Grandparenthood Comes of Age

Meredith Minkler, DrPH


Grandparenthood has come of age. All but 6% of Americans become grandparents, and with the dramatic increase in life expectancy in this century (from 47 in 1900 to 76 today), the length of role occupancy also has increased markedly. Women not infrequently are grandparents for more than 40 years, and the average child today can expect to spend almost half of his or her life as a grandparent (Barranti, 1985).

Given the prevalence of grandparenting in American society, and its importance both as a part of the life cycle and in its influence on families, the continuing neglect of this subject as a topic of research is curious. As several analysts have concluded, moreover, the research that has been conducted in this area tends to be descriptive, atheoretical, and limited in scope to a relatively narrow band of topics, such as the impact of grandparents on younger generations.

Even the most basic demographic data about grandparenthood have been difficult to come by. Analysts at the U.S. Bureau of the Census, for example, suggest that the widely cited figure of 50 million American

Budget Reconciliation Act of 1987.) The legislation specified seven broad objectives and 31 outcome standards meant to measure success in meeting the objectives. However, neither the objectives nor the outcome standards lend themselves to objective quantification and measurement. For this reason, Gibson argues that the monitoring process may be as important as the measures themselves. She provides an interesting discussion about whether the Australian standards really are outcome standards at all, whether they are too subjective, and the implications of subjectivity for the reliability and validity of the outcome standards.

In the 5-year period following the introduction of the nursing home standards, an evaluation of the program was conducted that consisted of both quantitative and qualitative methods. The purpose of this study was not only to evaluate the introduction of standards, but also to provide ongoing feedback to nursing homes about their performance. In 1991, a similar set of standards was introduced for aged hostels. Monitoring reports of standards compliance for both nursing homes and hostels indicate improvement over time.

Gibson’s book complements nicely the edited volume on social policy in Australia, even where they overlap. Collectively, they cover the gamut of issues from adequacy of retirement incomes to long-term care policy. It is interesting to note that the issues faced in Australia are similar to those in the United States. A number of previous studies have noted the similarity in the demographic patterns of aging faced by many developed nations.

However, it is not only the similarity of the patterns of aging between Australia and the United States that is striking—it is also the similarity of their programs. Although the Social Security program in Australia is means-tested whereas that in the United States is not, the differences are more apparent than real. Coverage under the means-tested Social Security program in Australia is nearly universal. The political environments that are the genesis for policy development in each country tend to view the issues as being unique to the domestic economy. They are not, however, and there is much to be learned from the policy responses of other countries to similar demographic challenges.

William H. Crown, PhD
Director
Outcomes Research and Econometrics
The MEDSTAT Group
125 Cambridge Park Drive
Cambridge, MA 02140

References


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grandparents is “probably too high” but they cannot, with existing census data, provide an accurate alternative number (Bryson, 1998). Census reports on an important subset of grandparents—the growing number who are raising their grandchildren—also are limited, because the census looks at this phenomenon among “current” households in the population, and misses those for whom such surrogate parenting may have occurred in the past (Szinovacz, 1998).

The extant literature on grandparenthood does, of course, include many seminal contributions. Neugarten and Weinstein’s (1964) early typology of grandparenting styles, Hagestad and Neugarten’s (1985) examination of this life stage as “countertransition,” brought about by the life choices of a younger family member, and research by Bengston (1987), Cherlin and Furstenberg (1986), Kornhaber (1996) and others on the meaning of grandparenthood have illuminated the symbolic, emotional, practical, and relational dimensions of this role. Finally, a handful of classic works, most notably Bengston and Robertson’s (1985) edited volume Grandparenthood, have helped bring attention to both the importance and the diversity of this life stage.

Grandparenthood

Building on this earlier work, yet going considerably further to address many of the continuing gaps in theory, demographic trends and realities, and the diversity of the grandparenting experience, Maximilane Szinovacz’s new Handbook on Grandparenthood makes a vital contribution. The book begins and ends with the editor’s own incisive analysis of the genesis and evolution of grandparent research and the challenges that lie ahead in this largely neglected field. The conceptual, theoretical, and methodological issues in research on grandparenthood indeed constitute one of four central organizing themes of this volume, and the glue holding it together. Additional thematic concerns, each underlying one of the book’s major sections, address the heterogeneity of the grandparenting experience; the dynamics and contingencies of grandparent-grandchild and extended family relationships; and clinical, public policy and programmatic interventions for grandparents. The book’s 18 chapters consist of new contributions by leading scholars in the field, and are uniformly well researched, written and organized.

Szinovacz’s stated purpose in preparing this volume is to “guide grandparent research into the mainstream of research on families and the elderly” (p. 11) and the book appears well suited to this task. The editor begins by carefully tracing the “legacies and turning points” in grandparent research from the 1940s through the 1980s, when grandparenthood “emerged as a research topic in its own right rather than as an appendix” (p. 7) to studies on family relations and other subjects. As she goes on to suggest, however, despite substantial increases in both the quantity and the diversity of grandparent research, such research has tended to remain marginal in quality and lacking in theoretical and contextual integration.

A major strength in this volume lies in the success with which it helps address these flaws. In Part 1 (Variations in Grandparenting Experiences), for example, grandparenthood is presented in historical, demographic, cultural, and social ecological context. Special attention is devoted to cross-cultural and family systems perspectives on grandparenting, with chapters not only presenting a broad overview of these topics but also exploring grandparenthood within specific racial/ethnic groups, in rural versus urban settings and through the often neglected prism of gender. Although addressing in particular the utility of a family systems/ecological perspective for grandparent research, Valerie King and her colleagues (Chapter 4) articulate a value that permeates this section, and indeed much of the volume, when they stress the need for far greater attention to how “intrafamily processes are influenced by extrafamily conditions and environments” (p. 53).

Part 2 of this book, Transitions and Contingencies, provides the work’s richest theoretical treatment, beginning with Merrill S. Silverstein, Roseann Giarrusso and Vern L. Bengston’s review of the multidimensional intergenerational solidarity model as it relates to the grandparent’s role. As the authors suggest, although this solidarity paradigm has guided much of the research on parent-child relationships for over a quarter of a century, its use in relation to research on grandparent-grandchild relations has tended to be implicit at best. A convincing case is made for using the language and constructs of multidimensional frameworks like this one to better address the complexities and “evolving contingencies” of the grandparent role.

Subsequent chapters in this section address a number of these complexities and contingencies, among them the age of grandchildren, the effects of an adult child’s divorce, and the growing phenomenon of grandparent caregiving when adult children are unwilling or unable to care for their offspring. Drawing on kinship theory and developmental studies, as well as on a number of the intergenerational solidarity dimensions set forth in Chapter 4, the contributions in this section both provide state-of-the-art knowledge within these domains and conceptual and empirical directions for further study.

Although just three chapters in length, the final section of this volume, Interventions in Grandparenting, provides an excellent overview of clinical, policy, and programmatic supports for grandparents. Particular attention is focused on the issues and challenges faced by those grandparents who, because of an adult child’s divorce or problematic circumstances, may find themselves having difficulty getting visitation rights, or at the opposite end of the spectrum, actually stepping in to raise a grandchild. The information in this section is timely and up to date, including brief overviews of welfare reform and its potential impacts on grandparents, and a variety of supportive programs and coalitions in support of grandparents’ rights and grandparents’ roles as surrogate parents.

This section is followed by a return to the book’s
overarching concern with setting the stage for more focused, methodologically sound, and conceptually sophisticated grandparent research in the next century. The editor pulls together many of the key research issues echoed throughout the book, including the need for longitudinal studies that can capture the changing dynamics and contingencies of grandparenthood; observational as well as survey and other more conventional research modalities; and the conduct of grandparent research within theoretical frameworks that capture the multidimensional nature of the role relationships and other characteristics observed.

The research agenda set forth is an important and ambitious one, to which I would only make minor additions. Among these is the need to supplement studies on grandparenthood within specific racial/ethnic groups with greater attention to the impact of factors, such as immigration status and language difficulties, which often cut across the experiences of diverse subgroups. To paraphrase Rena Pasick and her colleagues (1996), what is needed is a “third generation” racial/ethnic grandparenthood research that respects differences but also looks for commonalities across groups which programs and policies can then help address. Also needed, I believe, is the addition to the U.S. Census of a small number of questions that would better uncover family relationships and particularly grandparenthood status. Although several questions are to be added in 2000 to help gather data on grandparents and other relatives raising children (Bryson, 1998), the need for better census data on grandparenthood in general is underscored.

The aging of the baby boom will see an unprecedented increase in the number of grandparents in American society—grandparents with the prospect of retaining that status for a longer period than ever before. The Handbook on Grandparenthood provides an invaluable resource for scholars, as well as practitioners and policy makers, interested in better understanding this sleeping giant and its implications for gerontology, and for our society in a new century.

Grandparents as Parents

A persistent theme throughout the Handbook concerns the growing number of grandparents who enter the realm of “unplanned parenthood”—putting their traditional or “expected” grandparent role aside in order to step in and become primary caregivers to their grandchildren. The 1990 census indeed revealed a 44% increase over the preceding decade in the number of children living with grandparents or other relatives (Saluter, 1992), and growth in this phenomenon has continued. More than one in ten American grandparents report having been a primary caregiver for at least six months, and typically considerably longer, with African Americans, women, and low-income grandparents having the greatest odds of assuming this role (Fuller-Thomson, Minkler, & Driver, 1997). Although grandparent caregivers typically step in willingly to “keep the family together,” elevated rates of depression, social isolation, physical health problems, and other adverse consequences have been reported (see Minkler, in press).

For all of these reasons, the appearance of a different kind of handbook—one directed at grandparent caregivers and the professionals who work with them—is both timely and important. Grandparents as Parents by Sylvie de Toledo and Deborah Edler Brown is a widely used resource that lives up to its subtitle: it is indeed A Survival Guide for Raising a Second Family. Described by de Toledo as “part part, part dictionary, and something of a group hug” the book provides a wealth of information on topics such as navigating the child welfare system, working with troubled grandchildren, and salvaging one’s own sanity when life is “turned upside down” by the assumption of caregiving for a grandchild.

Beginning with the most personal and immediate level, the book’s opening section, When the Grandchildren Arrive, brings alive the complex of feelings, worries and practical issues that arise when you “take the grand out of grandparent” and face life as a second time around parent. The reasons for the rise in grandparent caregiving, the immediate steps to be taken, options to be considered by prospective surrogate parents, and the welter of emotions and family issues surrounding caregiving are examined, often through the eyes and voices of grandparents who have been there. Their stories, told concisely yet with great feeling, add a poignancy and reality to the many facts, practical tips, and challenges presented, and also make for an eminently readable book.

The middle section of this volume, appropriately subtitled Through the Red Tape, takes the reader on a carefully guided tour of the legal system, the child protective services/dependency system, government aid, and special education/early intervention. The four chapters in this section have far fewer grandparents’ stories, but remain highly readable thanks to the authors’ clear and lively writing style and their frequent use of subheads, tip sheets, and questions for caregivers to ask themselves as they struggle through the often bewildering maze of these bureaucracies.

Grandparents as Parents was published in 1995, one year before the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act ended “welfare as we know it” and brought a host of changes to the world of government assistance for low income families. Information provided on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) is, as a consequence, out of date. Yet the more general advice provided on accessing and working one’s way through other relevant government programs remains appropriate and helpful, and this section in particular should serve as a valuable reference to grandparents attempting to understand the bureaucracies of care with which they suddenly may be in frequent contact.

The book’s final section, Strength in Numbers, addresses what one spokesperson has called the “quiet revolution” of relative-caregiver families, and their growing public education and advocacy efforts. Building on her years as founder and leader of the Grandparents as Parents organization in Southern California, as well as in regional, statewide and national

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coalitions, de Toledo offers tips to grandparents who wish to start support groups, but also urges movement beyond mutual aid to bring about legislative and other needed changes.

_**Grandparents as Parents** is not without weaknesses. Most of the census and other statistics cited, while accurate, are attributed to newspaper articles or other secondary materials rather than to their original sources. The book gives only a scant paragraph to the American Association of Retired Persons' national Grandparent Information Center in Washington, D.C. It also fails to mention several other leading players, such as Generations United, a coalition of hundreds of organizations which has established an ambitious national intergenerational action agenda on grandparents and other relatives raising grandchildren (Generations United, 1998). Overall, however, this book makes a vital contribution to grandparent caregivers and the professionals who work with them. It is a book no grandparent raising a grandchild should be without, nor any professional or volunteer working with the growing number of grandparents who are raising some of America's most vulnerable children.

Meredith Minkler, DrPH
Professor and Chair
Health and Social Behavior
School of Public Health
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA 94720-7360

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**WEAVING THE SOCIAL FABRIC OF COMMUNITY: INTERGENERATIONAL INITIATIVES**


**Intergenerational Programs: Past, Present, and Future,** by Sally Newman, Christopher R. Ward, Thomas B. Smith, Janet O. Wilson, and James M. McCrea, with Gary Calhoun and Eric Kingson. Taylor & Francis, Bristol, PA, 1997, 247 pp., $27.95 (paper).


It is a widely shared assumption that maintaining connections across generations is vital to the creation of a "sense of cultural continuity" and the "building of community." Intrinsic to this view is the proposition that, through the transmission of history and tradition to younger cohorts, older generations have a significant role to play in creating a civil society. As Margaret Mead (1971) noted, "the quality of a nation is reflected in the way it recognizes that its strength lies in its ability to integrate the wisdom of its elders with the spirit and vitality of its children and youth" (p. 193). Yet, as these three books stress, the social and structural contexts in which intergenerational relations occur have changed dramatically over time.

Foremost among these changes is the trend of population aging within virtually all nation-states. In fact, the authors and editors of the books reviewed in this essay each lament that the "aging society" trend is typically defined as a social problem, noting the media's emphasis on how the growing fiscal costs of an increasingly aging population, in particular the expanding public pension and health care systems, will be borne by today's younger generations. Stressing instead that the longevity and health of older adults have improved substantially, these books cast the aged population as a largely "untapped resource." As individuals increasingly live twenty or thirty years post-retirement, these authors argue that we now have a significant segment of the older population whose existence is no longer defined centrally by work or illness. Thus, all three books promote a concept of

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