

RESEARCH ON GRANDPARENTING: REVIEW OF CURRENT STUDIES AND FUTURE NEEDS

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Grandparenting is about generations, but not necessarily about old age. Grandparenting research, therefore, encompasses a wide spectrum of approaches in which aging is seen in a life-course perspective. The following is a brief review of current scientific knowledge about major topics related to grandparenthood.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Today, an unprecedented number of people in American society are grandparents. Treas and Bengtson (1982) suggest that two key demographic changes have altered the nature of grandparenthood in our society: increased life expectancy and new rhythms in the family life cycle. Changes in mortality and fertility mean that an estimated three-quarters of adults will live to be grandparents. Omitting those who do not have children themselves, 94 percent of older adults are grandparents (Hooyman and Kiyak, 1988), and nearly 50 percent are great grandparents (Roberto and Stroes, 1992). Aldous (1995) laments that presently not enough is known about the sheer number of grandparents in the United States or

*A wide spectrum
of approaches.*

their age, gender, and social composition. Some data are available, however. For example, it is known that grandparents are not defined by age—they can be 30 or 110 years old! Most middle-aged people become grandparents around age 45 (Hagestad, 1985). One recent estimate places nearly half of grandparents at less than age 60, one-third at less than age 55, and one-fifth at age 70 or older (Schwartz and Waldrop, 1992). Additionally, because of changed family configurations through divorce or remarriage, that “new” grandchild can be an infant or a retiree. Longer lives also mean that the grandparent role has been extended. It is no longer uncommon for women to be grand-

mothers for more than four decades (Hagestad, 1988). Many people who are grandparents are still busy rearing their own children and participating actively in the work world, countering the image of all grandparents as frail and dependent or known best for baking cookies after school.

The U.S. Bureau of the Census (1991) estimates that 3.2 million children under age 18 live with their grandparents (Minkler and Roe, 1993). This estimate refers only to homes maintained by grandparents and does not include grandchildren whose parents maintain the home even though a grandparent is coresident. It is important to note that these numbers vary as a function of race, with 12.3 percent of black children and 3.7 percent of white children living with their grandparents (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991).

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The passage to grandparenthood has been called a “countertransition” because it is brought about by the transition of another family member (Hagestad and Neugarten, 1985). Becoming a grandparent is often studied as a psychological variable related to possible changes in activities, relation-

ships, and self-esteem. Early research on the grandparent role indicated that most grandparents enjoy their grandchildren and take pride in the grandchildren's accomplishments (Albrecht, 1954; Kahana and Kahana, 1970). Grandparents in these studies endorsed a "pleasure without responsibility" orientation toward the role of grandparent. During the 1960s and 1970s, various styles of grandparent-grandchild relationships were described (Neugarten and Weinstein, 1964; Robertson, 1977), and hypotheses were developed to account for differences in role type.

In the 1980s, greater attention to the grandparent role took two separate yet related courses. One focus has examined levels of satisfaction with the role itself, while the other has examined the relationship between grandparenting and broader, life-satisfaction issues (Roberto, 1990). Characteristics that have been associated with the psychological well-being of grandparents include timing of entrance to the role (Burton and Bengtson, 1985), gender (Thomas, 1986b), and the salience of the role for the individual (Kivnick, 1985).

Grandparents play various symbolic roles, including those outlined by Bengtson (1985) as "being there," the "national guard," "active participants in the family's social construction of its history," and "surrogate parent." Grandparents may also serve as historian, mentor, role model, wizard, or nurturer (Kornhaber and Woodward, 1981). Numerous writers (Baranowski, 1982; Bengtson and Robertson, 1985; Kivnick, 1982a, 1982b; Kornhaber and Woodward, 1981) underscore the reciprocal influence between grandparents and multiple generations.

Troll (1983) describes grandparenthood as a derived status only weakly regulated by social norms. As such, grandparent roles are ambiguous and vary in both form and function (see Bengtson and Robertson, 1985; Rosow, 1976; Wood, 1982), and it is not at all clear what the social and legal rights and obligations of grandparents are (Bengtson, 1985). With few norma-

tively explicit expectations for their role behavior, the type and level of involvement of grandparents are often matters for family negotiation.

One of the frequently disputed questions has been whether grandparenting roles have changed over the course of historical time. Kornhaber (1985) perceived a weakening role and asserted that grandparents have abdicated their responsibility by "turning their backs" on grandchildren both in terms of emotional investment and practical support (see also Gutman, 1985). Counterclaims have been made asserting that relations between grandparents and grandchildren remain strong, with both providing high levels of affection, feeling a strong sense of obligation, and providing extensive help to one another (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986b; Robertson, 1976). In a rare attempt to compare data over time, Kennedy (1990) found that compared to Robertson's (1976) findings twelve years earlier, contemporary young adult grandchildren were more likely than their earlier counterparts to turn to grandparents for advice and financial support.

GRANDPARENTING AND ADULT GRANDCHILDREN IN THE FAMILY UNIT

Just as not all grandparents are old, not all grand-"children" are young. Bengtson and Harootyan (1994) found that 56 percent of people age 65 and older have at least one adult grandchild. What is the nature of the relationship between grandparents and their older grandchildren? Studies of such relationships over time have reported discrepant findings (Langer, 1990). Cross-sectional studies consistently indicate that older grandchildren are less involved with their grandparents than are younger grandchildren (Hodgson, 1992; Johnson, 1983; Kivett, 1991; Sprey and Matthews, 1982; Thomas, 1986a). In a longitudinal study, Field and Minkler (1988) found that frequency of contact with grandchildren declined over a fourteen-year period, but there was no

corresponding decline in level of satisfaction with grandchildren. Investigating relationships between grandparents and teenaged grandchildren, Dellman-Jenkins, Papalia, and Lopez (1987) reported that over 80 percent of the teenagers viewed their grandparents as confidantes. Some researchers (Hagestad, 1981; Troll, 1980a) have speculated that the grandparent-grandchild bond may be even more significant in adult relations. Retrospective reports by adult children about the degree to which their childhood was influenced by grandparents strongly predict the quality of their contemporary intergenerational relationships (Lawton, Silverstein, and Bengtson, 1994; Matthews and Sprey, 1985). These findings support speculations that the quality of early attachment to a grandparent is sustained over time (Kornhaber and Woodward, 1981). Recently, Hodgson (1995) found that a large proportion of adult grandchildren maintain contact with their closest grandparents on a regular basis.

Finally, a new but increasing role is that of great-grandparent. The growth of four- and five-generation families has led a few researchers to explore the meaning and roles of great-grandparents in the lives of their families. Wentowski (1985), exploring the perceptions of nineteen great-grandmothers, found that great-grandmotherhood was significant for symbolic and emotional reasons. Doka and Mertz (1988) identified three aspects of the great-grandparent role, including personal and family renewal, diversion, and a mark of longevity. The vast majority of great-grandparents reported that great-grandparenthood renewed their zeal for life and reaffirmed the continuance of their families.

CUSTODIAL GRANDPARENTS

Recent national attention has focused on what is portrayed as an increasing number of grandparents who become surrogate parents for young grandchildren. Grandparents—especially grandmothers—may take on this role because of divorce (Ahrons and Bowman, 1982;

Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986a; Gladstone, 1988; Johnson, 1988), drug addiction (Burton, 1992; Minkler, 1991; Minkler, Roe, and Price, 1992), or adolescent pregnancy (Burton, 1995; Burton and Bengtson, 1985; Flaherty, Facticeau, and Garver, 1987; Furstenberg, 1980; Ladner and Gour-dine, 1984; Thomas, 1990). Related to the circumstances that may result in custodial grandparenting, a growing number of studies focus on grandpar-ents beset with a myriad of problems. Shore and Hayslip (1990a, 1990b), for example, found that such grandpar-ents had reduced scores on three out of four measures of psychological well-being, including satisfaction with the grandparent role, percep-tions of grandparent-grandchild relationships, and overall well-being. Burton (1992) found that caring for grandchildren generated considerable stress for grandparents, with 86 per-cent of the 60 grandparents in the study reporting feeling "depressed or anxious most of the time." In a more recent report of these data, Burton and deVries (1993) highlight the re-wards as well as challenges associated with surrogate parenting. Recently, the legal and economic difficulties ex-perienced by grandparents rearing their grandchildren have come to the attention of both social scientists and the press (e.g., Chaloff, 1982; Creigh-ton, 1991; Presser, 1989). In considera-tion of how custodianship affects grandchildren, Denham and Smith (1989), in their review of the litera-ture, suggest both a direct and indi-rect positive influence. A recent study by Solomon and Marx (1995) found that children reared solely by their grandparents fared quite well relative to children in families with one bio-logical parent present. Furthermore, they were not significantly different, except in academic performance, from children raised in traditional families.

ETHNICITY AND SOCIAL CLASS

Research on the intergenerational living arrangements, expectations, and circumstances of custodial grand-

parents has emphasized the need to examine ethnicity and social class in studies of grandparenting. Although studies of the grandparent role have included people from various ethnic groups (see, e.g., Bengtson, Rosent-hal, and Burton, 1990), the different groups usually have been examined from very different perspectives. Stud-ies of white grandparents have tended to focus on describing different ty-pologies of grandparents and examin-ing the meaning of the role of grand-parents (McCready, 1985; Neugarten and Weinstein, 1964), while studies of black grandparents have focused on grandparents as parent substitutes (Burton, 1992; Burton, Dilworth-Anderson, and deVries, 1995; Flaherty, Facticeau, and Garver, 1987; Minkler and Roe, 1993; Pearson et al., 1990) or on describing the traditional family structure of African Americans (Bur-ton, 1995; Burton and Dilworth-And-erson, 1991; Dilworth-Anderson, 1992; Wilson, 1984). A study by Schmidt and Padilla (1983) found that Spanish language compatibility be-tween grandparents and grandchild-ren predicted the amount of contact between them, underscoring the im-portance of cultural affinity in struc-turing intergenerational relations. The salience of the grandparent role in families of Hispanic elders has been described by Lubben and Becerra (1987) and Markides and Mindel (1987). Thomas (1994), contrasting the role of grandfathers across ethnic groups, found that grandparenting has a more central role for African-American men than for male mem-bers of other ethnic groups. Similarly, Kivett (1991) found grandparenthood to be more important among rural black grandfathers than among rural white grandfathers. Strom et al. (1995) investigated differences in perfor-mance and effectiveness of black and white grandparents.

One of the first studies to investi-gate the impact of social class on the role of grandparents was conducted by Clavan (1978). Cherlin and Fur-stenberg (1986b) report small class and ethnic differences among the

whites in their sample, but substantial differences between black and white grandparents.

A LOOK TO THE FUTURE

Generational research is currently a priority for many scientists involved in studies of aging, the family, and soci-ety. But important issues remain to be addressed, particularly if support for future investigations is to be secured. Three of these issues are prominent.

First, much remains to be done both in development of appropriate theory and in generation of empirical findings to test the theory. Current work is tentative, incomplete, and contradictory (Robertson, 1995). Methodological flaws limit how much studies can tell us about grand-parents today (Werner, 1991), and the basic demographic picture is scanty (Aldous, 1995). Disciplinary differ-ences may account for some discrep-ancies found in the grandparenting literature, since intergenerational re-search has been a topic for studies in psychology, sociology, social work, medicine, and law. Nevertheless, re-searchers are advised to look to theo-retical frameworks—for example, generativity in later life, social sup-port, family systems theory, role in-congruence ("on- and off-time grand-parenting"), or ethnic studies.

Second, the definition of grandpar-enthood and its boundaries is trickier for research than it might seem, given the biological ties. For example, what defines a custodial grandparent in a target population? Is it someone who serves as a family caregiver while the child's parent works? Or is it someone who cares intermittently for a grand-child, perhaps for the weekend or even for a year? Should only a grand-parent with legal guardianship be re-garded as a surrogate parent? What about the three-generation family in which the grandchild's parent is cores-ident but a teenager? And, how can research use innovative and cost-effective approaches to tap those fami-lies not experiencing problems?

Third, analysis issues must be care-fully considered. Again, here are some

questions often raised in research reviews. How is grandparenthood hypothesized to be related to, or causal, for a specific outcome, whether it is the grandparent's physical health, overall well-being, or self-concept? Does the research plan contain an assumption that custodianship is a burden? Will the unit of analysis be an individual grandparent, grandparent and grandchild dyad, or an entire family? Of importance also might be the ability to link research findings to the development of programs that enrich the lives of grandparents and their expanding families.

To address these and other research concerns related to studies of grandparenting and to encourage further study, the National Institute on Aging recently released a program announcement of research opportunities related to the topic, Grandparenting: Issues for Aging Research. In this ongoing announcement, five broad areas are identified:

- *Grandparents in an aging society.* For example, macrosocial studies, demographic analyses, and economic research.

- *Grandparents in the family unit.* For example, family relationships, caregiving, family change.

- *Grandparents in the network of aging social, community, and legal affiliations.* For example, churches, aging support and advocacy groups, neighborhood organizations, school-affiliated groups.

- *Grandparents as aging individuals.* For example, roles, expectations, and identity.

- *Special populations and grandparents in special circumstances.* For example, minority families, custodial grandparents, great-grandparents, and impoverished families.

Grandparents are an integral part of family life, yet they occupy an evolving family position. Only within the past half century has grandparenthood become a role that most older people will live long enough to enjoy. The challenge to aging research is to determine the impact of grandparenting for individuals, the

family, and the larger society. ∞

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Requests for information on the NIA Program Announcement, Grandparenting: Issues for Aging Research (also available as PA-95-086, NIH Guide to Grants and Contracts, Vol. 24, No. 32, Sept. 1, 1995), should be addressed to Dr. Katrina W. Johnson, Room 533, Gateway Building, 7201 Wisconsin Ave., Bethesda MD 20892.

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