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Understanding the Grandfather Role in Families

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Understanding the Grandfather Role in Families

Abstract

As adults continue to live longer and express satisfaction with grandparenting, an evaluation of the roles of grandfathers is warranted. Past research has focused on grandmothers, with little research explicitly investigating the experiences of grandfathers in families. This review assesses sociohistorical trends, demographic influences, gendered patterns, and changes that occur in grandfather-grandchild relationships throughout the lifecourse. We describe the roles grandfathers maintain in their grandchildren's negotiation of psychosocial and ecological life course tasks, the change and stability they experience relative to sociohistorical trends, and how grandfathers reconfirm masculine norms through generativity and provision of instrumental support. Findings indicate that future research investigating how grandfathers and grandchildren define and value their roles from a dyadic perspective is warranted. Implications include increasing awareness surrounding the significance of the grandfather role across generations.

Keywords

grandfathers, grandchildren, grandparenthood, intergenerational relationships, gender

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As adults continue to live longer and express satisfaction with grandparenting, an evaluation of the roles of grandfathers is warranted. Past research has focused on grandmothers, with little research explicitly investigating the experiences of grandfathers in families. This review assesses sociohistorical trends, demographic influences, gendered patterns, and changes that occur in grandfather-grandchild relationships throughout the lifecourse. We describe the roles grandfathers maintain in their grandchildren's negotiation of psychosocial and ecological life course tasks, the change and stability they experience relative to sociohistorical trends, and how grandfathers reconfirm masculine norms through generativity and provision of instrumental support. Findings indicate that future research investigating how grandfathers and grandchildren define and value their roles from a dyadic perspective is warranted. Implications include increasing awareness surrounding the significance of the grandfather role across generations.

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Introduction

Due to the growth of the older population in the United States, with men and women living longer, older adults are increasingly likely to spend more than a third of their lives as grandparents (Hayslip & Page, 2012). When compared to grandparents of the past, today's older adults are more likely to come to grandparenting with better health, more time, and additional economic resources (Uhlenberg, 2009). Their grandchildren also have the opportunity to extend their relationships with grandparents and great grandparents over time (Connidis, 2009; Hayslip & Page, 2012). Much is known about the meaning, activities, and relationship outcomes for grandmothers, but grandfathers have frequently been overlooked in empirical literature in family gerontology (Bates & Taylor, 2013; Kelley, Whitley, & Campos, 2013; Roberto, Allen, & Blieszner, 2001).

In this examination of current literature on grandparenting, we focus on grandfathers. Our intent is to gain a deeper understanding of this often overlooked role in families and to better understand the gaps in current intergenerational research regarding grandfathers. This examination specifically focuses on demographics in grandparenting, gendered patterns relative to grandparent-grandchild relationships, expectations of the grandfather role, and the influence of contact frequency, geographic proximity, and life course transitions on intergenerational relationships. Our overall goal is to understand the relationships between

grandfathers and their grandchildren as grandchildren transition into young adulthood.

Both grandfathers and their grandchildren view their roles, overall, as a crucial part of their personal identity (Sheehan & Petrovic, 2008). Grandchildren typically report viewing their grandparents as having significant impact on their lives (Wiscott & Kopera-Frye, 2000). Prior literature has also indicated that the unique nature of the grandfather-grandchild relationship serves the important purpose of facilitating resolution of psychosocial life course tasks such as those suggested in Erikson's stage of generativity vs stagnation (Erikson, 1982; Sheehan & Petrovic, 2008; Thiele & Whelan, 2006). This stage refers to the need to lead a productive life, in part through nurturing younger generations and creating a legacy in midlife (Erikson, 1982). As grandparents are living longer and remaining in the midlife stage for a greater temporal duration than in the past, this theory becomes especially relevant to the study of grandfathers' perceptions of their intergenerational relationships (Thiele & Whelan, 2006).

The post-World War II Baby Boom reformed age structures across generations, and the demographic realities of grandparenting have progressively changed in tandem with this increased longevity (Connidis, 2009; Hayslip & Page, 2012; Olshansky, Goldman, Zheng, & Rowe, 2009). In effect, the United States has observed the emergence of verticalization, a growing number of generations within one family and fewer members within each generation cohort (Knipscheer, & van Tilburg, 2013; Connidis, 2009). Families have historically and culturally changed over time relative to decreasing mortality rates

amongst older adults (Connidis, 2009; Hayslip & Page, 2012; Knipscheer, & van Tilburg, 2013; Olshansky, Goldman, Zheng, & Rowe, 2009; Szinovacz, 2014). Family members are witnessing increasing generations within multigenerational family structures, more grandparents for fewer grandchildren, and fewer younger family members to provide care when needed (Connidis, 2009). As a consequence of these changes, grandparents have the unique opportunity to observe their grandchildren's development over time and navigate new contexts for their relationship as both grandparents and grandchildren mature and negotiate psychosocial life course tasks (Hayslip & Page, 2012).

Demographic Influences on Grandparenting

From an examination of the current demographics of grandparenting, the path to grandparenting appears to differ based on cultural norms (Kelley, Whitley, & Campos, 2013; Silverstein & Marengo, 2001) and socioeconomic factors (Bol & Kalmijn, 2016; Silverstein & Marengo, 2001; Swartz, 2009). African American grandparents are more likely, in comparison to White grandparents, to fulfill functional roles such as raising grandchildren, offering financial assistance, and participating in religious activities (Kelley, Whitley, & Campos, 2013; Silverstein & Marengo, 2001). African American grandparents are 80% more likely to become custodial grandparents, offering comprehensive, traditionally parental care to grandchildren, relative to non-African Americans (Fuller-Thomson, Serbinski, & McCormack, 2014). Overall, 66.9% of custodial grandparents are White alone, 22% African American, 2.1% Asian, and 29.8% are Hispanic (Ellis & Simmons, 2014). African American grandparents are less companionate and maintain more traditionally parental style roles as grandparents (Silverstein & Marengo, 2001). Rural African American grandfathers tend to provide kinkeeping care even when resources are few and distress is present (Bullock, 2007). According to Bullock (2007), systemic oppression and discrimination have left older African American grandfathers in disadvantaged circumstances, yet their motivation for parenting demonstrates their distinct strengths and concern for family values.

Financial status and education influence grandparent roles and overall involvement with grandchildren (Bol & Kalmijn, 2016; Silverstein & Marengo, 2001; Swartz, 2009). Within intergenerational relationships, instrumental forms of support are frequently reported, and grandparents' socioeconomic status affects the extent of this support (Swartz, 2009). Earning some form of income

has been correlated with the provision of financial assistance to grandchildren, as well as with participation in recreational activities including travel (Silverstein & Marengo, 2001; Bol & Kalmijn, 2016). A grandparent's socioeconomic status additionally influences their frequency of contact (Silverstein & Marengo, 2001). Wealthy grandparents cover the costs of travel to visit family or even pay for travel in events of geographic distance (Silverstein & Marengo, 2001).

College educated grandparents are more likely to offer child care and demonstrate involvement in recreational activities than less educated grandparents, but only if in close geographic proximity to their grandchildren (Silverstein & Marengo, 2001). Higher education delays parenthood. Consequently, as Americans have become more highly educated as a society in recent generations, a trend has emerged of men having children and grandchildren at older ages than in the past (Hayslip & Page, 2012; Silverstein & Marengo, 2001). Less educated grandparents report more attachment to the symbolism of their role. In contrast, college educated grandparents are found to define themselves more in the context of their careers and receive more validation from their occupations rather than family roles (Silverstein & Marengo, 2001).

Gendered Patterns of Grandparenting

A grandparent's gender has been associated with distinct patterns related to communication (Barker, 2007; Reitzes & Mutran, 2004; Silverstein & Marengo, 2001), normative roles demonstrated with grandchildren (Bates & Goodsell, 2013; Horsfall & Dempsey, 2015; Lesperance, 2010; Mann, Tarrant, & Leeson, 2016; Mills, Wakeman, & Fea, 2001; Sheehan & Petrovic, 2008), marital status and level of involvement (Knudsen, 2012; Reitzes & Mutran, 2009), and quality of health (Reitzes & Mutran, 2009). A combination of cultural norms and gender highlights recurring themes amongst grandparents (Sheehan & Petrovic, 2008). Generally, both grandmothers and grandfathers actively participate in their grandchildren's lives and indicate placing high value on their role as a grandparent (Silverstein & Marengo, 2001).

Regarding gendered differences in communication with grandchildren, grandmothers typically talk with grandchildren about personal concerns, family matters, and family history more often, and talk for longer durations when compared to grandfathers (Barker, 2007; Silverstein & Marengo, 2001). In contrast, grandfathers more often discuss health and youth experiences (Barker, 2007). As traditional kinkeepers, grandmothers have

greater frequency of contact and spend more time talking with their grandchildren (Mann, Khan, & Leeson, 2013; Reitzes & Mutran, 2004).

Some researchers have reported that grandmothers are more highly involved in the lives of their grandchildren when compared to grandfathers (Bates & Taylor, 2013; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986; Reitzes & Mutran, 2004; Silverstein & Marengo, 2001). For example, grandmothers are more likely to attend family events with grandchildren, and maintain a significant familial role as matriarchs (Mann, Khan, & Leeson, 2013; Reitzes & Mutran, 2004; Silverstein & Marengo, 2001). Grandmothers feel more entitled to the role of kinkeeper compared to men (Knudsen, 2012; Sheehan & Petrovic, 2008). Grandmothers also are more likely to provide childcare compared to grandfathers, and express greater dissatisfaction with their free time and quantity of domestic work in comparison to grandfathers (Horsfall & Dempsey, 2015). In addition, grandmothers have traditionally been considered nurturing coordinators of care for their grandchildren (Horsfall & Dempsey, 2015). Overall, grandmothers report feeling closer to their grandchildren than grandfathers (Bates & Goodsell, 2013; Bates & Taylor, 2013; Geurts, Poortman, Tilburg, & Dykstra, 2009; Sheehan & Petrovic, 2008). However, perceived relational closeness on the part of grandparents is arguably dependent upon heterogeneous mediating factors such as geographic proximity (Roberto, Allen, & Blieszner, 2001; Tornello & Patterson, 2016), the level of gatekeeping provided by a grandchild's parents (Barnett, et al., 2010; Hakoyama & Malonebeach, 2013; Monesrud, 2011; Xu, Silverstein, & Chi, 2014), if the grandparent is biologically related to the grandchild (Gray & Brogdon, 2017), the social-emotional intelligence of the grandparent (Akhtar, Malik, & Begeer, 2017; Ruiz & Silverstein, 2007), and the grandparent's level of involvement (Hakoyama & Malonebeach, 2013; Knudsen, 2012; Roberto, Allen, & Blieszner, 2001).

Marital Status and Health Influences on Grandparenting

A grandparent's marital status may have a strong positive influence on involvement in sharing activities, providing child care, demonstrating emotional cohesiveness, and experiencing greater meaning to the grandparent role. Marital status, however, may have a different effect on grandparent role satisfaction for women than for men and there are notable contradictions within current literature (Reitzes & Mutran, 2004). For older women, marriage is correlated with reported greater satisfaction as a grandmother. However, for older

men, the opposite is true: being married produces less satisfaction as a grandparent (Reitzes & Mutran, 2004). As a married grandfather continues to grow older, their level of involvement subsequently increases, and they are more likely to have frequent contact with their grandchildren (Knudsen, 2012; Reitzes & Mutran, 2004). In cases of their own marital disruptions, grandfathers are inclined to communicate less frequently with their grandchildren (Knudsen 2012; Silverstein & Marengo, 2001). Grandfathers without a partner or spouse are associated with the lowest level of involvement with their grandchildren (Knudsen, 2012). Within events of remarriage and the addition to stepchildren or even step-grandchildren, grandfathers especially maintain their roles of providers and defenders of their family (Roberto, Allen, & Blieszner, 2001).

Finally, poor health on the part of grandparents is associated with increased contact frequency with intergenerational family members for grandmothers, but not for grandfathers (Hakoyama & Malonebeach, 2013; Reitzes & Mutran, 2009). This may be due to ailing grandfathers' lessened ability to initiate communication with grandchildren, as it is likely grandchildren feel more compelled to contact ill grandmothers than ill grandfathers (Reitzes & Mutran, 2004). Nonetheless, a grandmother's or grandfather's quality of health will affect their level of involvement and closeness with grandchildren (Hakoyama & Malonebeach, 2013).

Grandfathers and their Relationships with Grandchildren

According to Lesperance (2010), when first learning of the upcoming birth of their first grandchild, men have reported initial ambivalence about undertaking the role of a grandparent. However, grandfathers felt rejuvenated and excited upon the birth of their grandchildren and subsequent interactions (Lesperance, 2010). Overall, many grandfathers view involvement in the transference of values, behaviors, and perspectives on fatherhood to their grandchildren as a duty inherent to their role (Bates & Goodsell, 2013). Additionally, grandfathers tend to highly value their roles in passing down cultural traditions, providing instrumental support, and as mentors who provide guidance to their grandchildren (Mann & Leeson, 2010). Spending quality time with grandchildren by creating fond memories for them is another role that grandfathers tend to emphasize as important (Lesperance, 2010).

As changing family norms juxtapose social variations, grandfather roles may represent greater emotional relationships out of choice rather than

normative pressures (Mann & Leeson, 2010). Younger grandfathers may have more emotional intelligence and recent experience caring as fathers. Many, however, are still employed full-time and must accommodate their grandchildren into their busy schedules (Mann & Leeson, 2010). In comparison, older grandfathers have been found to be more reflective on their role and enjoy enduring relationships with their grandchildren (Mann & Leeson, 2010).

Prior research related to grandfathers' roles in families has indicated a desire to avoid traditional parenting roles, especially formal discipline (Lesperance, 2010). This may be due to a general desire to avoid overstepping what grandfathers view as the inherent boundaries of their responsibility. Despite this ambivalence to interfere with discipline and parenting duties, a large proportion of grandfathers report being dissatisfied with the way grandchildren are being raised (Lesperance, 2010; Mann, 2007; Mann, Tarrant & Leeson, 2016). Similarly, as grandchildren form their own identities in young adulthood, many grandfathers express disapproval of their grandchildren's behaviors and relationships, including homosexuality, lax parenting practices, and interracial relationships (Roberto, Allen, & Blieszner, 2001).

Grandfathers tend to value their role in the context of reconfirming masculine norms they fulfilled through careers and parenting in earlier life (Lesperance, 2010; Mann, Tarrant, & Leeson, 2016). As society equates retirement with relinquishing a portion of one's masculinity, actively fulfilling patriarchal roles in the lives of grandchildren can increase feelings of generativity and dependability, traditionally masculine values, in the lives of older men. Grandfathers feel that maintaining a consistent and dependable presence in the lives of grandchildren constitutes a masculine role in their family (Mann, Tarrant, & Leeson, 2016). This commitment plays an important part in dictating grandfathers' participation in activities with grandchildren throughout their lives (Bates & Taylor, 2013).

According to Lesperance (2010), older men have tended to be considered of lesser value in their familial roles in old age, relative to women who are traditionally considered a vital presence in families throughout the life course (Mann, Tarrant, & Leeson, 2016). This is due, in part, to the tendency for men to be considered primarily "breadwinners" within families, and for their identity to be strongly tied to their occupation. Despite this developmental role shift, men contribute to their families in later life through their role as grandfathers (Lesperance, 2010).

Regardless of the influence of gender constructs, grandchildren who feel that grandfathers have strongly influenced their values or character report more positive relationships with grandfathers overall, as do those who report that their grandparents' personalities are similar to their own (Wiscott & Kopera-Frye, 2000). Finally, Sheehan and Petrovic (2008) indicated that grandfathers who expressed pride in their grandchildren's accomplishments reported feeling more positively about their role overall. In particular, grandfathers emphasized pride and meaning in their role in relation to their grandchild's pursuit and completion of a college degree (Sheehan & Petrovic, 2008).

Proximity and Contact Frequency

Overall, geographic proximity is positively correlated to both contact frequency and exchange of support between grandparents and grandchildren (Bates & Goodsell, 2013; Hayslip & Page, 2012). Proximity, however, does not necessarily improve perceived relational closeness (Roberto, Allen, & Blieszner, 2001). Living within a close distance to family members tends to increase opportunities for active involvement in the lives of grandchildren (Barnett, et al., 2010; Mann, Tarrant, & Leeson, 2016). Geographic distance has been associated with decreased communication frequency, particularly during childhood and adolescence (Hakoyama & Malonebeach, 2013). Grandfathers have adapted contact with grandchildren through e-mail and telephone conversations, when faced with geographic distance from their grandchildren. The wealth of opportunities for long distance communication in the 21st century, and its potential influence on intergenerational relationships, however, has yet to be explicitly addressed in research (Mann, Tarrant, & Leeson, 2016; Sheehan & Petrovic, 2008).

In general, contact frequency has been shown to be a better indicator of close relational ties between generations than geographic distance alone (Bates & Taylor, 2013; Silverstein & Marengo, 2001). Contact frequency is linked to factors such as age of grandchildren, with younger grandchildren having more contact with grandparents, and grandparent health (Sheehan & Petrovic, 2008). This is especially true for in-person contact, with grandfathers citing their adult grandchildren's responsibilities and conflicting roles as preventing more frequent visitation (Roberto, Allen, & Blieszner, 2001). Contact frequency also has been shown to be significantly correlated with role satisfaction and relational closeness (Bates & Taylor, 2013). However, Bates and Taylor (2016) investigated the impact of

various dimensions of grandfatherhood on depressive symptoms, and contact frequency was found to be negatively associated with positive feelings. Researchers hypothesized that in families where significant relational conflict exists, too much communication with grandchildren may become harmful to grandfather's well-being (Bates & Taylor, 2016).

Life Course Transitions

Intergenerational contact frequency fluctuates across the life course (Hakoyama & Malonebeach, 2013; Monserud, 2011; Sheehan & Petrovic, 2008). One explanation for this shift in contact frequency as grandchildren age is that a high level of grandparent involvement is often necessary to provide vital assistance to parents when grandchildren are very young (Barnett, et al., 2010). An additional reason for this decline in communication in young adulthood is the traditional role of the parent generation as "gatekeepers." Namely, parents tend to either facilitate or hinder contact, typically the former, between their children and their own parents when children are living at home (Barnett, 2010; Hakoyama & Malonebeach, 2013; Monesrud, 2011). This gives parents the power to potentially shape the nature of relationships between grandparents and their grandchildren for a lifetime (Monesrud, 2011). Such mediation, or "gatekeeping," is typically absent or greatly diminished in young adulthood, as children move out of their parent's home and take on new responsibilities inherent to young adulthood (Geurts, Poortman, Tilburg, & Dykstra, 2009; Monesrud, 2011). These new roles and duties, including marriage, careers, and higher education, have been shown to be negatively correlated to not only frequency of contact, but also to perceived relational closeness between grandparents and their grandchildren (Sheehan & Petrovic, 2008). The sheer time commitment that undertaking these new roles requires on the part of grandchildren may lead to priorities shifting away from keeping in touch with intergenerational family members (Mills, 1999; Sheehan & Petrovic, 2008).

Divorce in families, whether present in the parent or grandparent generation, tends to negatively impact grandparent-grandchild cohesion (Mills, Wakeman, & Fea, 2001). This phenomenon, influenced by the inherent decrease in parental gatekeeping, may lead to a decrease in contact frequency. Intergenerational relationship quality additionally is influenced by the closeness of parent-grandparent connections (Monesrud, 2001). The intrinsic nature of divorce tends to negatively influence the coherence between the grandparent and

parent generation, thus impacting grandparents' relations with younger generations as well.

Conclusion and Implications

Although grandfathers in general are under researched in comparison to grandmothers across current literature (Bates & Taylor, 2013; Kelley, Whitley, & Campos, 2013; Roberto, Allen, & Blieszner, 2001), our investigation of the literature presents unique descriptions of the grandfather role across intergenerational relationships. The increase in longevity in Western society has allowed grandfathers to witness their grandchildren's and great-grandchildren's development into adulthood (Hayslip & Page, 2012; Lesperance, 2010). Grandfathers may significantly influence their grandchildren's negotiation of psychosocial and ecological life course tasks (Hakoyama & Malonebeach, 2013; Hayslip & Page, 2012; Mills, Wakeman, & Fea, 2001; Monserud, 2011; Sheehan & Petrovic, 2008). Grandfathers, and grandmothers, are actively involved in their grandchildren's lives, and typically designate significance to their role as a grandparent (Silverstein & Marengo, 2001). Grandfathers reconfirm masculine norms in older adulthood through their role as a grandparent, and exhibit generativity by participating in the transference of values, mentoring grandchildren, passing down cultural traditions, and providing instrumental support (Bates & Goodsell, 2013; Mann & Leeson, 2010; Mann & Leeson, 2016). Grandchildren who report that their grandfathers influence their own values and character, typically have more positive relationships with grandfathers (Wiscott & Kopera-Frye, 2000). Though grandfathers tend to avoid assuming a parental role in the lives of their grandchildren, when possible, many are dissatisfied with their life choices or how they are being raised (Lesperance, 2010; Mann, Tarrant, & Leeson, 2016). Grandparents, and notably rural African-American grandfathers, are increasingly co-residing with grandchildren or are custodial grandparents due to socioeconomic necessity or familial turmoil (Fuller-Thomson, Serbinski, & McCormack, 2014). Over the life course, grandfathers' level of contact with their grandchildren tends to decline during family events of divorce, and when grandchildren assume new adult roles and responsibilities (Hakoyama & Malonebeach, 2013; Monserud, 2011; Reitzes & Mutran, 2004; Roberto, Allen, & Bliezner, 2001; Sheehan & Petrovic, 2008). Overall, the grandfather-grandchild relationship is a complex one that

represents stability and change over sociohistorical contexts.

Research that explores the experience, expectations, and norms of grandfathering tends to focus on the perspective of the grandfather, leaving the outcomes of intergenerational ties experienced by grandchildren under-examined. Due to the complex and ever evolving nature of grandparent-grandchild relationships as both individuals mature over time, future studies from a dyadic perspective are warranted. Such research would increase public understanding of the ways in which both parties interact with one another throughout the life course, as well as how each family member defines their own roles and expectations of each other. Additionally, as grandchildren are increasingly growing up geographically distant from intergenerational family members, relative to prior generations, research examining how communication through technology affects relational outcomes is necessitated. In particular, the recent popularity of contact through means such as Facebook, text messaging, and video calling has changed the context in which many grandchildren interact with their grandparents.

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