**Connecting Fathers: Fathers’ Impact on Adult Children’s Social Networks**

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**Abstract**

We examine the relationship between having an emotionally close and active father in an adult child’s social network compared to having a father who is not close, and a father who was not named. We hypothesize that fathers provide both essential and important contributions to their children’s psychosocial development, and those contributions continue into active adulthood. Using the 2015 UC Berkeley Social Networks Study (UCNets), we find that adult children who name an emotionally close father in their network tend to have more males as social ties, and but not more female ties. We conclude that fathers continue to play an important and active role in their children’s lives long after childhood.

Keywords: social networks, fathers, adult children.

**Introduction**

Fathers are important because they can enable the successful launching of children into autonomous, socially integrated adults. Studying father’s involvement in their children’s lives is an areas of research recently highlighted by Hofferth and Goldscheider (2015) as crucial, yet it has often been sidelined in the emphasis on mothers and family structure such that the father’s absence rather than his presence is the focus. The body of literature that does exist on the father’s presence tends to examine three aspects of his impact on: (1) young children; (2) early life inputs, e.g., parenting time or parental divorce, and later life outcomes for adult children; and (3) the father’s social capital as reflected in the resources he provides given his education, occupation and income. The goal of this paper is to redirect the focus to the child/father dyad in adulthood, and its relationship to the adult children’s social support network using rich network data provided by the UC Berkeley Social Networks Study (UCNets).

Fathers are both an important factor in a person’s psychosocial development, and also an important contributor to their offspring’s social capital. The initial contribution of fathers emerges from attachment theory: children need to form a secure connection with a protective and nurturing significant other, and parents are the first and most common source (Bowlby, 1988). As they age, the importance of parents for the norms of reciprocity and social exchange come into play, such that the developing child learns that behavior is evaluated, and has consequences. Positive actions beget similar results, and over time the child develops an understanding of successful relationships. The outcomes for adult life are both in stable and rewarding social relationships, as well as a generalized norm for repaying the caring (or negative behavior) with care for parents in later life. A third mechanism for paternal contributions social capital: fathers contribute skills and knowledge, provide networked connections, financial footing, and advice derived from experience. These factors are critical in childhood: we are argue that the trust developed through attachment will also affect the ability to form relationships as adults. We ask whether the valuable presence of a father continues well into adulthood.

Two hypotheses frame the understanding of the value of fathers in a child’s life: essential father and important father. According to the “essential father hypothesis,” a father, because of his gender, makes unique contributions that a mother cannot, such as e.g. stimuli for psychosocial development. An “important” father, on the other hand, can significantly affect child outcomes but these contributions can be provided by other parental figures such as grandparents or step-fathers (King, Thorsen & Amato, 2014). These contributions include household income, breadwinning role, shared discipline, quality time, and more. For example, two mothers would produce the same outcomes in children as would a traditional family. When a father is absent, the child lacks a second parent, but it’s the loss of the contributions, not necessarily his “fatherness” that is important (Lamb, 2010). These second parents’ involvement is associated with positive outcomes such as fewer psychological problems for their young children (Amato and Rivera, 1999) and greater stability (Hofferth & Goldscheider 2015).

The effects of fathers do not stop at childhood. A central area of this research examines parental divorce and later life outcomes. The voluminous body of research consistently indicates that growing up in two-parent stable households is the gold standard for launching children successfully into adulthood in terms of successful employment and marriage, as well as improved health (Amato, 2001). Some of this is owing to stability of financial resources, with its concomitant reductions in stress and risk, e.g. greater access to health care, less frequent moves, greater household ownership, and higher income for other inputs into childhood. Parental divorce in contrast weakens access to those resources. In addition, one parent, typically the mother, now shoulders the bulk of the child-raising responsibility, often while working, and thus children receive less attention and resources. This loss is particularly salient if the absent father ceases to invest in his children’s well-being as a way to punish the mother. Beyond that, there is simply the absence, or reduced presence, of the father in the child’s life. Whether ‘essential’ or ‘important’, fathers contribute to their children’s outcomes.

Because parents are often at the heart of one’s successful juvenile psychosocial adjustment another area of inquiry is children’s social networks in adult life, critical for social support and expanded opportunities. Parents tend to have a positive influence on the quality of their young children’s social networks either directly through arranging activities or indirectly through, say, choice of neighborhoods, friendship opportunities, and role-modeling (Rubin & Sloman, 1984). Fathers, particularly those with higher SES, provide insights through experience to inform their children regarding networks for work, expertise in job-seeking and successful employment, financial strategies, as well as parenting mentorship (Adamic, Filiz, 2017). Each of those guiding contributions is correlated with successful psychosocial adjustments, so it follows that there should be positive effects of paternal contributions for their adult children’s social networks from having a present and contributing father.

Despite that foundation, few studies examine the presence and importance of fathers in the daily lives of adult children(Sharabany, Scher & GalKruz, 2006). Available studies suggest that paternal presence and closeness continue to be important for psychological well-being into young adulthood (Amato, 1994; Barnett, Marshall, Pleck, 1992). For example, adult sons who describe their relationship with their fathers as “positive” were more likely to adopt similar personalities to their fathers (Long et al. 2014). Other research found that college students tended to report higher interpersonal competence and more relationship satisfaction when they had “secure attachment” with their parents (Mattanah, Lopez, Govern, 2011). Evidence of the continued presence of parents can be found in recent work, where young adults tended to list their parents as sources of emotional support through confiding and advice more often than other social ties, with more exchange between children and their mothers (Offer and Fischer 2018).

It is further likely that the continuing effect of fathers on adult children’s lives would vary by gender of the child. Fathers tend to interact differently with their daughters compared to their sons. Fathers tend respond more attentively to their daughters and respond more strongly to their emotions (Mascaro et al., 2017). In contrast, fathers of sons were more likely to engage in “rough and tumble play” and have stronger responses to neutral face reactions. Others have found that fathers react more positively to their daughters’ submissive behavior (Chaplin, et al, 2005), spend money differently on their sons compared to their daughters (Lambrianos, et al., 2017), and even decide to work more or fewer hours depending on the gender of their newborns (Lundberg & Rose, 2002). While others have reported surprisingly few differences in the way fathers treat sons versus daughters (Endendijk, 2016). The direction of effect is therefore unclear.

There is also evidence to suggest that sons and daughters *respond* differently to the quality of presence from their father. Sons, for example, are more likely to be suspended from school, have more trouble paying attention, generally perform worse than girls in academia (Lundberg, 2017). Daughters with absent fathers as children in the US tend to alter their social behavior in ways that are unique to men. In a meta-analysis, Lynda Boothroyd and Catherine Cross (2017) conclude that “…father absence may predispose women to greater sensitivity to, and negative reactivity towards, the social environment in general.” There is little research on how adult sons compared to adult daughters continue to respond to the quality of the presence of a father; the research that exists suggests that fathers continue to play a role well into adulthood (Rostad, Silverman, McDonald, 2014, Quinlan, 2003; Ellis, et al., 2003; TenEyck, Knox, Sayed, 2021). Thus fathers may favor a daughter, they invest in their sons.

**HYPOTHESES**

The overarching hypothesis for our conceptual model is that the active presence of a close father in an adult child’s personal network is associated with a larger and more robust network. Specifically we address the following hypotheses:

* 1. When fathers are part of an adult’s social network, the adult child has more social ties
  2. When fathers are close as opposed to just present, the adult has more social ties.
  3. Close fathers would mean more ties with male ties but not necessarily female ties.
  4. A close father has a more salient effect on sons than daughters.

DATA AND METHODS

*Data*

The UC Berkeley Social Networks Study, or “UCNets” was five-year panel study funded by the National Institute on Aging (<http://ucnets.berkeley.edu>) created with the goal of drawing an egocentric map of respondent networks and collecting information about their social connections. Responses used were collected in 2015 in the first wave of a longitudinal panel survey through address-based sampling and Facebook advertisement sampling. The survey collected data on 1159 people in two cohorts – 21-30 year-olds and 50-70 year-olds living in the S.F. Bay Area. The surveys/interviews were conducted face-to-face and online (see documentation on website). The UCNets survey also collected detailed information about participants’ socioeconomic and health status. See Fischer and Lawton (2020) for details.

*Dependent Variable*

Data on social networks was collected by asking respondents 9 name-eliciting questions about how often they engaged in social activities, received advice, confided, and other interpersonal interactions, and then asking them to provide a list of names with whom they engaged in that activity. One of these questions asked respondents to name people they “go out to concerts, plays, clubs, sports, or other events with…” This social activities question is the focus of our study. We tallied the number of names, i.e., their alters, listed for each respondent. We limited the results to exclude parents from this list of names, resulting in the dependent variable of the respondents’ number of “Social Interaction Ties.” Three people in this study who answered the survey but refused to provide any information about their social network and were removed from the sample.

Table 1A shows the distribution of all “Social Interaction” alters named in a network by role relationship, gender. Because we were interested in the association between a close parent and the number of people the respondent interacted with *beyond* them, we removed parents from these three lists *if* they were named. The result was a dependent variable in which all mothers and fathers are removed from the social interaction list. We then break this information out into 3 distinct lists (which are analyzed in separate models): the total number of “Social Interaction Ties,” male-only “Social Interaction Ties,” and the female-only “Social Interaction Ties.” Table 1B features cross-tabulations of weighted case means of “Social Interaction Ties” by type of father relationship alongside N counts. Generally, those with an “especially close” father report a higher average amount of “Social Interaction Ties.”

*Explanatory Variables*

Variables describing the relationship with fathers were constructed based on whether the respondent named the father in the network. Each name in the list of alters was described by the ego (respondent) regarding age, sex, relationship and geographic and emotional closeness, among other descriptors. This information allowed us to identify fathers who appeared in this list and considered by the respondent to be “especially close” emotionally, resulting in a set of dummy variables “Close Fathers,” “Named but not close” and “not named.” In the analyses, we exclude egos for whom fathers are no longer living. Parallel “close” mother variables were also created, but the focus is on relationships with fathers. Accordingly, we selected respondents who reported having a *father* who was alive and controlled for the *father’s* distance from the respondent; the same was not done for mothers. Respondents were asked to identify their father as, “anyone they consider to be a father.” This ‘father’ variable accordingly includes adoptive and a small number of stepfathers (n=8) as well as biological fathers. People who reported more than one father or mother in this study were excluded (these were often coding errors).

*Covariates*

We controlled for respondent’s personal income, gender (sons, daughters), education, age and agegroups (21-30 years old, 50-70 at time of recruitment), and race (White, Black, Asian) ethnicity (Hispanic) and whether the father was lived within one hour from the ego. We also controlled for certain life events that could affect the size of personal networks (Gerstel and Sarkisian, 2006; Kalmijn and Graaf, 2012; Guiaux, et al., 2007), notably whether one had married within the past year, had a new baby, getting widowed or divorced, or getting a new job (Wruz, et al, 2013). Finally we controlled for mode of interview (web versus face-to-face) and whether recruited by Facebook.

**Methods**

The number of social ties ranged from 1 to 9, so for ease of interpretation we utilized an ordinary least squares linear regression model. There are three models: all social ties, male only ties, and female only ties. We also conducted this analysis with a General Linear Model (GLM), which can incorporate categorical, ordinal or continuous dependent variables, and received the same pattern of results.

**Results**

The results for the regression models are in Table 2. Consistent with the hypotheses, people who report a father in their network of activities with whom they are emotionally close have more ties overall, and more male ties, but not more female ties. However, those who name a father in their network who is not also regarded as close do not have significantly more social ties compared to those who do not name a father in their social activities network. A change in reference category (not shown) indicates that those who have a “close” father are likely to name more social ties relative to those who name him but don’t consider him “close.” There was no distinction between having a father in the network who was not designated as ‘close’ versus no named father, indicating that presence alone is not sufficient for a positive impact. Comparatively, none of the comparable variables for mothers were significant. Men, that is the sons, had significantly more male ties than did daughters, but significantly fewer female ties. We tested the interaction between sons and close fathers and named fathers but found no significant results.

Estimated marginal means produced by an ANCOVA using the same framework as OLS models revealed that people who have an emotionally close father have close to .6 more male social ties in comparison to those who do not (either because he wasn’t named or not close). This represents a 26% larger male social interaction tie network for those with a close father (Figure 1).

When a father is physically accessible, that is, lives within one hour, then the number of all ties, and female ties, is higher. This may be due to a higher propensity for married parents to live near children, whereas divorced fathers may live farther away (Lawton et al. 1994) and mothers are likely more associated with managing all social relationships compared to fathers.

The impact of attachment is also seen in the variable for whether parents were divorced. Here we find a negative effect on the number of all ties and male ties. Life course status also has an impact on total ties as expected: married egos have fewer total and male ties, there is no significant effect of having a new baby but getting a new job is associated with higher total ties.

**Discussion**

Having a father who is emotionally close and active in one’s network is associated with having a higher number of ties overall and male ties in particular, but not females. This finding highlights the growing awareness of fathers as important figures in a person’s life, not just in childhood, but over the course of adulthood. Having an active network of friends and families for social activities is important for social support and mental health (Child and Lawton 2017). The presence of a father is one of the factors that contributes to the ability to form it.

Although the cross-sectional nature of our findings limits our conclusions in terms of causality, we can clearly see a positive association between the subjective closeness of a father in a respondent’s reported life and a higher count of other people available for social activities even when we control for the father’s presence and geographic closeness to the respondent. The results suggest that the presence of the close father in adult children’s lives has an influence on their social network by providing skills and resources (Coleman, 1988). The presence of a father in an adult’s life as an influencer of social network formation is consistent with research carried out on children (Rubin & Sloman, 1984; Lavenda & Kestler-Peleg, 2018).

The father may also be passing down “gender specific” social capital; he’s introducing his children to his social network, which will more often be male than female (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001). If it were simply the father introducing his adult children to his homophilous social network, then physical closeness and presence would be associated with ties of both genders. This result suggests that fathers, as positive role models for male interaction, pass down social capital in the form of social skills that are useful for generating more male social ties, as well as the desire to generate more male social ties.

Further, that the positive presence of a father is strongly associated with a higher count of social ties is consistent with the predictions of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1980; Singh, 1988), and yet this confidence derived from earlier and ongoing attachment is apparently important for developing new emotional connections with men, rather than being generally more robust. It’s likely that a positive father relationship leads to him introducing adult respondents to more people in his social network (social capital), leading to more opportunities for adults to build a more robust social network. The results for having divorced parents indicates yet another long-term outcome of parental divorce. In this case, that the number of ties may indicate a less robust social support system. Also consistent with attachment theory, social network development benefits from the confidence derived from the reliable presence of parents builds as that builds trust in social relations.

The above discussion supports the concept of the ‘important father.’ In support of the essential father hypothesis, father closeness often produces unique outcomes relative to mother closeness. For example, a close father is associated with a higher number of male social ties whereas a close mother is not. In fact, my models repeatedly uncovered that respondents, of both sexes, will tend to have a higher count of male ties in their networks even after all controls and parental variables are included. If fathers were not “essential,” associations between a “close” father and social network size and composition would be the same as a “close” mother. Fathers may generate unique forms of social capital due to their gendered parental status and how it manifests within the context of society. That is, gender roles often dictate the acceptability of how “close” a male is to get to others and how that closeness should manifest itself (Floyd & Morman, 1997; Swain, 1989; Wood & Inman, 1993). Furthermore, previous research has identified that men are often unwilling or unable to communicate affection with their own children even when they’re emotionally close (Morman, Floyd, 1999). In other words, that fathers communicate closeness in a different way could, potentially, explain why their closeness results in unique outcomes relative to mother closeness.

*Limitations*

The UCNets data are from the San Francisco Bay Area which may have its own distinctive features so we do not claim that the results are generalizable. While the sample is representative in age and race of the region, it tends to be more highly educated than the overall population. The social ties measurement included family and friends in order to cast a broader net for different kinds of ties as both kith and kin are important for psychosocial health, but it is possible that distinctive patterns would emerge when looking at only friends. We did not exclude respondents who have no living mother in order to avoid reducing sample size, so the results for mothers may have been attenuated.

The association between a close and present father with a more robust social network in adults, much like in children exists even when controlling for education, income, certain life events, and the mother’s presence. However, further research is necessary in order to more concretely pin down the direction of this association, and to further disentangle contributors to patterns of network formation. This analysis used just one of the three waves of data: a subsequent analysis with all three waves in a fixed effects models, and expanding the frame of analysis to additional measures of networks, namely the availability of confidants and advisors, and satisfaction with the network. Such work is motivated by the present study’s findings: that fathers are important in adult lives, not just figures in a person’s past.

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| --- | --- |
| **Table 1A: Cross-Tabulation by Number of Alters named as Social Ties, Confidants, and Advice Givers** | |
| Category | Social Ties |
| **All** | 6,539 |
| **Males** | 2,622 |
| **Females** | 3,906 |
| **Fathers** | 70 |
| **Mothers** | 131 |
| **Total Beyond Parents** | |
| **All** | 6,338 |
| **Males** | 2,552 |
| **Females** | 3,775 |
| Note: Fathers and Mothers in this sample are anyone the respondent considers to be a "Father" or "Mother," stepparents are included. | |
|  |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 1B: Cross-Tabulations Number of Respondents in Father Named and/or Close Categories (Sons and Daughters) by Average Amount of Social Interaction Ties** | | |
|  | **N** | **Social Interaction Ties** |
| **Father Not Named** | **247** | **4.70** |
| Daughters | 165 | 4.72 |
| Sons | 82 | 4.67 |
| **Father Named/Not Close** | **147** | **4.83** |
| Daughters | 104 | 5.40 |
| Sons | 43 | 4.83 |
| **Father Named/Close** | **198** | **6.05** |
| Daughters | 128 | 6.00 |
| Sons | 70 | 6.10 |
| **All Respondents** | **592** | **5.19** |
| Daughters | 391 | 5.25 |
| Sons | 758 | 5.13 |
| Note: This sample contains all respondents who reported having a father who was alive and/or present in their lives in some capacity. The above presents unweighted N counts alongside weighted case means. | | |
|  |

**Table 2: OLS Regression Models for the Number of Social Activity Ties**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **All Ties** | | | **Male Ties** | | | **Female Ties** | | |
|  | B | SE | Beta | B | SE | Beta | B | SE | Beta |
| (Constant) | 4.428 | 1.035 |  | 2.05 | 0.713 |  | 2.381 | 0.752 |  |
| Father Named and Close | 0.512 | 0.308 | 0.091 | 0.573\*\* | 0.212 | 0.14 | -0.063 | 0.224 | -0.015 |
| Father Named | 0.382 | 0.276 | 0.075 | 0.157 | 0.19 | 0.042 | 0.236 | 0.201 | 0.06 |
| Mother Named and Close | -0.047 | 0.284 | -0.009 | 0.083 | 0.196 | 0.022 | -0.14 | 0.207 | -0.035 |
| Mother Named | 0.2 | 0.309 | 0.036 | -0.042 | 0.213 | -0.011 | 0.246 | 0.225 | 0.058 |
| Sons | -0.376 | 0.204 | -0.074 | 1.284\*\*\* | 0.14 | 0.348 | -1.647\*\*\* | 0.148 | -0.42 |
| Father resides < 1 hr | 0.443\* | 0.22 | 0.086 | 0.076 | 0.151 | 0.02 | 0.365 | 0.16 | 0.092 |
| Personal Income | 0.159\*\*\* | 0.039 | 0.184 | 0.041 | 0.027 | 0.066 | 0.117\*\*\* | 0.029 | 0.176 |
| Facebook Recruitment | 0.071 | 0.308 | 0.013 | -0.365 | 0.212 | -0.094 | 0.415 | 0.224 | 0.1 |
| Education | 0.101 | 0.064 | 0.067 | 0.01 | 0.044 | 0.009 | 0.091\* | 0.046 | 0.079 |
| Married | -0.63\*\* | 0.231 | -0.12 | -0.454\*\* | 0.159 | -0.119 | -0.182 | 0.168 | -0.045 |
| New Baby | -0.094 | 0.298 | -0.013 | 0.014 | 0.205 | 0.003 | -0.111 | 0.217 | -0.02 |
| New Job | 0.481 | 0.243 | 0.082 | 0.251 | 0.167 | 0.059 | 0.238 | 0.177 | 0.052 |
| Older Age Group | 0.94\*\*\* | 0.276 | 0.17 | -0.096 | 0.19 | -0.024 | 1.036\*\*\* | 0.201 | 0.243 |
| Wed Mode | -0.902\*\*\* | 0.275 | -0.177 | -0.692\*\*\* | 0.19 | -0.188 | -0.216 | 0.2 | -0.055 |
| Parents Divorced | -0.488\* | 0.22 | -0.091 | -0.394\*\* | 0.151 | -0.102 | -0.093 | 0.16 | -0.022 |
| Black | -0.516 | 0.369 | -0.055 | -0.536\*\* | 0.254 | -0.079 | -0.011 | 0.268 | -0.002 |
| Asian | -0.473 | 0.244 | -0.079 | -0.241 | 0.168 | -0.056 | -0.224 | 0.177 | -0.049 |
| Hispanic | -0.433 | 0.251 | -0.072 | -0.057 | 0.173 | -0.013 | -0.375\* | 0.182 | -0.08 |



**Figure 1: Estimated Marginal Means of Male Social Interaction Ties (Close Father Dummy)**

Chart, line chart

Description automatically generated