GRANDPARENTS: FAMILY SUPPORTERS, CUSTODIAL CAREGIVERS, AND DOLLS

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There is good news and bad news for family researchers and practitioners who focus on grandparents. Mattel, Inc., recently added grandparents to the Happy Family line! The Happy Family now includes Barbie (pediatrician for her friend Midge’s children), Midge (Barbie’s friend), Midge’s husband, Midge’s toddler son, Midge’s second child (a girl) who the doll owner helps birth, and Grandma and her husband Grandpa (the two cannot be purchased separately). Available in African American and Caucasian versions, both grandparents will have gray streaks in their hair and “wear sensible clothes. Grandpa will sport a wool sweater, [G]randma a floral blouse” (Gruca, 2003). Gruca reports that “psychologists say the dolls allow kids to play out the dynamics of the family unit.” The addition of Grandma and Grandpa to the Happy Family line coincided with my review of two new books on grandparents in the United States.

Grandparents: A New Look at the Supporting Generation, by Ursula Adler Falk and Gerhard Falk, places the role(s) of today’s grandparents within a socio-historical context. Within that context they briefly examine issues of gender relations and patriarchies, ageism, and industrialization across various religious groups and time periods. In a manner reminiscent of Cherlin and Furstenberg’s (1986) book, the Falks use Census data as well as data from the National Sample of Families and Households. The Falks’ focus on broad demographic changes (described below) presumably enables us to describe the likelihood of becoming a grandparent in the United States as well as divorce rates and employment status. Anecdotes from grandparents are cited to exemplify grandmother roles, grandfather roles, and the formal and informal surrogate parenting roles assumed by some grandparents. An appendix outlines the visitation and custody laws for each state.

Working With Custodial Grandparents, edited by Bert Hayslip Jr. and Julie Hicks Patrick, is narrower in scope; its 18 papers focus on grandparents who provide custodial care to grandchildren either formally or informally. The collection attempts to link psychological theory and theoretical perspectives (e.g., a developmental life course perspective, ecological systems theory, and process theories) with empirical inquiry to develop and examine useful preventions and interventions for grandparent caregivers. Their volume includes an examination of such diverse issues as intervention and support groups for custodial grandparents (e.g., Karen Kopera-Frye, Richard C. Wiscott, & Ana Begovic; Karen A. Roberto & Sara Honn Qualls; Gregory C. Smith); the special challenges faced by grandparents raising children with developmental disabilities (e.g., Jennifer M. Kinney, Kathryn B. McGrew, & Ian M. Nelson; Stacey R. Kolomer, Philip McCallion, & Jenny Overeynder); and building or rebuilding parenting skills (e.g., Carolyn W. Kern; JoNell Strough, Julie Hicks Patrick, & Lisa M. Swenson).

In this review essay I use these two books as a springboard for examining the research and the application of that research in the area of grandparents and grandparents raising grandchildren. I use Mattel’s Happy Family line to illustrate popular beliefs about these same foci.

The Good News

So, what is the good news? First, our empirical descriptions about the trends and demographics of the grandparent population and the population of grandparents who serve as caregivers are improving. The early chapters in the Falks’ book make extensive use of Census data as well as data from the National Sample of Families and Households. The Falks’ focus on broad demographic changes (described below) presumably enables us to describe the likelihood of becoming a grandparent in the United States. Narrower in focus, the Hayslip and Patrick collection focuses on a subset of grandparents who parent grandchildren either formally or informally. Thus, their foreword and some ensuing chapters (e.g., by Roberto & Qualls) contextualize the research or the theory using the same major data sets employed by the Falks.

The use of large, national data sets as either the main database or as a source to provide a historical or conceptual framework for grandparent research is not...
new (e.g., Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986; Goodman & Silverstein, 2002; Jendrek, 1993; Minkler & Roe, 1993, to name only a few). What is new are the questions on the 2000 Census that pertain to grandparents. Researchers and practitioners requested and applauded the addition of such questions as “Does this person have any of his/her own grandchildren under the age of 18 living in this house or apartment?” and “Is this grandparent currently responsible for most of the basic needs of any grandchild(ren) under the age of 18 who live(s) in this house or apartment?” These questions enhance the validity and reliability of our descriptions about grandparent trends and demographics, especially for those who parent grandchildren in multigenerational households.

So, at the risk of oversimplifying the descriptive research (and I am), the general population data presented in the two books indicate that even though fertility rates decline among some segments of the population, the likelihood of being a grandparent has increased in the United States simply because people live longer. However, these patterns vary by sex and race (e.g., women tend to have longer life expectancies than men and Whites longer life expectancies than Blacks). Furthermore, factors such as high divorce rates, drug and alcohol abuse, and the spread of the AIDS infection increase the likelihood that grandparents will serve as surrogate parents. However, this too, varies by sex and race (e.g., Martha Crowther & Rachel Rodriguez; Falk & Falk). Thus, these books confirm and replicate previously noted trends and demographics (e.g., Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986; Fuller-Thompson, Minkler, & Driver, 1997). This is fortunate because descriptions of these trends are often based on the aforementioned data sets and inconsistencies would be problematic.

In addition to our ability to describe the increasing likelihood of becoming a grandparent in the United States, a second piece of good news is that researchers find fairly consistent answers to the question “Why do grandparents become custodial grandparents either formally or informally?” Thus, a chapter in the Falks book reiterates research findings from recent decades: issues of divorce, drugs, alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, incarceration, the spread of the AIDS infection, and the like lead grandparents to parent their grandchildren (Minkler & Roe, 1993, Burton, 1992; Jendrek, 1994; ).

An area of inquiry examined in both books is the impact of surrogate parenting on grandparents. The third piece of good news, at least from a reliability viewpoint, is that research tends to confirm the hypothesis that grandparents who spend a considerable portion of their week providing care to a grandchild either formally or informally report higher rates of depression, psychological stress, and comparatively little time for self than noncustodial grandparents (e.g., Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2000; Jendrek, 1993; Minkler & Roe, 1993). However, Crowther and Rodriguez report an unanticipated finding in their chapter in the Hayslip and Patrick volume: In a comparison of custodial and noncaring grandparents, they found no support for the idea that “custodial grandparenting adversely affects health and well-being among African Americans” (Crowther & Rodriguez, p. 158). This is a provocative finding. It could be true or an anomaly, or it may underscore some of the “bad news” issues to be mentioned shortly. In any event, many of the chapters in the Hayslip and Patrick collection focus on strategies and interventions to improve the well-being of grandparents raising grandchildren. For example, Roberto and Qualls describe how intervention strategies (e.g., support groups, respite care, community education) used with older adults can be revised to develop and implement programs to assist grandparents in their surrogate parenting roles. Other chapters (e.g., Smith; Kopera-Frey, Wiscott, & Begovic) attempt to design, implement, and assess different strategies for grandparent support groups. Two additional chapters (Kinney, McGrew, & Nelson; Kolomer, McCallion, & Overeynder) focus on strategies and interventions for helping grandparents parent grandchildren who face the additional challenges of developmental disabilities.

A fourth piece of good news is that grandparent researchers use qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches. Quantitatively, we use national data from such sources as the Census or the National Sample of Families and Households to describe the grandparent populations of interest, the trends that influence the populations, and/or to contextualize our research. Qualitatively, we use grandparents’ anecdotes, such as those cited throughout the Falks’ book, to enable us to really “hear” grandparents. After all, grandparents powerfully convey through their stories their views of grandparenting, their fears, their joys, and their pains to researchers, practitioners, and policy makers.

A fifth piece of good news is that we examine grandparents and grandparents raising grandchildren issues using multiple perspectives and theories. Thus, the edited collection, primarily psychological in its approach, begins with a chapter by Hayslip and Patrick on life course theory and how it applies to grandparents who parent grandchildren; in a later chapter Crowther and Rodriguez use a stress process model to investigate “the nature, impact, and consequences of custodial grandparenting among African Americans” (p. 147). The Falks’ book uses a different theoretical approach. The Falks adopt a sociological approach to review the grandparent literature and therefore rely primarily on role theory, in addition to the socio-historical orientation previously noted. Each perspective is useful because it enables us to look at the broader issues through a slightly different lens.

The Bad News

Unfortunately, the good news leads to some bad news. So, what is the bad news? Methodological problems exist in both books and these reflect the problems encountered by many researchers and practitioners who study grandparents and grandparents who parent their grandchildren. First, we use qualitative and quantitative methodologies, but do we use them appropriately? A non-Census, non-national quantitative study in this field typically uses small nonprobability samples without a control group or with only one control group. Thus, it is not unusual to find that studies (such as those in the Hayslip and Patrick collection) are...
based on 130 families, or 97 grandparents, or even 42 grandparents, and that these grandparents or families self-selected themselves into the study because they saw or heard an “advertisement.” At other times, we examine custodial grandparents without comparing their experiences with those of noncustodial grandparents, or even parents. Many of us have read and even written the disclaimer at the paper’s end about our inability to generalize beyond the sample because of the small sample size or because of the lack of a control group, or because of the nonprobabilistic nature of sample selection. The Hayslip and Patrick collection contains several papers with this disclaimer. Although I have no definitive solution to this problem, the generalizability of our findings would be assisted by planned replications; replications that use different segments (e.g., African American, Hispanic, older grandparents, younger grandparents, grandparents who parent grandchildren with disabilities) of the grandparent population, obtained using different advertising strategies (e.g., recruitment through welfare programs, recruitment through newspaper advertisements, recruitment through schools and churches) in different parts of the country. The validity of our findings would be strengthened if planned replications produced similar findings. On the other hand, varied findings could lead to refinements in theory and/or additional research.

The use of qualitative data does not make sampling issues and sample size irrelevant. A major problem with the anecdotes presented in the Falks’ book is that we have no idea about how these grandparents were obtained and how many were interviewed (or if they were even interviewed). In order to place these anecdotes in a context, methodological information is needed which was not provided.

A second issue of concern embedded in the good news pertains to our focus when we examine the impact of surrogate grandparenting on grandparents. The good and bad news is that we tend to examine the stress and strains of surrogate parenting rather than the benefits. The Hayslip chapter in the edited collection clearly presents the rationale for examining the “upside down” world of grandparents who find themselves thrust into a new parenting role. However, some grandparents report that surrogate parenting of grandchildren gives them a feeling of “being needed” and/or “having a purpose for living” (e.g., Jendrek, 1993, p. 614). Perhaps studies that focus on the benefits or joys experienced by surrogate grandparents/parents might help us to develop interventions and programs that emphasize these benefits.

A third issue with which we struggle pertains to the role of culture and ethnicity in both our theory and our methodology. Research indicates that we cannot ignore these factors in either our research or our interventions and programs. As Goodman and Silverstein (2002) clearly stated in their study of African American, Latino, and White co-parenting and custodial grandmothers, “the study makes clear that cultural ideals, norms, and traditions make a difference in assuming custodial and coparenting roles” (p. 688).

In addition to their first chapter’s socio-historical approach, the Falks attempt to review the cultural influences on the grandparent role for such diverse groups as African Americans, the Amish, Asians, and Hispanics (to name a few) in a chapter entitled “Grandparents in Various Cultures.” Several chapters in the Hayslip and Patrick collection focus on a specific group either by “the luck” of the sample draw or design. Thus, for example, Hayslip’s “luck of the draw” sample resulted in nearly all Caucasian participants whereas Crowther and Rodriguez targeted African Americans for their sample. In reference to his White sample, Hayslip notes that “our data may paint a somewhat different, more dismal, picture than that gathered from African-American or Hispanic custodial parents” (p. 173). While true, the issue may be even more complex! Categorizing, for example, Mexican Americans with Guatemalans and Cubans under the rubric of “Hispanic” may mask very profound family differences and lead to programs or interventions that work for one segment of the Hispanic community but not another.

Finally and perhaps most dramatically, we have not done a very good job in exposing popular family myths generally and those that pertain to grandparents specifically. The Mattel line clearly and visually illustrates family myths. The “Happy Family” (the ideal family) is composed of mother, father, two children (a boy as first born and then a girl), grandmother, and grandfather. Of course, in the ideal family, we purchase two sets of grandparents. But, how does this Happy Family mesh with the “2.3 to 2.4 million grandparents who have primary responsibility for the care and upbringing of 4.5 million children” (Hayslip & Patrick, p. xi) under the age of 18? Moreover, the inseparable purchase of Grandma and Grandpa does not harmonize well with the facts that “maternal grandmothers have a better chance of living into their grandchildren’s adolescent years than paternal grandmothers. These are followed by maternal grandfathers and finally paternal grandfathers, who have the least chance of survival” (Falk & Falk, p. 40). Furthermore, why do the grandparents have gray streaked hair? Some grandparents have no gray hair because they are still in their 30s, whereas others use chemistry to eliminate the gray (or any other color) well into their 90s. In addition, where are the great-grandparents and the other sets of grandparents produced by blended families and step-families? One chapter in the Falks’ book entitled “Grandparents in the Media and in Literature” examines some of the popular images of grandparents. However, it is unclear to me as to whether that chapter’s focus is really on grandparents and family or on ageism. In either event, we must acknowledge that at least one toy company recognizes the existence and importance of grandparents; I know of no other grandparent dolls on the market. However, the availability of these dolls raises such research questions as: (a) who requests the grandparent dolls—child, parent, or grandparent?; (b) who purchases the grandparent dolls—grandparents or parents?; (c) do doll buyers prefer to purchase dolls that reflect their actual family structure or do buyers prefer to purchase dolls that represent an idealized family
structure?; and (d) does anyone complain because Mattel’s version of the Happy Family does not resemble their family structure?

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References


