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BOOK REVIEW

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Melvin, K. (2024). Navigating family estrangement. Helping adults understand and manage the challenges of family estrangement. Routledge. ISBN: 9 78 1032 423067. Pages 187. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003362203>

Family estrangement, understood as the creation of distance from one or more family members, together with the stigma often associated with it, represents a complex and widespread social phenomenon affecting individuals across cultures and contexts. In *Navigating Family Estrangement*, psychotherapist and estrangement specialist Karl Melvin provides an insightful and practice-oriented exploration of this subject. Structured into thirteen chapters across four parts, the book examines how estranged adults can be effectively supported through a variety of professional perspectives. Of particular significance to social work, the text recognises estrangement as a lived reality that practitioners frequently encounter, irrespective of context or role. Melvin identifies six professional biases that may hinder practitioners from engaging meaningfully with clients and introduces a distinctive seven-step Estrangement Inquiry Model. This framework offers a structured means of understanding family history, mapping current dynamics, and identifying suitable interventions. Drawing upon interdisciplinary research and illustrated through five detailed case studies, the book delivers a valuable and compassionate guide for professionals navigating the complexities of family estrangement.

The first part of the book explores widespread misconceptions about estrangement and the lack of definitional consensus within scholarly literature. The author presents nine definitions to illustrate the complexity and diversity of estrangement, which often makes it challenging for professionals to determine whether a client's circumstances constitute estrangement. The discussion further conceptualises estrangement as an ongoing process, identifying eight distinct types described in research, and emphasising that estrangement can hold both positive and negative dimensions. The subsequent chapters examine overt and subtle indicators of estrangement, including language, emotions, behaviours, and relational patterns that may reveal an unacknowledged experience. Central to this analysis is the Estrangement Impact Triad, which outlines interrelated psychological, relational, and social effects. The author provides a nuanced account of these intertwined struggles, such as how shame can lead to social

withdrawal and emotional detachment. The chapter on reconciliation insightfully addresses its inherent complexity, highlighting that restoration depends on voluntary engagement, mutual intention, and realistic expectations among all parties.

The second part, on the support dilemma, discusses potential roadblocks to effectively supporting an estranged person and how subjective experience may influence this process, particularly when the professional's own history shapes their openness to the client's experiences. While first-hand experience can offer significant benefits in establishing emotional context and building trust, it may become problematic if deeply held beliefs regarding loyalty, caring for family, respect for elders, self-sacrifice, and similar values compromise the therapeutic relationship. This may also give rise to one of six biases, all of which are examined: reconciliation bias, estrangement bias, perspective bias, attributional bias, attitudinal bias, and forgiveness bias. A lack of awareness of the long-term psychological impact of harmful behaviours within the family or the consequences of unsuccessful interventions may result in ill-advised responses. Within this framework, the author discusses the ethical considerations of working with estranged adults. Additional barriers are considered, including limitations in the professional's role and capacity to assist. Drawing on recent research and clinical insight, the author further examines the characteristics of effective practice and the role of the therapeutic alliance, highlighting its essential qualities, including warmth, safety, validation, collaboration, skill development, and education.

The third part of *Navigating Family Estrangement* offers a detailed exposition of the seven-step Estrangement Inquiry Model, outlining the purpose, process, and potential insights of each stage in understanding a client's experience. The model guides professionals in identifying estranged individuals, categorising the type and nature of estrangement, determining whether it was intentional, clarifying whether estrangement was explicitly communicated, identifying the means of communication, estimating its duration, and ultimately exploring its underlying causes. The culmination of this process is the creation of an Estrangement Map, which functions both as a diagnostic and a reflective tool. Through this mapping process, clients are able to gain a broader perspective on their experiences and are encouraged to draw upon their own insight and resilience as they address future challenges. Chapter Eight introduces the Estrangement Toolbox, a comprehensive set of strategies and interventions designed to strengthen therapeutic engagement and address the challenges identified in the Estrangement Impact Triad. These strategies are grouped into several categories, including clarifying and validating, resourcing, communicating, repairing, parking, re-engaging, and inspiring. Each category provides practical guidance to support clients in managing emotional distress, rebuilding relationships, establishing boundaries, and finding renewed purpose and meaning in the aftermath of estrangement.

The final part of the book presents five detailed case studies that focus on various forms of estrangement, including those between parents and children, siblings, and adult sons and daughters. Each case study provides practical illustrations of the concepts and strategies discussed throughout the book, demonstrating the complexity and diversity of estrangement experiences. Through these examples, the author highlights the emotional and relational challenges faced by both clients and practitioners, as well as the potential for growth and deeper

understanding within the therapeutic process. The concluding discussion suggests that, while professionals and estranged individuals may not always be able to foster a willingness for reflection or reconciliation within families, they nevertheless play a vital role in promoting broader societal awareness and empathy. Over time, this compassionate approach may generate a ripple effect that extends beyond individual families, offering support and understanding to those who need it most.

The author's acknowledgement of his personal experience of family estrangement, and his evident empathy for the pain it causes not only to those directly involved but also to those indirectly affected, is particularly thought provoking. In reflecting on this, several key insights emerge. Most importantly, the author's observation that "unfortunately some families are too fractured to rebuild a solid bridge" (p. 124) is worthy of consideration, since "...the truth is a very complex thing as there are many ways to tell the same story, and one person's truth may be vastly different from another's" (p. 124). Nevertheless, family estrangement can profoundly influence multiple dimensions of an individual's life, including mental and physical health, identity, self-worth, intimate relationships, professional life, and sense of belonging. Not all individuals are ready to recognise or describe their situation as estrangement, and many, including both practitioners and clients, attempt to manage the associated emotions in isolation. Feelings such as shame and anger are often internalised, resulting in an ongoing emotional struggle. Furthermore, individuals for whom reconciliation is unlikely deserve freedom from shame and guilt, and the compassion and understanding of others. Validation therefore becomes essential, whether achieved through therapy or through the strategies outlined in this book. It is commendable that the author thoughtfully addresses both professionals and estranged individuals, recognising that both may experience rejection, isolation, loneliness, and shame arising from the complexities of family estrangement.

Karl Melvin rightly concludes: "Without trying to sound alarmist, after hearing so many stories of estrangement from families who never thought for a second their relationship would end up this way, I slowly came to the painful conclusion that this phenomenon has the potential to affect every family in some capacity" (p. 172). This statement emphasises family estrangement as a deeply distressing social reality that remains largely neglected as a mainstream topic in the helping professions and, in particular, within social work. It is a phenomenon that may have a considerable effect on many in social workers' caseloads, although it manifests differently across contexts. Consequently, this book, which aims to help adults understand and manage the challenges of family estrangement, should be regarded as essential reading for social workers, students, and educators across diverse practice settings.