and Nelson's (2020) studies into how families manage political disagreements, May and Lahad's (2019) analysis of aunts' 'boundary work' and Bottero's (2023) work on the grudging acts we perform when we would really rather not, each give us ways to describe the hard work of family obligations. Such work often entails 'not doing', such as holding one's tongue. However, a focus on how we bear with obligations, if applied to estrangement, stops short of the point at which people decide they can no longer bear with or 'do' family, even begrudgingly. The family practices involved in estrangement are still 'sticky' (Davies, 2022), but go further beyond recognised relations. In cutting ties, the estranged can often feel they are defying social scripts about families that stick together because they get along *and* families that stick together

even when they do not, though there is also a stickiness to being apart. We know very little about family members' experiences once they reach this separating point, and what family practices estrangement entails.

With my focus on estrangement, I look more closely at acts of *not doing* family. These might include family members excluding themselves or another from family events; omitting a family member from the life history they share with others and so on. These acts are nonetheless family practices, but ones that family members may keep off display due to social stigma. Gabb (2011: 57) argues that non-displays can be rendered invisible because they do not have 'readily available scripts and/or [...] are already demonised by sets of moral values which determine what displays affectively count'. In this sense, estrangement *is* a way of doing family. Indeed it is a common one. But owing to its often anxious or hushed reception, it is rendered absent as a series of *not doings*. It is in this sense that I refer to the practices described here as *not doing family*. My sociological approach contributes to what has been a primarily psychological understanding of family estrangement. It focuses on how people articulate the connections between their lived experience and their perceptions of how social narratives about family life shape this experience. Continued attention to the impacts of normative family models is important in a context where, as Gabb (2008: 17) has noted, 'notwithstanding [the] inclusive relationality and the acknowledgement of diversity among kinship formations, there is no corresponding demise of "the family" as an institution. Families, as the structural framework of our private lives, remain "the norm".'

'A Silent Epidemic'

One of the leading scholars on the topic of family estrangement, Scharp (2020: 1055) notes that 'although there are no official statistics, family estrangement has been termed as a silent epidemic that might be as common as divorce in some segments of society'. And yet, she writes, apart from a small handful of projects, 'social scientific studies about [...] estrangement are virtually nonexistent and what little we know [...] largely emerges from an amalgam of court reviews, popular press articles, and personal accounts' (Scharp, 2019: 428).

Research on family estrangement has only started to gain ground in the past decade. Estrangement is defined as 'a process [...] by which one family member chooses [...] to distance themselves either emotionally or physically from another family member because of a perceived negative relationship' (Spinazola and Purnell, 2022: 2). Offering more detail, Agllias (2011: 108) identified several common indicators of an estranged relationship – 'physical distancing, lack of emotional intimacy, an unsatisfactory relationship, intermittent conflict and avoidance, and a belief that there is no way to resolve problems'. Other words are sometimes used synonymously for estrangement, for example, in Bowen family therapy 'emotional cut-off' is employed (Titelman, 2003), and psychology and communications scholars sometimes use 'family distancing' (Scharp, 2019).

Existing studies of family estrangement focus on specific cohorts such as estranged siblings (Blake et al., 2023; Hank and Steinbach, 2023), parents whose children have cut off from them (Scharp et al., 2021), children who have initiated estrangements (Agllias,

2016) and other family members that feel caught between or accused of ‘taking sides’ (Scharp, 2020). Studies also highlight points of the life course, for example, showing how estrangement is impacted by out-of-home care (Jones et al., 2019), affects educational outcomes (Bland, 2018) and can lead to losses at the end of life (Agllias, 2011). With a life course lens, Gilligan et al. (2022) offer a longitudinal study of estrangements between older mothers and their adult children over seven years. These studies reveal rich facets of family estrangement, but all call for more fulsome attention to this widespread yet often unspoken experience.

The Family Estrangement Survey

My findings are drawn from an online qualitative survey I ran in Australia in late 2021. After some fixed demographic questions, the survey included predominantly open text questions, for example, questions about how the estrangement happened; if and how respondents spoke about it with others; how their feelings about the estrangement might have changed over time; and if and what support services they had or would like to access. I recruited via social media advertisements, which were then shared by relevant support organisations. I closed the survey after four weeks with 1200 responses. The free text answers vary in length. Some respondents wrote long and detailed text, and others wrote just a few lines or skipped questions.

Surveys are a less common form of qualitative data collection. Indeed, one of the very few articles on this method states that ‘qualitative surveys remain a relatively novel and often invisible or side-lined method’ and that ‘a very limited methodological-focused literature on qualitative surveys is likely one key reason they are underutilised’ (Braun et al., 2021: 641). While this is an empirical article, it offers an illustration that can add to the limited literature on qualitative surveys. Braun et al. (2021: 644) note that ‘one ready critique of qualitative surveys is that depth of data is lost’, and the richness of responses to the estrangement survey may help to dispel this assumption. My choice to use this method was partly practical given pandemic conditions. Having previously used a qualitative survey for research on secrets, I also found it to be a useful method for sensitive or stigmatised topics, as respondents are anonymous, free to write when and what they want, and in their own space. I was also inspired by the free text questionnaire format of Mass Observation directives, which have been a valuable source in the sociology of intimate life (Holmes, 2019; May, 2015; Smart, 2011).

While this article focuses on qualitative findings from the survey, it is valuable to give a brief insight into who responded and the diversity of experiences covered. The demographic was self-selecting. Ages ranged from 18–80, but with a concentration between 30–60. Respondents identified as 85% women, 14% men and 1% non-binary. The high percentage of women respondents fits with Morgan’s (2011) analysis of the gendered nature of family practices and sociological findings about who is doing invisible forms of labour that are often heavy on emotions and strategising within intimate relationships, such as emotion work (Hochschild, 2012 [1983]), boundary work (May and Lahad, 2019) or the mental load (Dean et al., 2022). An analysis of how intersectional inequalities might exacerbate estrangement and its labours would require further research as the self-selecting sample was not particularly diverse. Data on ancestry and ethnicity were

not collected. Seventy per cent of respondents were born in Australia, with the remainder being born predominantly in New Zealand, the USA and the UK. Three per cent of respondents identified as First Nations. Ninety-four per cent of respondents spoke English as their first language, and the professions listed indicate a predominantly middle-class sample with a high number of people in trades or professional roles.

The survey welcomed responses about all kinds of family estrangement. As a result, ruptures in different relationships were covered (whole family 5%; whole maternal side of family 4%; whole paternal side of the family 5%; mother 9%, father 10%; daughter 9%; son 7%; sister 11%; brother 10%; sister-in-law 4%; brother-in-law 3%; cousin 3%; aunt 4%; uncle 4%; grandparent/s 3%; grandchildren 3%). In addition to the provided options, respondents could select 'other' and specify (6%). Here the difficulty of capturing the complexity of families with fixed questions was underscored, with respondents specifying birth/biological parents, siblings or children; adopted or foster parents, siblings or children; nieces and nephews; sons- and daughters-in-law; step-children or siblings; donor parents; and family friends. The responses offer differing perspectives in terms of timing and position too. For example, some respondents reported that the estrangement was still happening (90%), but for others the estrangement was past (10%), meaning that most spoke to the experience in *media res* but others in hindsight. Similarly, there were differences in experience depending on whether the respondent initiated the estrangement (35%) or not (65%), though as the qualitative responses detail, sometimes exactly who started the estrangement was tricky to determine. Estrangements ranged from less than one year in duration to long periods such as 60 years, or what some respondents described as a 'lifetime'; others noted that the estrangement was on and off. The causes of estrangement also varied. For some, the untenability of the relationship stemmed from clear events, such as abuse, a violent incident or dispute over a will. For others, it was hard to pinpoint the cause, with people drifting apart, slowly realising that they were the only one initiating communication, or being caught up, sometimes unwittingly, in a dispute among other family members.

The data offer both quantitative and qualitative insights, and therefore required diverse methods of analysis. To analyse the data inductively, I used visualisations and word frequencies generated in data-analysis software to look for patterns across the dataset. These were then checked against the particulars of the respondent's case, for example if they initiated the estrangement or not, to build a nimble picture of how the context of estrangements situated individual respondents within broader patterns. I use details about the estrangements sparingly here to protect anonymity. As noted, one of the trends identified was a disaffection with approaches that rush to fix estrangements and do not recognise the work involved in such relations. This led me to explore what specific labours were reported in the data set, identifying these broadly, and then refining to ascertain the most common reported. These were concentrated in responses to three questions, the first about if and how respondents spoke about the estrangement to others; the second about the degree with which they were cut off from the estranged family member/s; and the third about if and when feelings about the estrangement came up. The often hidden nature of the labours reported made family practices and display useful analytic concepts, for thinking, following Gabb, about what practices are kept

off-display and why. For the following section, I focus on three practices that respondents commonly said estrangement required – managing disclosure, checking on and dealing with reminders.

Managing Disclosure

Social expectations hang heavily over people's experiences of estrangement, especially their choices about whether and/or how to disclose it to others. As I will detail in this section, respondents reported that it is often difficult to open up to other people about being estranged from a family member. There were exceptions to this trend, where respondents reported, for example, 'I will tell anyone about my sister's poor behaviour' or 'Everyone who knows me knows'. But overwhelmingly family estrangement was something that people found difficult to disclose about themselves. It was a sensitive topic that could sometimes be shared with close friends, but most often respondents feared a bad response and developed strategies to manage conversations about family. The rationale, as I will illustrate, chimes with Smart's (2011: 549) analysis of why people keep family secrets – the threat of social emotions such as shame and embarrassment puts an onus on people to 'create a family story through which actual families come to appear more like the ideal or mythical family'.

Respondents described concrete strategies they developed to manage disclosure and display and avoid transgressing social expectations about family. Most often this included setting limits about who they would tell, as one respondent noted: 'Can only talk about it with very closest friends'; another said, 'At times it is difficult to talk about, especially with people I'm not close to (coworkers, etc.).' Revealing a different strategy, one respondent explained, 'I have a script I stick to when I speak about my family', and others similarly mentioned omitting the estranged relationship from the story they told about their family to acquaintances. When outlining why it felt difficult to disclose estrangement, a common thread was that 'people don't understand', and that friends often jumped to judge or fix things. For example, one said, 'People always react as though it'll blow over, and that I must be keen to fix the relationship. If I suggest otherwise, people often feel awkward, and the conversation becomes stressful for me.' Another echoed this concern, stating:

People don't understand . . . [that] you can love a family member and not be able to have them in your life, how all-encompassing it can be. 'Oh but it's your MUM.' I want to say, 'yes, it's MY mum. She's not the same as yours.' There's a feeling that you're being sort of cruel, when it's pure self-protection.

This is an example of where people who are estranged from a family member are responding not only to their own family situation but also to social ideas about how families should be. The role of 'not doing' in the practice of managing disclosure about family is captured well in this respondent's description of what she *wanted to say* but did not. In the retelling, the narration of what was not said, conveys the respondent's navigation of social truth with social sensitivity, it is what Scott (2020: 50) describes as an 'act of

commission' where one makes 'an intentional decision to say nothing or keep relatively quiet about something specific and meaningful', in this case because the speaker feels what needs to be said cannot be heard.

The idea of 'normal' families informed all three of the practices I describe in this article. While sociologists of family have worked hard to create inclusive models, in line with Gittins' (1993: 8) proclamation 'there is no such thing as the family – only families', the resilience of social norms around family intimacy was widely reported in the survey. As another respondent wrote, 'People don't get it. Families are meant to get on and be supportive with each other.' This perception of the family ideal sometimes also led to pre-empting how others would respond, as came out in this response, 'I don't want to be pressured to mend the relationship or to be perceived as "dramatic" or unreasonable.' Avoiding social stigma and bad feeling was central to decisions not to disclose estrangement.

While often respondents described not mentioning their estrangement to protect themselves from judgement or inapt advice, there was a related reasoning where people refrained from talking about estrangement to spare others from feeling awkward or upset. As one respondent said, 'I find people respond like it's almost taboo. They are very uncomfortable and try to minimise it. . . [. . .] I tend to try not to talk about it because I feel like I'm upsetting people or ruining something for them.' Another respondent similarly described keeping it under wraps specifically in situations where others were celebrating family, she said:

I tend to say nothing about the estrangement. At times like Christmas, when there's so much emphasis on family, or during the pandemic when people were so eager to see their family, I had to remind myself that most people like their family and mine is a minority experience.

In these cases, respondents were censoring their experiences because they were aware that they diverge from, if not disrupt, cherished ideas about the family as close-knit, what Smart (2011: 549) described as the 'ideal or mythical family'.

In some cases this meant that even with friends respondents had disclosed their family estrangement to, they sometimes still struggled with how much to reveal or conceal about their ongoing feelings around it. As I will discuss in a later section, in a few cases people described avoiding social situations altogether around Christmas and peak 'family times', and this had to be carefully managed to not offend friends and protect relationships. This often meant that in addition to being cut off from family, people also found themselves 'holding back' (Lahad and May, 2021) from the social circles they are connected with as well; a finding that resonates with Davies' (2022: 106) account of silence about family tensions as an act of maintaining relationships, even care; here in relationships beyond the family too.

As these examples convey, managing disclosure about family estrangement emerged in the survey results as a common practice, and one that impacts people's social lives, often creating vigilance and stress around discussions or events that are family-themed. As several findings from the survey illustrate, this often involved a complex pre-empting of how others might react or respond. This is a significant finding because it makes plain

just how *present* the absent relationships of estrangement are in people's lives – in everyday interactions with acquaintances, friends and social rituals.

Checking On

While it might be assumed that estranged family members are entirely out of contact, it became apparent in the survey results that sometimes people check on estranged family members indirectly. While they would or could not contact the family member directly, they were still curious about how they (or their children) were doing or wanted to keep track of major events in their lives. As Smart (2007: 35) found in her work on difficult family relations, 'while a physical escape from relationships may be possible for adults, other elements of these relationships may be slow to relinquish their grip'. The labour in this practice of checking on was often in managing an intimacy that was suspended but not totally cut off from indirect 'contact', navigating other family members acting as intermediaries or feeling embarrassed about the practice itself.

In some cases, news of the estranged was involuntarily received, for example in a shared family chat or from a meddling relative. To this effect one respondent wrote about an aunt she does not speak to:

she initiated a Whatsapp group with my mum, other Aunt, and my sister. I did not feel it was necessary to opt out of the group, but it has been a platform for her to share information about her life so I'm exposed to it there.

However, in many cases the information was actively, if secretly, sought. This was another form of unseen labour that went into managing the relationship and accorded with the idea of feeling continuously tied to family members, through obligation, emotion or other relatives. Respondents seemed to feel that this practice needed to be kept under wraps because it did not fit with their *not doing* of family. Beyond the general stigma of 'deep trawling' online profiles, it revealed the ongoing curiosity and connection with estranged family members that can accompany a refused or denied relation.

This practice of checking on was performed by both people who did and did not initiate estrangements. Some respondents said they deliberately did not check on estranged family members, however, sometimes such comments still inferred a tacit desire to do so, as one respondent noted, 'I'm very strict about that.' Where both Davies and Lahad and May (2021) have found 'holding back' to be a practice that family members employ to preserve relationships, in this case 'holding back' was described instead as a kind of self-care, not wanting to re-engage feelings through checking on.

People commonly checked on an estranged family member via social media. A respondent described setting up a 'finsta' or fake Instagram account to follow her brother who had cut off from the family, she said 'I use this to tell my family how he's doing. We miss him all [the] time.' In another case, a respondent who had conversely cut off from her mother admitted, 'When I'm feeling particularly sad *and* self destructive, I look at my mother's Facebook page.' The wording of several responses captured how the absent presence of estrangement is mirrored in the accessibility of digital profiles; for example,

one respondent who had initiated estrangement from their family wrote, ‘occasionally I look at the online presence of a couple of my siblings’, capturing the ever-present way that estranged familiars are ‘out there’, specifically online. Another respondent elaborated the feeling of vigilance that this can create, noting: ‘I am aware that she is out there in cyberspace [I’m] always being aware of what I say and post for others to see.’ The sense of being monitored online was also felt inversely, where a respondent referred to knowing their family was covertly checking on them: ‘I know that they keep track of my social media at least a little bit.’ As Simmel (1950 [1908]: 402) writes on the stranger, where distancing is deliberate, ‘strangeness means that he who is far is actually near’. Simmel’s counter-intuitive observation resonates deeply with experiences of being estranged from family, especially in an age where personal profiles and real-time updates are readily available without interaction or exchange. The latent nearness can be made real with a few clicks.

But checking on was not only a new practice enabled by social media. Indeed, much older forms of communication were reported, for example, one respondent wrote: ‘I hear all the gossip from my nanna – my father’s mother – who is still sharp as a tack at age 93.’ In this vein, people described checking on estranged family members via mutual acquaintances or other relatives. Sometimes these intermediaries were deliberate, for example, a woman wrote: ‘I purposely set up a line of communication via my husband, who would pass any information he thought I needed to have onto me.’ However, another respondent, who had multiple channels, noted a more mixed experience, where the helpfulness of information was affected by the allegiances it implied: ‘I get updates from my grandma, who is trying to guilt me into reconnecting, and I check in with my brother for gossip when I see him.’ Here the ‘guilting’ of the grandma differed from the collusive ‘gossiping’ with the brother. Some reported that the experience of checking on via mutual acquaintances was an uncomfortable one: ‘I try to find out, via family friends, but I feel awkward doing so.’ This echoes Scharp’s (2020) findings about the tensions that can arise with family members who are secondary to the estranged relationship but get ‘caught in the middle’, are accused of or fear being asked to ‘take sides’. Indeed, worthy of another sociological study in itself would be the ‘off display’ practices that intermediary family members perform when managing a family estrangement between relatives.

In the example of checking on as a family practice, we can see that respondents were caught in a balancing act – of being disconnected yet connected – with their estranged family member. This synchronic state accords with social work scholar Kylie Agllias’ application of Boss’s (2006) idea of ‘ambiguous loss’ to family estrangement. Agllias (2011: 109) defines ambiguous loss as ‘essentially a confused state of whether there is an absence or presence of another’. Agllias uses this idea to define the grief of family estrangement in contrast to family bereavement, where the loss is more final, making closure possible. Checking on is a practice where the ambiguity of the loss is evident, as the estranged family member is still ‘out there’ connected via various virtual and relational threads. For my respondents, checking on estranged family members sometimes brought a sense of embarrassment, or at least a feeling of needing to conceal the practice, especially where it ran counter to a stated commitment to or acceptance of distance. This practice, often private, gives insight into ‘what is happening at the edges’ of displays (Gabb, 2011: 39). We see the ongoing proximity of those who are estranged, and an

often-enduring connection to family even in relationships that may be ambivalent, tense or too painful to sustain in other ways.

Dealing with Reminders

The final example of unseen labour, or *not doing*, that I will detail refers to the times when people reported being reminded of their family estrangement, even in the context of very long-term rifts. Dealing with the emotions that these reminders brought up was a frequent and challenging aspect of living with estrangement. This example is where some of the most explicit references to the stigmatising function of social norms about family were made, and perhaps where the everydayness of the work behind the scenes of a suspended relationship was most visible, and often poignant. One respondent wrote about thinking she sometimes saw her brother in the street, but it was never him; others said that particular songs or music summoned reminders and feelings. For others still, memories arose in certain places, which some said they avoided visiting to keep reminders at bay. For one person, this place was ‘the pub where my father announced the estrangement [. . .] a place I have avoided since as it brings back memories’; for another, it was a more general feeling evoked by similar places, they said, ‘I get uncomfortable around farmland and country that looks like where my parents live – it’s very visceral.’ In the domestic environment, some described getting rid of reminders like photographs, or at least putting them away, leaning both ways, one respondent wrote: ‘I threw out a mug she gave me, and there’s a teapot at home I intermittently consider smashing.’ Such examples conveyed the phenomenological nature of how the estranged remained present in people’s lives.

For some respondents, the reminders could come simply from interacting with the displays of other families. They recalled the estrangement most keenly when they felt themselves making comparisons between their family relationships and the superior relationships they attributed to others. Several respondents described this in general terms, for example, ‘being around people living normative lives’; ‘other happy families make me feel sad that mine is broken’; ‘Sometimes when I see the closeness of other extended families, I feel a pang of envy’; ‘Any adult siblings with good relationships – ouch!’ Others linked this feeling to specific events, such as, ‘at school when grandparents pick up kids, seeing families together at restaurants, movies’, or particular life milestones ‘seeing late teenagers with their parents shopping for uni/moving out stuff, when people talk about their mum helping out when they have/had babies/small children’. For some, the comparisons were made close to home, with several responses describing the distinction between their family and their partner’s family – one woman wrote, ‘My partner’s extended family is very close and has regular gatherings so those often remind me of the potential of the missing relationships’, and another said, ‘When I see my husband relating to his three daughters, I feel sadness that I never had a father like that.’ These instances brought out the comparative aspects of family display, where the presentations of others ‘doing family’ became a sight against which to measure one’s own familial relationships, and to feel a sense of that ‘ambiguous loss’.

The yardstick of what we might call collective ‘family displays’ was also keenly felt. For many, the social rituals surrounding special occasions were listed as the most

difficult time to manage, indeed across all of the qualitative data fields, 'birthday' and 'Christmas' are two of the most prevalent words (a fact that may have been influenced by the survey running in December, when people were reflecting on the impending holidays). These occasions were considered difficult for a range of complex reasons. Often being a group gathering, it was when people sometimes experienced extra pressure to reunite. For others, these times were difficult because the event/s that precipitated an estrangement unfolded at previous family occasions on these dates. For example, one respondent explained that: 'Christmas is hard because the original estrangement with mother dates from a disastrous Christmas meeting.' This respondent also described the work that managing this involved, saying it 'took years to restore my sense of Christmas as a celebration – worked hard with partner to create new Christmas traditions etc to make it "ours"'. Others spoke about this time being when there was a heightened risk that a family member they had distanced from would try to make contact. One respondent talked about having to turn her phone off on her birthday, and another wrote:

Christmas & my birthday can be sensitive times that bring up memories & were often when my father would send me (unwanted) letters or calls long after the estrangement so I can be a bit on edge on those days.

In these cases, feelings around special occasions were tied to specific personal memories.

However, more often people said that these occasions, along with Mother's Day and Father's Day, were hard because they are when idealised displays of family, through family-centred *social* activities and conversations, are at their peak. It was in the lead up to and during these periods that people who were living with family estrangement felt most keenly their departure from family norms, and alienation from social traditions that assume a close family. As one respondent pithily expressed about Christmas:

I find the entire build up to the season very upsetting and find it difficult to engage with people who are excited about 'spending time with family', and so on. I find the overly optimistic view of family life and family time together (eg in media coverage of Christmas [. . .]) to be very hard to stomach because it fails to recognise that for many people this time of year is extremely challenging and lonely, triggering and distressing, and that rather than feeling 'together' and surrounded by love you in fact feel more acutely the absence of love and support from those who birthed and raised you.

While there is little sociological literature on Christmas, the findings of Mason and Muir (2013) lend further foundation to this respondent's feelings. Mason and Muir (2013: 609) write that 'Christmas is one of the major kinship events of the year, one that may involve the physical co-presence of family members who represent differences in background', and that '[a]s such, Christmas is often a time when thoughts of family, and differences in family practices, come into sharp relief' (2013: 609). However, where their qualitative study found that people reported tensions at Christmas, even in these critical stories the idea of family 'coming together' *despite* differences remained resilient. In this context, where the social trope 'you can't choose your family' is so sticky, it is easy to see how

respondents may feel pressure around voluntary or involuntary disconnection from family at such times, and therefore avoid occasions where they are reminded that they cannot fit the social narrative. As these examples illustrate, for many respondents the emotions surrounding an estrangement were just under the surface and called up often by reminders. Respondents described a range of practices they developed to deal with such reminders, including avoiding certain social contexts, places, people or events, sometimes resulting in further social exclusion.

Concluding Remarks

While it can appear from the outside as though someone is cut off from a family member and that they are *not doing* family, even for a lifetime, this apparent not doing requires active practices that are no less familial for being about a refrain from family. Managing disclosure, checking on and dealing with reminders were three family practices respondents commonly described as being part of the behind-the-scenes work involved in being estranged from family member/s. A sociological lens on real-time practices, rather than a psychological drive for resolution, gives attention to lived experiences of estrangement and the time and energy that people pour into the labours around such relations even when they might appear inactive and/or preferred. This attention goes some way to address respondents' concerns that there is little social recognition for the challenges of being estranged, or departing from family norms, that does not rush to 'fix' or reinstate suspended relationships. Such conciliatory approaches stigmatise estrangement and bolster an enduring emphasis on family bonds.

In many cases where people had initiated an estrangement, they noted that it was a positive or at least necessary arrangement for them, but that this did not make it easy. Even if chosen, the estrangement was still difficult to manage in settings where the idea of family as close, loving and central to social life, is dominant; and where, even if resisted, representations of troubled families often assume a resolution of overcoming or enduring difference for the sake of family. While new definitions of family open up our understanding about who comprises a family and are inclusive of non-biological kinship, blended families, queer families, chosen families and so on, they often retain the affective structure of family as supportive and close. For respondents to the survey, the social expectations to have a close family, or to pursue one, often made estrangement feel harder than it already was. It was the ongoing social pressure to meet these ideals that shaped the practices described above and the fact they were often kept off display, effectively rendering them *not doings*. In cases where people were on the receiving end of a family 'cut-off', it was similarly felt that a focus on 'burying the hatchet' did not help to deal with the stigma and the ongoing practical and emotional realities of *living with* estrangement.

A closer look at family practices that are 'off display' gives us a chance to revisit sociological critiques of the family that push for more constructivist and inclusive models, and rethink who comprises a family and what activities make kin (Gabb, 2008; Smart, 2007; Weston, 1997). While these critiques have been crucial in challenging conservative models of family, we can go further towards opening up the affective and

structural aspects of family, where the pressure to be in relation, even when doing family differently, can remain quite strong. The qualitative data I have analysed call attention to how people feel stigma when they do not qualify for happy *or* tense displays of family life.

Such considerations about what models of family we make available are important in the context of Gabb's (2011: 57) conclusion that non-displays can be rendered invisible because they do not have 'readily available scripts and/or [...] are already demonised by sets of moral values which determine what displays affectively count'. Importantly, in keeping with Scott's (2020) findings about 'paths not taken', estrangement is not simply a question of the absence versus presence of family members. Both the practical and social dimensions of family keep people tied in various ways, that can be chosen, not chosen or something in-between. With consideration for the practices that make up the *not doing* of family estrangement, we can see more sharply into a model of kin that is now compositionally diverse yet still often celebratory and rooted in an ethos of resilience, sacrifice, together-at-all-costs and similar received ideas about family.

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