

# Adult Child-Parent Relationships: Predicting Physical and Emotional Estrangement

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## Abstract

It is often assumed that the relationship between parents and children are involuntary and stable throughout the life course. However, a growing literature on the estrangement of adult children from their parents finds that this is not always the case. The current study uses Waves I – IV of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) to examine the predictors of different dimensions of adult child-parent estrangement. Physical and emotional estrangement are rarely considered separately in quantitative studies, but this study will explore these dimensions of estrangement separately and consider whether the predictors vary between types of estrangement and by gender of both the children and the parents.

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It is often assumed that parents and their children have unconditionally supportive relationships throughout the life course. However, studies on intergenerational relationships have found that the relationships between parents and their adult children are not always positive (Blake 2017). A growing literature on parent-child estrangement has found that some relationships between adult parents and their children are physically and/or emotionally distant, and others are dissolved entirely (Blake 2017). Depending on the measure or typology of estrangement used, studies estimate that between four and 27 percent of adult children report having strained relationships or no contact with their parents, making it a fairly common occurrence over the life course (Aglias 2017; Gilligan et al. 2015; Scharp 2017).

This study attempts to categorize the relationships between adult children in their parents in a way that differentiates between emotional and physical estrangement in order to examine whether the predictors of physical and emotional estrangement are similar or different. In addition, this study examines the mother-child and father-child relationship separately, providing insight into whether the predictors of estrangement vary by gender of the parent; the father-child estrangement literature is especially sparse (Blake 2017). I expect to find that the predictors of emotional and physical estrangement are slightly different, and that the predictors of estrangement from mothers are different than fathers.

## Measuring Estrangement

Most studies on parent-adult child estrangement cite Murray Bowen's (1978) work on *emotional cutoff*, which was a key concept in Bowen family systems theory. According to Bowen, emotional cutoff, or estrangement, is a strategy used to manage emotional problems with family members by maintaining physical and/or emotional distance from them (Bowen 1978). Although Bowen's work provides an initial framework in most of these studies, researchers disagree on how to define estrangement and how it should be measured.

Qualitative research on estrangement has found that becoming estranged is a com-

plex process, with some researchers distinguishing between physical estrangement, in which at least one of the family members have cut off all contact, and emotional estrangement, in which there is still some infrequent (and unsatisfying) contact (Agllias 2013, 2015, 2018; Blake 2017). Others have theorized that estrangement consists of numerous components that, when taken together, create a continuum of estrangement, with relationships being more or less estranged (Scharp 2017). These conceptualizations create a complex picture of estrangement in which the way that one is estranged has implications for how individuals describe their relationships, the explanations for why their relationships suffered or ended, and the implications of estrangement for the well-being of estranged family members.

Quantitative research on parent-adult child estrangement is scant. In extant quantitative studies that do exist, though, estrangement is not measured in a way that captures the complexity found in the qualitative literature. Typically, estrangement is measured with dichotomous variables: parents and children are either estranged or they have a relationship (Gilligan et al. 2015; Hartnett et al. 2018; Kim 2006). Emotional estrangement, in which parents and their adult children still speak, but infrequently and without a close relationship, is not always considered (Kim 2006). By focusing solely on physical estrangement, studies may underestimate the prevalence of estrangement, and neglect to examine the implications for individuals who may still have some contact with their estranged family members. When the frequency and closeness of the communication is taken into account to measure estrangement, emotional estrangement is often combined into the same category as physical estrangement (Gilligan et al. 2015). Putting physical and emotional estrangement in to one category limits researchers' ability to identify if the predictors and consequences of estrangement vary by the type or severity of estrangement.

# Predictors of Estrangement

Attachment theory (Bowlby 1979), which posits that insecure attachment to parents has consequences for children and their relationships over the life course, provides additional insight into what conditions in adolescence may lead to estrangement from parents in adulthood. In particular, children who have avoidant attachment, in which they lack connection to their parents or caregivers, may be especially likely to estrange from their parents in adulthood (Agllias 2017). Avoidant attachment emerges when parents practice insufficiently sensitive and responsive parenting throughout children’s development (Agllias 2015, 2017). This suggests that the parent-child relationship in adolescence may predict parent-child relationships in adulthood (Kim 2006).

In qualitative research, estranged individuals often cite parental separation as a precursor to estrangement (e.g., Agllias 2011, 2015, 2017; Scharp 2017; Scharp and McLaren 2018). In addition, biological parents tend to have stronger ties to their children through the life course compared to other types of parental figures, but nonresident biological parents tend to have relatively weaker ties to their children than resident parents (Amato 2000; Hartnett et al. 2018). Other experiences cited by estranged family members as contributors to limiting contact include childhood abuse or neglect (Agllias 2015, 2017; Blake 2017; Conti 2015; Scharp 2017) and parental incarceration (Agllias 2015; Blake 2017; Hartnett et al. 2018).

## Method

### Data

This study utilizes the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health), which is a nationally-representative longitudinal study of 20,745 adolescents during the 1994-1995 academic year when they ranged from 11 to 19 years of age. The most

recent wave of data that has been fully released, Wave IV, was collected in 2007-2008, when the respondents were between 24 and 32 years old (Harris et al. 2009).

The analytic sample for this study is restricted to respondents who, in Wave IV, identified their biological mothers and/or biological fathers as the parental figures who they considered as having raised them, and have valid longitudinal sample weights for Waves I, III, and IV (N = 11,431). Due to the way that Add Health asks respondents about their relationships with their parents across waves, I can only be certain that the respondent is referring to the same mother and father as they were in earlier waves if they considered their parental figures to be biological.

## Measures

**Parent-Child Relationships** To construct the parent-child relationship categories, I use respondents' answers to four questions about their relationships with each of their parents at Wave IV. Respondents were asked two questions about the frequency that they were in contact with their parents, each with options never to almost every day: (1) how often did they see their parental figures, and (2) how often did they speak to their parents by telephone, letter, or email. These two variables were combined into one contact variable for each parent. Respondents were coded as no contact (saw and/or spoke to their parents once a year or less), infrequent contact (saw or spoke to their parents between a few times per year and twice a month), and frequent contact (saw or spoke to their parents once a week or more).

Respondents were also asked two questions about their relationships with each of their parents: (1) Satisfaction with the way the respondents and their parents communicate, and (2) closeness to their parents. Each of these were measured on a five-point scale, with higher values indicating higher quality relationships. An average of the respondents' answers was taken from these two questions to create one variable for emotional closeness (range: 1-5).

Table 1: Adult Child-Parent Relationship Variable

		Contact		
		Frequent	Infrequent	Never
Emotional closeness	High	Close	Close	Physical estrangement
	Low	Not close	Emotional estrangement	Physical estrangement

The mother-child relationship and father-child relationship variables consist of four mutually exclusive categories: physically estranged, emotionally estranged, not close, and close. Relationships were coded as physically estranged if the respondents were coded as having no contact with their parents. Respondents who reported infrequent contact and low emotional closeness (score of lower than a 4 on the emotional closeness variable) with their parents were coded as emotionally estranged. If respondents reported having frequent contact with their parents and low emotional closeness, they were coded as not close. Relationships were coded as close if respondents reported any contact with their parents and high emotional closeness (score of 4 or higher on the emotional closeness variable) (Table 1 depicts how these variables were created).

**Independent variables** *Parent-adolescent closeness* measures how close the respondent reported feeling to the parent at Wave I (1 = not close at all, 5 = extremely close). *Parental separation* is coded as a dichotomous variable, indicating whether the child experienced parental separation by Wave I (0 = no, 1 = yes). *Nonresident parent* indicates whether the parent was nonresident at Wave I, II, or III (0 = no, 1 = yes). To measure *childhood abuse*, I use retrospective reports from Wave IV, at which time respondents were asked about mistreatment by adults before they were 18 years old, to create a dichotomous variable to measure whether they were ever emotionally, physically, or sexually abused (0 = no, 1 =

yes).<sup>1</sup> *Parental incarceration* is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the parent has ever spent time in jail or prison.

**Controls** A number of background variables will be included in the model to limit the influence of confounding factors. Several of these will be measured at Wave I. *Sex* is a dichotomous variable measuring the sex of the child (0 = male, 1 = female). *Age* is a continuous indicator of the child's age. *Race/ethnicity* is measured as a categorical variable: White (referent), Black, Hispanic, and other race/ethnicity. *Parent's education* is a categorical variable indicating the highest level of education attained by the parent: less than high school (referent), high school diploma/GED, some college, technical school/two-year college, and Bachelor's degree or more. *Income* will be measured as the natural logarithm of household income.

Two variables that were measured at Wave IV will also be included in the model. *Education* is a categorical variable indicating the highest level of education attained by the child by Wave IV: less than high school (referent), high school diploma/GED, some college, technical school/two-year college, and Bachelor's degree or more. *Distance from parent* is a count variable measuring how far the adult child lives from the parent (1 = live together, 2 = within 1 mile, 3 = 1–10 miles, 4 = 11–50 miles, 5 = 51–100 miles, 6 = 101–200 miles, 7 = more than 200 miles).

## Plan for Analyses

Table 2 shows the prevalence of each type of adult child-parent relationship in the analytic sample. For the next steps, I will use multinomial logistic regression to predict belonging to each of those categories. Relationships with mothers and fathers will be examined separately. I will also include interactions between the significant predictors of estrangement and the gender of the adult child, as moderation by gender of the child has underexamined

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<sup>1</sup>I will also measure each type of abuse separately to see if the type of abuse matters when predicting adult child-parent relationships.

Table 2: Prevalence of Adult Child-Parent Relationship Categories in Sample

	Mothers (n = 10,629)	Fathers (n=8,197)
Relationship categories		
Physically estranged	82	253
Emotionally estranged	387	1,004
Not close	1,134	1,055
Close	9,026	5,885

in the existing estrangement literature.

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