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CONNECTED OR SET APART? ACADEMIC YOUTH ABOUT THEIR TIES WITH THE MOTHER AND THE FATHER

ABSTRACT

The article's goal is to show how young adults assess the ties with their parents and the parental support they can count on in difficult situations. The following research questions were posed – what is the character of the ties with parents during young adulthood? Do parents provide strong support to their adult children? Are the ties with the mother and maternal support different from those one has with the father?

The empirical material was collected as a part of the research project “Academic Youth on Family and Religion 2020.” The survey was conducted in the spring of 2020 with CAWI (Computer Assisted (Aided) Web Interviews) among academic youth from numerous Polish academic centers (N = 621).

Most young people assessed their ties with the parents and parental support positively, especially from the perspective of stability and satisfaction. But important differences were noticeable: the ties with the mother were evaluated more positively. The ties with the father were assessed as weaker, especially regarding expressions of affection, honest and open communication, and trust and care. Similarly, when assessing parental support, the mother turned out more involved and her support did not depend on other factors, such as her education and the respondents' economic situation.

KEYWORDS: *Ties, mother, father, academic youth, support*

INTRODUCTION

Of all interpersonal ties, parental bonds are some of the most important. Despite ongoing social changes, they have an unquestionable value and the power to influence both children and parents. Early adulthood, especially the beginning of university education, is a period of life having a tremendous effect on one's interpersonal relationships. It is a time when one's identity and independence are shaped and when intimate relationships are formed. Hence, one can pose several interesting questions about this process: What is the character of young adults' ties with the mother and the father at this stage? Do parents provide strong support to their grown-up children? Do mothers and fathers differ in how they support children and regarding the character of interpersonal bonds with them? Or perhaps young people are rather inclined to take a path of breaking free from parents, thus demonstrating their independence?

The study's main research goal was to illustrate how young adults assess the ties with their parents and the support (or lack thereof) received from them. The empirical material was collected as a part of the research project *Academic Youth on Family and Religion 2020* carried out by the Research Lab of the Polish Values and Attitudes Assessment (PPPiW) at the Institute of Sociology at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw (UKSW)^[1].

The research that provided data for this article had an exploratory character. The survey was conducted in the spring of 2020 with CAWI (Computer Assisted (Aided) Web Interviews) on a purposefully selected sample of academic youth aged 18–29 from over 30 Polish universities (N = 621). The choice of the university was made using the snowball method, in which research and teaching staff from individual research centers were involved. The survey questionnaire consisted of 37 thematic questions (family, religion, ethics and the meaning of life) and 12 demographic questions.

The study's timing coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Poland. In this situation, the topic of parental support given to adult children assumed particular importance (although certainly it also would be interesting

to investigate the nature of support which, especially in such circumstances, adult children give to their parents).

The study included 621 respondents, 78.6% of whom were women. The sample's gender structure is a consequence of the respondents' academic profile. Research participants were recruited mostly from humanities or social science programs, which are in Poland numerically dominated by women. Respondents were between 18 and 29 years old. Thus, they met the age criterion of early adulthood (Erikson, 1963; Levinson, 1990; Arnett, 2004; Rathus, 2013).

Respondents' social origins and their parents' education level are important for the discussed issues. Nearly 50% of the surveyed youth came from a village or a small town of 20 000 inhabitants or less. About 18% of the surveyed came from a city of 500,000 or more inhabitants. As could be predicted given the Polish society's educational profile in recent decades (see Melosik 2002; Zimbardo, Coulombe, 2015), the respondents' mothers were much better educated (44% with higher education vs. 28% of fathers); mothers were also more likely to have secondary education than fathers.

More than half of respondents lived with their parents and depended on them financially. Over a quarter of respondents declared that they did not live with their parents. However, only 32% of the latter stated that they were financially independent from them. The sample thus included a significant share of people who lived with their parents or were financially dependent on them, which should be expected due to the nature of full-time studies and given the fact that living with parents during and after college has become a social norm (see Mitchell, 2006; Bieńko, Kwak, Rosochacka-Gmitrzak, 2017). It is also more and more acceptable in Poland to live together with a partner during college. This was admitted by over 11% of study participants.

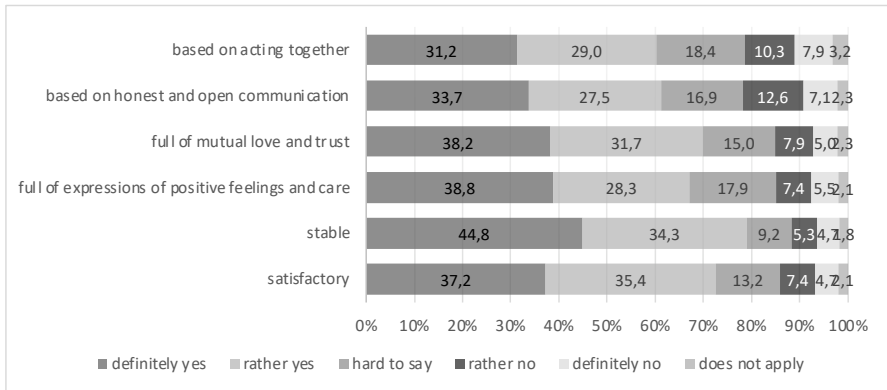
Nearly 66% of the respondents considered themselves believers. Believers who were also regular practitioners constituted about 30% of all respondents. Non-believers and non-practitioners constituted 18.5% of the sample. Over 66% of the surveyed students assessed their financial situation as good or very good; less than 4% as bad or very bad. It was assumed that these factors could affect the results.

QUALITY OF ACADEMIC YOUTH'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE MOTHER AND THE FATHER

Contemporary changes affect almost all aspects of social life, including also, and even above all, family ties. Sociologists have observed noticeable changes regarding the nature of emotionality and intimacy in relationships. In terms of family relations, economic factors and the role of social origins have weakened while qualitative and emotional factors have become more valuable (Slany, 2020). In the parent-children relationships, distance has decreased and the ties have become more personal, based on the expression of personality, mutual communication, and open expression of feelings. Although community is still important, what has become crucial in the context of family relationships is a sense of individuality, satisfaction of psychological needs, self-fulfillment, and experience of happiness (Tyszka, 2002; Gałęska, 2014; Sroczyńska, 2019; Szyszka, 2020).

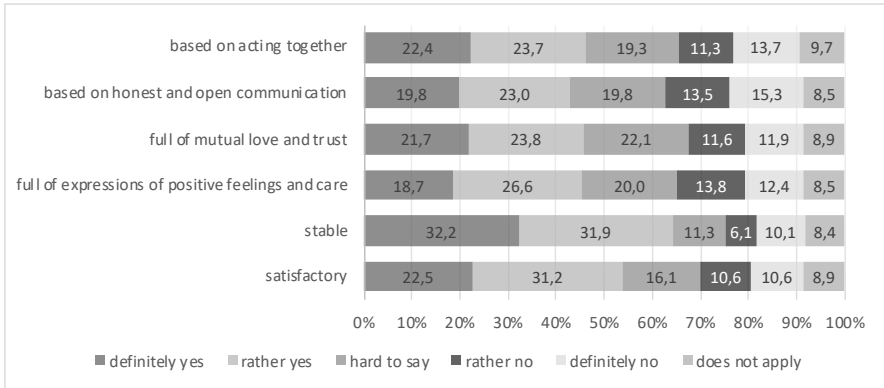
According to sociologists and psychologists, emotional ties are a key factor affecting the quality of family life (Ryś, 1997; Majkowski, 2003; Plopa, 2015; Cudak, 2017; Linek, Kurtyka-Chałas, 2019). Therefore, respondents were asked to assess their emotional ties with the mother and the father. The list includes categories considered important for building a relationship – first of all, satisfaction brought by the relationship and its stability. Then, based on the literature on the subject, the list includes expression of positive feelings and care, mutual love and trust, honest and open communication, and acting together. Largely, these dimensions take into account the contemporarily emphasized emotional dimensions of interpersonal bonds and the elements shaping the involvement in their creation. Figure 1 shows young adults' assessment of the bond with mother.

Figure 1. Assessment of the ties with the mother (%)



Source: Author’s own calculations based on the study *Academic Youth on Family and Religion 2020*

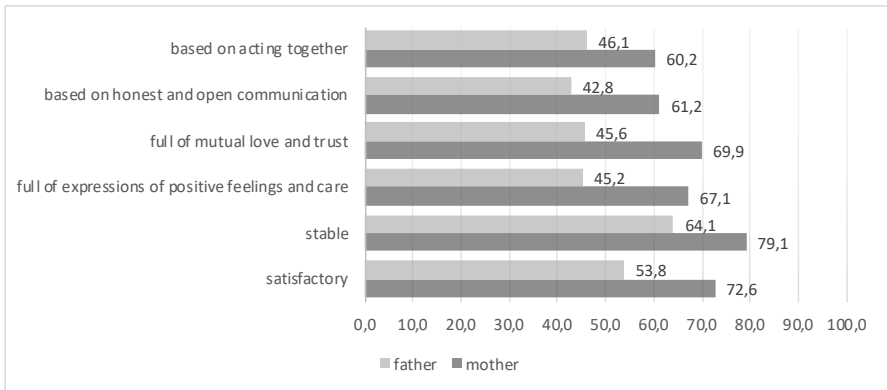
As it turns out, the relationship with the mother was most often described as stable (79.1% agreeing: definitely yes and rather yes) and satisfactory (72.6% agreeing). These two positions also generated the smallest share of negative responses (10% and 12.1% disagreeing, respectively). Respondents agreed that their relationship with their mother was full of mutual love and trust (69.9%) and full of positive feelings and care (67.1%). Slightly less positive assessment characterized such relationship features as “based on honest and open communication” (61.2% agreeing) and “based on acting together” (60.2%). These two positions also generated the largest share of negative responses (around 20%). Respondents assessed their relationship with the father slightly less positively. The results are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. *Assessment of the ties with the father (%)*

Source: Author's own calculations based on the study *Academic Youth on Family and Religion 2020*

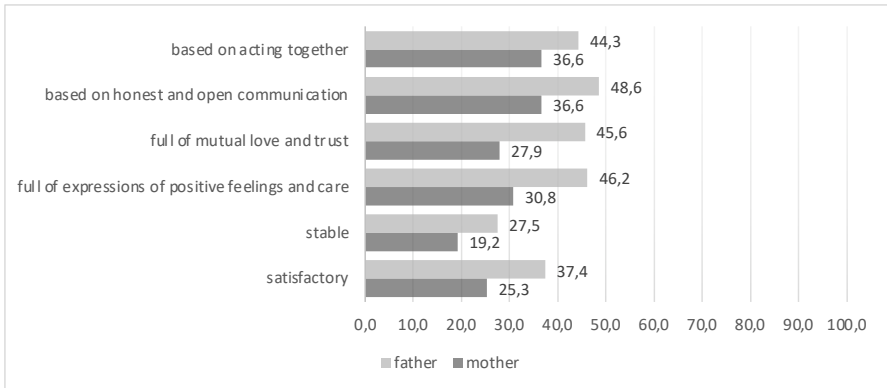
As with the assessment of the relationship with the mother, the largest share of positive responses characterized the questions about stability (64.1%) and satisfaction with the relationship with the father (53.8%), but these were much lower numbers than the corresponding ones describing the relationship with the mother. The remaining relationship's dimensions were evaluated even less positively – they collected slightly over 40% of positive responses. These dimensions also generated the largest shares of negative assessments. The highest share of the latter was related to the following relationship features: “based on honest and open communication” (28.8%) and “full of positive feelings and care” (26.2%). Figures 3 and 4 compare the share of positive and negative assessments of the relationships with the father and the mother. Figure 3 combines the positive assessments (“definitely yes” and “probably yes”) while Figure 4 combines the negative assessments (“probably no” and “definitely no”) of these relationships.

Figure 3. *Juxtaposition of the positive assessments of the ties with the father and the ties with the mother (%)*



Source: Author’s own calculations based on the study *Academic Youth on Family and Religion 2020*

Figure 4. *Juxtaposition of the negative assessments of the ties with the father and the ties with the mother (%)*



Source: Author’s own calculations based on the study *Academic Youth on Family and Religion 2020*

In terms of gender differences regarding the assessment of the relationship with the mother, one could notice that women tended to give more decisive answers, especially in terms of positive assessments (“definitely yes”), while

men more often answered “probably yes.” The women’s tendency to give decisively more positive answers was less visible regarding the relationship with the father. Moreover, women and men did not differ in the overall share of positive assessments of the relationship with the mother. Regarding its negative assessments, men the most often pointed to acting together (20.3%), and women to “honest and open communication” (20.1%), i.e. features stereotypically associated with each sex, respectively. In their assessment of the relationship with the father, respondents also did not differ regarding the share of positive evaluations; in terms of negative ones, they most often (both men and women) indicated “honest and open communication” (with 27.3% of women and 34.6% men assessing it negatively). Otherwise, among women, negative shares stood at 25.8% for “full of positive feelings and care,” 24% for “mutual love and trust,” and 23.5% for acting together. Men’s negative assessments applied, first to all, to acting together (30.1%), and expression of positive feelings and care (27.8%).

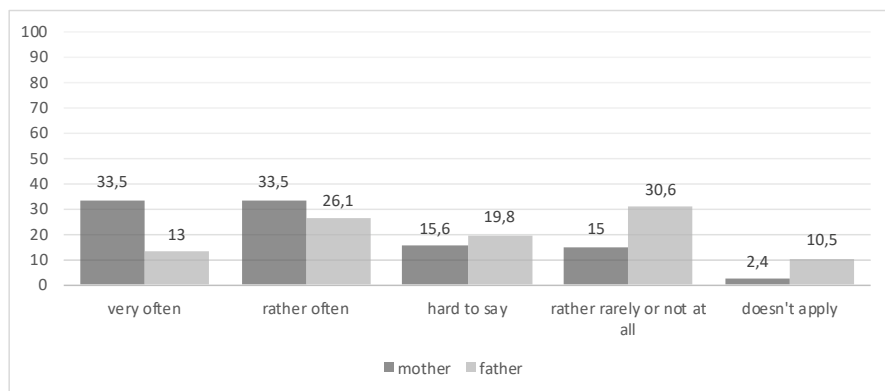
Respondents’ social origins did not affect assessment of the relationship with the mother and the father. However, the financial situation turned out to be important. People in a very bad financial situation rated ties with their parents, especially with the father, the most negatively. The remaining respondents did not differ in their assessment of the relationship with the mother, however, the relationship with the father was assessed more positively by the people in a very good financial situation. The remaining respondents were equally likely to choose both options. Father’s education did not affect the assessment of the relationship with him regarding “honest and open communication” and acting together. Yet, assessments of affection, stability, and most importantly, satisfaction with the ties increased with the father’s education. Thus, each dimension of the relationship was assessed the most positively by the people whose father had university education.

If one considers respondents’ faith and religious practices, the results are interesting. This variable did not affect at all the assessment of the relationship with the mother, but it did affect the relationship with the father. It was clearly visible that regularly practicing believers assessed the most positively the relationship with the father on all assessed dimensions. They also were the least likely to give negative evaluations to any of its dimensions.

STRENGTH OF THE MOTHER'S AND FATHER'S SUPPORT

Giving support in difficult situations is the best indication of strong interpersonal ties. In this case what is important is both the actual support given and the other party's awareness that they can receive such support if needed. If one is convinced that they will be helped, if necessary, they will assess the difficulties awaiting them differently. There are multiple dimensions of the support offered by the family. It may be expressed by showing interest, needs satisfaction, giving help, providing information, sharing emotions, or providing intimacy (Rathus, 2013; Żurek, 2005). At a time when a young person begins their adult life, they still need their parents' support, but it is also a moment when one is expected to start acting independent and make their own decisions. These circumstances might make one distance themselves from the parents or even cut off the ties entirely. Therefore, the survey asked whether respondents received support from the mother and father in difficult situations. The results are shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Support from the mother and the father in difficult situations (%)



Source: Author's own calculations based on the study *Academic Youth on Family and Religion 2020*

According to the data, in difficult situations respondents receive support from the mother much more often than from the father. Respondents were more likely to agree that the mother is a supportive parent (67%) rather than

the father (39.1%). Among the latter, 33.5% agreed that the mother provides support very often and 33.5% that she provides it rather often (13% and 16.1%, respectively, thought so about the father). When assessing parental support, respondents also more often gave negative assessments to the father (41.1%) than to the mother (17.4%). Interestingly, when the father's support was analyzed in relation to the mother's support to determine if it was provided when the latter was missing, it turned out that the strength of the two was correlated.

Regarding this topic, it could be noticed that gender had little effect on the answers. Men slightly more often answered "don't know," while women "definitely yes." People financially dependent on parents chose positive answers slightly more often. Those financially independent and living with a partner evaluated maternal support the most negatively. Similarly, paternal support was evaluated the most positively by people living independently but financially dependent on the parents, and it was evaluated the most negatively by those financially dependent on parents but living with a partner.

Respondents' financial situation along with faith and religious practices turned out to be important. Respondents in very bad financial situation did not assess parental support positively. When assessing the mother's support, they most often chose the answer "hard to say" (about 67%). When assessing the father's support, their answers were equally divided between "hard to say," "rather rarely or not at all" and "not applicable" (33.3% each). In terms of positive responses, the people describing their financial situation as very good had a definite tendency to assess their father's support positively. When it comes to the assessment of maternal support, there was no such correlation – those who assessed their financial situation as bad evaluated the mother's support similarly to those whose situation was very good in this respect.

Similar associations could be noticed when analyzing respondents' faith and religious practices. This factor did not affect the assessment of maternal support. Yet, paternal support in difficult situations was evaluated more positively by those declaring themselves religious and regularly practicing. Also, this group of respondents featured the smallest share of negative assessment of the father's support.

When considering the mother's education as a factor affecting the assessment of maternal support, it could be noticed that people whose mother had

primary education evaluated her support less positively than others. People in this group the least often answered that the mother supports them “very often” (8.3%) and preferred the option “quite often.” Also, these people gave the largest share of negative assessment to the mother (25%). The most positive assessments of maternal support came from those whose mother had higher education (70.5%, including 38% “very often”), although, as noted, the differences between them and the rest were negligible.

When analyzing the paternal support’s assessment in relation to father’s education, it could be observed that both were slightly positively associated (if a measure combining both positive answers – “very often” and “quite often” was used). At the same time, the group of respondents whose father had only primary education featured the largest share of negative assessment of the father’s support. Those whose father had higher education were the most likely to assess his support positively. Therefore, it can be assumed that this factor fosters bonding with children and giving them support.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULT IN LIGHT OF WORLDWIDE RESEARCH

Many other studies have noticed changes affecting the relationship between young adults and their parents. These days, the process of achieving maturity is longer and young adults more often continue to live with parents and depend on them financially. This process also affects the parenthood’s character and the ties between parents and young adult children. The latter are characterized by more intense dynamics of contacts and a greater preoccupation with the emotional sphere. According to K.L. Fingerman (2017), many studies show an increase in parental involvement in the relationships with their young adult children.

More often than thirty years ago, young adults (from among students) admit to receiving various forms of support from their parents – financial, emotional, and practical. Moreover, this support contributes to higher life satisfaction. However, it should be emphasized that some of this parental support is offered due to a young person’s student status (Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe, Birditt, & Zarit, 2012).

Data from international studies show that macroeconomic factors and social policy strongly influence the ties between adults and their parents. For example, international differences regarding the share of young adults living with parents strongly suggest that the scope of this phenomenon depends on such factors as the availability and price of housing and the ease of finding stable employment. More precisely, what appears to be important according to data from the 2003 European Quality of Life Survey are national differences in rental housing markets, mortgage loans availability, and access to long-term employment. These factors, along with the cultural acceptance of co-living, help explain why 60% of 18–34-year-olds lived with their parents in Southern European countries such as Italy and Spain but only 10% did so in Nordic countries (Newman, Aptekar, 2006). These differences highlight the role of student financial support and availability of work opportunities, which differ across countries. All these factors may influence the necessity of parental support and thus the scope of parents' involvement in supporting and maintaining the relationship with their young adult children.

It is also worth pointing out to the specific character of young adulthood. During this period, one begins making independent decisions with long-term consequences. In post-modern times, characterized by uncertainty and anxiety, young people's fears may be particularly strong and decisions often inaccurate. If a country lacks policies helping young adults in the spheres of education, housing, and financial security, then parental support of all kinds (emotional, financial, and housing-related) becomes particularly crucial on the road to maturity (Beck, 2002; Billari, Liefbroer, 2010; Santoro, 2011). Then, even more so, the ties with parents become a safe foundation one which one can build their maturity.

Researchers also notice that young people have stronger bonds with the mother than with the father. They report spending more time with the former and describe the relationship with the mother as bringing more frequent positive emotions and intimacy (Miller, Lane, 1991). Therefore, it can be assumed that the mother still takes the leading role in building family relationships (Argyle, 1994; Kotlarska-Michalska, 2011).

Summarizing the research results obtained herein in the context of studies on the subject from other countries, it should be noted that many researchers

emphasize that young adults' good relations with parents and the latter's involvement in the relationship with children help shape young people's identity and improve their mental well-being (they are also beneficial for the parents themselves who, as they support their children, improve the life situation and thus gain a sense of greater security for their own future). Distancing or cutting oneself off from one's parents do not affect young adults positively (Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe, Birditt, & Zarit, 2012; Miller, Lane, 1991).

SUMMARY

Analyzing the study results, one can conclude that most academic youth do not run away from the relationships with their parents – they have stable and quite satisfying ties with them, and many are supported by parents in difficult times. When assessing the parental ties and support, young people highly assessed the quality of the bond with the mother. It was described as stable, satisfying, and full of mutual love and care. More than half of respondents assessed the relationship with the father as similarly stable and satisfactory, but this was a lower response share than with the relationship with the mother. Other dimensions of the relationship with the father were assessed even less positively. This applied to being full of “mutual love and trust,” “full of positive feelings and care,” as well as its basis on “honest and open communication and acting together.”

Similarly, when respondents were evaluating parental support, the mother turned out more involved than the father. Moreover, her support did not depend on other factors such as education, economic situation, or faith and religious practices. The mother's special role in giving support to children is evident also in other studies from Poland (see Braun-Galkowska, 1992; Bienko, 2017; Kotlarska-Michalska, 2020; Grzelak et al., 2020). On this basis it can be presumed that mothers define their family roles through the ties with other family members, especially children (Kotlarska-Michalska, 2016). On the other hand, the father accompanies the mother in her activities (Żurek, 2005). Studies carried out in other countries reached similar findings. Thus, one can conclude that fathers still have a lot to do to improve relationships with their

children, especially regarding their emotional aspects, such as showing affection and care, giving love and trust, and engaging in honest and open communication. And although the topic of “new fatherhood,” emotional and engaged, is discussed more and more (Kluczyńska, 2008; Szlendak, 2009; Sroczyńska, 2016; Kotowska-Wójcik, Luty-Michalak, 2020; Linek, Wróblewska-Skrzek, 2020), it seems that one still needs to wait for the effects of these already noticeable changes.

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ENDNOTES

^[1]For more information on the survey and its research problems see: Kawińska M., Wróblewska-Skrzek J., Linek A., (2020), *Wolność Wyboru czy Przymus Zwyczaju. Młodzież Akademicka w Dobie Pandemii o Związkach, Intymności i Więzyach Rodzinnych* [Freedom of Choice or Compulsion of Custom: Academic Youth in the Times of the Pandemic on Relationships, Intimacy, and Family Ties], Vol. I, Poznań: Rys; Zaręba S.H., Sroczyńska M., Klimski W., (2020), *Wolność wyboru czy przymus zwyczaju? Młodzież akademicka w dobie pandemii o religii, duchowości i moralności* [Freedom of Choice or Compulsion of Custom: Academic Youth in the Times of the Pandemic on Religion, Spirituality, and Morality], Vol II, Poznań: Ryś; Uklańska K., Kotowska-Wójcik O., Choczyński M., (2020), *Młodzież akademicka w dobie pandemii o sensie życia, relacjach i planach życiowych* [Freedom of Choice or Compulsion of Custom: Academic Youth in the Times of the Pandemic on the Meaning of Life, Relationships, and Life Plans], Vol III, Poznań: Rys.