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49 How the Grandparent Role Is Changing

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As Reading 50 describes, our world is aging. Increasing numbers of adults—especially in Western nations—are now great-grandparents and even great-great-grandparents. Such unprecedented longevity suggests the growing importance of multigenerational family relations. In this reading, Roseann Giarrusso, Merril Silverstein, and Vern L. Bengston examine how our longevity has already affected intergenerational family structures and why grandparent-grandchild relationships will become more important.

Grandparenthood has changed over the past decades as demographic shifts have increased the complexity of family structures and roles. Increases in longevity, in divorce and remarriage rates, and in old-age migration have simultaneously produced new opportunities and new stresses for grandparents. The longevity revolution has increased the number of three-, four-, and five-generation families, thereby lengthening the time spent in the grandparent role and adding multiple roles of great- and great-great-grandparent. Increases in divorce and remarriage rates have resulted in a high proportion of blended families and step-grandparent relationships. Improved health, stable finances, and early retirement have made geographic mobility possible for retirees. How have these changes in family structure, composition, and living arrangements influenced the role of grandparents? What are the implications of these changes for the psychological well-being and resources available to grandparents?

In this [reading] we first examine how population aging and the changing structure of the intergenerational family highlight the increasing diversity in grandparenting and great-grandparenting styles. Second, we examine how divorce and remarriage in the middle generation influence grandparents' ability to enact their role when custodial parents act as gatekeepers to their children, and we underscore the need for research on grandparents rearing grandchildren in order to determine the psychological costs and rewards to caregiving grandparents. Third, we discuss how household arrangements and geographic mobility of grandparents and grandchildren jointly influence their relationship. We conclude with an overview of some research and policy implications that result from these complex family arrangements and emphasize the need for greater conceptual and theoretical development in grandparenting studies.

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CHANGING INTERGENERATIONAL FAMILY STRUCTURES

Because of dramatic increases in average longevity over the past century, it has become more likely that grandparents, great-grandparents, and even great-great-grandparents will survive long enough to have relationships with grandchildren, great-grandchildren, or great-great-grandchildren. Where fewer than 50 percent of adolescents in 1900 had two or more grandparents alive, by 1976 that figure had grown to almost 90 percent (Uhlenberg, 1980). Thus, there is an unprecedented number of grandparents in American society today; more than three-quarters of adults can expect to become a grandparent (Barranti, 1985; Hagestad, 1985; Kivnick, 1982).

While historical increases in life expectancy have resulted in families with more generations alive simultaneously, reductions in fertility have resulted in smaller average family size (Bengtson & Treas, 1980; Uhlenberg, 1980; Watkins, Menken, & Bongaarts, 1987). Consequently, the shape of American families has gone from that of a pyramid, with larger numbers of young people at the base, to that of a beanpole. Three, four, and five generations of family members are increasingly present, but with fewer numbers being born in each subsequent generation than in previous eras (Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1990).

With fewer family members in each generation, existing *intergenerational* family relations take on added significance. Since there may be more *between*-generation kin than *within*-generation kin available in such a family structure, grandchildren may emerge as potentially more important sources of emotional meaning and practical support for grandparents than in the past. Thus, grandparenthood may be an increasingly significant social role for older people, offering valuable rewards. At the same time, it is important to consider whether a more involved grandparenthood also results in social, economic, and psychological costs—especially for grandparents who become "surrogate parents" for their grandchildren (Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1995).

Elongation of multigenerational families also can occur from age-condensed family patterns: Teenage pregnancy can produce differences of less than twenty years between generations, leading to grandparenthood in one's twenties or thirties, over four or five generations. This kind of intergenerational structure is more common among ethnic minorities than among the white majority. In addition, higher rates of fertility, along with the tendency to include fictive kin in definitions of family, have created a paradox for minority grandparents: Although they have a larger kin network from which they may draw potential support, they also have a larger number of kin to whom they must *provide* support (Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1995). . . .

Adult Grandchildren

Not only have relationships with grandparents, great-grandparents, and great-great-grandparents been a neglected topic of research, so too have relationships of grandparents with *adult* grandchildren. Most previous research has tended to focus only on pre-adult grandchildren or those living with the grandparent (Jendrek, 1994; Robertson, 1995). Given the growth recently of studies examining adult parent-child relations, it is surprising that only scant attention has been devoted to studying relationships between grandparents and adult grandchildren.

Because of increases in longevity over the past century, it has become more likely that a grandparent will not only survive, but live long enough to have *long-term* relationships with *adult* grandchildren. As the median age of first grandparenthood has remained relatively constant over the past century at forty-five years (Hagestad, 1985), gains in life expectancy imply that grandparents are spending many more years in the grandparent role: Among women, for example, this status can engage 50 percent of their lives, and the prevalence of grandparents who have adult grandchildren

is historically unprecedented (Goldman, 1986). Farkas and Hogan (1994) examined intergenerational family structure in seven economically developed nations (including the United States) during the 1980s and found that more than half (50.6 percent) of people sixty-five years of age and older have a grandchild who is at least eighteen years old. Lawton, Silverstein, and Bengtson (1994) found a slightly higher percentage in a study of intergenerational relations in the United States conducted by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), with 56 percent of Americans sixty-five years of age and older having at least one adult grandchild.

In light of the recent expansion in adult grandchild-grandparent relations in the American population, it is unfortunate that little attention has been paid by large-scale survey researchers to these adult intergenerational relationships. For example, most of the major national surveys designed to study social aspects of aging ask no specific questions of older adults about their relationships with grandchildren (or great-grandchildren) or of younger adults about their relationships with grandparents.

Other scholarly analyses concerning the relationships of grandparents with pre-adult grandchildren suggest that grandparents are more involved with their younger grandchildren than ever before. Some researchers have speculated that the grandparent-grandchild bond may be even more significant in adult relations (Hagestad, 1981; Troll, 1980). As yet, however, the trajectory or life-course "career" of grandparent-grandchild relationships, and the contribution of "successful" grandparenting to quality of life of older adults, are issues that are unclear and remain unexamined. . . .

Diversity in the Styles of Grandparenting

Population aging has not only led to the long-term viability of grandparenthood; it has also led to an increasing diversity in the demographic characteristics of individuals holding the roles of grandparent and grandchild. Today grandparents may range in age from 30 to 110, and grandchildren range from newborns to retirees (Hagestad, 1985). With demographic diversity in grandparents has come a corresponding diversity in grandparenting styles (Bengtson, 1985). Consequently, some scholars have suggested that the role of grandparent is ill-defined, that it is a social status without clear normative expectations attached to it. Fischer and Silverman (1982) and Wood (1982) refer to the grandparent role as "tenuous" or "ambiguous," without clear prescriptions regarding the rights and duties of grandparents. In fact, there is no single "grandparent role," but there are multiple ways to be a grandparent. It is important not to confuse variance in styles of role enactment with lack of role definition. What is needed is a classification of the different types of grandparenting since there are a variety of reasons that grandparents do not perform the role in the same way.

Yet there has been little empirical research on the styles of grandparenting and the sources of diversity in those styles. In the only previous attempt to classify grandparent-grandchild relations, Cherlin and Furstenberg (1986) identified five types of grandparenting styles by cross-classifying grandparents on three relationship dimensions: exchange of services with grandchild, influence over grandchild, and frequency of contact with grandchild. They labeled these types as follows: (1) detached, (2) passive, (3) supportive, (4) authoritative, and (5) influential. Their analysis suggested that none of the five styles is dominant, and they conclude that grandparenting styles are quite diverse in contemporary American society.

However, Cherlin and Furstenberg's classification does not take into account several relevant dimensions of grandparent-grandchild relations. One of the most important issues related to grandparenting styles is the extent of bonds, solidarity, or connectedness in multigenerational relationships. The lives of grandparents or great-grandparents and their grandchildren and great-grandchildren are linked in a number of ways: through roles,

through interactions, through sentiments, and through exchanges of support. Connectedness between grandparents and grandchildren can also be considered along more social-psychological dimensions. One approach is a typology of grandparenting styles based on six dimensions of intergenerational solidarity (Bengtson & Schrader, 1982) that are comprehensive in describing intergenerational relations and that have been widely used in empirical studies (Atkinson, Kivett, & Campbell, 1986; Roberts & Bengtson, 1990; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). These six dimensions are affection (emotional closeness), association (frequency of contact), consensus (agreement), normative quality (importance of familial obligations to members), structure (geographic proximity), and function (helping behavior).

Silverstein, Lawton, and Bengtson (1994) used data from the AARP national study of intergenerational linkages to create a typology of five categories of adult parent-child relations based on five of the six dimensions of intergenerational solidarity. They found five types of intergenerational relationships: (1) *tight-knit*—connected on all five dimensions of intergenerational solidarity; (2) *sociable*—connected only on associational, structural, affectional, and consensual dimensions of solidarity; (3) *cordial but distant*—connected only on affectional and consensual dimensions of solidarity; (4) *obligatory*—connected on associational, structural, and functional solidarity; and (5) *detached*—connected on none of the five dimensions of intergenerational solidarity. While these dimensions have been used to describe parent-child relations, the same five types of parenting styles may also characterize grandparenting styles and grandparent-grandchild relations—an issue awaiting future research development.

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

The structure of American families has undergone profound changes as a result of increases in divorce and remarriage during the past decade. Such changes in family composition and living arrangements can interfere with grandparents' ability to perform their role. The parental generation mediates the grandparent-grandchild relationship, since they provide the opportunities for grandparents and grandchildren to socialize together (Barranti, 1985; Hagestad, 1985; Robertson, 1977). When the parents are divorced, the quality of the grandparent-grandchild relationship may suffer—or it may strengthen.

Divorce may weaken grandparent-grandchild relations on the noncustodial (usually paternal) side of the family but strengthen those relations on the custodial (usually maternal) side of the family (Clingempeel et al., 1992; Creasey, 1993; Matthews & Sprey, 1984). Custodial parents can effectively prevent the parents of an estranged spouse from seeing their grandchildren (Gladstone, 1989). Thus, divorce has a particularly harsh effect on the relationship between grandchildren and grandparents whose children have not been given custody. Even though all states now have grandparents' rights legislation, which gives grandparents the power to go to court to secure their right to visit their grandchildren (Wilson & DeShare, 1982), grandparent-grandchild association after divorce will probably become increasingly matrilineal. Further, if the divorced parent remarries, then stepgrandparents may enter with a new role that is fraught with ambiguous expectations (Cherlin, 1978; Henry, Ceglian, & Ostrander, 1993).

The greater their investment in the grandparent role, the more distress grandparents may feel when contact with grandchildren declines following the parental divorce (Myers & Perrin, 1993), and one would expect that reduced contact between grandparent and grandchild will have an enduring effect on the well-being of both generations. The long-term consequence of early parental divorce and remarriage for grandparents and adult grandchildren is a subject that requires further research investigation.

Future research should also examine possible positive outcomes of the increasing complexity

of family arrangements; steprelationships, for example, may have taken on added importance. These changes in the family have led to the development of "latent kin networks" (Riley, Kahn, & Foner, 1994), which have the potential of being activated when needed. It is possible that such complex family arrangements have led to new definitions of family, making it necessary to test long-held assumptions about the primacy of biological relationships over other kinship forms. Stepchildren and stepgrandchildren may represent untapped resources for family members in later life.

Most past research on steprelations has focused on the difficulties that exist between preadult stepchildren and their stepparents (Pasley, Ihinger-Tillman, & Lofquist, 1994). We know of no research on how these steprelations develop over the life course, as stepchildren, siblings, parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents age. When stepgrandparents share many years of life with stepgrandchildren, especially during the grandchildren's formative years, the intergenerational bonds that develop may equal or surpass those of biological relations—particularly in cases where custody arrangements preclude contact with biological grandchildren.

GRANDPARENTS AS SURROGATE PARENTS

Increasing numbers of grandparents are rearing their grandchildren because of divorce and other problems such as drug and alcohol addiction, AIDS, incarceration, and unemployment within the parental generation (Chalfie, 1994). Census figures estimate the number of grandchildren living with their grandparents (many without a parent present) to be as high as 3.4 million, with African American grandchildren being slightly more than three times more likely than their white counterparts to be in this type of living arrangement (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993). Grandparents caring for grandchildren is such a rapidly growing problem that AARP established the Grandparent Information Center in 1993, which in its first four months of operation received over 2,100 calls and requests for information from grandparents who are rearing a grandchild.

Only recently has research begun to address the role of the grandparents who assume direct, full-time caregiving responsibilities for their grandchildren (Burton, 1995; Chalfie, 1994; Shore & Hayslip, 1994). These studies indicate that caregiving grandparents experience a variety of stresses and strains for which there is little institutional support. They encounter difficulties in such matters as obtaining financial assistance, health insurance coverage, and housing, as well as in gaining legal rights to make decisions regarding the child's education and medical care (Chalfie, 1994). Minority caregiving grandparents, because they tend to have low incomes and multiple caregiving roles, may experience greater stress than similar white grandparents, putting them in "double-jeopardy" of experiencing psychological distress (Dowd & Bengtson, 1978). Many questions on caregiving grandparents need to be addressed in future research: What are the consequences of becoming a parent again in midlife? Does this responsibility lead to lower levels of psychological well-being, or an increase in intergenerational conflict? When grandparents become parents to their grandchildren, who takes over their previous function as safety net in times of family emergencies? And, while providing full-time care for a grandchild may be stressful, grandparent caregivers are also likely to obtain certain rewards and informal support from their intergenerational family relations (Burton, 1995). Future research needs to examine these benefits. . . .

GEOGRAPHIC MOBILITY AND HOUSEHOLD ARRANGEMENTS

Grandparent-grandchild relationships are obviously influenced by how close geographically the generations are to each other, since this factor structures opportunities for interaction (Baranowski,

1987). There is evidence that movement of older people to retirement communities reduces in-person contact between older people and their adult children, and, it may be concluded, with their grandchildren. Developmental approaches to late-life migration have found that return of the elderly to their home community or to the household of an adult child often follows a decline in functioning and death of a spouse (Litwak & Longino, 1988; Silverstein, 1995). However, the role of grandchildren in caregiving to their grandparents following such a move is not known and needs further study.

The role of parent as "gatekeeper" to grandchildren remains a critical factor in regulating grandparent contact. Remarriage of a divorced parent influences the amount of contact between grandparents and their grandchildren when the parent relocates (Gladstone, 1991). The number of adult children moving to the parental home (following divorce or unemployment) with young children in tow has swelled the number of generationally complex households with the older—grandparent—generation as the head of household. At the same time, after leaving the parental nest, adult grandchildren renegotiate their relationships with their grandparents—most commonly reducing the frequency of contact with them (Field & Minkler, 1988). A recent trend may moderate this residential transition: A "boomerang" generation of young adults is moving back to or never leaving the parental nest, to take advantage of a lower cost of living. The result is an increase in the number of three-generational households that have two adult generations. Young-adult "boomerangers" might maintain or strengthen their relationships with grandparents by virtue of living with parents who facilitate extended intergenerational involvement.

In immigrant families, acculturation of adult grandchildren, especially those in ethnic groups with traditional values and orientations, may serve to distance grandparents from their grandchildren. Does assimilation and loss of native language among native-born grandchildren result in reduced intergenerational cohesion with traditional grandparents? There is some evidence that acculturation—the adoption of mainstream values, language, and practices—does create a cultural gulf between generations in the Hispanic family. Schmidt and Padilla (1983) find that Spanish-language compatibility between grandparents and grandchildren predicts the amount of contact between them, underscoring the importance of cultural affinity in structuring intergenerational relations. Research also shows that the better the grandchild speaks the native language of the grandparent, the greater the tendency of grandchildren to live with grandparents (Perez, 1994). Yet, we are unaware of research that formally links acculturation to the propensity of adult grandchildren to move away from grandparents or to leave their ethnic enclave in pursuit of educational or employment opportunities. . . .

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The results reviewed above concerning increasing family complexity and grandparent-grandchild relations raise new questions not only for researchers but also for program planners and policy makers as well. Recently implemented cuts to government health programs such as Medicare make it clear that federal and state government can go only so far in providing support for old-age dependencies. It is more important than ever to look for alternative solutions to the support and care of the growing population of aging Americans.

The most cost-effective solution may be to develop new programs and policies to shore up or strengthen intergenerational family ties. But before developing such programs, policy makers need to consider the increasing complexity of family arrangements. Successful programs would accommodate the diversity that characterizes the role of grandparent, and also revise traditional definitions of caregiving to conform with changes in the shape of the intergenerational

family from pyramid to beanpole. Legislators are familiar with the concept of the "sandwich generation," wherein the middle generation is faced with caring for aging parents while simultaneously raising minor children. However, changes in family structure, coupled with increases in divorce, have resulted in a situation, unparalleled in human history, of fifty-five-year-old children caring for seventy-five-year-old parents and ninety-five-year-old grandparents while rearing adolescent grandchildren—a "club sandwich generation." Policy makers need to develop more programs that provide financial support in such situations—"dependent" care tax credits, for example.

Finally, policy makers must anticipate intergenerational conflict that might result from certain types of geographic mobility or household arrangements and should develop programs that could help families prevent such intergenerational conflicts.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have highlighted three social changes that have increased structural complexity in the intergenerational family, consequently expanding the varieties and contingencies of grandparent-grandchild relationships. Because of the almost exponential rise in the heterogeneity of grandparenting experiences and styles over the last several decades, the investigation of these relationships represents one of the most fertile areas of inquiry in family studies. We predict that social scientists and policy makers will continue to be challenged in their efforts to keep pace with rapid societal changes affecting this ever-evolving and increasingly disparate population of middle-aged and older adults. In the future, intergenerational family structures might become even more diverse. Coupled with shifts in social, political, and economic conditions, such family complexities make even more pressing the need for fresh theoretical perspectives, informed research designs, and innovative intervention strategies to address the needs of grandparents.

CRITICAL-THINKING QUESTIONS

1. What do Giarrusso and her colleagues mean when they say that the shape of U.S. families has gone from a "pyramid" to a "beanpole"? What are the rewards and costs for grandparents and grandchildren in terms of this changing family structure?
2. Some researchers speculate that grandparent-grandchild relationships in the future may be more significant than in the past. What are the reasons for such predictions? How do divorce, remarriage, and geographical mobility threaten the positive impact of such relationships?
3. Giarrusso and her colleagues propose several economic policies to strengthen intergenerational family ties. Do you think their suggestions are realistic? Also, what role, if any, can families play in addressing the needs of grandparents, adult children, and grandchildren that the authors address?

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