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Without the Ties that Bind: Young Adults Who Lack Active Parental Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Parents are an important source of affection and support for young adults in the U.S., so those who lack parental relationships are a potentially vulnerable group. The purpose of this study is to describe how common it is for young adults to lack active parental ties, identify predictors of estrangement, and examine how individuals without parental ties are faring in young adulthood, using logistic and ordered logistic regression. Analysis of the 2008-2009 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (*N=5,080*) reveals that 24% of young adults ages 25-32 in the U.S. lack an active relationship with at least one parent, which translates into 7.9 million individuals. A large share of young adults lack a relationship with a father figure (20%), and a smaller but substantial share lack a relationship with a mother figure (6.5%). Consistent with Family Stress Theory, lacking contact was more common when there was a disruptive event such as parental separation or when the initial tie was weaker, such as when the parent figure was not the biological parent. Young adults who do not have parental ties face disadvantages such as lower levels of education, poorer health, and more depressive symptoms, pointing to compounding disadvantages.

INTRODUCTION

As the transition to adulthood has become more challenging, parents increasingly provide financial and instrumental assistance, as well as advice and emotional support. Recent research has highlighted the increased reliance of young adults on their parents and the positive characteristics of these ties (Fingerman, Cheng, Wesselmann, et al. 2012; Wightman et al. 2013). However, not all young adults have active relationships with their parents. Long-term changes in family structure have meant that children are less likely to reach adulthood having lived continuously with both parents (U. S. Census Bureau 2016). They are more likely to experience the stressors that accompany divorce, and are more likely to have relationships with other types of parent figures, such as step-parents (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008; Kennedy and Ruggles 2014). Because of these shifts in family dynamics – as well as situations like parental death and incarceration, we might expect that a substantial number of young adults lack access to parental – particularly father – relationships and the affection and support that may accompany them. However, little is known about the group of young adults who lack active parental ties.

Here we use data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to estimate how common it is for young adults to lack relationships with mother or father figures and identify the characteristics associated with absent ties. Finally, we examine how individuals who lack parental ties are faring in young adulthood, focusing on educational attainment, physical health, and depressive symptoms. This research contributes to our understanding of the contemporary transition to adulthood by identifying a potentially vulnerable group of young adults. In addition, we extend the existing literature on tenuous parent-child ties in childhood by focusing on the next stage of life.

Importance of Parents and Reasons for Lacking Parental Relationships

Parent-child relationships are largely positive and beneficial throughout the life course. These relationships often involve the sharing of tangible resources, emotional support, and frequent contact (Fingerman et al. 2009). Parents and adult children tend to name one another as among their most important social ties and, in most cases, both parties appear to benefit from these relationships (Antonucci and Akiyama 1987; Hartnett et al. 2013; Van Gaalen and Dykstra 2006). In particular, parents and adult children who report more positive relationships have

higher levels of well-being and lower levels of depression (Fingerman et al. 2008; Umberson 1992; Ward 2008).

The dynamics of contemporary young adulthood make relationships with parents especially important. The process of transitioning to adult roles – including finishing school, entering the workforce, leaving the parental home, marrying, and having children – is more protracted and the chronology is more varied compared to prior periods (Arnett 2000; Fussell and Furstenberg 2005; Isen and Stevenson 2011). As a result, the parent-child tie has become increasingly consequential beyond the age of 18, a fact that is now widely recognized both normatively and institutionally (for example, the Affordable Care Act mandates that parents' health insurance covers children through age 26). Research has shown that these changes are reflected in transfer patterns: the amount of financial support young adults receive from parents is higher now compared to previous cohorts (Wightman et al. 2013).

Although parent-child relationships tend to be helpful and positive, on average, they are not universal. Due to long-term changes in family structure, in particular, we might expect that a substantial number of young adults lack an active relationship with at least one parent. In particular, the rise in divorce and nonmarital childbearing have loosened the bonds between some parent-child pairs. Fathers increasingly live apart from their children, which often results in lower levels of closeness, contact, and resource transfers (Cheadle, Amato, and King 2010; Cooney and Uhlenberg 1990; Vespa, Lewis, and Kreider 2013). In addition, there are a variety of other factors that may lead to lacking parental ties in young adulthood, including disagreements or misaligned values, parental death or incarceration, or histories of abuse or neglect (Agllias 2015b; Gilligan, Suitor, and Pillemer 2015). What remains unclear from the literature is how common this situation is in young adulthood, who these individuals are, and how they are faring.

Which Young Adults Lack Contact

There are two facets of Family Stress Theory that may help explain why some young adults lack contact with living parent figures. First is the idea that family discord and estrangement are more likely to happen in the context of stressors (Agllias 2015a; Galvin et al. 2016; McKenry and Price 2000). According to this theory, stressors include major disruptive events (such as divorce), more mundane events, and anticipated life cycle events (such as the

transition to adulthood). Research in the field of social work has supported this contention, finding that estrangement is often caused when these types of stressors – particularly major disruptive events – lead to interpersonal conflict (Agllias 2015a; Carr et al. 2015). A common pattern is that adult children report cutting off contact with a parent whom they believe reacted poorly to a divorce. Therefore, we expect that young adults who have experienced family stressors, such as the divorce or separation of their biological (or adoptive) parents will be more likely to lack contact later on. In addition, we anticipate that incarceration of a parent figure might also act as a stressor that would be associated with lacking contact in young adulthood (Agllias 2015a; Johnson and Easterling 2015; Turney 2014).

The second facet of Family Stress Theory that we draw on is the idea that family resources – such as cohesion and closeness – can act as a buffer against the effects of stressors (Langenkamp and Frisco 2008; McKenry and Price 2000; Willoughby, Malik, and Lindahl 2006). Therefore, our second hypothesis is that weak ties (such as non-normative ties or those with fewer shared experiences in adolescence) will be more likely to result in estrangement. There are several types of parent figure relationships that, based on prior theory and research, we anticipate will be less close, and therefore more prone to losing contact. Sons and fathers may be more likely to lack contact than daughters and mothers, due to the gendered nature of "kin keeping," whereby women have closer and more active familial relationships than males (Rossi and Rossi 1990; Troll, Miller, and Atchley 1979; Willson, Shuey, and Elder 2003). Likewise, scholars have argued that biological parent-child ties are normative and considered nonvoluntary, so we expect these ties to be stronger than when the parent figure is a step-parent or another type of friend or relative (Crabb and Augoustinos 2008; Scharp 2014). Finally nonresident parents have been shown to have weakened ties to their children (Amato 2000; Amato and Booth 1996; Aquilino 2006), and may therefore be prone to eventual loss of contact. This is consistent with the solidarity model, which argues that the associational solidarity generated from shared experiences is necessary for affection and cohesion (Bengtson and Roberts 1991).

Young Adult Outcomes for Those Lacking Parental Relationships

Parental support is pivotal for successful achievement of adult roles as well as buffering against the financial and romantic vicissitudes of early adulthood (Berlin, Furstenberg, and

Waters 2010; Fingerman, Cheng, Wesselmann, et al. 2012). Therefore, those who are missing parental ties are likely to be disadvantaged in young adulthood, compared to their peers with active ties. These disadvantages may include lower levels of education (Henretta et al. 2012), poorer self-rated health (Collins, Nicholson, and Fund 2010; House, Umberson, and Landis 1988), and more depressive symptoms (Fingerman et al. 2008; Umberson 1992). The theoretical basis for these hypotheses is two-fold. First, those without parental relationships miss out on the emotional support, logistical assistance, and financial resources that these relationships often provide, and which are useful for remaining healthy and in school (Berlin et al. 2010; Fingerman, Cheng, Wesselmann, et al. 2012; Furstenberg, Rumbaut, and Settersten 2005). Second, studies suggest that lacking parent-child relationships may be a stigmatized status (Agllias 2013; Kools 1997; Scharp 2014). Stigma typically generate stress, which could make it difficult for those without parental relationships to achieve optimal outcomes (Goffman 1963; Ng and Jeffery 2003; Pearlin 1999).

PRESENT STUDY

This study addresses three research questions which, together, seek to provide a descriptive portrait of young adults who lack active relationships with parent figures. Most prior research on the relationship between parents and young adult children in the U.S. has focused on what is average or typical — average frequency of financial transfers, average level of contact, etc. — or has explored how parent-child relationships differ across groups (Cooney and Uhlenberg 1992; Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe, et al. 2012). This study uses recent U.S. data to make a unique contribution by focusing on young adults with the particular vulnerability of lacking an active parental relationship .

We utilize nationally representative data on 25 to 32 year olds to address the following questions:

1) How common is it for young adults to lack active relationships with mother and father figures? We consider both those who lack a parent figure entirely (due to death or failure to ever know that parent), as well as those who have disengaged and no longer have contact with that parent figure.
2) Among those who have living parent figures, why are some young adults disengaged from them? Here we examined preexisting characteristics of the relationship or of the parent that could help explain the lack of contact during adulthood. Based on our theoretical

framework, we expected that young adults would be more likely to lack contact when there were "weaker ties" (i.e. when the parent or child was male, when the parent figure was someone other than the biological parent, and when the parent figure did not live with the respondent in adolescence). We also expected higher levels of estrangement in the case of "disruptive events" (i.e. parental separation or incarceration of the parent figure).

3) How are individuals who lack relationships with parent figures faring in young adulthood? We hypothesize that those lacking active parental ties will likely experience other disadvantages, including lower levels of education, poorer health, and higher levels of depressive symptoms.

METHOD

Data

The data for this research come from Waves I and IV of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health ("Add Health," http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/addhealth). Add Health is a large, nationally representative study of adolescents who were in grades 7-12 during the 1994-1995 school year, when Wave I data were collected (Harris 2013). In 2008-2009 when Wave IV of the study was administered, respondents were in their prime young adult years – ages 25 to 32.

Initially, a stratified random sample of American high schools was drawn and students from each school (and corresponding middle schools) were then sampled and interviewed in their homes. Respondents who completed the Wave I in-home interview were sought for follow-up in Waves II, III, and IV. In Wave IV, 92.5% of the sample was successfully located and 80.3% of the sample was interviewed. Response rates for Wave IV differ by race, gender, and other characteristics; however, analyses have indicated that after sampling weights are applied, bias is small for nearly all survey questions (Harris 2013).

Due to follow-up protocols for Wave IV, even respondents who were not in touch with parents were likely to have been successfully contacted. In addition to parental contact information, the study team utilized respondents' own contact information provided in Wave III of the survey, as well as contact information for "another person like a relative or close friend, who would know how to reach [them]" (Tabor 2014). When these approaches were not successful, the team relied on other information from their locating database, collected over the

14-year study period, in addition to other modern methods for locating respondents, such as social media. Successful interviews were conducted with several populations considered difficult to study, including 73 incarcerated and 16 homeless young adults.

In Wave IV of Add Health, there were 5,090 respondents interviewed in the core age range of 25-32. Ten respondents (0.2%) with missing data on educational attainment, self-rated health, or depressive symptoms are excluded using case-wise deletion. The final analytic sample is 5,080 respondents.

Throughout the analyses, we utilize measures of prior characteristics from Wave I, when all respondents were adolescents ages 18 and under. Measures from Waves II and III were not used since respondents were divided between high-school-age and post-high-school-age during these waves, making some variables not comparable across age groups (such as variables based on household rosters).

Measures

Presence of Parent Figure Ties.

Whether the respondent has active parent figure ties is based on three questions from Wave IV. Regarding mothers, the following introduction was given: "We would like to know about the woman you feel raised you. This may be your biological mother, or it may be a step-mother, adoptive mother, grandmother, etc. If you have more than one mother figure, choose the one who is most important to you." Respondents are then asked:

1. "Is your (mother figure) still alive?"

2. "How often do you and your (mother figure) see each other?" ("Never," "once a year or less," "a few times a year," "once or twice a month," "once or twice a week," "almost every day," "don't know")

3. "How often do you and your (mother figure) talk on the telephone, exchange letters or exchange email?" ("Never," "once a year or less," "a few times a year," "once or twice a month," "once or twice a week," "almost every day")

Questions for father figures follow the same format.

Using these questions, we categorize respondents as either "having" or "lacking" an active relationship with a mother figure and a father figure, respectively (for simplicity, "mother

figures" will sometimes be referred to as "mothers," and "father figures" will sometimes be referred to as "fathers"). Respondents "lack" a mother/father figure when they were not raised by a mother/father figure, they cannot name a mother/father figure ("don't know"), the mother/father figure is not living, or respondents have a living mother/father figure but do not have regular contact with her/him (i.e. they see or communicate with each other "once a year or less" or "never"). In contrast, respondents "have" a relationship with a mother/father figure when they identify a person as filling that role and report having regular contact with her/him (i.e. communication or visits a few times a year, once or twice a month, once or twice a week, or almost every day).

Variables predicting lack of contact.

The type of mother figure relationship was ascertained using the Wave IV question, "What is this person's relationship to you [the woman you feel raised you]?" "Biological mother," "Adoptive mother," "Step-mother who adopted you," "Step-mother ," "Foster mother," "Grandmother," "Aunt," "Sister," "Other female relative," "Other female non-relative," "Was not raised by a mother figure," "Don't know." The same question was asked for father figures. In order to collapse the smallest groups, responses were recoded into the following categories (for mother and father figures separately): biological, adoptive, step-parent, grandparent, other relative, or other non-relative.

Dummy variables for whether the respondent lived with their mother figure and father figure, respectively, during adolescence were coded using the Wave I household roster. If the respondent reported in Wave IV that their father figure was their grandfather, we examined the Wave I household roster to see if a grandfather was listed. This variable is considered an indicator of the previous strength of the tie.

We expected parental relationship instability to be a key stressor that would predict subsequent disengagement. Add Health does not include a direct measures of parental divorce, so instability is approximated with a dummy variable for whether the respondent's biological mother and biological father (or both adoptive parents) were living together in Wave I. This dummy variable = 1 if parents had separated (not living together) and = 0 if the parents were living together.

Information on parental incarceration was assessed in Wave IV with the question, "(Has/did) your (father figure) ever (spent/spend) time in jail or prison?" Responses were categorized as yes (=1), or no / "don't know" (=0). There were only 6 cases of maternal incarceration so only paternal incarceration was included as a variable in the regression analysis.

Control Variables

Socioeconomic background is assessed using the respondent's household income in adolescence (collected in the Wave I survey of parents). Approximately 20% of cases are missing data; these data are imputed using the resident parents' education. In the analyses, we use the cube root of income, which, similar to logging income, makes the distribution more normal, but has the advantage of being able to retain values equal to zero.

Race is based on the Wave I question: "What is your race?" Respondents are recoded into four categories: White non-Hispanic (hereafter "White"), Black non-Hispanic (hereafter "Black"), Hispanic of any race (hereafter "Hispanic"), and non-Hispanic other race (hereafter "other race"). Only 4 respondents (0.08%) refused to answer or have missing data. In these cases, the same series of questions from Wave III is used, or as a last resort, the interviewer's evaluation of the respondent's race.

Young Adulthood Outcomes and Related Measures.

Education level in young adulthood is based on the question, "What is the highest level of education that you have achieved to date?" Answers are recoded as "less than high school/GED," "high school (or GED)," or "more than high school." Models that predict education level in young adulthood control for prior educational aptitude and interest. This is captured by averaging Wave I English, Math, Science, and History grades to construct an adolescent G.P.A. In cases where this information is missing, we use the same set of questions measured in Wave II, and when this is not available, we impute G.P.A. based on problems in school, number of absences, and resident parents' education level.

Health status in young adulthood is assessed using the question, "In general, how is your health?," and respondents choose from a 5-point scale (5 = "excellent," 1 = "poor"). Models predicting health in young adulthood control for health in adolescence, which is assessed using the same question taken at Wave I (or at Wave 2, when Wave 1 data is not available).

Depressive symptoms in young adulthood are evaluated using questions based on the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression (CES-D) scale (Radloff 1977). The CES-D is a screening tool for depression that has been validated for adult and adolescent populations (Andresen et al. 1994; Dierker et al. 2001). Add Health uses a shortened version, which includes 10 items asking respondents to assess their feelings over the previous seven days. For the nine respondents who are missing data for at least one of these items, values are imputed based on the items that were answered. Scale values fell within the range of 0 to 30 and Cronbach's alpha for this scale is 0.84. To follow the format of the original scale, we reweight our scale to have a maximum of 60 points and, following current recommendations, dichotomize it at the level of 22 for males and 24 for females (Anderson, Cesur, and Tekin 2015; Roberts, Lewinsohn, and Seeley 1991). This scale is usually dichotomized since small differences between values are not considered meaningful, particularly at the low end of the scale. In predicting young adult depressive symptoms, we control for pre-existing depressive symptoms in adolescence, using the CES-D questions asked in Wave I.

Descriptive statistics for the sample are presented in Table 1. The table shows unweighted means or percentages for the whole analytic sample and by presence of parental relationship. Just under half of the sample was male (46%) and the racial-ethnic distribution was 60% White, 24% Black, and 10% Hispanic. The average family income in adolescence (Wave I) was almost $48,000. Sixteen percent of respondents had a high school education level and three-quarters (76%) had additional schooling. Average self-rated health in Wave IV was 3.7 on a 1-5 scale, and 11% reported depressive symptoms above the recommended threshold.

Analytic Strategy

To answer the first research question, we estimate the proportion of 25-32-year olds who lack active parental relationships using information from the Add Health survey, as described above. We apply these proportions to Census estimates of the U.S. resident population ages 25-32 in May 2008, which was the median interview month for Add Health Wave IV (U.S. Census Bureau 2010).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health Wave IV (2008-09) Unweighted						
	Full Sample	Mother figure			Father figure	
		Has Relationship[1]	Lacks Relationship[2]		Has Relationship[1]	Lacks Relationship[2]
Male (%)	45.9	46.1	44.0		46.2	45.0
Age (Mean)	28.4	28.4	28.7 *		28.3	28.6 *
Adolescent Family Income (Wave I, 1997) (mean, in $1,000s)	47.6	48.3	36.9 *		51.1	34.1 *
Race-ethnicity (%)						
White	59.8	60.4	51.2 *		63.3	46.4 *
Black	23.9	23.3	31.5 *		20.6	36.3 *
Hispanic	10.4	10.4	10.1		10.2	10.9
Other	5.9	5.9	7.1		5.8	6.4
Young Adult Outcomes						
Education (%)						
Less than high school	7.8	7.4	12.5 *		6.7	12.0 *
High school	16.1	15.6	23.2 *		15.2	19.7 *
More than high school	76.1	76.9	64.3 *		78.2	68.2 *
Self-Rated Health Scale (mean, 1-5 scale)	3.7	3.7	3.5 *		3.7	3.5 *
Has depressive symptoms (%)	11.1	10.9	14.6		9.9	15.6 *
Prior Measures of Young Adult Outcomes						
GPA (Wave I) (mean)	2.8	2.8	2.7 *		2.9	2.7 *
Self-Rated Health (Wave I) (mean, 1-5 scale)	3.9	3.9	3.8		3.9	3.8 *
Depressive symptoms (Wave I) (mean, 1-60 scale)	10.9	10.8	12.3 *		10.5	12.1 *
N =	5,080	4,744	336		4,026	1,054

[1]Has a living mother/father figure and communicates with or visits him/her at least "a few times a year"

[2]Respondent never had a mother/father figure, he/she is deceased, or there is little or no communication (communicates and visits either "once a year or less" or "never")

*Difference from "Has Relationship" group significant at $p<0.05$

Note: All variables are from Wave IV unless otherwise specified.

To address the second research question we use logistic regression analysis to examine preexisting characteristics of the relationship or of the parent that could help explain the lack of contact during adulthood. Potential explanatory factors included in the model are indicators of "weak ties" (i.e. gender, the type of relationship, and prior coresidence) and "disruptive events" (i.e. prior family disruption and paternal incarceration). Models control for background characteristics including respondent's age, sex, race-ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

The final research question is addressed using logistic and ordered logistic regression analyses. Here we examine how young adults who lack parental relationships are faring. In each model, the key predictors are lacking a mother figure tie and lacking a father figure tie. We estimate separate models predicting the respondent's educational attainment, self-rated health, and presence of depressive symptoms in young adulthood. We include controls for background characteristics (age, gender, race, socioeconomic background), as well as a dummy variable for whether the respondent's parents had separated, since this is a potentially important confounding factor. We also control for prior indicators of the outcomes of interest from Wave I (for example, adolescent G.P.A. as a predictor of educational attainment in adulthood). These prior measures are included to account for the childhood resources and other unobserved background characteristics that influenced their propensity to experience poorer outcomes in young adulthood. Under ideal circumstances, we would identify how the association between lacking parent figures and outcomes differs based on the reason the tie is absent (e.g. death versus estrangement, etc.), however, the subgroups are too small to analyze separately.

Data are analyzed using Stata 13.0/SE. Survey weights are applied to account for stratified sampling and nonresponse. Logistic and ordered logistic regressions are estimated using the "logit" and "ologit" commands, respectively. These are exercised in conjunction with the "svy" and "subpop" commands which specify survey weights and the analytic sample.

RESULTS

Prevalence of Lacking Active Parental Relationships

Table 2 shows that among the population age 25 to 32, a substantial proportion lack an active relationship with at least one parent. Twenty percent of young adults in this age range –

approximately 6.6 million individuals – lack an active relationship with a father figure. In contrast, 6.5% of young adults do not have an active relationship with a mother figure, which translates into approximately 2.1 million individuals ages 25-32. Taking mothers and fathers together, only 76% of young adults have regular contact with both parents, meaning that the remaining 24% lack a relationship with at least one parent. However, lacking a relationship with *both* parents is relatively rare at 2.4%.

Table 2. Distribution of Young Adults (Ages 25-32), by Relationship with Mother and Father Figure, National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health Wave IV (2008-09, *N = 5,080*) and U.S. Census Resident Population Estimates (May 2008)

		Mother figure: Weighted %, *Population-level n*		
		Has relationship[1]	Lacks relationship[2]	Total
Father figure: Weighted %, *Population-level n*	Has relationship[1]	76.1%	4.0%	80.1%
		25,182,494	*1,327,660*	*26,510,154*
	Lacks relationship[2]	17.5%	2.4%	19.9%
		5,790,715	*807,853*	*6,598,568*
	Total	93.6%	6.5%	100.0%
		30,973,209	*2,135,513*	*33,108,722*

[1]Has a living mother/father figure and communicates with or visits him/her at least "a few times a year"

[2]Respondent never had a mother/father figure, he/she is deceased, or there is little or no communication (communicates and visits either "once a year or less" or "never")

Reasons for Lacking Parental Contact

We examined whether various preexisting characteristics of the parent-child relationship predicted later estrangement when children were young adults. Table 3 presents odds ratios from logistic regressions predicting whether young adults lacked contact with mother or father figures (comparing them to those who had regular contact). These models focus on estrangement, specifically; we exclude from this analysis those who had no mother or father figure at all (due to

death or no relationship having been established) since most of the predictor variables do not pertain to this group. Appendix Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the variables and the subsample used in this analysis.

Based on our theoretical framework we expected that estrangement would be associated with weaker ties (being male, having a parent figure who was a non-biological parent, or not living with the parent figure in adolescence) and disruptive events (parental separation or incarceration). In Table 3, Model 1 provides some support for the "weak ties" hypothesis; this model indicates that those who lack maternal contact were, in fact, more likely to have a mother figure who was not their biological mother (specifically an adoptive mother or another relative). The same is true for father figures. Model 2 shows that those who lack contact with father figures were more likely to have listed someone who was not their biological father (specifically a step-father or a male non-relative). Further, those who did not live with their father figure during adolescence were less likely to have contact with him later on. Model 2 also provided some support for the "disruptive event" hypothesis: there was a lower likelihood of father contact found for those who experienced a parental separation and those whose father was ever incarcerated.

Effects on Young Adults Lacking Parental Relationships

Finally, we examine how lacking active parental relationships is associated with various indicators of success and well-being in young adulthood. We expect that those lacking an active parental relationship will be more disadvantaged in adulthood, including having lower levels of educational achievement and poorer physical and mental health. The variables for lacking mother and father relationships are entered into the regression model together, since they are positively correlated. All models control for background characteristics and parental separation. Models also control for a prior measure closely related to the dependent variable (e.g. adolescent G.P.A. is included in the models predicting education level) in an effort to account for the fact that both the dependent and key independent variables are likely driven, in large part, by early life disadvantage.

Table 3. Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression Analyses Predicting Lack of Contact with Mother/Father Figures (Reference = Has Contact). National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health Wave IV (2008-09)

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Lacks Contact with Mother Figure		Lacks Contact with Father Figure	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
Male	1.61	[0.86,3.03]	0.98	[0.70,1.37]
Relationship to mother/father figure (Ref = Biological)				
Adoptive	9.36 **	[3.20,27.34]	1.91	[0.78,4.63]
Step	3.03	[0.69,13.33]	1.79 **	[1.20,2.67]
Grandparent	1.17	[0.24,5.71]	0.13 *	[0.02,0.97]
Other relative	6.38 **	[1.91,21.25]	0.41	[0.12,1.46]
Other non-relative	7.30 ^	[0.78,68.55]	3.65 *	[1.32,10.08]
Did not live with mother/father figure (Wave I)	1.66	[0.75,3.68]	1.62 *	[1.08,2.41]
Parents separated (Wave I)	2.02	[0.87,4.68]	2.98 **	[1.81,4.91]
Mother/Father figure ever incarcerated	--	--	3.06 **	[2.03,4.61]
Controls				
Age	0.96	[0.79,1.16]	1.14 **	[1.04,1.24]
Family income (cube root) (Wave I)	0.72 *	[0.52,0.99]	0.94	[0.76,1.15]
Race-ethnicity (Ref = White)				
Black	0.25 **	[0.09,0.68]	1.00	[0.62,1.62]
Hispanic	1.06	[0.42,2.62]	1.59 ^	[0.98,2.57]
Other	1.16	[0.35,3.87]	2.31 *	[1.22,4.36]
N[1]	*4,791*		*4,220*	

^ p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01

[1]Respondents with no living mother figure (n=289) excluded from Model 1. Respondents with no living father figure (n=860) excluded from Model 2.

Model 1 in Table 4 presents odds ratios from ordered logistic regression models examining whether lacking active parental relationships in young adulthood predicts educational attainment. The results indicate that lacking a mother figure is associated with lower educational achievement, even controlling for background characteristics and prior G.P.A. Lacking a father figure is not associated with educational attainment. Model 2 shows odds ratios from ordered logistic regression models examining whether lacking active parental relationships in young adulthood predicts self-rated health. We see that lacking a father figure predicts lower self-rated health, controlling for background characteristics and self-rated health in adolescence. Finally, depressive symptoms in young adulthood are addressed in Model 3. Logistic regression models reveal that lacking a father relationship is associated with the presence of depressive symptoms, even when depressive symptoms in adolescence and other characteristics are controlled.

Post Hoc Tests

To test whether the findings are robust to alternative specifications, we re-estimate the models from Table 4 using OLS regression, treating educational attainment, the self-rated health scale, and the depressive symptoms scale as continuous variables. We also estimate a logistic regression model with self-rated health dichotomized at the median, following the approach taken by some others (Boynton-Jarrett et al. 2008; Cavallo et al. 2015). In these alternative specifications we find the same pattern of results. We also explore whether the indicators of well-being and achievement from Wave I (i.e. high school G.P.A., adolescent self-rated health, and adolescent depressive symptoms) predict estrangement in young adulthood. Some of these variables do; specifically, lower self-rated health and greater depressive symptoms in adolescence are significantly associated with increased estrangement from father figures in young adulthood at the p<0.05 level. This finding affirms our decision to include adolescent indicators as control variables in Table 4 and shows that links between child functioning and estrangement may be bidirectional.

Table 4. Odds Ratios from Regression Analyses Predicting Young Adult Outcomes. National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health Wave IV (2008-09)

	Model 1 Educational Attainment[1]		Model 2 Self-Rated Health Scale[2]		Model 3 Depressive Symptoms[3]	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
Lacks relationship with mother figure	0.64 **	[0.46,0.89]	0.84	[0.66,1.07]	0.97	[0.66,1.43]
Lacks relationship with father figure	0.89	[0.73,1.08]	0.74 **	[0.63,0.87]	1.30 *	[1.01,1.67]
Controls						
Male	0.63 **	[0.53,0.74]	1.10	[0.98,1.24]	0.95	[0.76,1.18]
Age	1.05 ^	[1.00,1.09]	0.99	[0.95,1.02]	0.98	[0.92,1.04]
Family income (cube root) (Wave I)	1.73 **	[1.55,1.93]	1.16 **	[1.08,1.24]	0.86 *	[0.76,0.97]
Race-ethnicity (Ref = White)						
Black	0.90	[0.73,1.11]	0.80 **	[0.68,0.93]	1.33 *	[1.03,1.72]
Hispanic	0.76 *	[0.59,0.99]	0.77 *	[0.63,0.95]	0.79	[0.56,1.12]
Other	0.91	[0.63,1.31]	0.77 ^	[0.59,1.00]	1.07	[0.70,1.64]
Parents separated (Wave I) (%)	0.83 *	[0.70,0.99]	0.90	[0.79,1.03]	1.22	[0.96,1.55]
Prior Measure						
G.P.A. (Wave I)	2.70 **	[2.42,3.00]				
Self-Rated Health Scale (Wave I)			1.88 **	[1.76,2.02]		
Depressive Symptom Scale (Wave I)					1.08 **	[1.07,1.09]
N = 5,080						

^p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01

[1]Ordered logistic regression. Educational attainment categories are: less than high school; high school/GED; or more than high school.

[2]Ordered logistic regression. Scale range is 1 (poor health) - 5 (excellent health).

[3]Logistic regression. Depressive Symptoms = 1 if CES-D scale > 22 for males or 24 for females; = 0 if lower.

Finally, we disaggregate the reasons for lacking parental ties and examine the association between these variables and young adult outcomes. To do this, we re-estimate the models from Table 4 with three mutually-exclusive categories for mothers and three for fathers. For mothers,

the categories are: respondent is estranged from mother figure, respondent does not have a living mother figure, or respondent has regular contact with mother figure (reference category). The same three-category variable is constructed for fathers. In all cases, we find the disaggregated coefficients have the same signs as the original coefficients, but fewer of the disaggregated coefficients are statistically significant at the $p<0.05$ level. Specifically, lacking a living father figure is significantly associated with lower self-rated health and the presence of depressive symptoms. Other coefficients are not significant, perhaps due to the small size of these groups.

DISCUSSION

In the twenty-first century, research has documented the supportive roles that parents play in their children's lives during young adulthood (Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe, et al. 2012; Johnson 2013). Indeed, this newly defined period – labeled the "transition to adulthood" (Berlin et al. 2010) or "emerging adulthood" (Arnett 2000) – is characterized by prolonged dependence on parents into the early 30s. It is therefore notable that researchers have not yet documented the prevalence of missing a parental tie and the possible disadvantages of lacking such a tie.

In contrast to prior research which has emphasized the close relations and frequent contact typically enjoyed by young adults and their parents (Hartnett et al. 2013), this study demonstrates that a nontrivial minority have no active relationship with one or both parents. Findings indicate that 6.5% of U.S. young adults ages 25-32 lack an active relationship with a mother figure and 20% lack an active relationship with a father figure. These percentages translate into 7.9 million young adults who lack a relationship with one or both parents. This study also sheds light on the factors associated with this lack of parental bond. Consistent with our hypotheses, we found that both weaker preexisting ties and disruptive experiences were associated with lacking contact with parents in young adulthood, though admittedly, these two types of effects are difficult to disentangle. Finally, young adults without parental ties are less likely to be navigating the transition to adulthood successfully, after adjusting for background characteristics, parental separation, and earlier measures of achievement and well-being. Specifically, those who lack a mother figure tie in young adulthood have lower levels of education, and those who lack a father figure tie have lower self-rated health and more depressive symptoms.

Weakened Ties, Disruptive Experiences, and Young Adults' Adjustment

Several key contributions are worth highlighting. First is the fact that a substantial proportion of young adults lack active parental relationships. Prior research had explored related topics, such as attempting to classify family typologies as detached or uninvolved (Silverstein and Bengtson 1997; Van Gaalen and Dykstra 2006), or examining reasons for maternal estrangement (Gilligan et al. 2015). The current study differs from prior research because it takes a population approach and describes the prevalence of lacking parental ties among the current cohort of young adults. In addition to having consequences for well-being, the finding that a large proportion of young adults lacks parental ties also has methodological implications. Specifically, researchers should be mindful of the fact that those who lack a mother or father figure entirely (due to death, for example) may be excluded from survey questions assessing relationship quality or contact frequency. These young adults may be omitted from research on parent-child relationships, and may therefore be "invisible."

The reasons for lacking contact that we identified were also striking. Notably, we found that non-biological parent ties appeared to be more prone to estrangement, particularly those with adoptive mothers, step-fathers, more distantly related women and men, and unrelated women and men. This fits with existing research finding that non-biological parent ties are not equivalent to biological ones, and generally tend to be less protective and less close (Becker et al. 2013; Lansford et al. 2001; Loehlin et al. 2010). However, this prior research was limited to children (in the case of Lansford et al. 2001), older adults (in the case of Loehlin et al. 2010), or contexts outside of the United States (in the case of Becker et al. 2013). Our findings indicate that for U.S. young adults, specifically, non-biological parent figure ties are more prone to estrangement. In addition, we build on prior research by examining estrangement across a wide range of parent figure types, rather than only focusing on step-parents or adoptive parents, for example.

The findings regarding gender are also noteworthy. We anticipated that males (both fathers and sons) would be more likely to lack parent-child relationships due to their tendency to have weaker and less active kinship ties (Rossi and Rossi 1990). We find that this is the case for fathers – who are much more likely to lack contact with young adult children than are mothers – but not for sons. Some recent research has suggested that there are fewer differences between sons and daughters than in the past (Fingerman et al. 2011; Johnson 2013). The findings

presented here show that these gender similarities also exist for parent-child ties in young adulthood. Regarding the gender of parents, family demographers have long documented absent or tenuous ties with some fathers (Amato and Booth 1996; Cheadle et al. 2010). We extend this research to the next phase of life and demonstrate that it is very common to lack active father relationships in young adulthood. Our results also indicate that lacking a mother figure is fairly common among young adults. This fact that may be underappreciated in the literature, which tends to assume the presence of mother-child ties.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations of this study warrant consideration in future research. First, we were constrained by the available variables in the survey. Notably, the set of possible predictors in the data was not comprehensive; particularly for individuals whose parent figure was not the biological parent (but rather a step-parent, grandparent, or other adult), there was little information available from the respondent's youth. In addition, young adults who had two parents of the same sex were limited in their ability to report on these relationships. However, this issue likely only affects a small proportion of the sample since many of these children would have been born into opposite-sex relationships (Gates 2011).

Second, we were not able to examine how the reason for lacking a parental tie (whether it was due to death, never having established a relationship, or estrangement) was associated with young adult outcomes, due to the small size of these subgroups. Instead, we grouped them together on the basis that they have in common the powerful fact that they lack a mother (or father) figure in their lives. Future efforts to understand the distinctions across these subgroups will require a larger sample of young adults.

Third, we showed that young adults who were missing parental ties were faring worse in young adulthood, compared to their peers with parent figures. However, it was difficult to make a strong case about the *causal* relationship between lacking parental ties and poor outcomes in young adulthood because they were measured concurrently and were both driven by prior disadvantage. The fact that we controlled for an earlier measure of the outcome helped minimize the second concern, but did not address it fully. We will know more about whether and how lacking parental ties impacts outcomes once additional waves of the Add Health study are

released. In the meantime, we have strong evidence of compounding disadvantage, since those who would benefit most from parental relationships are the least likely to have them.

Findings from this study also raise important questions for future analyses. An important question is how young adults and their parents explain the lack of contact. Parent-child relationships could be severed for a variety of reasons, and the cutting of ties could be initiated by either the child or the parent, or it could be mutual. Qualitative research has found that people sometimes attribute estrangement to misaligned values or factors such as divorce, loss of income, and incarceration, and the aftermath of these events (Agllias 2015a; Gilligan et al. 2015). However, existing national surveys do not include direct questions on reasons for estrangement, so we lack representative data that would provide a fuller portrait. Having this type of information could be particularly valuable if it sheds light on which party (if either) suffers more the lack of contact, and whether contact is likely to resume later on.

Absent a highly involved friend or family member, the disadvantages faced by young adults lacking parental ties are likely to compound in the years that follow. Because of the trend toward higher life expectancies, parents and children usually have many decades during which they can either reap the benefits of positive relationships, or suffer from negative or non-existent ones (Hagestad and Uhlenberg 2007). These are relationships in which children tend to be the beneficiaries, since support generally flows "downward" from parents to children (Albertini, Kohli, and Vogel 2007; Hill 1970). It is possible that some of those who lack contact in young adulthood will regain it later, but the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior, and research has shown substantial continuity in relationships over time (Amato and Booth 1996; Aquilino 2006; Suitor, Gilligan, and Pillemer 2013). The group of individuals that we have identified as not having active parental relationships in young adulthood will likely become the group of middle-aged adults who lack parental help in caring for their children, a financial safety net in times of emergency, and the emotional security that comes from a strong parent-child bond.

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APPENDIX

Appendix Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Variables Predicting Lacking Contact with Parent Figures (Table 3), National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health Wave IV (2008-09), Unweighted

	Mother figures			Father figures		
	Has Relationship[1]	Lacks Contact[2]	Total	Has Relationship[1]	Lacks Contact[2]	Total
Male (%)	46.1%	55.3%	46.1%	46.2%	45.9%	46.2%
Relationship to mother/father figure (%)						
Biological	93.5%	72.3% *	93.3%	81.9%	60.3% *	80.9%
Adoptive	1.1%	8.5%	1.2%	2.0%	3.6%	2.0%
Step	1.3%	6.4%	1.4%	10.8%	29.9% *	11.7%
Grandparent	2.7%	4.3%	2.7%	2.3%	0.5% *	2.2%
Other relative	1.1%	6.4%	1.1%	2.4%	2.1%	2.3%
Other non-relative	0.3%	2.1%	0.3%	0.7%	3.6% *	0.8%
Did not live with mother/father figure (Wave I) (%)	8.7%	27.7% *	8.9%	23.4%	55.2% *	24.9%
Parents separated (Wave I) (%)	43.6%	70.2% *	43.9%	36.4%	77.8% *	38.3%
Mother/father figure ever incarcerated (%)	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%	8.6%	27.3% *	9.4%
N =	4,744	47	4,791	4,026	194	4,220

[1]Has a living mother/father figure and communicates with or visits him/her at least "a few times a year"

[2]Has a living mother/father figure, but there is little or no communication (communicates and visits either "once a year or less" or "never")

*Difference from "Has Relationship" group significant at $p<0.05$

Note: All variables are from Wave IV unless otherwise specified.

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