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Author(s): Robert Crosnoe and Glen H. Elder, Jr.

Source: *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (Nov., 2002), pp. 1089-1096

Published by: [National Council on Family Relations](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3600007>

Accessed: 05/12/2013 09:32

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## Life Course Transitions, the Generational Stake, and Grandparent-Grandchild Relationships

*Drawing on past research and prominent theoretical orientations, this research note suggests new approaches to intergenerational dynamics. For 316 grandparent-grandchild pairs, we found that the transition of grandchildren to higher education, controlling for other transitions, improves the quality of the grandparent-grandchild relationship. For grandparent mentoring, however, we see evidence of a generational stake, with grandparents overestimating their mentoring role, compared to grandchildren, during this transition. This generational stake reflects the importance of grandparent education, with increased mentoring for the college-going grandchildren of college-educated grandparents. These findings indicate that the intergenerational literature can be significantly advanced by taking a long-term perspective, incorporating multiple points of view, and examining contextual variation. Moreover, greater understanding of these intergenerational ties will benefit research on families and individual development.*

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Department of Sociology, University of Texas—Austin, Austin, TX 78712-1088 (crosnoe@mail.la.utexas.edu).

\*Carolina Population Center, University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill, 123 West Franklin Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516.

*Key Words:* education, family system, grandchildren, grandparenting, life course.

The changing demography of the United States (e.g., decreasing mortality and fertility) has magnified the grandparent role (Uhlenberg & Kirby, 1998). Consequently, intergenerational dynamics have become a major research focus. Like other relationships, this intergenerational bond may be best understood as a developmental phenomenon—ebbing and flowing within social contexts (Silverstein & Long, 1998; Szinovacz, 1998). This research note pursues this developmental approach by applying a life course perspective to a specialized, but rich, longitudinal sample of mostly White and rural Midwestern families. The overarching purpose of this note is to promote avenues of future research that may lead to a fuller understanding of intergenerational dynamics and the ecology of children, adults, and the elderly.

### INTERGENERATIONAL DYNAMICS AND THE HUMAN LIFE COURSE

Life course theory calls attention to the importance of family members' linked lives, which, like individuals, follow a developmental course. Transitions are strategic windows on such development (Elder, 1998). The lives of grandparents and grandchildren, like those of parents and children, are linked. Supportive relationships can be salutary by providing support and guidance to the young and serving as a source of assistance, meaningful activity, and pride for the old (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986; Elder & Conger, 2000; Hagestad, 1985). Unfortunately, the dynamic nature

of this particular relationship is rarely studied. We do so here by examining how this relationship changes during the grandchild's transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Specifically, we ask the following: Does the grandparent-grandchild relationship (grandparent mentoring and relationship quality) change when grandchildren enroll in higher education? This transition can represent adolescents' entry into adult life, navigation of new social contexts, and opportunity to establish themselves as individuals independent of their families (Arnett, 2000). Focusing on transitions, including this one, addresses one void in the intergenerational literature (Silverstein & Long, 1998). Past research has rarely crossed life stages (typically examining old age or childhood) or examined key life transitions (grandparent or grandchild), but doing so provides a rich perspective.

Investigating this question brings up two issues. First, past research (e.g., King & Elder, 1995; 1998) has identified predictors of grandparent-grandchild relationships, some of which (grandparent gender, education, health, marital status, closeness with the grandchild's parent, and proximity) are particularly relevant to studying how this relationship changes during the grandchild transition to higher education and should be controlled. Second, we recognize that other grandchild transitions may also occur during this time period (e.g., marriage, parenthood, employment). Although we control for these potential co-occurring transitions, our specific focus is on grandchildren starting college, which may represent a test to the strength of family ties.

Our second research question is a twist on the first: Does the nature of the change in the grandparent-grandchild relationship during the transition to higher education depend on whether the point of view of the grandparent or grandchild is taken? To answer this question, we compare grandparent and grandchild reports of mentoring and relationship quality when examining the relationship over time. This question is derived from the concept of the generational stake—the tendency for the young to emphasize autonomy and the old to emphasize continuity in relationships (Bengston, Schaie, & Burton, 1995). Thus the same transition may be experienced differently. For the grandchild, enrollment in higher education may be a time to break free of family ties and establish an adult identity (Arnett, 2000), which might lead them to distance themselves from their grandparents. In light of this distancing, grand-

parents may maintain some continuity by placing more value on the relationship and on their role in the grandchild's life. Our sample of rural Iowa families provides a vantage point for viewing these dynamics because such families are typically tightly knit and because higher education has become such a crucial pathway to adult success (which might entail leaving the area) in this region (Elder & Conger, 2000; Elder, King, & Conger, 1996).

This question addresses another important void in the intergenerational literature (Silverstein & Long, 1998). Like other relationships, the grandparent-grandchild bond is subjectively experienced by each participant. Intergenerational research typically focuses on one actor or the other, but we argue that taking the perspectives of both is a better test of the life course concept of linked lives and provides more valuable information about family dynamics. Our examination of the generational stake is an attempt to do so.

#### THE CONTEXT-SPECIFIC NATURE OF GRANDPARENT-GRANDCHILD RELATIONSHIPS

Life course theory also asserts that linked lives are embedded in sociohistorical context (Elder, 1998). Relationships and their development are not monolithic across time and place. Intergenerational research does not typically bring in the moderating role of context, but studies that do, such as research on rural/urban or racial differences in grandparenting (Burton & Bengston, 1985; King, Silverstein, Elder, Bengston, & Conger, in press), have been informative. Investigating such moderation could identify new aspects of the continuity and change in intergenerational relationships.

Our third research question addresses this potential contextual variability: Is the link between grandchild enrollment in higher education and grandparent mentoring moderated by grandparents' educational history? This question is based on findings that educated grandparents mentor adolescents more (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986; King & Elder, 1998), which might extend to this specific transition. A college-educated grandparent would have experience to draw on in mentoring a college-going grandchild, and this shared experience would increase common ground between generations. Thus grandchildren's transition to higher education might enhance the mentoring role of the college-educated grandparents and weaken it among less educated ones.

Our fourth research question also addresses variability. Is the link between the grandchild's entry into higher education and the quality of the grandparent-grandchild relationship moderated by the grandparent's relationship with the grandchild's parent? This question is based on family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 1997), which holds that any relationship cannot be divorced from the larger family system and past findings that the gatekeeper role of the middle generation links young and old and affects relationship quality (King & Elder, 1995; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). In families where grandparents and parents are not close, enrollment in higher education, which might entail freedom from parental constraints, could allow young people to build stronger ties with grandparents.

## METHOD

### *Sample*

The Iowa Youth and Families Project, which began in 1989, is a longitudinal study of 451 families (parents, focal adolescent in 7th grade in 1989, and a near sibling) in North Central Iowa. In 1994 and 1998, grandparents were also surveyed. Not all adolescents had a grandparent participate, and some had all four grandparents participate.

To select our study sample, we chose the 1994 survey (when focal adolescents were seniors in high school) as the starting point and the latest survey (1997 for adolescents, 1998 for grandparents) as the end point. Although these two end points differ, we believe they are close enough to each other and within the normative span of the adult transition to be useful. A total of 411 adolescents and 592 grandparents participated at both time points. This attrition is not negligible, but past studies of the sample have shown no strong attrition biases (King & Elder, 1999). In order to match grandparent and grandchildren reports, we had to focus on specific grandparent-grandchildren pairs. Rather than having a single grandchild appear in the data multiple times (with the analytical problems this repetition poses), we selected one grandparent for each focal child who had a grandparent interviewed through a process of random assignment. The final study sample contains 316 grandparent-grandchild pairs.

## *Measures*

For each of two intergenerational relationship characteristics, we create grandparent (based on grandparent reports on the focal adolescent in 1994 and 1998) and grandchild (based on grandchild reports about that grandparent in 1994 and 1997) versions. All other variables are based on 1994 data. From this point on, we refer to 1994 data as Time 1 (or pretransition) and 1997/1998 data as Time 2 (or posttransition).

*Grandparent mentoring.* Grandchildren assessed how often (1 = *never* to 4 = *often*) their grandparent gave advice or helped with problems ( $M = 2.45$ ,  $SD = 0.93$  in 1994;  $M = 2.54$ ,  $SD = 1.02$  in 1997). For grandparents, we take the sum of their assessments (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*) of whether in the last month they gave advice to the grandchild, served as a voice of experience, served as a source of family history, and talked to the grandchild about their own childhood ( $M = 3.07$ ,  $SD = 1.04$  in 1994;  $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = 0.94$  in 1998).

*Quality of grandparent-grandchild relationship.* Grandparents assessed the quality of relations with their target grandchild (1 = *poor* to 4 = *excellent*), how close they felt to the grandchild (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very*), and how much the grandchild made them feel loved and appreciated (1 = *not at all* to 4 = *a lot*). These items are standardized and averaged, with the absolute value of the minimum added to each case to ease interpretation ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 0.83$  in 1994;  $M = 5.00$ ,  $SD = 0.81$  in 1998). For grandchildren, we take the mean of their assessments of how happy they were with their relationships with the grandparent (1 = *very unhappy* to 4 = *very happy*) and how often (1 = *not at all* to 4 = *a lot*) their grandparent made them feel loved and appreciated ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = 0.71$  in 1994;  $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = 0.72$  in 1997).

*Grandchild transitions.* We created binary measures for whether the grandchild had enrolled in a 2- or 4-year college, gotten married, become a parent, or started full-time employment between 1994 and 1997.

*Control variables.* Analyses control for grandparent gender (1 = *female*, 73%); grandparent education (1 = *attended college*, 24%); grandparent self-reported health (1 = *poor* to 4 = *excellent*;  $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ); grandparent marital status

TABLE 1. MEANS (STANDARD DEVIATIONS) FOR GRANDPARENT-GRANDCHILD RELATIONSHIPS BY GRANDCHILD'S EDUCATIONAL STATUS

	In College	Not in College
Grandparent mentoring <sup>a</sup>		
Grandparent report (Time 1)	3.05 (1.03)	3.10 (1.03)
Grandparent report (Time 2)	3.29* (0.84)	2.98 (1.10)
Grandchild report (Time 1)	2.44 (0.94)	2.47 (0.92)
Grandchild report (Time 2)	2.49 (0.95)	2.64 (1.13)
Relationship quality <sup>b</sup>		
Grandparent report (Time 1)	4.12* (0.67)	3.78 (1.02)
Grandparent report (Time 2)	5.14* (0.65)	4.76 (0.97)
Grandchild report (Time 1)	3.50* (0.62)	3.27 (0.83)
Grandchild report (Time 2)	3.55* (0.59)	3.26 (0.86)
<i>n</i>	199	116

<sup>a</sup>Mentoring ranges from 0 to 4 (low to high) for grandparents and 1 to 4 (low to high) for grandchildren at both time points. <sup>b</sup>Quality ranges from 0 to 5.65 (low to high) for grandparents at Time 1 and 0 to 4.71 (low to high) for grandparents at Time 2, and from 1 to 4 (low to high) for grandchildren.

\*Differences in means between two groups significant at  $p < .05$ , as determined by one-way ANOVA.

(1 = *married*, 69%); grandparent self-reported relationship with grandchild's parent (1 = *poor* to 4 = *excellent*;  $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ); and changes in residential proximity (1 = grandchild lived within 50 miles of grandparent at Time 1 but not Time 2, 26%).

### Plan of Analyses

Our empirical analyses are conducted with Amos 4.0, a structural equation package that allows us to account for measurement error and estimate missing data with full information maximum likelihood (Arbuckle & Woethke, 1999).

### RESULTS

Nearly two thirds of grandchildren enrolled in higher education between Times 1 and 2. They and their grandparents reported higher quality intergenerational ties than other youth who did not enroll in college (Table 1). According to their grandparents (but not themselves), they also received more mentoring.

Our first two research questions asked whether grandchild enrollment in higher education influences the grandparent-grandchild relationship and whether this influence differs depending on grandparent or grandchild point of view. Tables 2 and 3 present the results of regression analyses on two aspects of the grandparent-grandchild relationship.

TABLE 2. RESULTS OF MODELS PREDICTING GRANDPARENT MENTORING<sup>a</sup>

	Grandparent Report		Grandchild Report	
	b	$\beta$	b	$\beta$
Control variables				
Grandmother	0.16	0.08	-0.10	-0.04
Grandparent education <sup>b</sup>	-0.07	-0.03	0.08	0.03
Grandparent health <sup>c</sup>	-0.01	-0.01	-0.15*	-0.11
Grandparent marital status <sup>d</sup>	0.14	0.09	0.06	0.03
Grandparent-parent closeness <sup>e</sup>	-0.02	-0.01	0.28**	0.14
Decrease in proximity <sup>f</sup>	0.02	0.01	0.06	0.03
Prior mentoring	0.44***	0.48	0.50***	0.46
Grandchild transitions <sup>g</sup>				
Higher education	0.36***	0.19	-0.19	-0.09
Married	-0.04	-0.01	-0.21	-0.06
Parenthood	0.15	0.05	0.12	0.04
Employed	-0.12	-0.06	0.03	0.01
$R^2$	0.27		0.28	
<i>n</i>	316		316	

<sup>a</sup>Mentoring ranges from 0 to 4 (low to high) for grandparents and 1 to 4 (low to high) for grandchildren, <sup>b</sup>Attended college = 1, <sup>c</sup>Health ranges from 1 to 4 (poor to excellent), <sup>d</sup>Married = 1, <sup>e</sup>Closeness ranges from 1 to 4 (poor to excellent), <sup>f</sup>Grandchild lived within 50 miles of grandparent at Time 1 but not at Time 2, <sup>g</sup>All transition variables are binary, with 1 indicating that it occurred between Times 1 and 2.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

TABLE 3. RESULTS OF MODELS PREDICTING GRANDPARENT-GRANDCHILD RELATIONSHIP QUALITY<sup>a</sup>

	Grandparent Report		Grandchild Report	
	b	$\beta$	b	$\beta$
Control variables				
Grandmother	0.16	0.09	0.10	0.06
Grandparent education <sup>b</sup>	-0.15	-0.08	-0.04	-0.02
Grandparent health <sup>c</sup>	-0.00	-0.00	-0.01	-0.01
Grandparent marital status <sup>d</sup>	0.14*	0.08	0.12	0.08
Grandparent-parent closeness <sup>e</sup>	0.15*	0.10	0.21**	0.15
Decrease in proximity <sup>f</sup>	0.06	0.01	-0.00	-0.00
Prior quality	0.46***	0.47	0.39***	0.38
Grandchild transitions <sup>g</sup>				
Higher education	0.24**	0.14	0.24*	0.16
Married	0.08	0.03	0.10	0.04
Parenthood	0.02	0.01	0.10	0.04
Employed	-0.01	-0.01	0.08	0.05
$R^2$	0.34		0.25	
$N$	316		316	

<sup>a</sup>Quality ranges from 0 to 5.65 (low to high) for grandparents and 0 to 4.71 (low to high) for grandchildren. <sup>b</sup>Attended college = 1. <sup>c</sup>Health ranges from 1 to 4 (poor to excellent). <sup>d</sup>Married = 1. <sup>e</sup>Closeness ranges from 1 to 4 (poor to excellent). <sup>f</sup>Grandchild lived within 50 miles of grandparent at Time 1 but not at Time 2. <sup>g</sup>All transition variables are binary, with 1 indicating that it occurred between Times 1 and 2.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Beginning with mentoring (Table 2), grandparents report mentoring more when their grandchildren are enrolled in higher education ( $\beta = .19, p < .001$ ). Because the mean of grandparent-reported mentoring increases across time points, this regression coefficient represents a greater *increase* in mentoring than for other grandparents. The grandchild-based analysis reveals no enrollment effect. Thus we see evidence of an intergenerational stake—grandparents feel that their grandchildren's entry into higher education allows them to mentor more, but the grandchildren see no change. This apparent generational stake does not result from differences in the grandparent- and grandchild-reported measures of mentoring, as substituting a one-item grandparent-reported measure that matched the grandchild-reported measure did not change results.

Turning to relationship quality (Table 3), both grandparents and grandchildren report higher quality relationships when the grandchild is enrolled in higher education ( $\beta = .14, p < .01$  for grandparents;  $\beta = .16, p < .05$  for grandchildren). Again, because the mean grandparent- and grandchild-reported quality increases between Times 1 and 2, these coefficients indicate that the quality of college students' relationships with grandparents *increases* over time compared to non-college-going youth.

Our remaining questions deal with contextual variability in intergenerational relationships. Is the link between grandchild entry into higher education and grandparent-mentoring moderated by whether the grandparent ever enrolled in higher education? To investigate this, we included an interaction term (grandparent education  $\times$  grandchild enrollment) in the mentoring model (Table 4). Again, point of view is important, with grandparents' educational backgrounds influencing grandchild-reported mentoring only. In the grandchild model, the main effect of grandchild enrollment ( $\beta = -.31, p < .05$ ) indicates that it is inversely associated with grandparent mentoring when the grandparent had not attended college, but the significant interaction term ( $\beta = .57, p < .05$ ) indicates that enrollment is directly associated with grandparent mentoring when the grandparent had attended college. Thus when viewing all grandparent-grandchild pairs as one group (refer back to Table 2), we saw no evidence of an association between grandchild enrollment and grandchild-reported mentoring, but splitting the sample into meaningful subgroups (Table 4) reveals two significant, although opposite, associations. College-going grandchildren report more mentoring from grandparents who have undergone this transition in their own lives and less from grandparents who have not.

TABLE 4. RESULTS OF MODELS PREDICTING GRANDPARENT MENTORING<sup>a</sup>, WITH GRANDPARENT EDUCATION AS A MODERATOR

	Grandparent Report	Grandchild Report
Grandparent education <sup>b</sup>	-0.22 (0.18)	-0.30 (0.20)
Grandchild in higher education <sup>c</sup>	0.32* (0.11)	-0.31* (0.13)
Grandparent education × grandchild education	0.22 (0.23)	0.57* (0.24)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.27	0.29
<i>N</i>	316	316

Note: Unstandardized coefficients (standard errors). All models control for grandparent gender, health status, marital status, grandparent-parent closeness, decrease in proximity, and three grandchild transitions (marriage, parenthood, and employment).

<sup>a</sup>Mentoring ranges from 0 to 4 (low to high) for grandparents and 1 to 4 (low to high) for grandchildren. <sup>b</sup>Attended college = 1, <sup>c</sup>Entered higher education between times 1 and 2.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Is the link between the grandchild's entry into higher education and grandparent-grandchild relationship quality moderated by the grandparent's relationship with the middle generation? To investigate this, we included an interaction term (grandparent-parent relationship quality × grandchild enrollment) in the quality model. This interaction term did not reach statistical significance, indicating no such moderation.

### CONCLUSION

Research on grandparent-grandchild relationships is in an early stage, but it can make a significant contribution to family studies, especially if it undergoes the type of evolution that has characterized the literature on parent-child relationships. The purpose of this research is to encourage such an evolution by mapping out potentially rewarding pathways of research in this area. We have done so by asking four questions built upon prior grandparenting research (e.g., Silverstein, King, Burton, and others) and drawn from family-related theoretical orientations (e.g., life course, family systems).

Clearly, intergenerational relationships do change when grandchildren transition into higher education, and this change seems to be positive. The importance of this transition is magnified when considering that other grandchild transitions (e.g., marriage, parenthood, and employment) do not influence grandparent-grandchildren relationships. The importance of these transitions might have

been diluted by the broad time frame in which they were assessed, but our findings suggest that enrollment in higher education may be qualitatively different from other role changes in young adulthood. Entry into college may lead to a re-evaluation of relationships without moving the young person into a new family, as marriage and parenting would. More extensive research is needed to uncover the mechanisms behind such relationship development and the potential for life transitions to serve as turning points. In any case, this finding demonstrates the value of taking a long-term approach to intergenerational relationships.

These processes demonstrate a generational stake. Grandparents feel that their grandchildren's transition to higher education has enhanced their mentoring role, but their grandchildren do not. More so than relationship quality, mentoring refers to specific behaviors defined by each actor. Grandparents may be motivated to interpret their interactions with grandchildren positively if they feel they are losing their grandchildren to the adult world, but grandchildren entering new arenas may interpret these same interactions as interference. These findings reinforce the need to incorporate multiple perspectives when studying relationships. This can only enhance our understanding of intergenerational relationships (King & Elder, 1995), even more so when studying transitions that may differ in meaning for each participant.

Furthermore, these intergenerational processes vary by context. The generational stake discussed above does not hold for grandparents and grandchildren who have similar educational experiences. This common ground could grant more authority to grandparents. The stake does coincide with educational mismatches, which may convince grandchildren that their grandparents have no wisdom to share on this new arena and dissuade grandparents from offering advice on an unfamiliar domain. On the other hand, we found no such variation related to the strength of the grandparent-parent relationship. The gate-keeping role of parents may decrease before young adulthood, or its effects might be set well before this time. Still, these analyses, which draw upon contributions of family sociology (the potential moderation of social context) and family psychology (the embeddedness of relationships in a system of family ties) demonstrate pathways to illuminate grandparenting, and, by doing so, family dynamics as a whole.

Although our analyses have been specific, our suggestions are general—taking long-term per-

spectives, comparing viewpoints, and exploring contextual variability. For example, we have studied one grandchild transition, but we have focused exclusively on those who made this transition without exploring the lives of those who did not make it or who made other transitions instead. At the same time, we have ignored transitions in the lives of grandparents (e.g., widowhood, retirement) and of the parents who link the generations. Beyond transitions, modeling long-term trajectories (see Silverstein & Long, 1998) would offer a different approach to relationship development. Furthermore, qualitative research might be the best method for investigating the different perspectives of grandchildren and grandparents and for uncovering the seeds of the generational stake. Finally, in introducing context, we should think of both the proximate (e.g., family, community) and structural contexts (e.g., race, class) that shape the human life course.

Of course, future studies in this spirit should draw upon less specialized data. The Iowa sample is well-suited to our goals—rich enough to allow in-depth exploration of developmental and family processes, temporally broad enough to allow multistage analysis, and inclusive enough to combine multiple perspectives. Moreover, the dynamics addressed in this research may be more visible in this sample. In tight-knit, rural communities, where farm work has historically been more important for adult life than education, grandchildren's transitions into higher education may occasion more reflection and more reorganization of family ties. Although using this homogenous sample to put forward new possibilities for intergenerational research is a good start, more representative data are required to realize these possibilities.

Our main goal here has been to encourage new pathways of intergenerational research. We strongly believe that such research is valuable. First, demographic changes have increased the importance of the grandparent role on family and societal levels. The influence of these changes, which include decreasing mortality (which lengthens the duration of being or having a grandparent), decreasing fertility (which limits the number of grandchildren per family), and increasing divorce rates (which may lead to more active grandparenting), necessitates in-depth analysis. Second, the grandparent-grandchild relationship is not divorced from the larger family system, and so its study provides a broader understanding of families as a whole. For example, grandparent-grand-

child relationships may interact with parent-child dynamics—undermining positive parenting, promoting resilience in troubled families, or opening new conduits of social capital. Third, these intergenerational relationships may help to structure the life course of both young and old, so that studying them promotes greater understanding of human development more generally. For these reasons, grandparent-grandchild relationships deserve the type of attention that has provided such insight into other areas of family life.

#### NOTE

The authors acknowledge support from the National Institute of Mental Health (MH 00567, MH 51361, MH 52429, MH 57549), a Spencer Foundation Senior Scholar Award to G.H.E., and the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Adolescent Development Among Youth in High-Risk Settings.

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