The Influence of Religion on Ties Between Adult Children and Their Parents

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Abstract

In this study we examine whether religious adults (as measured by the frequency of attendance at religious services) report more extensive ties with their parents. Using nationally representative data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), we consider several dimensions of adult children's relationships with their parents including relationship quality, frequency of contact, providing care to parents, and providing other types of assistance and support. Preliminary findings suggest that religious adults have more extensive ties with their parents than their less religious peers. Factors that potentially confound or explain the connection between religiousness and adult children's ties to parents are also examined.

A growing body of research has examined the influence of religion on parent-child relationships and suggests that religion may foster more frequent and positive ties between family members (see King, 2010 for a review). Most of these studies, however, are limited to considering the parent-child relationship when children are young. Likewise, there is a large body of research examining the correlates of adult children's assistance and ties to parents, but studies rarely consider the role that religion may play in these relationships (Myers, 2004). Consequently, we know little regarding the influence of religion on ties between adult children and aging parents.

In this study we examine whether religious adults (as measured by the frequency of attendance at religious services) report more extensive ties with their parents. Using nationally representative data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), we consider several dimensions of adult children's relationships with their parents including relationship quality, frequency of contact, providing care to parents, and providing other types of assistance and support. An understanding of what motivates and fosters strong ties between adult children and their parents is crucial given the importance of such ties for parent's well-being in later life, and the important role that adult children play as a potential resource for impaired parents (Umberson, Pudrovska, & Reczek, 2010).

There are several reasons to hypothesize that religious adults might provide more assistance to, and report higher quality relationships with, their parents than less religious adults (King, 2010). Religious teachings and values emphasize and support the centrality of family life, the importance of positive family relationships, and a focus on the concerns and needs of others over the self (Abbott, Berry, & Meredith, 1990; Ellison, 1992; Pearce & Axinn, 1998; Wuthnow, 1991). Religious institutions promote pro-family messages through sermons, scriptural stories,

church publications, and other church teachings. In addition, individuals who participate in religious activities are surrounded by like-minded coreligionists and may seek out friends who share similar beliefs, which can also reinforce pro-family teachings and family-oriented behaviors. Thus religious individuals are involved in a culture that shapes their values and behaviors by emphasizing the importance of family relationships and a commitment to others that could encourage them to be actively involved with their parents (Wilcox, 2002). Relatedly, religious individuals may sanctify family roles or relationships, infusing them with religious meaning that leads to placing a high priority on fostering close and involved relationships with parents (Mahoney et al., 2001, 2003).

In exploring the link between adult children's religiousness and ties to parents, we also consider factors that potentially confound or explain this association. Adult children could have more extensive ties with parents for reasons that have little to do with their religiousness. A number of demographic factors are known to be associated with both religiousness and child-parent ties. For example, church attendance is higher among women than men, and among those in better health (Idler, 1994). These same factors are associated with providing assistance to parents (Chesley & Poppie, 2009). [We find evidence of similar associations in our study.] The effect of religiousness on ties between adult children and their parents may also be mediated through other mechanisms. For example, one mechanism that we will explore is the role of norms. Religious adults may hold stronger norms regarding the expectation that adult children should provide support to their parents, and such norms in turn could foster their involvement with parents (Gans, Silverstein, & Lowenstein, 2009). We will also explore several factors that may interact with religiousness in patterning adult child-parent ties including the adult child's gender, race, and age.

Data

      Data come from the first wave of the National Survey of Families and Households

(NSFH), a nationally representative probability sample of 13,007 adults in U.S. households in

1987-1988. We selected respondents who reported having at least one living parent (n = 9002).

Some of the questions regarding ties to parents refer to parents in general and we examine all

respondents who have at least one living parent. Other questions refer specifically to ties with

mothers and ties with fathers, and these analyses are based on the subset of respondents who

have a living mother (n = 8312) or have a living father (n = 6282) as appropriate (5592

respondents report that both parents are still alive).

Methods

      We examine the relationship between adult children's attendance at religious services and

ties to their parents in a bivariate and multivariate regression framework (ordinary least squares

regression will be employed for all outcomes except for providing care to a parent, which is a

dichotomous outcome (1 = yes, 0 = no) that is examined with logistic regression). Preliminary

results are presented in Table 1. These results are based on unweighted data but we will test and

compare models with and without weights. We have also employed mean substitution for

missing values on the independent variables, but we intend to use multiple imputation in future

analyses.

Measures (to date)

      We examine six measures of adult child-parent ties. Help to parents in general includes

two measures. Providing care in the past year to an ill or disabled parent who lives outside the

household is a dichotomous indicator (1 = yes, 0 = no). Providing assistance to parents is a scale

of four items that are averaged regarding whether the respondent gave parents help in the past

month with (a) housework, (b)transportation, (c) home or car repairs, or (d) advice, encouragement, moral or emotional support (1 = yes, 0 = no). Relationships with mothers are assessed with two measures. Relationship quality is a single item asking respondents to describe their relationship with their mother (1 = very poor, 7 = excellent). Contact is the average of two items regarding how often in the past year they saw their mother and how often they communicated by phone or letter (1 = not at all, 6 = several times a week). The same two measures are available for relationships with fathers. Providing care, assistance, and contact are limited to respondents who are not coresiding with parents, whereas relationship quality is measured regardless of coresidence.

The adult child's religiousness is based on a measure of how often they attend religious services (1 = never, 5 = more than once a week).

We include a number of controls and mediating variables in our study. Characteristics of the adult child respondent include their age (in years), gender (1 = female, 0 = male), race/ethnicity (Black, Hispanic, Other, White=reference group), education (high school, at least some college, less than high school= reference group), current employment status (1 = working, 0 = not working), health (1 = very poor, 5 = excellent), marital status (divorced/separated, widowed, never married, married=reference group), number of living siblings, and the presence of children in their household (kids under 5 in household, only kids 5-18 in household, no kids in household=reference group). Norms is the average of two items regarding how much they agree that kids should let aging parents live with them and that kids should give financial help to aging parents (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Parent characteristics include their health (1 = very poor, 5 = excellent), and distance from the child's household (in miles, logged). A set of dummy variables capture which parents the respondent has that are still living and, if both are

alive, whether they are still married to each other (both parents alive but not married to each other, both parents alive and unknown whether they are still married to each other, only father is alive, only mother is alive, both parents alive and married to each other=reference group).

Preliminary Findings

Table 1 reports our preliminary findings. We find evidence that religious adults report more extensive ties with their parents. The bivariate models indicate that adult children who attend religious services more frequently are significantly more likely to provide care to a parent outside the household, provide other types of assistance to parents, have more frequent contact with their mothers and fathers, and report higher quality relationships with both mothers and fathers. The addition of controls and mediating factors often reduce the magnitude of these associations although most remain significant. At the same time, it should be noted that the differences in ties to parents between adult children who attend religious services frequently and those who attend infrequently are modest (we will illustrate this point by creating a descriptive table or graph that reports frequencies/levels of the dependent variables by levels of religious attendance).

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Table 1: Ties Between Adult Children and Their Parents Predicted By Child's Church Attendance (Unstandardized Regression Coefficients)

| | Help to Parents | | | | Relationship with Fathers | | | | Relationship with Mothers | | | |
| | Care* | | Assistance | | Quality | | Contact | | Quality | | Contact | |
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Child Characteristics												
Church attendance	0.10 **	0.04	0.01 **	0.01 **	0.14 ***	0.06 ***	0.10 ***	0.04 ***	0.09 ***	0.04 ***	0.07 ***	0.06 ***
Norms help parents		0.21 **		0.02 ***		0.14 ***		0.05 *		0.25 ***		0.10 ***
Age		0.03 ***		-0.00 ***		0.02 ***		-0.01 ***		0.01 ***		-0.01 ***
Female		0.55 ***		0.02 ***		-0.17 ***		0.15 ***		-0.00		0.30 ***
Black[a]		-0.12		-0.07 ***		-0.01		-0.12 **		0.33 ***		0.05
Hispanic[a]		-0.42		-0.04 ***		0.05		-0.14 *		0.13 *		-0.08
Other[a]		0.02		-0.01		0.15		-0.20		0.19		-0.03
High school[b]		0.36 *		0.05 ***		-0.12		0.19 ***		-0.05		0.20 ***
Some college[b]		0.52 **		0.09 ***		-0.24 ***		0.24 ***		-0.19 ***		0.25 ***
Currently working		-0.01		0.01		0.01		-0.02		-0.04		0.02
Health		0.11		0.01 **		0.08 **		0.01		0.10 ***		0.03 *
Divorced[c]		-0.08		-0.04 ***		-0.17 ***		-0.04		-0.22 ***		-0.07 *
Widowed[c]		0.12		-0.02		-0.15		0.13		-0.11		0.13
Never married[c]		0.32		-0.04 ***		-0.22 ***		-0.11 **		-0.20 ***		-0.12 ***
# Siblings		-0.00		-0.00 **		0.03 ***		-0.01		0.04 ***		-0.03 ***
# kids under 5 years[d]		-0.71 ***		-0.01		-0.09		-0.10 *		-0.21 ***		-0.09 **
# kids over 5 years[d]		-0.05		-0.01		-0.10 *		-0.15 ***		-0.21 ***		-0.11 ***
Parent Characteristics												
Health		-0.86 ***		-0.01 *		0.40 ***		0.13 ***		0.29 ***		0.09 ***
Distance (log)		-0.23 ***		-0.02 ***		-0.03 ***		-0.31 ***		-0.02 ***		-0.32 ***
Both alive, not married[e]		0.16		0.02 **		-1.46 ***		-1.33 ***		-0.37 ***		-0.29 ***
Both alive, unknown married[e]		0.16		0.04		-0.62 ***		-0.73 ***		-0.29 *		-0.30 ***
Only father alive[e]		0.55 **		-0.04 ***		-0.50 ***		-0.66 ***		-		-
Only mother alive[e]		0.54 ***		-0.01		-		-		-0.11 **		-0.09 ***
_constant	-3.10 ***	-3.04 ***	0.17 ***	0.20 ***	4.93 ***	3.05 ***	3.71 ***	4.98 ***	5.61 ***	3.43 ***	4.17 ***	4.80 ***
N	8415	8415	8569	8569	6217	6217	5675	5675	8269	8269	7467	7467

Note: *Logistic regression (all other regressions are ordinary least squares) [a]White is reference category. [b]Less than high school is reference category.
[c]Married is reference category. [d]No kids is reference category. [e]Both parents alive and married to each other is reference category.
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001