

Grandparents & grandchildren

WHILE a great deal is written about parents, relatively little is written about grandparents, and their relationships with grandchildren. Yet some three-quarters of adults will become grandparents, and the mean age of becoming a grandparent is currently about 54 years in Britain (Dench & Ogg, 2002). Thus, most people will be a grandparent for around a third of their lifespan. With falling fertility and the demographic ageing of Western industrialised societies, family networks are changing from broad/horizontal to narrow/vertical structures or 'beanpole families', in which grandparents arguably have an increasingly important role to play (Hagestad, 2000). And it's a role that should interest a wide variety of psychologists, particularly developmental, social, clinical and educational.

Grandparenting over the years

Nowadays, grandparents generally get a good press. That was not always the case. Clinical case studies from the 1930s to 1950s, such as 'The grandmother: A problem in child rearing' (1937) and 'Grandma made Johnny delinquent' (1943) (both published in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*), berated the adverse influence of grandmothers who interfered



PETER K. SMITH on an important and surprisingly underresearched relationship.

in old-fashioned and didactic ways with the mother's childrearing. There is in fact some supportive evidence: Staples and Smith (1954) found grandmothers to have stricter and more authoritarian views than mothers. But child-rearing opinions were changing rapidly in the 1950s, and on interviewing older people in the UK, Townsend (1957) reported that 'the grandparents were notably lenient towards grandchildren'. This leniency and spoiling may have been a reaction against the perceived earlier stricter role of grandparents. As one grandparent put it, 'I used to slosh my children. But I don't like to see my grandchildren walloped.'

Since the 1970s, as developmental psychology moved to a lifespan perspective, there has been more systematic research on grandparenting, and this generally shows grandparents in a positive light (Smith & Drew, 2002). Today's grandparents will have had a much fuller education, far fewer live directly with the grandchild, and their role is commonly seen as helper rather than family disciplinarian.

Current grandparent-grandchild relationships

Contemporary grandparents and grandchildren see each other moderately frequently. In the UK, the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey of 1998 found that

30 per cent of grandparents reported seeing grandchildren several times a week; conversely, 32 per cent said they saw their grandchild less than once a month (Dench & Ogg, 2002). The relationship is usually (though not invariably) quite close and satisfying, rather than conflictual, and is seen as positive and important by both generations.

Just as mothers are more often the closer parent to children, many studies find that grandmothers are involved with their grandchildren more than grandfathers are. Also, grandparents through the mother's side are typically more involved than those through the father's side (Dench & Ogg, 2002).

Grandparents and grandchildren do all sorts of things together, such as taking part in family events, having treats, imparting family history, playing games, going on holidays, shopping, watching TV or videos, babysitting, giving emergency help, giving personal advice, joining in religious activity, and giving advice on school (Smith & Drew, 2002). The BSA survey found that trips to the park or playground tended to make way for indoor games or watching TV at around the age of six (Dench & Ogg, 2002). Tyszkowa (1991) reported conversations as being prominent in activities reported by Polish grandchildren: 'When we go fishing with Grandpa, we talk. We tell each other about

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ourselves'; '...with Grandma I can talk about my problems'. Because they are close but do not have a parental authority role, grandparents can act as confidants in situations where an older child might not wish to confide in a parent. Also, grandparents will often know more about family history, and national history; Tyszkowa found many grandchildren in Poland reported that grandparents had told them about episodes such as the Second World War.

Uhlenberg and Hammill (1998) found six factors predicted contact between grandparents and grandchild; geographic proximity was the strongest, followed by quality of parent–grandparent relationship. In Britain, the BSA survey found that 74 per cent of grandparents reported contact several times a week if they lived within 15 minutes of a grandchild, 37 per cent if they lived between 15 minutes and an hour away, and 0 per cent if they lived more than an hour away. However, 86 per cent of grandparents and grandchildren keep in regular phone contact (Age Concern, 1998), and 4 per cent via the internet or e-mail – percentages likely to be rapidly increasing.

Different grandchildren have different needs and personalities. Ferguson *et al.* (2004) found that although some grandparents reported a norm of treating all grandchildren equally, others had noticeably closer relationships with one or a few grandchildren; this might be because of age, personality, or circumstances: 'I suppose K, the eldest one, had the most special relationship because she had nanny and granddad to herself for a time...' (p.53).

Stereotypes

Television and children's books often portray grandparents as aged, fussy, domesticated, and sedentary, probably with infirmities (Roald Dahl is a culprit in this respect), although this is beginning to change (Janelli & Sorge, 2001). The stereotype is out of step with demographic realities, as most grandchildren who read children's books will have grandparents in their forties to sixties. As Hagestad (1985) pointed out for TV commercials: 'Often, the grandmother presented on the screen should be a great-grandmother. The woman who has small, golden-haired grandchildren is not likely to have silver hair in a bun...She would more realistically be portrayed dressed in a jogging suit or

her way to aerobic dancing, or in a suit coming home from work' (pp.35–36).

On-time and off-time grandparents

For most people, becoming a grandparent is a positive experience; but this can depend on the age at which it happens. Nearly one third of grandparents enter grandparenthood 'off-time': either before 40 or after 60 (Szinovacz, 1998). Burton and Bengtson (1985) interviewed African-American grandmothers and found that those women who became grandmothers early (25–37 years) were discontented, feeling obligations they were not ready for: 'I don't have time to do what I would like to do as a grandmother. I work everyday. I have young children. Right now I'm just too busy,' said one 31-year-old grandmother. They were also affected by the stereotypes associated with grandparenting and age: 'I am just too young to be a grandmother. That's something for old folks, not for me' (p.68). Those grandparents who experienced the transition 'late' (in their seventies) were often disappointed that they were not physically active enough to make the most of the grandparental role. Thus, off-time grandparents, whether early or late, are likely to experience more difficulties in the role. This is reflected in findings from the BSA survey. Grandparents aged 50–65 were more likely to find the role rewarding, and feel very close to their grandchild, than grandparents aged less than 50, or 66 and older (Dench & Ogg, 2002).

What influence on development?

Influences can be direct, resulting from contact and face-to-face interaction, and indirect, mediated by other means such as parental behaviour. One source of indirect influence of grandparents is via financial support. Also, by acting as parents themselves, grandparents influence how their children act as parents. Benoit and Parker (1994) found 65 per cent concordance in attachment security across three generations: maternal grandmothers' and mothers' adult attachment interview (AAI) status and infants' strange situation classification at 12 months.

Attachment theory emphasises consistency over generations, but it also predicts that adults can work through or resolve unsatisfactory relations with their parents and modify their internal working models, either through self-reflection or

with the aid of therapy or counselling. Many survivors of the Holocaust in the Second World War (now grandparents) score unresolved on the AAI, due to the traumatic way in which they lost their parents at an early age; but few of their children score unresolved, and their grandchildren appear to be indistinguishable from the remaining population in terms of attachment characteristics (Sagi-Schwartz *et al.*, 2003).

Other studies have looked at transmission of more general qualities such as warmth, autonomy, depression and aggression. For example Vermulst *et al.* (1991) noted overall differences between generations, in Dutch grandmother/mother dyads; mothers scored higher than grandmothers on educational level, affection, and perceived support, but lower on conformity and restriction. They found links from grandmother affection to mother's psychological well-being. About one third of the variation found in mother's parental functioning could be explained in terms of earlier parental functioning of the grandmother.

Research on children's antisocial behaviour also points to intergenerational influences. The use of physically aggressive and punitive techniques in the grandparent/parent generation predicts similar behaviour in the parent/grandchild generation, and also antisocial behaviour in the grandchildren (Farrington, 1993; Murphy-Cowan & Stringer, 1999). Caspi and Elder (1988) found a reinforcing dynamic between problem behaviour and unstable ties in the family across four generations of women in their Berkeley Guidance Study.

Examples of direct influence are giving gifts, being a companion and confidant, acting as an emotional support or 'buffer' at times of family stress, passing on family history or national traditions, and acting as a role model for ageing. Jessel *et al.* (2004) worked with families of Bangladeshi origin in the East End of London. They found examples of synergistic learning interactions between grandparents and grandchildren; the grandmother would help the grandchild learn about their Bengali language and heritage, while the grandchild would be helping their grandmother learn how to use computers.

Child care

Regular child care from grandparents can provide help for the middle generation. The

BSA survey found that about one fifth of grandparents looked after grandchildren once a week or more; this was almost as common for children aged 5–12 (after-school or holiday care) as for pre-school children, and was more frequent when mothers were working part-time, than full-time (Dench & Ogg, 2002).

Grandchild care can later lead to close grandparent/grandchild relationships. Many grandparents enjoy looking after a grandchild, which can be an opportunity for indulging them. As one song puts it,

*Granny spoils us, oh what fun,
Have some sweets and a sticky bun,
Don't tell mum you were up till ten,
I want to come and babysit again!*

But some grandmothers, especially paternal grandmothers, may be reluctant to provide long-term support of child care for working mothers: 'One thing I've always said, even with my own daughter, I would never look after grandchildren on the same basis during the day whilst they go to work. I don't agree with that. I've brought up my own children and I don't want to be tied down every day looking after grandchildren' (Cotterill, 1992, p.614).

In parent-maintained households with co-resident grandparents there is much greater opportunity for helping with child care. Although this is more the norm in some traditional societies, Pearson *et al.* (1990) studied a predominantly African-American community in Chicago, and found that 10 per cent of households with six- to eight-year-old children had co-resident grandmothers. The grandmothers

Grandparents can give stability and support

had substantial childrearing roles in these families, in control, support and punishment. Oyserman *et al.* (1993) examined families where teen mothers of children under two were assisted by grandparents. Involved grandfathers had a positive influence, probably by modelling a male role of nurturance and cooperation.

In grandparent-maintained households, the grandparents are actually responsible for their grandchildren (Clarke & Cairns, 2001; Richards, 2001). In many such cases there are family problems and poverty, and research (mainly in the US) finds that grandchildren reared in grandparent-headed households have poorer academic performance than similar children in parent-headed households, and that grandparents in grandparent-headed households have a higher incidence of depression and risk for physical and emotional health problems (Szinovacz *et al.*, 1999). Some custodial grandparents need support at a national and community level to continue effectively; however, data from the 1997 US Census Bureau suggested that 36 per cent of custodial grandparents had excellent or very good health and worked outside the home.

Grandparents can experience unexpected difficulties if they wish to adopt grandchildren who lack parental care (Chesterman *et al.*, 2005; Jenkins, 2001). However the most debated legal aspects relating to grandparents, concern access to grandchildren when parents divorce.

After relationship breakdown

When parents separate and divorce, the relationship of grandparents to parents, particularly to a custodial parent (or one who has care and control of the grandchildren) becomes a crucial issue. If these are harmonious, grandparents can provide stability, support and nurturance to the grandchild(ren) and family, often

providing financial assistance or child care (Dench & Ogg, 2002; Ferguson *et al.*, 2004). They can negotiate relationship difficulties between the parent and grandchild and be a 'buffer' during times of family distress. Lussier *et al.* (2002), using data from the ALSPAC longitudinal study, found that closeness to maternal (but not paternal) grandparents was significantly associated with grandchild adjustment when parents had separated, even when other family variables were controlled for.

In contrast, a difficult or disrupted grandparent–parent relationship can threaten proximity of grandparents to grandchildren, contact, involvement and fulfilment of a satisfying grandparental role (Ferguson *et al.*, 2004; Lavers & Sonuga-Barke, 1997). If (as is usually the case) the children reside with their mother, then paternal grandparents may have to 'tread carefully' in obtaining access to their grandchildren; and it can be denied. The consequences of unwanted loss of contact with grandchildren can be devastating. Drew and Smith (2002) sampled grandparents who were members of support groups such as the Grandparents Association; after loss of contact with their grandchildren due to parental divorce, grandparents reported symptoms of bereavement and negative effects on their physical and emotional health (more so than with separation just arising from geographical distance). The hope of reunion with their grandchildren, while not totally unrealistic, makes it difficult to work through the grief process.

An important issue for grandparents is what access and visitation rights they have with grandchildren. Sometimes legal contact orders are the only way of obtaining these. Under the Children Act 1989 any person (not just grandparents or relatives) may seek leave to apply for an order for contact with a child. But even if the grandparent has obtained a contact order there is little that holds the parent to abide by the court ruling. The issue of what further legal rights grandparents should have continues to be debated (Chesterman *et al.*, 2005; Ferguson *et al.*, 2004; Jenkins, 2001).

The three-generation family relationships which can follow divorce are complex. A grandchild could have various types of step-grandparent, resulting from a parent remarrying (the most usual), a grandparent remarrying, or from the parent of a step-parent remarrying! The BSA

DISCUSS AND DEBATE

- Why have views of the roles of grandparents changed over the last century?
- Why might grandparents, parents and (grand)children differ, in their perceptions of grandparent–grandchild relationships?
- What are the wider implications of grandparents helping significantly in the care of pre-school children?
- What kinds of roles can a grandparent play in their grandchildren's development?
- What rights of access should grandparents have, when parents divorce?

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survey found that step-grandparents generally had less contact with grandchildren than did grandparents; but an interesting finding was that step-grandfathers generally had more contact (20 per cent seeing step-grandchildren several times a week) compared with step-grandmothers (11 per cent).

Grandparents in society

In the US there are courses for grandparents (Szinovacz & Roberts, 1998). These can include components on sharing feelings and ideas with peers, listening to the views of younger people, learning about lifespan development, improving family communication skills, and focusing self-evaluation. There are also 'foster grandparent' programmes. Werner (1991) described how these give 'elders with low income the opportunity to provide companionship and caring for a variety of high-risk children and youths in return for a tax-exempt stipend' (p.78). These take place in hospitals, residential institutions, daycare programmes and family shelters. The evaluation of these programmes appears to be positive.

Controversies and new directions

Research on grandparenthood is growing in strength and relevance. Now a more thorough application of theory to data collection and interpretation is needed. Theoretical perspectives can be brought from evolution, psychoanalysis and attachment theory, family systems theory, family sociology, lifespan development and gerontology. Also, most research has been in the US, and some in Europe. Further work on cross-cultural variations in the grandparent role could give a broader perspective on the topic. Among African-Americans, for example, the maternal grandmother tends to have a particularly influential role.

Although three generations are involved in grandparent/grandchild relationships, most studies have focused on the viewpoint of only one generation, via interviews or questionnaires. Sometimes, the views of grandparents have been elicited; more often, the perspective of the grandchild. However, studies which have obtained multiple perspectives regularly report some incongruence. Mangen and Miller (1988) found only moderate correlations across generations for amount of contact (.41 to .75). Disagreements can signify

relationship difficulties; one father claimed to bring his children to visit the grandmother once a month, but the grandmother complained that he hardly ever came and that 'I do not see my son's children enough to know their middle names' (p.121). These differing perceptions are strongly echoed in the BSA survey findings (Dench & Ogg, 2002). They

deserve more attention in future, both for their theoretical interest and possible practical benefits that might ensue if misunderstandings can be avoided.

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