

‘GRAND’ RELATIONSHIPS

‘GRAND’ RELATIONSHIPS:  
A CANADIAN STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY  
GRANDPARENT-GRANDCHILD TIES

By  
CANDACE L. KEMP, B.A., M.A.

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AUTHOR: Candace L. Kemp, B.A. (Brock University), M.A. (McMaster University)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Carolyn J. Rosenthal

COMMITTEE MEMBERS: Dr. Jane Aronson  
Dr. Graham Knight

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## **ABSTRACT**

Against the backdrop of social and demographic transformations, including increasing longevity and changing family relationships, this dissertation combines quantitative and qualitative methods to examine contemporary grandparent-grandchild ties in Canada. Beginning with an analysis of grandparenthood at the population level, this research analyzes the social and demographic contours of grandparenthood, establishing the prevalence of grandparenthood, adults with living grandparents, step-ties, multi-generational households and grandparents raising their grandchildren, as well as the supply of grandchildren and the intersection of family and work roles with grandparenthood. And, given that American data are often used to represent the Canadian situation, the dissertation provides a comparative analysis between the two countries.

The demographic analysis revealed high percentages of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships in the population. This finding formed the foundation for the micro-level analysis on which the dissertation is also based— an original qualitative study involving older grandparents and adult grandchildren (n=37). The overall aim of this research was to explore grandparent-adult grandchild relationships from the perspectives of both generations in order to understand the significance of the ties and these family roles, as well as how they are negotiated over time and within the context of contemporary social life. The data reveal that the ties have instrumental, symbolic, existential and material significance, that adult relationships are qualitatively different

and more complex compared to young grand relationships and that the broader social context is very consequential to how these family ties and roles are negotiated. Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative findings challenge commonly held assumptions about who and what constitutes ‘the family’ and shed scholarly light on choice and obligation as they arise in contemporary family life.

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### **CHAPTER II**

Kemp, C. L. (2003). The social and demographic contours of contemporary grandparenthood: mapping patterns in Canada and the United States. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 34 (2), 187-212. In a letter dated May 19, 2003, the Journal of Comparative Family Studies' assistant editor granted irrevocable, nonexclusive license to McMaster University and the National Library of Canada to reproduce this manuscript as part of the dissertation.

### **CHAPTER III**

Kemp, C. L. Dimensions of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships: from family ties to intergenerational friends. Under consideration with the *Canadian Journal on Aging* (submitted January 15, 2003).

### **CHAPTER IV**

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## CHAPTER I: Introduction

*Of all the changes shaking the world today, none is more important to us than those which affect the core of our personal life—sexuality, love and marriage, relationships and parenthood, the various personal networks with which we actively identify. Here, the revolution that has been transforming the foundation and models of everyday life is apparent not least in the resistance that constantly forms against it.*

*Beck-Gernsheim (2002:vii)*

Over the course of the previous century, demographic, social and ideological transformations have dramatically altered the social landscape, affecting the very nature of social life and social relations, particularly those constituting 'the family' and influencing family life. Considerable scholarly attention has been paid to changing family structures, including the declining prevalence of the nuclear family (Popenoe, 1993), as well as shifting gender roles and patterns of intimate, sexual partnerships (e.g. Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Giddens, 1992). Within the context of these and other social and demographic trends, recent speculations suggest that multi-generational family ties will become more important in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century than they have in the past and further, that grandparents in particular will assume increasing importance in family life (Bengtson, 2001). Despite these observations, relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to social, demographic and historical change as they impact intergenerational family relationships, especially between grandparents and grandchildren (Uhlenberg & Kirby, 1998).

Overlooked by many scholars of the family, as a biological connection, the

grandparent-grandchild tie is second only to the parent-child tie (Kivett, 1991). It has been characterized as a "vital connection"(Kornhaber & Woodward, 1985), having symbolic meanings and instrumental value. Previous research associates the grandparent-grandchild relationship with the provision and exchange of social support, sources of family continuity and self-worth (see for e.g. Kivnick, 1982; Langer, 1990; Harwood & Lin, 2000). It is a socially significant bond that is increasingly complicated by the wider cultural context of social change.

With specific reference to grandparenthood in Canada and grandparent-adult grandchild relationships, this dissertation investigates the social, demographic and ideological influences that enter into and shape contemporary family life, including interpersonal and intergenerational relationships. In doing so, this dissertation examines the implications of the broader social landscape for the lives and experiences of individual families and family members. The three separate papers that constitute Chapters II, III and IV address questions regarding how grandparent-grandchild ties are objectively and subjectively defined, explore the conditions within which individuals negotiate and give meanings to these intergenerational relationships, and ultimately examine the outcomes of such negotiations.

In this chapter, my purpose is to map out the temporal sequencing of these separate, yet intimately related investigations. I also aim to provide an overview of the

intellectual pathways that lead to each of the three data chapters. In doing so, I seek to establish the broader patterns and trends which have given rise to the questions underlying this dissertation and, in a sense, "tell the story" of the dissertation. Beginning with the identification of ongoing demographic transformations and processes which are altering the supply of kin and changing contemporary family life in Western societies, I explore their connections to the research presented in Chapter II. The findings of this first research investigation are based on a demographic analysis and give rise to the research topic and questions taken up in Chapters III and IV. Given that these two chapters are based on primary data from an original qualitative study and ask the most sociologically interesting questions, I will focus greater attention on the unfolding of the study in this introductory chapter. To this end, my aim will be to identify the contexts from which the research questions emerged, make explicit the underlying theoretical perspective of the work and to examine and reflect on the methodological processes behind the study, in particular, my role in the research process. The final pages of this chapter will provide a brief overview of each of the subsequent chapters.

## **DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE AND CONTEMPORARY GRANDPARENTHOOD**

Without doubt, the past one hundred years have been witness to considerable social and demographic transformation. Demographic processes, including mortality,

fertility, marriage, divorce and remarriage which essentially create, dissolve and recreate families have been fundamentally altered in ways that have redefined the contours of family life and familial experiences. The impact of these social changes has restructured patterns at the population level and reshaped the supply of kin in ways that directly influence individuals' lives.

First and foremost, increasing longevity is among the most influential demographic changes of the past century. Significant improvements to hygienic and nutritional standards, as well as advancements in medicine and medical technology have meant dramatic rises in life expectancy and increasing numbers of those 65 years and older in the wider population. For individual families, increases to life expectancy have translated into a rise in the number of older family members. Such an increase means greater numbers of years of intra- and intergenerational overlap.

Demographically new social roles and relationships are emerging as a direct result of increasing longevity. In terms of grandparent-grandchild relationships, the current cohorts of grandchildren can and in many instances will know one or more grandparent for two or three decades and possibly more (Uhlenberg & Kirby, 1998). This trend also means that many grandparents can expect to live long enough to watch their grandchildren grow to adulthood (Hodgson, 1998; Szinovacz, 1998b). Uhlenberg's (1996) demographic estimates suggest that of Americans born in 1900, only 21% had any

grandparents still living at the time of their birth. In contrast, 76% of Americans born in 2000 can expect to have at least one grandparent still living by the time they reach age 30. Insofar as they are occurring in historically unprecedented numbers, grandparent-adult grandchild relationships can be considered a new demographic phenomenon directly related to escalating longevity.

At the same time as life expectancy is increasing, with the exception of the baby boom, fertility rates have been declining over the past century (Milan, 2000). Changing gender roles, women's increased educational attainment and labour force participation, the widespread availability of birth control as well as changing views of marriage and intimate partnerships are some of the underlying catalysts for lower fertility rates. The decline in the total fertility rate, alongside rising life expectancy is reshaping population structures and has brought about population aging throughout the Western world. In terms of family life, decreasing fertility rates mean fewer members per generation in multi-generational families and changes to the composition and structure of families (Rosenthal, 2000). Lower birth rates have created a small-family society (Uhlenberg, 1980) and enhanced opportunities for the development and maintenance of stronger intergenerational bonds in Western nations. For example, on average, children have fewer siblings and cousins relative to previous historical eras and in theory, there is less competition from within the family for their grandparents' attention (Uhlenberg & Kirby,

1998). This trend means that decreasing fertility rates are shaping the family context within which relationships between grandparents and grandchildren develop.

Changing patterns of marriage, divorce and remarriage have also altered the nature and composition of contemporary families. In 1968, the introduction of the Divorce Act in Canada gave rise to increasing rates of marital dissolution (Milan, 2000). Subsequently, divorce replaced widowhood as the central reason for lone-parenthood, which has also increased over the course of the past several decades. Separation, divorce and lone-parenthood, particularly in the middle generation, have altered relationships between the generations, including an increase in exchanges of family support flowing downward from the grandparent generation.

Patterns of remarriage after divorce have also altered family ties. Reflecting on the history of the family, step-ties are not new. What is new, however, is that today remarriage is more likely to occur after a divorce, rather than the death of a spouse as was previously the case. This trend creates complexity within families and introduces new family relationships and forms arising out of divorce and remarriage including, intergenerational step-ties between grandparents and grandchildren. With increasing longevity, step-ties, like other family ties, have the potential to last for decades longer than in previous eras.

Other population-based trends have affected relations between generations and

created new structures of opportunity and constraint. For example, during the previous century, improvements in health status, economic status and education levels among the older population reduced obstacles that traditionally prevented grandparents from developing significant and meaningful bonds with their grandchildren, especially as they aged (Uhlenberg & Kirby, 1998). Changes to the life course, such as the institutionalization of retirement (Myles, 1984, 1996; Phillipson, 1998) and the separation of parenthood and grandparenthood as distinct phases of life (Gee, 1991; Hagestad, 1988), have decreased competition between the grandparent role and other social obligations. Moreover, more positive social constructions of old age and grandparenthood (Gratton & Haber, 1996) potentially remove barriers to the development of meaningful intergenerational relationships.

Changes to the lives of older persons, the structure of the life course and shifting patterns of family life also create new opportunities outside the family, particularly for grandparents. In a recent longitudinal study Silverstein & Long (1998) found cohort differences among grandparents in terms of contact with and geographic proximity to grandchildren. They hypothesized that:

...increases in the relative wealth, earlier retirement, and better health among more contemporary grandparents may explain the steep decline in contact-proximity in more recent cohorts. This may reflect the greater tendency of these grandparents (as well as their grandchildren) to be involved in alternative social roles that compete with extended family relationships (921).

The reduction of traditional barriers to the development of grandparent-grandchild relationships also creates new possibilities for life outside the family and competition with family-related roles.

### ***Limitations to Current Demographic Knowledge***

Most, if not all of the demographic findings related to grandparenthood are based on American data. To date, the demographic contours of grandparenthood in Canada remain largely unestablished. Beyond estimates comparing the prevalence of grandparenthood in Canada and the United State (Connidis, 2001) there is no known comprehensive comparative analysis of grandparenthood in the two countries, despite the common practice of using American figures. It is not uncommon for Canadian scholars to use American estimates in the absence of Canadian data and the study of grandparent-grandchild relationships has been no exception (e.g. Connidis, 2001). Based on the demographic literature on grandparenthood it is possible to speculate, for example, that most older Canadians will experience grandparenthood generally for the first time in mid-life, a number of grandparent-grandchild relationships will be affected by divorce and even remarriage, and many Canadian grandchildren will know their grandparents as adults. These speculations, however, are rooted in the American experience, rather than Canadian data and figures.

The idea for Chapter II, "The social and demographic contours of contemporary grandparenthood: mapping patterns in Canada and the United States", grew directly out of my evaluation of the demographic literature on grandparenthood. Demographic factors generally define families, shape individual experiences and are, therefore, an essential dimension of understanding most familial phenomena. Therefore, I perceived the lack of nationally representative information on Canadian grandparents and the common practice of drawing on the American situation to represent or approximate the Canadian experience as a barrier to understanding contemporary grandparenthood in Canada. My purpose in conducting the research reported in Chapter II was to establish the demographic contours of grandparenthood in Canada, comparing results with existing American estimates. Accordingly, the analysis and its measures were quantitative in nature and used data from nationally representative samples.

The demographic contribution essentially forms the backdrop for chapters III and IV. In analyzing grandparenthood at the population level, the quantitative findings raise several, largely unaddressed research questions about grandparenthood and grandparent-grandchild relationships. I was particularly interested in the high prevalence of adults in their twenties and thirties with living grandparents. In Chapter II, I conclude, "for many Canadian grandchildren, grandparents belong to their family networks for a duration lasting from early childhood through their teenage years on into adulthood".

When I turned to the academic literature on grandparenthood and grandparent-grandchild relationships, it became clear that these are demographically new relationships about which very little is known. Despite the demographic realities, little scholarly attention has been paid to the experiences of older grandparents and adult grandchildren (Hodgson, 1998; Rosenthal, 2000).

With the findings of Chapter II, scholarly need and my personal experience collided, sparking an interest in research on older grandparents and adult grandchildren. As a researcher, as well as an adult grandchild, I was intrigued by the possible implications of the demographic findings. The high prevalence of adults with living grandparents led me to inquire, for example: How does this population-based pattern translate into the lives of individual family members? What does such lengthy generational overlap mean to grandparents and grandchildren? How do these relationships change or stay the same over time?

Ultimately, my interest in older grandparents and adult grandchildren generated an original qualitative study (the data sources for Chapters III and IV) aimed at investigating this macro level phenomenon at the micro level of lived experience. First, however, I began by identifying what was known and not known about grandparent-adult grandchild relationships and by determining what makes these particular ties sociologically interesting. Distinct yet not entirely unrelated literatures helped to identify the research

questions and were crucial in the development of the study.

Beginning with a consideration of the literature relevant to grandparent-adult grandchild relationships, the following section discusses its themes and limitations and then turns to an examination of theories of individualization. I explore the application of individualization to the understandings of contemporary family life and reflect on how the social conditions of late-modernity might enter into grandparent-adult grandchild ties. Then, I introduce the grandparent-adult grandchild study, its specific research questions and objectives, and its underlying theoretical currents. Finally, I present the study's methodological approaches, including the challenges and processes.

## **THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE STUDY**

### ***Existing Research on Grandparent-Grandchild Relationships: Themes and Limitations***

In general, the literature on grandparent-grandchild relationships does not reflect the realities of an aging population, including the growing number of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships. Despite this fact, existing research offers some insight into this intergenerational tie. Broadly speaking, the literature dealing specifically with grandparenthood or grandparent- grandchild relationships can be classified into three main categories. First, a number of research efforts, particularly from the early years of grandparenthood research, are dedicated to characterizing grandparents and

grandparent-grandchild relationships. This research thrust has sought to develop typologies, classifying grandparents and their relationships into distinct categories based on levels and types of involvement, and the meanings and dimensions of meaning associated with the relationship and the grandparent role (e.g. Bengtson, 1985; Kivnick, 1982; Mueller, Wilhelm & Elder Jr., 2002; Neugarten & Weinstein, 1964). Next, there have been attempts to measure the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren, including various types of intergenerational solidarity, such as emotional closeness, contact, geographic proximity, similarities in values and beliefs (Kivett, 1996; Lawton, Silverstein & Bengtson, 1994; Silverstein & Long, 1998) and to account for differences in relationships according to gender and lineage (Block, 2000; Hodgson, 1992; Thomas, 1995) and race (Hunter & Taylor, 1998; Wiscott & Kopera-Frye, 2000). Finally, there is also an emerging literature that deals with grandparenting and social problems. This research has examined, for example, the impact of divorce and remarriage on grandparenthood and grandparent-grandchild relationships (Gladstone, 1988, 1989, 1991; Johnson, 1998), grandparents raising their grandchildren in the face of problems such as cocaine addiction and incarceration in the middle generation (Barnhill, 1996; Minkler & Roe, 1996; Minkler, Roe & Price, 1992). Cumulatively, findings from all three facets of grandparent-grandchild research suggest that relationships between these two generations can be socially meaningful, personally significant, contingent, dynamic, heterogeneous

and somewhat lacking in specific normative behavioral guidelines.

For the most part, these findings have been derived from studies of grandparents with young grandchildren, which mainly take the perspective of the grandparent and neglect the view of the younger grandchild. Many of these findings are important, even pivotal to understanding the development of adult-relationships. Yet, the increasing complexity brought about by aging and the passage of time, makes the adult relationship deserving of research attention in its own right. After all, are the same characterizations, measurements and social problems applicable to both the young and adult grand relationships? In what respects is there continuity and change over the life course?

Despite being relatively sparse, a small body of work dedicated specifically to understanding the adult relationship does exist. This literature is discussed in greater detail in Chapters III and IV. To avoid repetition, my present purpose is to provide a brief summary and critique. In part, this evaluation shaped my approach to the study of grandparent-adult grandchild ties, including the questions it raises and the methods it employs.

In general, existing research offers a sketch of this newly extended intergenerational bond. It outlines the aggregate properties of the relationship and to a certain extent situates the bond within the context of the life course. This work indicates that many grandparents and adult grandchildren share personally meaningful and socially

significant bonds (Roberto & Stroes, 1992). They often have frequent contact with one another and characterize their relationship as 'close' and 'enduring' (Hodgson, 1998). Exchanges of emotional and instrumental support within the relationship are not uncommon (Langer, 1990; Roberto, Allen & Bliezner, 2001). In terms of life course changes, there is evidence to suggest that levels of intergenerational solidarity fluctuate over time as grandparents age and as grandchildren become adults and experience transitions associated with adulthood (Mills, 1999; Silverstein & Long, 1998). For example, quantitative findings suggest that death or illness in the family are significantly related to strengthening or weakening feelings of closeness between grandparents and adult grandchildren (Hodgson, 1992; Holladay et al. 1998). And, insofar as the grandparent-grandchild relationship has been viewed as negotiated, grandparents' negotiation partners switch from the middle to the grandchild generation as the latter become teenagers and adults (Roberto & Stroes, 1992). Little is known about these processes and the effect of life course transitions on the grandparent-adult grandchild relationship, particularly at the level of lived experience.

Overall, this small literature suffers from a number of methodological problems stemming from research practices that have impeded acquiring in-depth knowledge of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships. First, studies have tended to focus on the perspective of only one family member, generally the grandchild. And, given academics'

accessibility to college students, a large number of studies draw on this convenient sample. Less is known about grandparents' experiences, those of adult grandchildren not in school and older adult grandchildren who are more likely to be in intimate partnerships and who have children and employment demands. Equally problematic is the fact that many studies ask the grandparent or grandchild to reflect on their closest grand relationship. This practice has led to a neglect of variation within families as well as an understanding of those differences. Next, the overwhelming use of cross-sectional research designs and a neglect of grandparenthood in a life course perspective have led to a static view of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships (Hagestad & Burton, 1986; Hodgson, 1998). Considering that grandparents will pass from mid to later life and that grandchildren grow from children to teenagers and into adulthood during the course of their overlapping lives, ongoing age transitions are likely to influence their everyday experiences, including their relationships with one another. Quantitative studies have investigated some of these processes, but little is known about their meaning and how they are experienced.

The dominance of quantitative studies is yet another limitation. Research on grandparent-adult grandchild relationships has overwhelmingly been based on survey methods and/or the use of quantitative measures (Hodgson, 1998). While not dismissing the sociological importance of survey research or quantitative measurement, "too often

quantitative dimensions of family ties, such as contact, support or exchange, are used as indicators of the qualitative aspects of kin interaction" (Connidis, 1987:88). The practice of relying on large-scale surveys needs to be complemented by an understanding of how these relationships translate into everyday experiences. Ultimately, very little is known about the processual and experiential nature of this intergenerational family relationship, what it means in the everyday lives of grandparents and adult grandchildren, and how, why and under what social conditions the bond is defined and maintained.

Relatedly, research agendas have been narrowly defined, aimed, for example, at measuring feelings of closeness, contact and geographic proximity between grandparents and adult grandchildren. While these are important, findings need to be understood within the broader social landscape. The majority of work, while often linking the need for the study to increasing longevity, generally ignores other key factors. In particular, findings and analysis are often not linked to broader social and ideological contexts within which they occur (Uhlenberg & Kirby, 1998). This final observation encouraged me to consider the nature of contemporary social relations and how it might be related to the family experiences of grandparents and adult grandchildren.

### ***Theories of Individualization***

My assumptions about the organization of the social world (discussed in greater

detail below) – namely that individual experiences cannot be divorced from the social contexts within which they occur– also lead me to reflect on the broader social landscape. In doing so, alongside the demographic changes that have created the opportunity for the lives of grandparents and grandchildren to overlap for historically unprecedented lengths of time, I discovered that additional consequential historical, social and ideological shifts are also taking place. These changes are shaping the experiences of individuals and families. What makes grandparent-adult grandchild relationships even more sociologically intriguing, therefore, is not only are they 'new', but they are being forged within the context of late-modern times. This has potential implications for interpersonal and intergenerational connections.

In an effort to make sense of the transformations influencing family life and personal relationships, theorists such as Ulrich Beck, Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim and Anthony Giddens have drawn attention to processes of individualization within contemporary late-modern times. Their endeavors essentially seek to understand how ongoing structural (i.e. economic, social and technological) changes are shaping and influencing the seemingly separate arenas of personal relationships and family life. They identify, for example, globalization, the introduction of the welfare state, its demands, as well as those of the labor market, heightened environmental risk and social uncertainty, changing gender roles, and the separation of marriage and reproduction through the

widespread availability of birth control as intimately connected to the changing nature and foundations of interpersonal relationships in contemporary Western societies.

According to Beck-Gernsheim (2002), individualization rests on the assumption that the traditional bonds and relationships which once defined individuals' lives have lost much of their meaning. Social class, religion, the family unit and other institutions that once provided guidelines for individuals in their daily lives and interactions continue to lose their deterministic influence over peoples' lives. As individualization occurs and the traditional frameworks for everyday life erode and greater options exist for both men and women:

Individualization in this sense means that each person's biography is removed from given determinations and placed in his or her own hands, open and dependent on decisions. The proportion of life opportunities which are fundamentally closed to decision-making is decreasing and the proportion of the biography which is open and must be constructed personally is increasing (Beck, 1992:135).

In this context, it is, to a certain extent, up to individuals to decide their own courses of action and to shape their own lives and futures.

Presumably, this dimension of individualization affects different cohorts and generations differently. For example, this shift is also accompanied by the view of young adults as entitled and deserving of a right to a life of their own. The "biographization of youth" means, in an effort to define their own identity and life course paths, younger generations are becoming active, struggling to design their own lives (Beck, 1998:78).

This personal freedom is accompanied by new challenges, such as how to ensure family commitment and occupational success and how to balance autonomy and interdependence (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002).

Individualization is also predicated on the assumption that individuals are embedded within broader social institutions such as the welfare state and the labor market, both of which are characteristic of contemporary Western societies. The very notion of the welfare state is collectivistic, but insofar as its demands and entitlements are aimed at individuals as opposed to the family unit, individualization is effectively institutionalized. In many cases welfare state demands and entitlements presuppose employment, which, in the present context, in turn implies education; both presuppose mobility. As Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (1995:52) suggest, "Mobility in all its forms—geographical, social, daily moves between job and family, work and leisure, training, workplace and retirement—continues to force people away from their established ties". The demands of individual mobility are speculated to be particularly great for younger cohorts who are attempting to establish their professional and personal lives.

Individualization and the conditions of life in late-modern times have a number of implications for contemporary family life and interpersonal relationships. First, the loosening of tradition means that family and interpersonal relationships are largely 'optional', based on choice, negotiation and personal freedom (Beck, 1999, 2001;

Giddens, 1994). In recent years, for example, changing gender roles, along with patterns of divorce and remarriage mean that interpersonal relationships, particularly marriages, are based more on personal than social relevance (see Allan, 2001). Alongside the decline in the patriarchal family and the separation between marriage and reproduction, personal freedom and democracy are taking root as the foundation for interpersonal relationships, especially among those connections that were typically defined by old authority structures and obligations (for e.g. parent-child relationship; gender roles and relationships between husbands and wives).

Second, individuals are required to create social bonds, rather than inherit them from the past, which means "a genuinely new social universe of action and experience" (Giddens, 1994:106). To use Bauman's (2000) characterization of contemporary social life and relations, family ties can be thought of as more "fluid" and less "solid". As family ties are understood as processual, instead of established or given, negotiation processes are the dominant pattern of interpersonal relationships and become central to understanding family practices (Allan, Hawker & Crow, 2001; Beck, 1998). Without specific expectations, family roles and relationships are often structured by the outcomes of previous interpersonal negotiations (Finch & Mason, 1993). And, because social bonds are rooted more firmly in voluntarism and negotiation rather than tradition or obligation, "there is a strong tendency towards relationships based on emotional communication

rather than institutionally given gender roles in relations between men and women, between same sex partners and children" (Giddens & Pierson, 1998:124). Under these circumstances, personal relationships hold the potential for significant personal rewards and self-fulfilment, but can also be "fraught with difficulties" and are likely more fragile and easily dissolved than bonds rooted in tradition and obligation (Giddens, 1994).

Next, as personal relationships become more malleable, fluid and individually negotiated than in previous eras, greater choice brings about another consequential implication for family life: increased diversity. Family structures are increasingly complex and hold new relationship possibilities resulting from changing patterns of marriage, divorce, women's labor force participation, mobility and life expectancy (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1994). In fact, Western societies have entered into an era of the 'post-familial family' (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). 'Post-familial family' suggests that far from being in decline, the family is being continuously reinvented, assuming new forms and meanings. Who and what constitute family is being expanded and redefined such that heterogeneity characterizes the modern family landscape. On one hand, greater choice means more opportunities for individuals. Simultaneously, greater choice brings about another implication for family life under the conditions of individualization: a lack of clarity and uncertainty with regard to roles, rules and expectations for family and personal life.

...whereas there used to be many exceptions but also impressively solid rules it is now in many respects no longer clear what is the exception and what is the rule especially as it is also unclear where people can find any guidance for the new questions and decisions that confront them, in a globalizing world marked by scientific and technological change, labour-market risks and other tendencies which spill over into the realm of the private. In short, for quite a lot of middle and older generation, and even more for the younger generation, the landscape of family life has opened up and the ground has become unstable (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002:15).

Lack of clarity and greater choice are likely to bring about new challenges for individual family members as they attempt to navigate and negotiate their individual and collective lives.

The final implication for personal relationships is related to the possible contradictions individualization creates between the demands placed on individuals and their desires, as well as the interaction between personal freedom and a desire for intimate connections to others. Individuals are being pulled in many directions with the demands of training and employment, oftentimes away from their families and other personal ties. At the same time, as uncertainty and lack of clarity have become normative states, Beck (1998) hypothesizes that there are ever growing demands for family intimacy, community and a sense of belonging. Ultimately, how these contradictions are reconciled in daily life and how the desire for close personal ties interacts with the right to personal freedom, particularly across generations, is not empirically understood.

With the exception of Beck's (2001) brief example of choice in step grandparent-

grandchild relationships, theories of individualization have most commonly been applied to intimate, sexual relationships (Giddens, 1992), changes to the nuclear family form and to some extent parent-child ties (e.g. Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002; Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). This body of work has generally been criticized for failing to acknowledge wider aspects of kin relationships (Allan, 2001). It is clear, however, that dramatic changes are occurring in the realm of family relationships and that the social processes which theories of individualization address are most certainly at work in other familial ties, including those between grandparents and adult grandchildren.

Although rarely drawing explicitly on individualization or the works of Beck, Giddens and Beck-Gernsheim, selected research findings on grandparenthood and grandparent-grandchild relationships lend support to certain aspects of their theorizing. For example, speculations that grandparent-grandchild relationships have few normative expectations and behavioral guidelines (Silverstein, Giarrusso & Bengtson, 1998) and are marked by extreme heterogeneity (Bengtson, 1985) are congruent with this theoretical current. The work of historians Gratton and Haber (1996) also addresses processes of individualization. They have linked the changing nature of the grandparent role to distinct social, historical and economic conditions. Their conclusions regarding the nature of contemporary grandparenthood are compatible with theories of individualization. Similar to what Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002) have argued, they

suggest that the introduction of social security, particularly old age pensions, altered the nature of individuals' dependency on their families. The growing cultural emphasis on autonomy and independence has left its mark on grandparenthood. In contemporary times, Gratton & Haber (1996) suggest, grandparenthood is defined by companionship and equality; grandparents are encouraged to "strive for love and friendship with their grandchildren rather than demand respect and obedience" (11). How these cultural emphases operate in the family lives and relationships of older grandparents and adult grandchildren is generally not known.

Theories of individualization generate sociological questions about the grandparent-adult grandchild ties, most of which remain unanswered. For example, research has yet to address how ties between grandparents and adult grandchildren are being forged and negotiated within a cultural context emphasizing personal freedom, independence and negotiation rather than tradition and obligation. What grandparents and adult grandchildren encounter in their individual lives that facilitates or constrains the development of their intergenerational relationship(s) is also not known. Moreover, how, if at all, the experiences of grandparents and adult grandchildren are consistent with theories of individualization remains to be seen. These are some of the unknowns that acted as departure points for my qualitative study on older grandparents and adult grandchildren.

## **THE GRANDPARENT-ADULT GRANDCHILD STUDY**

### ***Research Questions***

After assessing the current state of knowledge on grandparent-grandchild relationships and analyzing dominant sociological theorizing about the current state of the family and social change, several key questions remained. This study asks four central questions, each targeting a specific unknown:

- 1) Given that meanings and experiences, have generally been overlooked by researchers in this area and that it has been uncommon to elicit the perspective of both young and old in the same study, I ask: How do older grandparent and adult grandchild conceptualize their relationships and what meanings and significance do these ties hold from the perspectives of both generations?
- 2) Because grandparent-adult grandchild research has relied mainly on cross-sectional studies and has given little attention to the development of the relationship over the years, the next research question inquires about the dynamics of the relationship over time and asks: In what ways do these relationships change or are perceived to change as grandparents and grandchildren move through the life course and experience life course transitions?
- 3) As the young grand relationship is often described as ambiguous and without clear norms and expectations (Silverstein, Giarrusso & Bengtson, 1998), the third question inquires: What roles older grandparents and adult grandchildren play in one another's lives and what are the expectations they have of their relationships, themselves and each other?
- 4) Finally, in response to the neglect of the wider social landscape in accounting for these intergenerational relationships, the study inquires: How, if at all, do elements of the broader social context enter into and shape relationships between older grandparents and adult grandchildren as recounted by them? For example, do personal freedom and negotiation

arise in discussions of these intergenerational ties? Does the evidence support theories of individualization?

### ***Theoretical Perspectives***

To begin, it is necessary to identify the theoretical lens through which I have chosen to view grandparent-adult grandchild relationships. Because I have attempted to give some semblance of order to an otherwise chaotic process of thought, it may be apparent that my choice of theoretical perspectives led me to ask particular questions and to look for answers in particular places. Much like the social world it seeks to understand, social research processes are rarely neat or tidy and do not always follow linear paths. Ultimately, my assumptions about the organization of the social world and how it is best understood left a significant imprint on my approach to the study of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships and can likely be traced back to my examination of theories of individualization and to the particular shortcomings I identified in my evaluation of the grandparent-grandchild literature.

### ***An Interpretive-Life Course Approach***

My work on grandparent-adult grandchild relationships is underpinned primarily by an interpretive perspective (for a detailed discussion see Marshall, 1996; 1999). Many of its epistemological assumptions informed and guided the research process, from

inception to completion. Below, I identify the central tenets of this perspective and also introduce those of the life course perspective, as well as how the two complement one another.

Meanings and interpretation are at the center of interpretive analysis as they are understood as the foundations for action, motivation, interaction and the social world. Social life is emergent and processual and individuals are agents, acting on and within their social worlds. With an emphasis on human agency, interpretive theorists see individuals as "architects of their own lives" (Ryff, Marshall & Clarke, 1999). Through action and interaction, individuals continually [re]create the social world, fitting lines of action together, interpreting, negotiating and responding to one another and their surrounding social contexts.

In attempting to impose meanings and order on the social world, individuals encounter the conditions of their interactions, the meanings others impose on situations and obdurate realities (Marshall, 1999:440). According to Fine (1993:69), "Much of the world is not of an individual's making and can only be understood in the context of the circumstances in which these social realities are expressed". There are also parameters to agency and creativity imposed by both the perceived boundaries on action and the effects of societal infrastructure that transcend individuals (Fine, 1991) and structure their lives. Although the possibilities for action are limitless, human interaction cannot be divorced

from the wider social context (Fine, 1991; 1992), including its temporal dimensions.

In order to underscore the centrality of time, I also draw on the life course perspective. This perspective highlights location in time and place, linked lives and the timing of lives within its framework (Giele & Elder, 1998). Presently the most widely applied theoretical framework in the study of aging (Bengtson, Burgess & Parrott, 1997), life course shares with interpretivist thought an emphasis on the link between agency and structure, while placing the passage of time— whether individual aging, the timing of life course events or a reference to the passage of socio-historical time— at the forefront of its analytic endeavors. Overall, a life course approach to the study of intergenerational relationships emphasizes continuity and change over time, the link between macro and micro levels of analysis, the familial context of relationships and the heterogeneity among and within families (Hess Brown & Roodin, 2002).

Applied to grandparent-adult grandchild relationships, an interpretive-life course perspective, reinforces the dynamic nature of social bonds as they are negotiated with[in] response to individual, familial and societal level factors. Attention is directed to the creative capabilities of individuals as well as processes of continuity and change over time, the linkage between family members and the wider social and historical conditions. Although most research does not link current social and historical conditions, the interconnectedness of family life and individual and dyadic experiences within

grandparent-adult grandchild relationships to one another (for a critique of the literature see, for e.g. Aldous, 1995; Robertson, 1995; Szinovacz, 1998b, 1998c), these levels of analysis are intertwined and each provides an explanatory backdrop for understanding the others.

## ***Methods***

### *Methodological Approach*

The use of an interpretivist approach, with its focus on meaning, experience and process, calls for 'intimate familiarity' (Lofland, 1976) or an understanding of the social world from the perspective of those who experience it. Qualitative research methods and data gathering techniques such as in-depth interviewing are among the most useful for achieving intimate familiarity, particularly when the aim is to "collect detailed, richly textured, person-centred information" (Kaufman, 1994:123). According to Richardson (1990: 28):

Sociological discovery, generally happens through finding out about peoples' lives from the people themselves listening to how people experience their lives and frame their worlds, working inductively, rather than deductively. Qualitative researchers generally learn about other people through interaction in specified roles, such as participant observer/informant, interviewee/interviewer and so on. As a result, their knowledge of people's lives is always historically and temporarily grounded.

Located within a particular view of the social world as emergent and processual and of

social actors as creative agents, the use of qualitative methods enables researchers to link individual experiences to social contexts and structures (Jaffe & Miller, 1994) and to access personal experiences, including the taken-for-granted dimensions of everyday life. Such an approach enables the researcher to examine meanings, definitions and social processes, as well as enabling them to identify the inherent contradictions and tensions of social life (Lyman, 1994; Sankar & Gubrium, 1994).

The use of 'life course' as an orienting concept or framework requires a research design which is also capable of capturing both continuity and change in individuals' lives and relationships over time. Ideally, with its data collected in a forward-oriented manner, over an extended period of time, a prospective, longitudinal research design would be most useful in understanding continuity and change in grandparent-adult grandchild relationships. However, given pragmatic constraints such as time and money, I employed a cross-sectional retrospective longitudinal research design (see Giele & Elder, 1998). Combining both interpretivist and life course approaches, this qualitative study of grandparents and adult-grandchildren proceeded inductively and used semi-structured, open-ended, in-depth, life-history interviews. After my study's proposal was reviewed and approved by McMaster University's Research Ethics Committee, I began the search for grandparent and adult grandchild volunteers.

*The Search for Grandparents and Adult Grandchildren*

My sampling technique was purposive and for the most part, the sample was one of convenience, derived through several channels. Recruitment ads were posted on the university's website and in local public libraries (See Appendix A). The ads asked for grandparent and adult grandchild volunteers to participate in a doctoral research project, which was briefly outlined. The ads stipulated that interested grandparents should have one or more grandchildren aged 21 years or over, and that grandchildren should be a minimum of 21 years old with at least one living grandparent. Interested individuals were asked to contact me by telephone or through email. Four participants responded to the web ad and another 4 contacted me after seeing the ad posted in a library. Other participants were recruited in a snowball fashion through community contacts (n=16) and through the participants themselves (n=13).

With the exception of grandfathers, the response to the recruitment ads and interest in the study through word-of-mouth was unexpectedly quick and positive. Largely because of the response, the majority of the interviews were completed within two months, several months ahead of the anticipated time schedule. It was especially challenging at the beginning and somewhat difficult to maintain an interviewing pace that kept stride with the requests to participate. In particular, the response from grandmothers was so overwhelming that after exceeding the desired number of grandmother interviews

by five, I thanked any additional grandmother volunteers (n=4), for their interest in the project, but declined to conduct more grandmother interviews. My decision to decline interviews with more grandmothers was necessary in order to focus my time and attention on grandfathers and grandchildren.

The unforeseen, largely positive responses to the grandparent-adult grandchild study are themselves data. It seemed that the topic itself sparked a genuine interest in and enthusiasm for sharing experiences and stories of being a grandparent and adult grandchild. On reflection, these responses were forerunners to the nature of the study participants' grand experiences, but also to the potential personal and social significance grandparent-adult grandchild relationships can hold for both generations.

### *The Study Participants*

Given the qualitative nature of the study, the search for grandparents and adult grandchildren was not driven by any attempt to generate a representative sample. At the outset of the study, I wished to have roughly equal numbers of grandmothers, grandfathers, granddaughters and grandsons. However, the sample composition was somewhat adjusted based on the volunteers. While I attempted to manipulate gender representation by declining to interview more than 15 grandmothers, in the end there was considerable gender imbalance in the grandparent sample. Overall, 15 grandmothers, 3

grandfathers, 10 granddaughters and 9 grandsons participated in the study, for a total of 37 interviews. Four same-family dyads participated in the study, although owing to time constraints, as well as concerns over the willingness to be forthcoming if another family member participated, there was no attempt to recruit members of the same family. My decision to ask participants to talk about all of their adult grand relationships as opposed to the common practice of asking about the closest grand relationship, in total, yielded accounts of 99 relationships. Participant profiles are presented in Appendix B. Selected socio-demographic characteristics of the grandparents and adult grandchildren are outlined in Chapters III and IV. In order to avoid repetition, I will not discuss these further at this time, however, it should be noted that the most consequential characteristic of the sample is their enthusiasm for the topic.

### *The Interviews*

In terms of geographic location, the majority of interviews (n=23) took place in Hamilton, an urban industrial city in south-western Ontario. I also traveled to nearby towns and cities including Ancaster, Burlington, Dundas, Grimsby, Guelph, Stoney Creek and Toronto in order to meet and interview participants. As for the actual interview settings, all 18 grandparent and 6 grandchild interviews were conducted in participants' homes at kitchen tables or in living rooms. I conducted the remainder of the grandchild

interviews in public settings such as restaurants and coffee shops (n=9) and in private locations at the grandchild's place of employment (n=4). Interview location was selected by participants.

At the beginning of the interview, I explained the research project in detail and presented each participant with a letter of information (see Appendix C) and a letter of consent (see Appendix D). With written consent and guaranteed anonymity, all interviews were tape recorded. The interview tapes were subsequently transcribed into text format for analytic purposes.

Regarding the content of the interviews, I generated two thematic interview guides, one for grandparents (see Appendix E), the other for the adult grandchildren (see Appendix F). As qualitative research recasts participants as experts, the use of a thematic interview guide along with an open-ended format permitted flexibility during the interview process and was amenable to exploring the experiences and topics deemed to be most important as expressed by grandparents and adult grandchildren. Given that I sought to explore and learn more about the complexities of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships, including processes and factors that I was not necessarily aware of, as Lincoln & Guba (1985:208-211) suggest the design and focus of this research should be understood as "emergent".

Although flexible, the interview guide offered some structure, directing the

content of the interviews. It followed three major lines of inquiry (adapted from Schuman's 1982 'three-interview series', see Seidman, 1991). In order to place the grandparent-adult grandchild relationship within the broader context of individual, family and social histories, I began with focused, life history questions. These questions, among other topics, explored each generation's background, individual and family histories, family structure and the functioning of the family network. Next, the interview questions concentrated on the details of their experiences within grandparent-grandchild relationships, seeking to understand how all of their adult relationships have been negotiated and maintained over the years and examining what types of exchanges occur, how frequently, as well as in what ways these have changed or stayed the same over time and why. As well, I was also interested in learning about similarities and differences within families according to family members. After situating the relationship within the context of the life course and family history and focusing on experiences within the grandparent-adult grandchildren relationship, the third and final section of the interview required participants to reflect on the meaning of their relationship. Meaning and experience were of interest throughout the interview, but the final section drew explicit attention to the significance and meaning of the relationship from the perspective of grandparents and adult-grandchildren. Because I was interested in having a conversation-like interview with both generations, I did not necessarily follow the

interview questions in sequential order, when the interviews were actually conducted.

As will be seen, sometimes improvisation was necessary.

*Self-Reflection: My Role in the Research Process*

Owing to limitations of space, my presence in the research process is not documented in Chapters III or IV. Self-reflection has led me to conclude that my participation in the research was an important element of this study and dimension of the study's context. As such, it deserves at the very least some consideration in this introductory chapter.

My past experiences with qualitative research, particularly in-depth, life history interviews, made me aware that this was the best approach for my particular research questions and objectives. At the outset, I was also very aware that this approach was one fraught with challenges, risks and ethical issues. Qualitative researchers rely on participants' accounts of their lives and experiences. We attempt to create intimacy and trust and in doing so, we often invite stories of pain and failure as often as happiness and success. Essentially, we tend to encourage participants to share very intimate details of their lives and relationships, at the risk of them becoming vulnerable and exposed (see Sinding & Aronson, 2003).

Ultimately, I viewed the interview as an intrusion, albeit a voluntary or invited

intrusion, on the thoughts, feelings and events that constituted participants' lives. Yet, my research depended on these very things. My efforts to repair the potential interruption in people's lives and to give something of myself in the interview process began with rapport-building.

It goes without saying that qualitative research largely depends on a researcher's ability to build trust and to create trust and rapport with participants. This goal can be somewhat challenging in a cross-sectional study, using a one-time interview. I began my efforts at rapport-building, offering certain details of my life (i.e. I was a student and a granddaughter) to participants when they contacted me. I made sure to thank them for their interest, elucidate my personal and academic interest in knowing more about grandparent-adult grandchild relationships and explain exactly what agreeing to participate would entail for them. Rapport-building continued with each face-to-face meeting. High levels of trust were established very quickly. While not underestimating my research skills, I wondered why.

In hindsight, my personal circumstances, those of the participants and the participants' grand ties were all consequential to the interviewing process. Participants' knowledge of my student status, along with my identity as an adult granddaughter, in most cases forged instant connections and identifications. These identities put participants at ease and created an atmosphere of trust and familiarity.

Grandparents, most of whom had grandchildren in university, college or high school, drew parallels between their own grandchildren's lives and mine. They viewed me as a granddaughter. I would eventually come to learn that most grandparents just want to help their grandchildren in any way they can, particularly in the pursuit of education. It was only 'natural' for grandparents to want to help. Meanwhile, for the most part, grandchildren related to me as one of their peers, similar in age and life experience. They also identified with me as a fellow grandchild, someone who shared their interest in and appreciation for having grandparents as an adult. As I was viewed as one of them, grandchildren were just as willing as grandparents to help in any way possible.

Both generations were equally interested in making my personal family experiences an item on the research agenda. To a certain extent, I was very willing to share this information in order to offer something of myself in exchange for their willingness to divulge their own family experiences. It would not only be difficult, but also unwise to feign detachment from the subject and the participants' experiences. Rather than attempting to keep my personal experiences separate from the research in the interview process, I drew them in and narrowed the distance between participants, the researched and myself, the researcher (see Adler & Adler, 1997; Ribbens & Edwards, 1998), in order to better understand their experiences, as well as my own biases.

During the course of the interviews, grandparents and grandchildren shared very

detailed accounts of their experiences, recollections and reflections– generally good, but sometimes bad– on their family lives. As anticipated, given the nature of family life, I stirred up emotional topics and events involving discussions of death, widowhood, illness, suicide, divorce, remarriage, infertility, alcoholism, loneliness and neglect. These discussions often prompted emotional responses and break-downs, requiring improvisation and adjustment on my part. In many instances, this meant knowing when to back down from a line of questioning, knowing when to take a break from the questioning and when to stop altogether. With the grandparent generation, my improvisations often involved holding hands, sitting quietly, hugs or having tea and cookies. With both generations, it always involved my apologies and an expression of my appreciation for how difficult it must be to share such personal information and how appreciative I was that they had tried. I also sent all participants thank you notes in the hopes of affirming to them that their participation and their stories were important and much appreciated.

What is particularly telling about these experiences is that, with the exception of the death of a grandparent, spouse, parent or child, the grandparent-grandchild relationship rarely evoked visible sadness or accounts of negative events. If sadness was involved in the account of a ‘grand’ relationship, it was usually discussed in the context of becoming closer to their grandparent or grandchild, generally through widowhood or

the death of a parent or grandparent. All of the unhappy experiences, whether related to the telling of grand relationships or not, were important as features of family experience and the familial context within which grandparent-adult grandchild relationships were taking place.

For the most part, the grandparents and grandchildren involved in the study had fairly positive experiences and rarely, if ever, were these relationships the subject of negative feelings. There is little doubt that the nature of the sample, in many cases, led to data analyses yielding the best-case scenario for this particular intergenerational tie. Articulated by a thirty-two year old granddaughter, the following passage illustrates a representative response to the interview material:

I have really appreciated this interview because it has given me an opportunity to share some of these feelings. I don't know if I have articulated myself as well as I would have liked because it is really hard to. I just know that they are a big part of my life. I don't know how it came to be that, in that way. I just know that it is and I am probably going to phone them when you leave, just to say hello. I feel very lucky and very blessed.

In discussing the interview process, this granddaughter's emotional response and appreciativeness illustrate how personally meaningful grandparent-adult grandchild relationships can be.

This granddaughter's experience also reveals the challenge participants encountered when attempting to articulate the taken-for-granted dimensions of

relationships and everyday life and to put in words feelings or processes that "just are". Here again, my student and granddaughter identities were not unimportant. Recognizing that one of my aims in the interview process was to access the taken-for-granted dimensions of the grandparent-adult grandchild relationship, I was often empathetic, remarking, "I appreciate and know how difficult it is". This remark was generally followed by questions like, "And, why do you think that is?" or "Can you try to describe that for me?". Being a student also gave me licence to ask seemingly obvious questions, even if they seemed simple or the answers obvious to participants. Because I was a granddaughter, they often challenged me to reflect on my own experiences and interview questions. In the end I always led participants back to reflect on their own relationships, which they were more than happy to discuss.

Participants also viewed me as someone who, by showing interest in their relationships, had offered them a forum to express their thoughts and feelings about their grandparents or grandchildren. From their perspective, I offered a form of legitimacy. Therefore, when it came to discussions of their own experiences, participants' reactions to and interactions with the interview topics and questions were engaged and enthusiastic. Interviews varied in length, ranging from 1 to 4 hours. The average grandchild interview lasted approximately 1.5 hours and for grandparents, it was a little over 2 hours. The interviews totaled between 65 and 70 hours of tape and produced several hundreds of

pages in text.

### *Analyzing the Interviews*

As I was the only interviewer in the study, I was able to reflect on the interviews, gaining a general impression of patterns and irregularities as they unfolded. During the interview process, as well as after, I read and re-read the transcripts in search of meanings, themes and processes. Given the overwhelming amount of data, I elected to use QSR NUD\*IST, a qualitative analytic program, in order to store, manage and retrieve the data. This program was useful for searching the transcripts and generating thematic codes. I returned frequently to the hard copies of the manuscripts as I had also colour-coded the transcripts by hand. I found this practice facilitated reflection on the accounts in ways that use of the computer screen simply did not allow.

Several key themes emerged from the experiences of the grandparents and grandchildren. For the most part, these themes centered around the relationship being a unique family tie and, in many instances, a friendship. Without doubt, the relationship is one which is marked by considerable continuity over time, although age also brought about many changes in how grandparent and grandchildren relate to one another. Moreover, the accounts indicate that their experiences do support some dimensions of theories of individualization. Personal freedom, negotiation and increasing lifestyle

demands and options were pivotal to grandparents' and grandchildren's interpretations of their relationships and how they operate. As will be seen in chapters III and IV, both generations offered similar accounts of their relationships although they had different experiences within them. Overall, these grandparent and grandchild accounts attest to the positive implications increasing longevity can have on the lives of individual family members and for family life experiences.

#### **'GRAND' RELATIONSHIPS: A CANADIAN STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY GRANDPARENT-GRANDCHILD TIES**

To reiterate, this dissertation is a collection of Canadian research dedicated to understanding contemporary grandparenthood and grandparent-adult grandchild relationships. It is equally, if not more so, about the social, demographic and ideological changes influencing family lives and relationships. Each chapter approaches these themes in slightly different ways. To the extent that there is any overlap or repetition in the chapters, these occur to a certain degree in Chapters III and IV. There is minimal overlap in the literature reviews, but because the data are drawn from the same source, some repetition can be expected in the discussion of the study's theoretical and methodological approaches. Also, these two chapters draw on similar theoretical currents. In the end, however, each chapter explores a separate dimension of contemporary grandparent-grandchild relationships.

Chapter II, “The social and demographic contours of contemporary grandparenthood: mapping patterns in Canada and the United States”, is a demographic assessment of grandparenthood in North America. Drawing on the nationally representative data generated by samples from the General Social Surveys of Canada (1990 and 1995) as well as Szinovacz’s (1998b) study of grandparenthood in the United States, this chapter examines such demographic variables as the prevalence of grandparenthood, step-ties and adult grandchildren. It also attempts to establish estimates for the types of commitments (i.e. employment, child rearing, marriage) that currently influence grandparents’ lives. Further, it explores gender and age differences, finding Canadian patterns similar to those in the United States. Important differences between the two countries also emerge, which are largely attributable to the different population compositions.

Drawing on data from the qualitative study, Chapter III, “Dimensions of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships: From family ties to intergenerational friends”, examines the relationship from the perspective of both generations. This chapter is primarily concerned with understanding the meanings and social significance of the grandparent-adult grandchild relationship. As well, it examines the role of the relationship in the lives of each generation. It offers participants’ conceptualizations of the tie, suggesting that it is a unique family relationship and further that it is multi-

dimensional, dynamic and variable. This chapter explores how and why this is the case and makes efforts to link findings to previous research findings as well as the wider social context of late-modernity and processes of individualization.

Also based on the qualitative study, Chapter IV, “‘Grand’ expectations: the experiences of older grandparents and adult grandchildren”, asks whether there are normative behavioral expectations associated with the grandparent and adult grandchild roles. In other words, based on the experiences and accounts from both grandparents and grandchildren it explores what expectations each generation has of themselves and the other. In doing so, ‘participants’ accounts shed light on processes of intergenerational family life in contemporary times and also on the social construction of youth, old age and generations. They also attest to the negotiated, improvised nature of social life and social relationships. These findings are also interpreted within the context of wider social conditions, including individualization.

Finally, Chapter V, “Rethinking Grandparent-Grandchild Relationships and Family Ties”, offers a brief overview of the key findings of the dissertation work. The combination of demographic and qualitative research offers new information about the grandparent-grandchild tie at the macro and micro levels of analysis. The theoretical, methodological and substantive contributions to knowledge of the grandparent-grandchild relationship are explored. More generally, findings also shed scholarly light on family

relationships and personal ties in contemporary times. Therefore, this chapter examines the findings in light of the ways researchers typically portray family life and relationships. Ultimately, I suggest that the dissertation's findings call into question taken-for-granted assumptions about who and what the family is, the boundaries between friend and family, the separation between choice, obligation, and the nature of family roles and relationships. Finally, the chapter ends with a consideration of additional questions for future research in the areas of grandparent-grandchild relationships, as well as the study of family life in contemporary society.

**CHAPTER II:        The Social and Demographic Contours of Contemporary Grandparenthood: Mapping Patterns in Canada and the United States<sup>1</sup>**

*Abstract:*

Although there exists a growing body of literature dedicated to understanding the complexities of grandparenting, few researchers have documented the demographic patterns and social trends that encompass contemporary grandparenthood. Concomitantly, in instances where researchers have described such patterns, data are largely derived from studies profiling American populations. This paper, therefore, first establishes social patterns in Canadian grandparenthood and outlines the demographic context within which individuals participate in grandparent-grandchild relationships. Then, placing these findings in a North American context, this paper offers a comparative examination of grandparenthood in Canada and the United States. This research explores grandparents' rates of survival, the prevalence of grandparenthood, multiple generation families, step-grandparenthood and the availability of grandchildren. In addition, analysis considers rates of intergenerational cohabitation and surrogate parenting as well as grandparents' participation in additional social roles. Ultimately, while national similarities emerge, there are noteworthy differences between Canada and the United States including: the timing of grandparenthood; the prevalence of grandparenthood; multiple generation families; and rates of intergenerational cohabitation.

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Kemp, C. L. (2003). The social and demographic contours of contemporary grandparenthood: mapping patterns in Canada and the United States. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 34 (2), 187-212.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Research in the area of grandparenthood has been steadily growing for over two decades. Cumulatively, this work suggests that grandparenthood is a contingent and complex process which is largely shaped and mediated by influences including, but by no means exclusive to, individual, familial, socio-historical, economic and demographic factors (Szinovacz, 1998a;1998c). To date, researchers have made significant steps toward understanding grandparenthood from a micro-perspective, elucidating for example, the meaning, roles, types, styles and activities of grandparents (e.g. Bengtson 1985; Cunningham-Burley, 1986; Johnson, 1985) and exploring dimensions of intergenerational contact, as well as factors influencing grandparent-grandchild relationships (e.g. Hodgson, 1992; Hunter & Taylor, 1998; Roberto & Stroes, 1992). Although few researchers would dismiss the significant import of large-scale social and demographic patterns in explicating this intergenerational tie, parallel efforts to understand population-based trends in present-day grandparenthood have generally not been made (Aldous, 1995). Concomitantly, of the few studies that examine these patterns drawing on nationally representative samples, data are derived from American populations (see for example, Szinovacz, 1998b; Uhlenberg & Kirby, 1998). As a result, we possess surprisingly little information on the demographic contours of grandparenthood in Canada and generally lack comparative analysis with other nations.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is essentially twofold. The first aim is to establish the demographic patterns and social trends which characterize contemporary grandparenthood in Canada using nationally representative data from the 1990 and 1995 General Social Surveys of Canada. Patterns characterizing and influencing grandparenthood such as the prevalence of grandparenthood, multiple generation families, step-grandparenthood and the availability of grandparents and grandchildren are examined. Analysis also focuses on rates of intergenerational cohabitation and surrogate parenting by grandparents, as well as the intersection of grandparenthood and other family and work-related roles. The second aim of the paper—where methodologically possible—is to provide a comparative analysis of Canadian and American trends, thereby placing findings within a North American context. Szinovacz's (1998b) recent comprehensive profile of American grandparents serves as a comparative base.<sup>1</sup> First, however, I situate grandparenthood within a framework of contemporary social and demographic trends, beginning with a consideration of the family.

## **CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS**

### **Grandparenthood, Family Structure, Generational Overlap and the Supply of Grandchildren**

Canadian families are presently undergoing processes of transformation and

redefinition, generally assuming more heterogeneity in size and structure (Rosenthal, 2000). Increasing life expectancy, decreasing fertility, changing gender roles, patterns of work and of marriage and divorce, all join to influence family structure (Beaujot, 2000; Milan, 2000) and consequently, grandparenthood. Accordingly, family structure impinges on the experience of grandparenthood defining not only if, who and when, but also under what circumstances individuals enter into grandparent-grandchild relationships.

In order to better comprehend the emerging diversity characterizing present-day families, researchers have conceptualized various multi-generational family types including: “beanpole”; “age condensed”; “age gapped”; “truncated”; and “step” or “reconstituted” families (Bengtson, Rosenthal & Burton, 1990; George & Gold, 1991). Each family type holds unique implications for grandparenthood. The “beanpole” family is characterized by “verticalization” or an increase in the number of generations and a decrease in the number of members (Bengtson, Rosenthal & Burton, 1990). This “long and lean” family contains multiple generations, but family members are few[er] in number. Meanwhile, in “truncated” families a lineage ends due to childlessness and therefore, grandchildlessness ensues. “Age condensed” and “age gapped” refer to the timing of child birth and hence, age differences between grandparents and grandchildren; the former family type occurs in instances of several adjacent generations experiencing

childbearing early, the latter when childbirth is experienced late. Finally, “step” or “reconstituted” families are formed by a remarriage involving one or more children from a previous union and potentially extend the grandparent-grandchild relationship into the ‘step’ realm.

In 1995, the step family represented an estimated 10 per cent of all Canadian families with children (Statistics Canada, 1996), but the actual prevalence of the “beanpole”, “age condensed”, “age gapped”, and “truncated” multiple generational families types has not been empirically demonstrated (Uhlenberg, 1993). Despite this fact, the “beanpole” family is frequently speculated to be among the most prevalent multiple generational family type. Rossi & Rossi (1990) have countered that estimates of families with four and five generations are likely over-exaggerated.

Regardless of such debate, the increasing likelihood of “generational overlap” as a result of escalating longevity and life expectancy is widely acknowledged (Rosenthal, 2000). More individuals will live to experience grandparenthood and maintain the grandparent role for a longer time and witness their grandchildren grow into adults (Hodgson, 1992, 1998; Kennedy, 1990). Grandchildren too, will have the opportunity to know more grandparents longer. A recent estimate suggests that in North America, over 90% of ten year old children and three quarters of twenty-year-olds will have at least one living grandparent (McPherson, 1998).

Grandparents are surviving longer, but are projected to have fewer grandchildren compared to the past. Women's increased labor force participation, the availability of contraception and patterns of marital dissolution during the twentieth century have all contributed to declining birth rates in Canada (Milan, 2000) and other Western countries. Such declines have meant fewer children and consequently, fewer grandchildren for grandparents. In a recent U.S. study, Uhlenberg & Kirby (1998) observed a decrease in the supply of grandchildren over the course of the last one hundred years. They estimated that women who reached old age in the 1990s could expect to have less than six grandchildren and predicted such a downward trend to persist into the twenty-first century until reaching an average of approximately four grandchildren.

### **Grandparenthood and the Restructured Life Course**

Grandparenthood unfolds within boundaries set by the structure and content of the life course. The timing and sequencing of life events, not to mention the intersection of grandparenthood with family and work-related roles, combine to impact how individuals ultimately experience grandparenthood and how such experiences change over time. Interestingly, there is little empirical evidence to suggest that the timing of grandparenthood itself has changed drastically over the course of the past century (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986). U.S. estimates suggest that grandparenthood typically

begins in mid-life (Sprey & Matthews, 1982). Likewise, the findings of a Canadian study drawing on a sample of women born between 1905 and 1929, reported the transition to grandmotherhood as typically occurring around age fifty (Gee, 1991).

Dramatic changes to the timing and sequencing of events other than grandparenthood have altered the life course, particularly for women (Hagestad, 1988). Shifting patterns in childbearing, life expectancy and marital status as well as employment and retirement have, in a sense, restructured the life course in several ways that directly or indirectly influence grandparenthood. First, declining fertility rates are accompanied by overall declines in the span of years spent actively parenting. This trend renders active parenthood and grandparenthood distinct phases of the life course as child rearing is generally completed at the onset of grandparenthood. Over time and as a result of shifting fertility patterns, the overlap between grandparenthood and active parenting has continued to become less likely (Uhlenberg & Kirby, 1998). In Gee's (1991) study, slightly less than half of the women reported having dependent children at the onset of grandmotherhood. This number is expected to decrease with future cohorts.

The second implication of a restructured life course for grandparenthood is brought about by increasing life expectancy as well as changing marriage patterns. As a result of these trends, grandparenthood is more likely to precede, rather than follow, widow[er]hood in the sequencing of life events. In Gee's (1991) study, nearly three

quarters of the grandmothers were married. Such a finding suggests that the transition to grandparenthood is often entered into as a couple. However, as patterns of marriage and marital dissolution<sup>2</sup> are not constant, this number is expected to fluctuate with cohorts over time. Ultimately, it appears that among those whose marriages do not end due to separation or divorce, the transition to grandparenthood will typically occur prior to the death of a spouse. As women live longer and marry at younger ages relative to men (Statistics Canada, 2001), however, it is likely that a greater number of grandfathers will be married compared to grandmothers.

Women's massive entry into the paid labor force has brought about a third implication for grandparenthood, particularly for grandmothers. While employment and grandparenthood have typically intersected for men, women's growing labor force participation increases the likelihood that grandmothers will also have work-related roles. This, is of course, more true for younger grandparents and for those who must work in their later years due to financial necessity. In Gee's (1991) study, slightly less than half of the women reported working at the time of becoming a grandmother. This figure is likely to rise with successive future cohorts.

Related to the final implication of a restructured life course, is the possibility that the overlapping of grandparent and employment-related roles will be influenced by trends in retirement and early retirement. The institutionalization of retirement as a distinct

phase of life impacts the intersection of work and grandparenthood, particularly for men and increasingly for women (offsetting the trend towards employment). At the beginning of the twentieth century, retirement was not institutionalized, but at its close, it was not an uncommon experience among those aged 65 and over (Uhlenberg, 1992). Ideally, the transformation of retirement into a distinct phase of life, paired with declines in average retirement ages (Guillemard & Rein, 1993; Phillipson, 1998) could translate into new possibilities for grandparent-grandchild relationships.

### **Grandparenthood & Household Composition**

Geographic proximity is routinely noted as contributing to the quality and quantity of interactions between grandparents and their grandchildren (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1985, 1986; Gladstone, 1987; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Not surprisingly, those grandparents and grandchildren who live further from one another are generally found to have less contact than those who live closer (Hodgson, 1992). As geographic proximity impinges on intergenerational relationships, it follows that grandparent-grandchild coresidence, with or without the middle generation, represents the potential for developing qualitatively distinct intergenerational bonds.

Canadian rates of grandparent-grandchild cohabitation have not been widely publicized. Conversely, in the U.S. grandparent-grandchild coresidence and child rearing

has garnered considerable attention sparked by the suggestion that grandparents are raising their grandchildren in unprecedented and growing numbers (e.g. Cox, 2000; Hayslip & Goldberg-Glen, 2000). Despite alarmist demographics, Uhlenberg & Kirby (1998) have demonstrated that three generations typically do not reside in the same household. Further, it is even less likely, with the exception of Black families, that grandparents and grandchildren live together without the middle generation. In Black families, children are more likely to live alone with a grandparent or with one parent and a grandparent compared to children in White families (Uhlenberg & Kirby, 1998). Thus, it is doubtful that grandparent-grandchild coresidence among Canadians will be a common living arrangement and it is even more improbable that a sizeable percentage of grandparents will act as surrogate parents to their grandchildren.

### **AMERICAN FINDINGS AND CANADIAN PREDICTIONS**

In a recent U.S. study based on data from the National Survey of Families and Households (Wave 2-conducted between 1992 and 1994), Szinovacz (1998b) sketched a demographic profile of contemporary American grandparenthood. Similar to the present paper, her analysis included: the prevalence, survival and timing of grandparenthood; grandparents' roles; divorce; and surrogate parenting among grandparents as well as household extension. Szinovacz also examined variations in grandparenthood according

to gender, race (Black, Hispanic, white) and where appropriate, age. Specific details of the findings appear later in this paper, however, the study's more general conclusions can be incorporated into predictions regarding the state of grandparenthood in Canada.

Based on the American experience, it is anticipated that grandparenthood in Canada will be relatively common among older members of the population with children, particularly among those aged 65 and over. Rates of grandparent survival will be related to the age of the grandchild, as well as the gender and lineage of the grandparent. Multiple generation families containing three generations will be relatively common. Further, it is anticipated that multi-generational cohabitation and surrogate parenting among Canadian grandparents will be very rare while a substantial minority will experience step-grandparent-grandchild relationships. It is also plausible that many Canadian grandparents will have work and/or other family related roles including spouse, adult-child and in some instances, active parent. The extent to which this is true, however, will be linked to both the gender and age of the grandparent.

Although general similarities between the two countries are predicted, Canadian and American populations differ in important ways which may lead to differences related to grandparenthood. Given Canada's lower birth rate (in recent years), greater life expectancy and dissimilar racial composition (lower percentages of Black and Hispanic individuals) compared to the United States (CIA, 2000), national differences among

grandparents are anticipated. For example, it is likely that the supply of Canadian grandchildren will be lower and the supply of Canadian grandparents (based on survival) will higher than in the United States.

## **METHODS**

### **Data Source(s) and Sample(s)**

The data for this study were derived from Statistics Canada's 1990 and 1995 General Social Surveys of Canada (GSS)-Cycle 5, Family and Friends and Cycle 10, Family, respectively. For both cycles, the target population was comprised of all persons aged 15 and over living in a private household in one of the 10 provinces.<sup>3</sup> The samples were selected using random digit dialing and the surveys were administered by telephone. The GSS 1990 ( $n=13,495$ ) focused on respondents' family and friends. Certain core questions were repeated again in the 1995 survey ( $n=10,749$ ), but the latter survey focused mainly on the respondents' family, marital history, children, family origins and fertility intentions. Prior to analyzing each survey, both the 1990 and 1995 samples were weighted using the population weights provided by Statistics Canada. Thus, the sample and subsequent findings can be considered nationally representative and generalizable to the larger Canadian population.

As previously stated, American data are drawn from Szinovacz's (1998b) research

on contemporary grandparenthood. Her study relied on responses from the U.S. National Survey of Families and Households, Wave 2, collected between 1992 and 1994 (n=10,008). The U.S. data described in the present paper were weighted by Szinovacz and are representative of the American population (1998b:41).

### **Measures**

Measures for this study relied on responses from both the 1990 and 1995 surveys and include: the prevalence of grandparenthood, multiple generation families and step-grandparenthood; the availability of grandparents and grandchildren; rates of intergenerational coresidence and surrogate parenting; and the intersection of grandparenthood with work and family-related roles. Wherever possible, data were drawn from the most recent survey. Data from the 1990 survey were used if it was neither possible to address the research question directly nor feasible to make inferences based on the responses of the middle generation (or it was uninformative to do so). For comparative purposes, in several instances measures were modeled after those in Szinovacz's (1998b) study.

The prevalence of grandparenthood was measured by the percentage of respondents who identified having one or more grandchildren in the 1995 survey. Such self-reports allow grandparents to define 'grandparenthood' in the sense that

grandchildren could refer to any combination of biological, adopted, step or 'fictive'<sup>4</sup> grandchildren. Thus, the prevalence of grandparenthood was measured by the overall percentage of the population who identified themselves as a grandparent. Likewise, the supply of grandchildren was estimated using the actual number of grandchildren as reported by respondents. In the 1995 survey, the coding for the number of grandchildren ranged from none to fifteen or more. Therefore, for those grandparents who reported having fifteen or more grandchildren (4.5%), this number potentially underestimates the actual number of grandchildren. Consequently, the mean number of grandchildren per grandparent is slightly underestimated. Both the prevalence and supply of grandchildren measures were examined according to age group and gender. In order to facilitate comparison with Szinovacz's findings, prevalence was measured among those over the age of twenty.

Following Szinovacz's study, measures for multiple generation families were constructed using respondents' reports of having at least one living parent, having one or more children and/or having at least one grandchild. Respondents who answered affirmatively to any combination totaling two of these family conditions were categorized as belonging to three generation families. In cases where the combination totaled three, respondents were classified as members of a four generation family. For comparative purposes, analysis of multiple generation families emulates Szinovacz and is based on

reports of respondents 35 and over in the 1995 survey and explores gender and age differences.

In the 1990 survey, respondents were asked directly about the survival of their grandparents, specifically whether they were presently living (or not) by gender and lineage. Responses to these questions were used to evaluate the percentages of grandparents' rates of survival in adult-grandchildren's lives. Survival of respondents' maternal grandmother and grandfather, as well as their paternal grandmother and grandfather were examined separately. The survival/supply of grandparents was also measured using the total number of living grandparents and represents the sum of surviving grandparents, ranging from no living grandparents to a maximum of four living grandparents. Percentage results measuring grandparents' rates of survival are displayed according to the adult-grandchild's age group.

Given that neither survey cycle asked grandparents to report the ages of their grandchildren or their grandchildren's dates of birth, establishing the timing of the onset of grandparenthood relied on data provided by the middle generation in the 1995 survey. All respondents with children were asked to provide the age of each child. In instances where children were deceased dates of birth and death were not recorded. Consequently deceased children were not included in the analysis. Information from each respondent was collected on the year of birth of each parent as well as, if applicable, the year of

death. Working backwards from the date the survey was collected and the age of each child, it was possible to establish a year of birth for grandchildren and determine the percentage of grandparents living at the time of the births of the first and last born child (youngest at the time of the survey). If the grandparent was living at the time of the survey or, if the grandparent's year of death was after the birth of the child, the grandparent's age at the time of each child's birth was calculated. From this measure, it was possible to establish the mean age at the birth of first and latest child for the middle-generation child's mother and father for the entire cohort and by gender. The mean age of the parents at the birth of the middle-generation child represents the mean age at the onset of grandparenthood. The measure assumes that the middle generation child's first born is also the first grandchild; that is not always the case, but the measure remains the best possible estimate of timing given the limitations of the data.

Due to the manner in which the questions were posed, step-grandparenthood could not be established directly, but only inferred indirectly based on reports provided by the middle and older generations in the 1995 survey. Responses to the question "How many step-children have you ever raised?" form the basis of estimating step-grandparenthood. Owing to the fact that step-relations can occur through the actions of various generations, the prevalence of step-grandparenthood was examined on two levels. The first step-grandparenthood measurement relied on respondents aged 35 to 55

examining step-parenthood among the entire cohort as well as those with at least one living parent at the time of the survey. If respondents reported raising at least one step-child, their parent was considered a step-grandparent. Prevalence of this form of step-grandparenthood was measured by the number of individuals age 35 to 55 with at least one living parent and who reported ever raising a step-children. Second, those respondents who self-identified as grandparents were analyzed separately to determine the prevalence of raising step-children. Assuming that children of the step-child generation would be step-grandchildren, the prevalence of step-grandparenthood was measured by the percentage of grandparents who ever raised step-children. Admittedly, there are many methodological flaws with these measurements including for example, the possibility of overlap between the sample aged 35 to 55 and the grandparent sample, the possibility that step-children do not have children and the fact that many step-parents never assume the responsibility of raising their step-children. Overall, the estimates of step-grandparenthood should be regarded as low and generating a somewhat crude, but the best approximation of the Canadian situation given the GSS data.

While the GSS 1995 asked respondents if they had a grandparent living within the household, questions did not specifically address household composition. In the 1990 survey, however, respondents were asked to identify their living situation and could, among other options, identify their household as composed of three-generations or

composed of grandparent(s) and grandchild(ren) without the presence of the middle generation. In the first instance, those respondents who stated that their household type was comprised of three-generations were classified as living in a three-generation household. In the second instance, rates of surrogate parenting on the part of the grandparent were inferred based on the number of respondents reporting that their household, at the time of the survey, was composed of grandparents and grandchildren only. It should be noted that this form of co-residency does not necessarily indicate that the grandparent is acting as a surrogate parent; the measure should be regarded, however, as the best available estimate. Analysis examined the entire population, the grandparent population and younger grandparents (<65) and older grandparents (>64) separately and considered gender differences.

The GSS 1995 probed various areas of the respondents' lives including work and family. In order to establish the degree to which grandparenthood intersects with other roles, responses made by those who self-identify as a grandparent were examined. Again, for comparative purposes, measures are similar to those created by Szinovacz (1998b). For instance grandparents worked full-time if they reported working 30 hours per week or more on a regular basis. Respondents were considered married if they reported being married or living in a common-law relationship. Those grandparents with both children under 19 and children at home were considered to be active parents. Reports of having at

least one living parent established the prevalence of the adult-child role. In order to assess the total number of roles beyond grandparenthood, these roles (employee, spouse, active parent, adult child) were each valued at one and summed totaling to a maximum value of four roles. Analysis examined grandparents under age 65 and those 65 and over separately and investigated variation between men and women.

## **RESULTS**

### **Prevalence of Grandparenthood, Supply of Grandchildren and Multiple Generation**

#### **Families**

As Table 1 suggests, grandparenthood is a common experience in Canada. Overall, slightly more than one quarter of community dwelling Canadians over the age of 20 have grandchildren. A higher percentage of women, 31% compared to 22% of men identify themselves as grandparents. Not surprisingly, the percentage of grandparents in the over-twenty population increases as age group increases. Early onset or “off-time” grandparenthood experienced before the age of 40 is extremely rare among the younger cohorts. Less than 1% of this age group are grandparents. In contrast, a sizeable majority of those age 65 and over have grandchildren. In every age group, there are significant gender differences as more women than men experience grandparenthood, reflecting the fact that women marry at a younger age than men and also live longer.

Table 1. Prevalence of Grandparenthood and Mean Number of Grandchildren					
	All	Male	Female	Sig.	n
Percentage of All Respondents Who Are Grandparents					
	26.7	22.4	31.0	p<.0001	9647
Age Group of Respondents					
21 to 39	0.4	0.1	0.6	p<.0001	4227
40 to 54	20.2	15.8	24.6		2750
55 to 64	69.7	61.9	77.3		1144
65 and over	79.4	74.4	83.2		1526
Percentage of Parent Respondents Who Are Grandparents					
All Ages	36.3	31.8	40.2	p<.0001	7117
Age Group of Respondents					
21 to 39	0.6	0.3	0.9	p<.0001	2344
40 to 54	23.1	18.2	27.9		2406
55 to 64	77.1	68.5	85.4		1034
65 and over	90.9	86.1	94.4		1333
Mean Number of Grandchildren					
All Grandparents	4.93	4.58	5.18	p<.0001	7117
Age Group					
21 to 39	1.24	1.38	1.19	p<.0001	2344
40 to 54	2.52	2.28	2.68		2406
55 to 64	4.67	4.32	4.94		1034
65 and over	6.26	5.82	6.56		1333
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1995					

In narrowing the analysis to examine rates of grandparenthood among respondents

over twenty years of age with birth, adopted and/or step children (and therefore, a greater potential for grandparenthood), the prevalence of grandparenthood increases. The gender and age patterns observed in the larger population persist within this smaller population. Overall, between one-third and two-fifths of respondents twenty-one and over with children are grandparents. Being a grandparent between the ages of 21 and 39 is again extremely rare, experienced by less than 1% of this group. In fact, grandparenthood does not become common until reaching the age group of 55 to 64, where the majority of men and women are grandparents. Also noteworthy, for those parents aged 65 and over, grandparenthood is almost universal, particularly among women. In this age category, 86% of men and 94% of women are grandparents.

The bottom panel of Table 1 shows that Canadian grandparents have approximately 5 grandchildren, on average. As expected, the number of grandchildren is directly and positively correlated to the age group of the grandparent. And, with the exception of the youngest age group, women have a higher number of grandchildren compared to men. Overall, the mean number of grandchildren per grandfather is slightly lower (4.58) than per grandmother (5.18).

Table 2 displays the prevalence of multiple generation families. Over three quarters of people aged thirty-five and over belong to three generation families; approximately one-tenth are members of four generation families. Slightly lower

percentages of individuals aged 45 to 54 (72.4%) and higher percentages of those aged 65 and over (80.9%) belong to three generation families. Roughly 20% of those aged 45 to

Table 2. Percentage of Respondents Age 35 and Over in Multiple Generation Families

	All	Male	Female	Sig.	n
Percentage of Respondents Age 35 and Over Who are Members of Three Generation Families					
	76.7	73.5	79.6	p<.0001	6458
Age Group of Respondent					
35 to 44	76.7	75.2	78.2	p<.0001	2186
45 to 54	72.4	69.5	75.3		1651
55 to 64	77.2	73.3	81.9		1116
65 and over	80.9	76.7	84.0		1505
Percentage of Respondents Age 35 and Over Who are Members of Four Generation Families					
	10.5	9.1	12.2	p<.0001	6314
Age Group of Respondent					
35 to 44	3.4	1.6	5.1	p<.0001	2177
45 to 54	17.6	15.4	19.7		1623
55 to 64	22.7	19.9	25.4		1073
65 and over	4.4	3.4	5.3		1444

*Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1995*

64 and less than 5% in the 35 to 44 and 65 and over age groups are members of a four generation families. Overall, higher percentages of women than men aged 35 and over are three and four generation family members. This pattern is evident across each age group.

### **Adult Grandchildren and Their Grandparents**

Table 3 presents the supply of living grandparents among Canadians. Among the entire 1990 sample, roughly 30% of the population aged 15 and over had one or more grandparent living at the time of the survey. Not surprisingly, there exists a significant and positive correlation between age group and the number of living grandparents.

While the majority of grandchildren have experienced the loss of a least one grandparent by age 15, those between the ages of 15 and 17 are three times more likely to have all four grandparents living than to have none living at all. An overwhelming majority of grandchildren aged 15 to 19 have at least one living grandparent. The results support the high prevalence of adult-grandchildren: close to 70% of Canadians in their twenties and one-third of those in their thirties have at least one living grandparent. Very few Canadians aged 40 and over have living grandparents, but among those who do, it is most likely a maternal grandmother.

Survival clearly favors grandmothers and the maternal lineage: the highest percentages are maternal grandmothers followed by paternal grandmothers, maternal grandfathers and paternal grandfathers. The same pattern holds for the various age groups of grandchildren. Given that life expectancy is increasing, rates of grandparent survival are likely to rise over time (unless the age at the transition to parenthood increases to such an extent, countering this projected trend).

Table 3. Supply of Living Grandparents

Percentage of Living Grandparents by Age of Grandchild and Gender & Lineage of Grandparent

	Maternal Grandmother Alive	Maternal Grandfather Alive	Paternal Grandmother Alive	Paternal Grandfather Alive	Sig.	n
All Ages	21.9	10.9	16.9	7.9	<.0001	13 495
Age Groups						
15 to 17	73.4	51.9	61.6	39.8	<.0001	697
18 to 19	69.2	47.2	61.9	31.6	<.0001	518
20 to 29	48.2	22.9	37.7	17.5	<.0001	2860
30 to 39	20.1	6.3	13.3	3.9	<.0001	2949
40 to 49	4.4	0.9	2.6	0.4	<.0001	2278
50+	0.2	--	--	--	<.0001	4193

Percentage of Grandchildren with Living Grandparents by Age Group of Grandchild and Number of Grandparent

	0	1	2	3	4	Sig.
All Ages	68.9	14.6	9.1	4.9	2.5	<.0001
Age Groups						
15 to 17	6.3	22.1	28.9	23.7	19.0	<.0001
18 to 19	7.6	22.5	34.6	23.3	12.0	<.0001
20 to 29	32.1	30.4	21.2	11.6	4.6	<.0001
30 to 39	67.8	22.9	7.5	1.2	0.4	<.0001
40 to 49	92.7	6.6	0.6	—	0.1	<.0001
50+	99.7	0.3	—	—	—	<.0001

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey of Canada 1990

### **The Onset of Grandparenthood**

As expected, most Canadians survive to experience grandparenthood (results not shown). Over 93% of middle generation Canadians had their mothers' living and 85% had their fathers' living at the time of the birth of the first child. The majority of grandparents were also living at the time that middle generations' youngest children (at the time of the survey) were born. Given that mothers tend to be younger than fathers, a greater percentage of women have living parents at the time their eldest and youngest children are born. Once again, survival not only favors women, but also maternal lineages.

Table 4. Grandparenthood Timing (Mean Ages) in Canada and the United States\*  
*Based on Reports from Middle Generation Respondents with Children*

<i>Measure (in years)**</i>	<i>Canada</i>			<i>United States</i>		
	All	Male	Female	All	Male	Female
Mother's Age:						
Birth First Child	53.6	54.9	52.5	45.2	46.8	44.0
Birth Latest Child	58.0	59.2	57.1	51.9	53.3	50.8
Father's Age:						
Birth of First Child	56.6	57.9	55.6	48.1	49.6	47.0
Birth of Latest Child	60.7	61.6	60.0	54.4	55.5	53.4

*Sources: Canadian: General Social Survey, 1995; American: Szinovacz, 1998.*

\*Analysis only draws on [grandparents] parents who were living at the time of the birth and only children who were living at the time of the survey \*\*Results are statistically significant

As Table 4 illustrates, among those grandparents who were living at the time of the birth of their first grandchild, the transition to grandparenthood in Canada is typically

experienced in mid-to-late fifties. Based on responses from the middle-generation, their parents' mean age at the onset of grandmotherhood is 53.6 years and grandfatherhood is 56.6. Likely reflecting the women's tendency to marry older men, women's parents are generally younger and experience the onset of grandparenthood earlier relative to men's parents.

### **Step-Parenthood and Step-Grandparenthood**

Assuming that the population aged 35 to 55 would be more apt to have married, had children, experienced marital dissolution and remarriage than other cohorts, initial analysis focused solely on this group. Table 5 indicates that less than 5% of individuals in this group have ever raised a step-child. Among those with one or more parents living, just over 6% have raised a step-child thereby rendering their parents step-grandparents. Compared to women, two times as many men aged 35 to 55 with a living parent have ever raised a step-child.

Table 5. Step-Families					
Percentage of Respondents Who Raised					
One or More Step-Children	All	Male	Female	Sig.	n=
Respondents Aged 35 to 55	4.6	6.0	3.2	<.0001	10736
Respondents Aged 35 to 55	4.8	5.8	3.3	<.0001	7391
with 1 or both living parent(s)					
Respondents who are Grandparents	6.3	8.8	4.6	<.0001	2580
Respondents who are Grandparents	6.8	11.2	3.9	<.001	517
with 1 or both living parent(s)					
<i>Source: Statistics Canada, 1995</i>					

It is, of course, possible for step-parents to become step-grandparents through the family formations of their step-children. Accordingly, analysis also considered step-parenthood among self-defined grandparents. Among grandparents, approximately 6% have ever raised a step-child and roughly 7% of grandparents with at least one living parent have ever raised a step-child. These figures suggest the potential for step-grandparents-grandchild relationships, but given that many step-parents do not raise their step-children these approximations are not wholly accurate. Again, men have more step-relations compared to women; this finding is a reflection of the fact that greater percentages of men remarry than women.

It is important to note, however, that there are likely grandparents in the 35 to 55 age group and as such, the groups are not mutually exclusive. Results should be interpreted as such. It does appear that while step-grandparent-grandchild relations are not the norm, when percentages are translated into actual members of the population, a sizable number of individuals and families experience this 'step-relation'.

### **Household Composition**

As shown in Table 6, grandparent-grandchild co-residence is not a typical experience for Canadians. Three generation households are fairly uncommon. Only 2.5% of all Canadians aged 15 and over and 3% of all Canadian grandparents reside in a

three-generation household. Meanwhile, grandparent-grandchild households with the middle generation absent are even more rare. Less than half a percent of the entire

Table 6. Percentages of Grandparent-Grandchild Co-residence

	All	Male	Female	Sig.	n
Percentage of All Respondents					
Grandparent/grandchild household	0.3	0.2	0.4	<.0001	13 495
Three generation household	2.5	2.1	2.9		
Percentage of All Grandparents					
Grandparent/grandchild household	0.6	0.5	0.7	<.0001	3099
Three generation household	3.0	1.5	4.1		
Percentage of Grandparents $\leq 64$					
Grandparent/grandchild household	0.5	0.4	0.6	<.0001	1708
Three generation household	2.7	1.0	3.9		
Percentage of Grandparents $\geq 65$					
Grandparent/grandchild household	0.8	0.7	0.9	<.0001	1391
Three generation household	3.5	2.1	4.4		
<i>Statistics Canada, General Social Survey 1990</i>					

population and fewer than 1% of all grandparents experience this living arrangement.

Therefore, it appears that surrogate parenting among grandparents is uncommon.

Variations according to age and gender indicate that greater percentages of older grandparents relative to younger grandparents and women, relative to men, experience grandparent-grandchild co-residence, either with or without the middle generation in the household.

### **Intersection of Grandparenthood with other Roles**

Results appearing in Table 7 indicate that grandparenthood intersects with other family and work-related roles and further, that there are variations according to gender and age group. Among all grandparents, slightly less than one-third reported being employed in a full-time capacity. Roughly three-quarters were married or living in a common-law relationship. Approximately 5% of Canadian grandparents have children under the age of 19 living in the household full-time. Slightly more than one-quarter of this group have one or both parents living at the time of the survey. Not surprisingly, fewer grandmothers are employed full-time, married or in a common-law union and have dependent children under 19 and children living in the household full-time when compared to grandfathers. Although, slightly higher percentages of women have at least one parent living, this gender difference was not statistically significant. None of the work and family-related roles intersect with grandparenthood for 29.2% of Canadian grandmothers and 7.9% of Canadian grandfathers.

When analysis was narrowed to compare grandparents aged 64 and under and those 65 and over separately, considerable differences emerged. Among the younger group, slightly more than half are employed full-time (70% of men and 40% of women) as compared to less than 5% (of 8% of men and only 2% of women) in the older age group. The majority of younger grandparents are married, but gender differences exist:

Table 7. Grandparents' Multiple Roles

	All	Males	Females	Sig.	n
<b>Roles Among All Grandparents</b>					
Working full-time	30.2	41.6	22.2	<.0001	2439
Married/Common-law	71.9	87.2	61.2	<.0001	2580
Children in hhd & <19	5.2	7.1	3.9	<.0001	2580
At least 1 parent alive	27.3	26.5	27.9	>.05	2442
*Total Number of Roles					
0	20.4	7.9	29.2	<.0001	
1	42.2	47.0	38.9		
2	22.7	24.2	21.6		
3	12.2	16.9	8.8		
4	2.5	4.0	1.5		
<b>Roles Among Grandparents ≤64</b>					
Working Full-time	52.9	70.1	40.3	<.0001	1297
Married/Common-law	81.1	90.3	74.7	<.0001	1367
Children in house & >19	9.5	12.5	7.4	<.01	1368
At least 1 parent alive	46.6	45.9	47.0	>.05	1293
Total Number of Roles					
0	6.4	2.3	9.2	<.0001	
1	30.0	23.2	35.0		
2	36.3	35.7	36.8		
3	22.6	31.4	16.2		
4	4.7	7.4	2.8		
<b>Roles Among Grandparents ≥65</b>					
Working full-time	4.5	7.8	2.2	<.0001	1142
Married/Common-law	61.4	83.8	46.3	<.0001	1211
Children in house & <19	0.3	0.8	0.0	<.05	1212
At least 1 parent alive	5.6	4.5	6.3	>.05	1149
Total Number of Roles					
0	36.4	14.4	51.6	<.0001	
1	56.1	74.5	43.3		
2	4.7	11.0	4.7		
3	0.3	0.0	0.5		

*General Social Survey of Canada, 1995* \* Total number of roles = marital status + work status + children in house hold and children under 19 + parent living

90% of younger grandfathers and only 75% of younger grandmothers have a spouse.

Among the older group 61% are in a marital union and the gender differences are larger: approximately 84% of older grandfathers and less than 50% of older grandmothers have a spouse. While about 10% of younger grandparents have dependent children living in the household, among those 65 and over that is rare. In fact, it is virtually a non-occurrence for older grandmothers. And, while close to half of all younger Canadian grandparents have at least one parent living, this figure drops to about 5% among the older grandparent population. Again, gender differences were not found to be statistically significant. Overall, in Canada, younger grandparents have more roles than older grandparents and grandfathers have more roles than grandmothers.

## **GRANDPARENTING IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES**

Having established a social and demographic snapshot of contemporary Canadian grandparenthood, I now turn to comparisons with the findings of Szinovacz's (1998b) American study<sup>5</sup>. Thus, what follows below is a comparative analysis of the two nations examining: the prevalence of grandparenthood and multiple generation families; the supply of grandchildren and survival of grandparents; the timing of grandparenthood and the intersection of work and family-related roles with grandparenthood; as well as rates of intergenerational cohabitation and step-grandparents. The comparisons suggest that there

are similarities and differences— ranging from subtle to stark— between Canada and the United States.

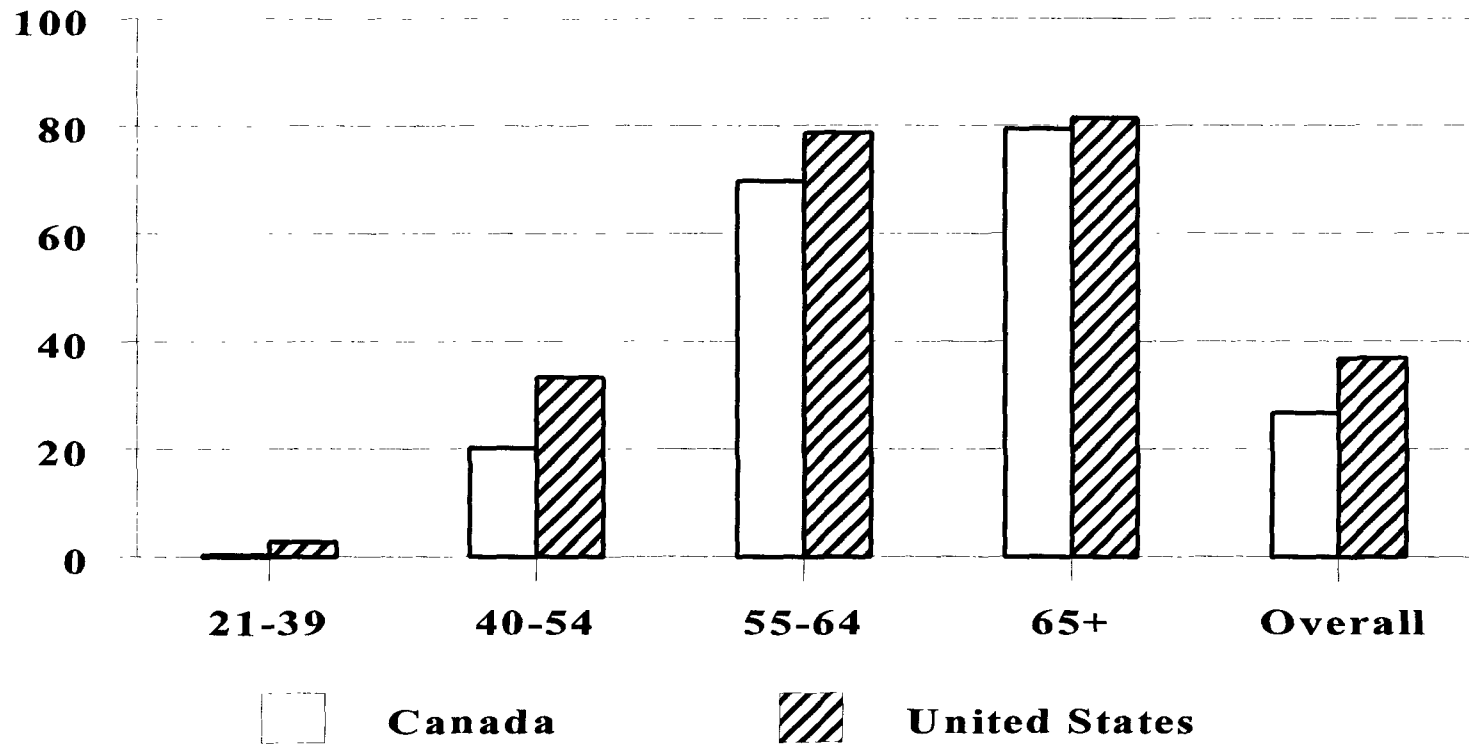
### **The Prevalence of Grandparenthood in Canada and the United States**

Although grandparenthood is common among Canadians aged 65 and over, particularly those with children, grandparenthood is more prevalent among Americans across all age groups and both gender categories. Of particular interest is the fact that higher percentages of the younger age groups are grandparents in the United States. For instance, as shown in Figure 1, roughly 3% of those aged 21 to 39 in the U.S. and 33% of those 40 to 54 report having grandchildren, compared to 0.4% and 20% in Canada. When American findings are broken down by race and gender, a greater percentage of women (than men) and of the Black population (than Hispanic or White) are grandparents at younger ages. In the United States, these populations are also more likely to experience the early (under age 40) onset of grandparenthood. With Blacks making up a substantially lower proportion of the Canadian population, it is possible that Canada's different racial composition accounts for some of the difference in the prevalence of grandparenthood, particularly in the younger age categories.

Interestingly, roughly equal percentages of those aged 35 and over belong to three generation families, 76.7 % in Canada and 80.0% in the United States. However, four

**Figure 1. Prevalence of Grandparenthood Among Respondents 20+ (%) by Age**

*Sources: Canadian: General Social Survey, 1995; American: Szinovacz, 1998b*



generation families are less common for Canadians 35 and over (10.5%) than Americans (16.1%), for Canadian women (12.2% versus 17.8%) and for Canadian men (9.1% versus 14.2%). These differences are likely due to the differences in the timing of grandparenthood and, in particular, the higher proportion in the United States that experience grandparenthood “off-time” through early onset.

### **The Supply of Grandchildren in Canada and the United States**

While Canadian grandparents have, on average, approximately 5 grandchildren (see Table 1), their Americans counterparts are estimated to have an average of 5.5 grandchildren. This difference is due, in part, to the coding of the Canadian GSS data, which did not count the actual number of grandchildren beyond 15 (only 4.5% had 15 or more). However, different birth rates and immigration patterns between Canada and the United States (Statistics Canada, 2001) presumably explain the remaining difference in the supply of grandchildren. Just as in Canada, women in the United States have more grandchildren compared to men.

### **The Survival of Grandparents in Canada and the United States**

When examined by age group, grandparents' gender and lineage, patterns of grandparent survival in Canada and the United States, are relatively similar.<sup>6</sup> For instance,

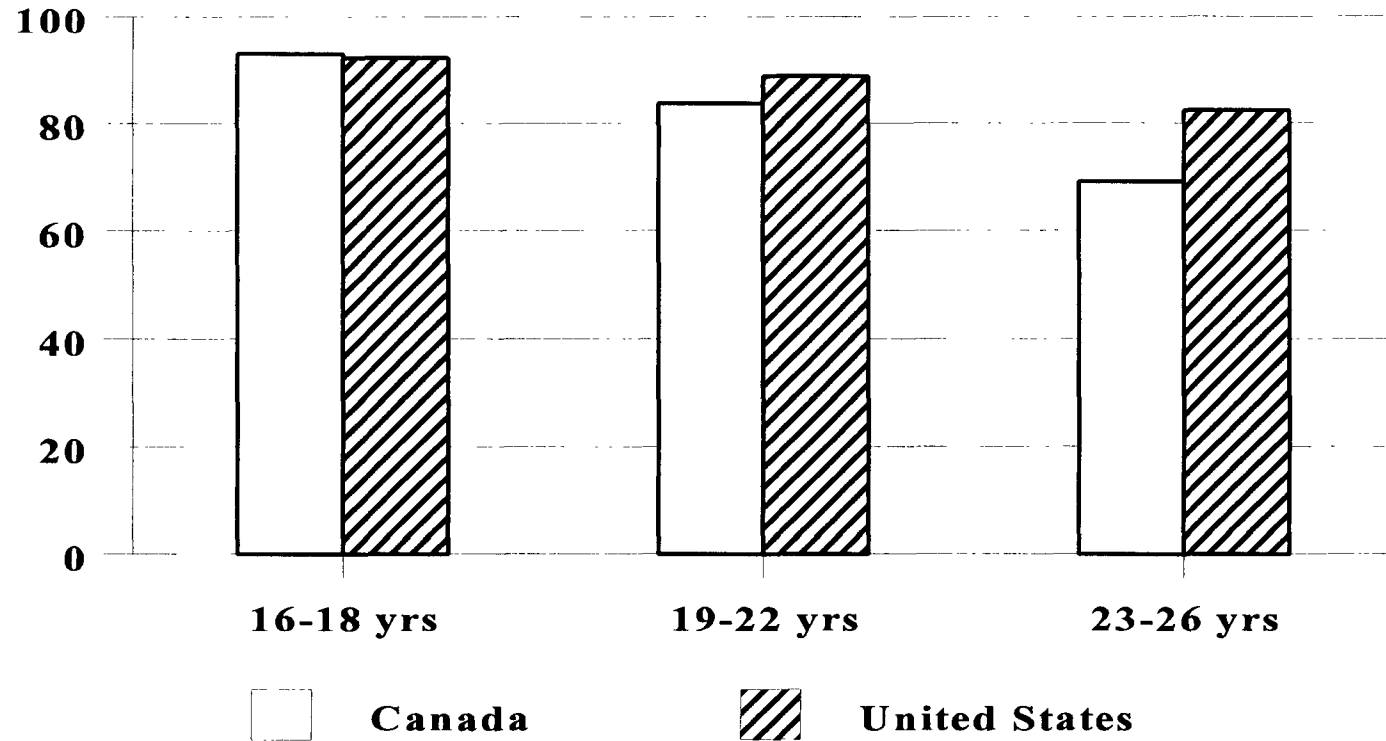
as Figure 2 illustrates, in both countries, survival is more prevalent among grandmothers than grandfathers and favors maternal lineages over paternal lineages and over 90% of both American and Canadian grandchildren age 16 to 18 have at least one living grandparent. In the older age categories, however, national differences do emerge. Older American children have a greater number of living grandparents than do similar Canadian children. These differences are especially evident in the 23 to 26 year age group where approximately 30% of Canadians are grandparentless compared to only slightly less than 18% of Americans. These differences are again presumably attributable to the greater percentage of American grandparents as well as differences in the mean age at the time of the transition to grandparenthood.

### **The Timing of Grandparenthood in Canada and the United States**

Not surprisingly, most North Americans survive to experience grandparenthood. In both countries survival to this life course transition favors women over men and the matrilineal over patrilineal lineages. Among the most striking differences between Canada and the United States, represented in Table 4, are the mean ages at the onset of grandparenthood. Canadians, regardless of gender or lineage experience grandparenthood notably later than their American counterparts. For instance, in Canada, the mean age of respondents' mothers at the time of the birth of their first child was nearly 54 years.

**Figure 2. Grandchildren With At Least One Living Grandparent by Ages (%)**

*Sources: Canadian: General Social Survey, 1990; American: Szinovacz, 1998b*



Meanwhile, in the United States, the mean age was approximately 45 years. Similarly, the mean age for the onset of grandfatherhood among Canadian men was slightly less than 57 years compared to 54 years of age among American grandfathers. It is important to underscore the limitations of the approach with the Canadian data used in this study, since it overestimates the age at which grandparenthood occurs. It may be noted, however, that Gee's (1991) study estimated that the transition to grandmotherhood in Canada occurs at age 50; this finding also indicates that Americans do in fact experience first-time grandparenthood earlier in life.

### **Step-Parenthood and Step-Grandparenthood in Canada and the United States**

Given the difficulty ascertaining rates of step-grandparenthood in Canada, comparison between the two North American nations is necessarily somewhat speculative. Canadians were only asked whether or not they had ever raised a step child; Americans were asked to report the number of step-children including both those they had raised and not raised. In Canada, roughly 5% of individuals with at least one living parent reported having *raised* step-children. Thus, the figure does not include those step-children who were not raised by the step-parent. In the United States, 14.5% of married persons with children under age 18 reported having step children and at least one living parent. It might be speculated that rates of step-grandparenthood are somewhat higher in

the United States, but given the incompatible nature of the data, results are somewhat tentative.

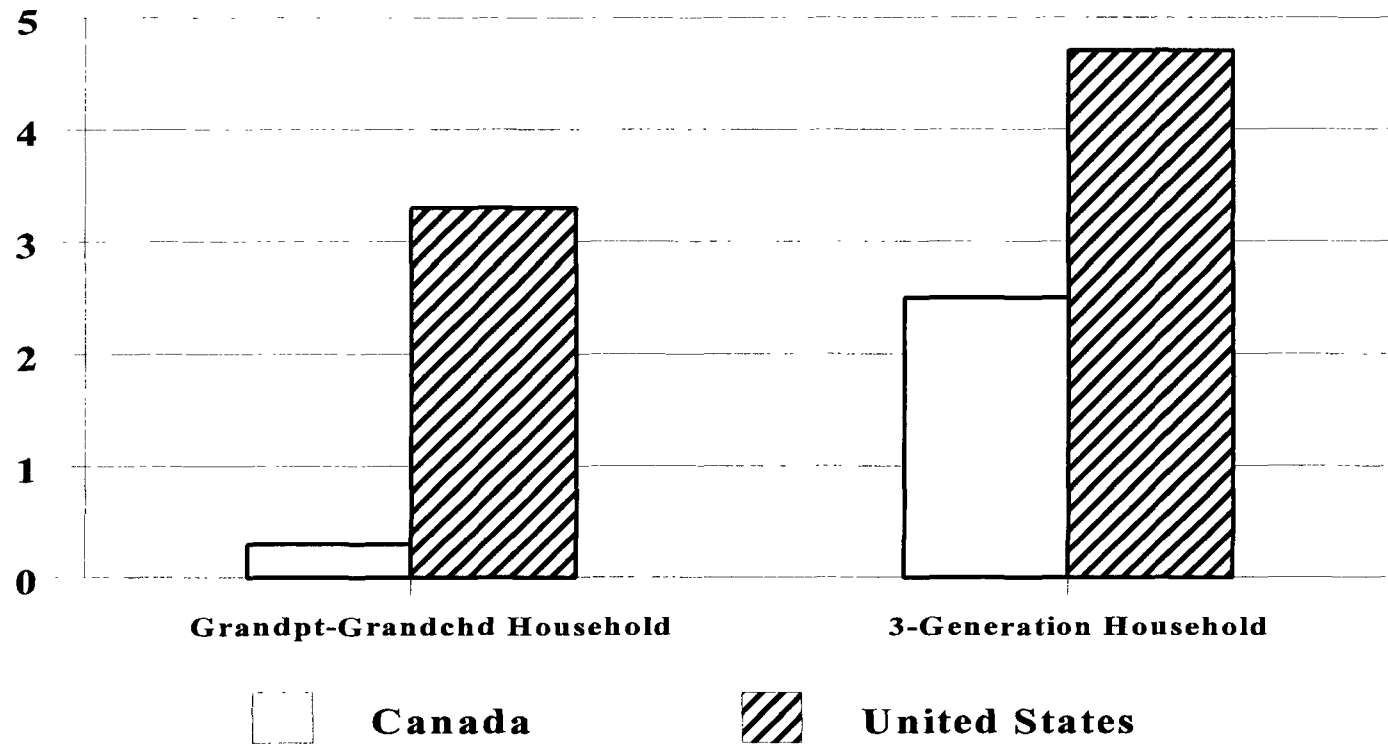
### **Household Composition in Canada and the United States**

As presented in Figure 3, evidence demonstrates that grandparent-grandchild cohabitation, with or without the middle generation, is relatively rare in North America. In both countries, more women than men reside in multi-generation households (not shown). However, a higher percentage of multi-generation households can be found in the United States than in Canada. In fact, relative to Canadians, twice as many Americans (proportionally) reside in a household with three or more generations— 5% of Americans and only 2.5% of Canadians. Importantly, however, in 1996, immigrants headed close to half of all three generation households in Canada; with higher levels of Canadian immigration expected, this type of household arrangement is anticipated to increase in prevalence (Milan, 2000).

Comparing rates of surrogate parenting is somewhat problematic. In the U.S. study, 11% of respondents with grandchildren indicated that they had assumed primary responsibility for a grandchild at some point in time. Recalling that Canadian rates of surrogate parenting were estimates based on coresidence without the middle generation at the time of the survey, it is difficult to compare the two measures. However, since less than 1% of Canadian grandparents had primary care responsibilities for their

**Figure 3. Household Composition (% of Grandparent Population)**

*Sources: Canadian: General Social Survey, 1990; American: Szinovacz, 1998b*



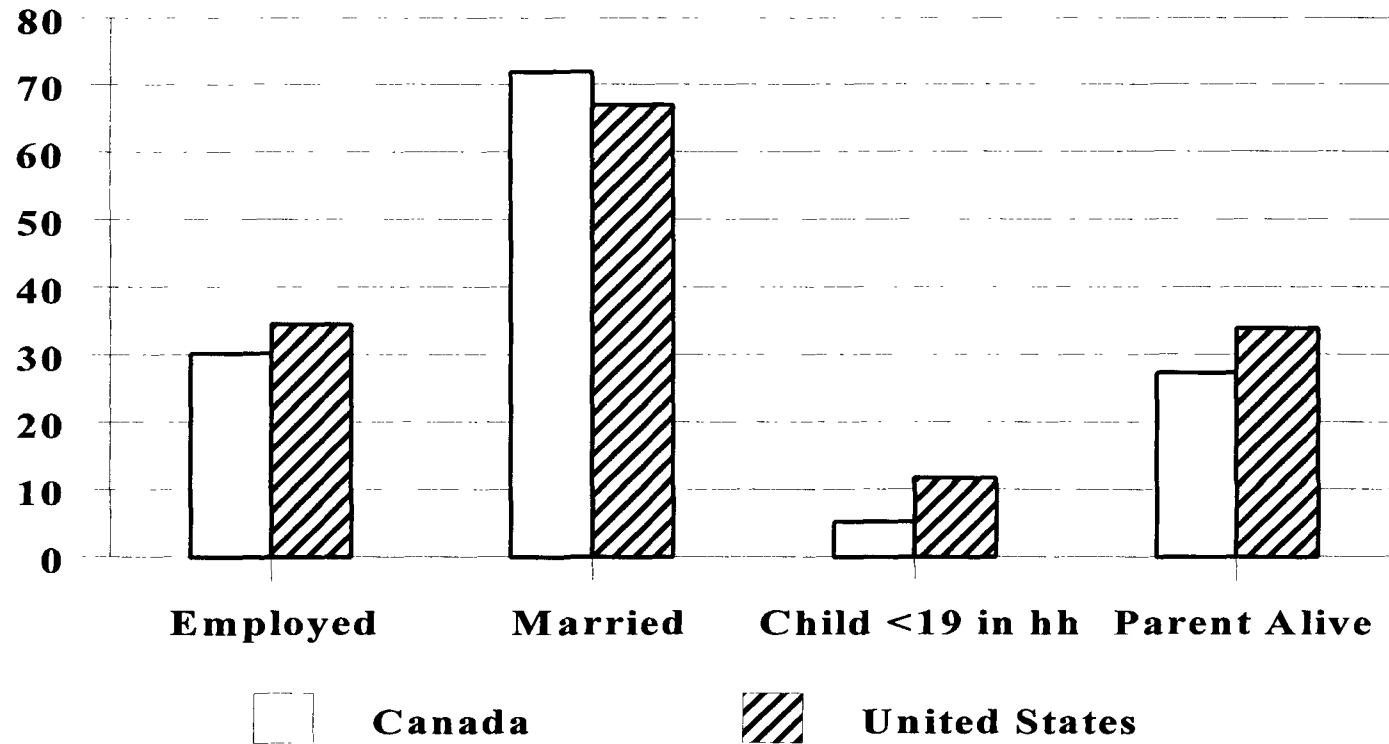
grandchild[ren] at the time of data collection, it seems probable that lower percentages of Canadian grandparents act as surrogate parents to their grandchildren when compared to American grandparents.

### **The Intersection of Work and Family-Related Roles Among Canadian and American Grandparents**

As Figure 4 illustrates, Canadian and American patterns pertaining to the intersection of work and family-related roles with grandparenthood are relatively congruent. In both countries, grandmothers have fewer roles than grandfathers, lower percentages are engaged in full-time employment outside of the home, married and have dependent children in the household. Marginally higher percentages of grandmothers relative to grandfathers have at least one living parent. However, there are several distinctions between the two nations. Attributable in part to the higher percentages of younger grandparents in the U.S. and the country's racial composition, a higher percentage of American grandparents are employed full-time (34.5%) compared to their Canadian counter-parts (30.2%). As less than half of grandfathers in both countries were employed full-time, grandmothers' rates of employment influenced the overall grandparent employment rates. Whereas almost 30% of American grandmothers were employed full-time, only 22% of Canadian grandmothers made the same claim. Black

**Figure 4. Grandparents' Work & Family-Related Roles (%)**

*Sources: Canadian: General Social Survey, 1995; American: Szinovacz, 1998b*



and Hispanic women are over-represented in the employed category and again, the racial composition of Canada may account for the divergence between the two countries with respect to the intersection of grandmotherhood and employment.

The degree to which the spousal role intersects with grandparenthood varies by country. A slightly higher percentage of Canadian grandparents are married (72%) compared to American grandparents (67%). And, while overall rates for both men and women were higher in Canada compared to the United States, variation appears to be due to trends among Black and Hispanic populations. The overall marital rate for Canadian grandfathers (87.3%) is similar to rates among White American grandfathers (84.0). Meanwhile, 61.2% of Canadian grandmothers are married, which closely approximates the 60.1% of White American grandmothers who have spouses.

In North America, grandparenthood does not typically intersect with the role of active parent. However, greater percentages of American grandparents have children under 19 years of age living in the household compared to Canadian grandparents. Whereas approximately 12% of American grandparents are actively parenting less than 6% of Canadians assume this dual role. In both countries, compared to women, a greater proportion of men experience the overlap between grandparenthood and active parenthood. Importantly, in the United States, among the Black and Hispanic populations, the percentages who are grandparenting and actively parenting are

considerably higher than the overall population. And, recalling that the average age at the onset of grandparenthood is earlier for these populations, national differences can be linked to the overall timing of grandparenthood, which, is assumed to occur notably later in Canada.

For a sizable minority in both countries, grandparenthood intersects with the role of adult-child by having grandchildren as well as at least one living parent. It appears that women experience this intersection more so than men although Canadian gender differences were not found to be statistically significant. However, greater percentages of American grandparents have at least one living parent (33.9%) compared to Canadian grandparents (27.3%). This difference, is of course, not surprising given that four generation families are more prevalent in the United States.

## **SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS**

The findings pertaining to the state of grandparenthood in Canada, and the comparative analysis with the United States, have several important implications, particularly for research in the areas aging and the family. Findings either directly and/or indirectly address issues of family structure, generational overlap and the structure of the life course as well as grandparent lifestyles and responsibilities. The implications for each are discussed in turn below.

Due to the nature of the data, the current study could not establish the *actual* prevalence of the various multiple generational family types. The GSS 1990 and 1995 each collected information relevant to family structure from only one family member, at one point in time and in such a way that did not permit an overview of complete family networks and structures; measures of family types are not completely accurate. However, it is possible to *infer* levels of existence and prevalence of the “bean pole”, “age condensed”, “truncated” and “step” family structures in Canada. For instance, while the three-generation family is relatively commonplace in Canada, membership in a four-generation family is experienced by only a minority, depends largely on age group and favors cohorts aged 35 to 44 and those 65 and over. Thus, Rossi & Rossi’s (1990) assertion that the high prevalence of the bean pole family is likely over-exaggerated (particularly the prevalence of families with four, even five generations) is clearly applicable in Canada. Further, extrapolating from the low percentages of grandparents in the under 40 age groups and the high percentages of individuals with children who are also grandparents in the 65 and over age groups, casual inference suggests that “age condensed” and “truncated” families likely exist, but are relatively rare in Canada. And, although the prevalence of step-grandparenthood was difficult to document fully, findings indicate that while such a multi-generational family type does exist in Canada and touches the lives of a substantial number of individuals, it accounts for only a low

percentage of the overall population. Additional research is needed in order to address the social significance and meanings of these various family types, exploring how they are acknowledged and experienced by individual family members.

In terms of generational overlap, it is clear that grandparents and grandchildren are woven into the fabric of Canadian families. Most older adults who have children are grandparents and most grandchildren know at least one of their grandparents. Grandparents' survival rates also attest to the high prevalence of adult-grandchildren in Canada. Thus for many Canadian grandchildren, grandparents belong to their family networks for a duration lasting from early childhood through their teenage years and on into adulthood. Presumably, such relationships grow and change as both the grandparent and grandchild age and experience life events. Thus far, however, increasing longevity and its impact on grandparent-grandchild relationships, normative patterns of grandparenting, distinctions between grandmother and grandfather roles and on intergenerational relations more generally, remain relatively under explored by researchers.

Although the findings of this paper do not establish changes in the supply of children and grandchildren over time or their interactions and behaviors, the average size of Canadian families is decreasing (Milan, 2000). Thus, Giarrusso, Silverstein & Bengtson (1996:18) are likely correct in their assertion that "grandchildren may emerge

as potentially more important sources of emotional meaning and practical support for grandparents than in the past”. However, given that intergenerational assistance is more likely to flow from the older to the younger generation (Logan & Spitze, 1996), the reverse is perhaps more true. As Kornhaber (1985) found, many grandparents assume an important helping role within the family by providing social and emotional stability to grandchildren and other family members, particularly when family stability is threatened (see also Adkins, 1999). And, while the findings of this paper indicate that levels of coresidence and surrogate parenting are low among Canadian grandparents, this does not signal that other forms of intergenerational assistance and support—whether tangible or intangible—are not exchanged throughout the life course. In fact, future research would do well to investigate the flow of intergenerational assistance between grandparents and their grandchildren, particularly as it occurs over time.

This paper also investigated the intersection of grandparenthood and other work and family-related roles. There are several noteworthy implications pertaining to the timing of life events and the structure of the life course. First, since most grandparents are married, especially in the younger age group, it is apparent that widow[er]hood does indeed, follow the onset of grandparenthood for most people. Second, very few grandparents have children under age 19 and children living in the household which attests to the separation of active parenthood and grandparenthood as distinct phases of

life. Finally, employment is relatively common among younger grandparents and uncommon among older grandparents. Although there may be differences across cohorts, many individuals become grandparents prior to retirement. Additionally, Troll's (1985) observation that grandparenthood intersects with 'careers' of individual development is supported by the fact that for some Canadians, grandparenthood intersects with other work and family-related roles. Importantly, how and when these intersections and multiple intersections occur will ultimately influence grandparent-grandchild relationships and require further consideration and research attention.

Placed within the larger North American context, it is clear that overall demographic patterns and social trends in contemporary Canadian and American grandparenthood are relatively similar and reinforce early findings regarding gender and age. What is perhaps most important to note is that while similarities emerge, there are important differences between the two countries related to the higher birth rate and higher percentages of "off-time" grandparenthood in the United States. And, while it is often scholarly practice to use Canadian and American findings interchangeably—particularly when faced with a lack of available data—this research suggests that national differences do exist and further, that figures and findings are not invariably interchangeable.

## **CONCLUSION**

The overall aim of this paper was to provide a general demographic characterization of contemporary Canadian grandparenthood, ultimately comparing the situation in Canada and the United States. Results of this endeavor, however, can only be interpreted within the limits of cross-sectional data and secondary data analysis, and should be regarded as a mere sketch of grandparenthood in Canada and more broadly, North America. Building on this demographic outline, future research should consider how various multi-generation family structures shape family life, particularly grandparent-grandchild relationships. In examining grandparent-grandchild relationships, variables representing time spent with grandchildren as well as generational and cultural factors (see Strom et al., 1999) should also be examined along side standard demographic measures such as gender, age and geographic proximity. It is important that research begin to investigate the family as a network emphasizing the interconnectedness of individual members, not to mention the meanings and activities associated with family membership. Also of import to the study of family life is the need to explore specific configurations of intergenerational relationships (e.g. step relations, age gapped and condensed relations), particularly how they are negotiated, maintained and change over time, ultimately intersecting with individual, family, socio-historical and demographic contexts. Overall, additional research—both qualitative and quantitative, as well as

longitudinal and cross-sectional—is required if we are to address adequately the contingencies, complexities and dynamics that impinge on and constitute grandparenthood in Canada, the United States and elsewhere. Only by doing so, will researchers generate a more complete and detailed picture of contemporary grandparenthood and grandparent-grandchild relationships.

## **Notes**

1. The present paper models Szinovacz's analysis in several ways in order to facilitate a comparative analysis of Canadian and American findings.
2. It is important to note that in Canada, while divorce rates increased in 1968 due to the introduction of the Divorce Act and again in 1986 as a result of amendments to the Act, divorce has been steadily decreasing since 1987 (Milan, 2000). Ultimately, rates of divorce will impact cohorts of grandparents differently as patterns change over time.
3. Residents of the Territories, Native Indian reserves and institutionalized members of the population are excluded.
4. Fictive grandchildren are those who are not related by blood and/or marriage (see Burton & Dilworth-Anderson, 1991 and Chatters, Taylor & Jayakody, 1994).
5. Unless otherwise indicated, all American data in this study are taken from Szinovacz (1998b).
6. Due to dissimilar national data collection practices, it was possible to compare only three age groups: 16 to 18; 19 to 22 and 23 to 26.

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**CHAPTER III:        Dimensions of Grandparent-Adult Grandchild Relationships:  
From Family Ties to Intergenerational Friends**

*Abstract:*

This paper examines the growing demographic phenomenon of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships from the perspectives of both generations. Drawing on qualitative life-history interviews (n=37), this research explores the subjective meanings of the relationship, as well as the experiences of being grandparents and adult grandchildren. Despite tremendous diversity in grandparent-adult grandchild relationships, including differences among and between generations, both groups view one another positively and conceptualize their ties as personally and existentially meaningful. They classify their relationships as a distinct family tie centered on unconditional love, mutual support, respect and obligation. A number of individuals also discuss their grandparent-adult grandchild relationships as friendships, involving mutual trust, shared confidences and personal choice. Overall, this research suggests that grandparent-grandchild relationships often grow more profound and meaningful as grandparents and grandchildren age, move through the life course and experience life events.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Increasing longevity in Canada, as in other Western countries, has provided significantly greater opportunities for the formation of new family relationships, including those between grandparents and *adult* grandchildren. This current demographic trend means that growing numbers of grandparents and grandchildren will spend a longer amount of time in these family roles than at any other point in history (Hagestad, 1988; Hagestad & Burton, 1986; Uhlenberg, 1993). As a result, a significant proportion of grandparents are witnessing their grandchildren grow into adulthood and historically unprecedented numbers of grandchildren are sharing bonds with their grandparents lasting twenty years or more (Kemp, 2003; Szinovacz, 1998b Uhlenberg & Kirby, 1998).

Although very little research has specifically examined the growing phenomenon of grandparents and adult grandchildren relationships (Rosenthal, 2000), what little scholarly work that does exist suggests that many adult grandchildren consider relationships with their grandparents to be “significant and meaningful” as well as “close and enduring” (Hodgson, 1992:209) and further, that adult grandchildren are likely to provide “an important source of emotional meaning to grandparents when they approach the last decades of life” (Silverstein & Long, 1998:922). Insofar as this small body of literature has generated an overall positive impression of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships, it has relied mostly on survey data, taken the perspective of only one family member (Hodgson, 1998), and employed cross-sectional methods that do not address

continuity and change over time (Szinovacz, 1998a, 1998c). As a result, the experiential, subjective, temporal and contextual dimensions of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships have been under explored.

The purpose of this paper is to examine grandparent-adult grandchild relationships from the subjective perspectives of both generations in an attempt to understand the meanings of the tie, including the implications of increasing longevity on intergenerational family life. Drawing on a study of grandparents and adult grandchildren, this study explores the ways in which both generations experience, conceptualize and give meanings to their relationships. Further, it considers how, according to each generation, these conceptualizations have been marked by continuity and change over time, including grandchildren's passage to adulthood and grandparents' entry into later life. To begin, this paper offers a brief examination of grandparent-grandchild relationships, including the social contexts within which they are occurring, as well as the existing research context.

### **The Social Context**

The extension of this intergenerational tie represents a 'new' family relationship without clear role expectations, well-defined norms and legal obligations (Aldous 1995). Potentially, the tie between grandparents and adult grandchildren is made more ambiguous as it unfolds within the context of late-modern society. Theorists such as

Beck (1999, 2001) and Giddens (1992, 1994) suggest, for example, that in late-modern societies, family and interpersonal relationships are largely ‘optional’, based on choice, negotiation and personal freedom. Consequently, relationships, including those between grandparents and grandchildren, have the potential to be founded on emotional communication, intimacy, warmth and companionship (Baranowski, 1982; Gratton & Haber, 1996), as opposed to tradition or obligation as they were in previous times. According to Beck-Gernsheim (2002:78), in the traditional family— which she argues is increasingly an image of the past—familial support for those in later life “often comes with a sense of duty, instilled through moral pressure, social expectations and the pangs of conscience”. The nature of and extent to which choice and obligation enter into grandparent-adult grandchild relationships remain relatively unexplored.

### **The Research Context**

Much of the research into the relationships between grandparents and grandchildren involves grandparents with young grandchildren and rarely considers the grandchild’s perspective. This body of work has documented various grandparenting styles and types (e.g. Neugarten & Weinstein, 1964; Robertson, 1976) – attesting to the heterogeneity of grandparent-grandchild ties (Bengtson, 1985). In an early effort to capture the multidimensional nature of grandparenthood, Kivnick (1982), developed a typology encompassing five levels of meanings associated with the role: 1) *centrality*

refers to how central the grandparent role is to the individual and has implications for selfhood and identity; 2) *valued elder* represents the passing on of traditions to younger generations; 3) *immortality through clan* refers to a sense of immortality derived from grandchildren; 4) *reinvolvement with the past* captures the idea that grandchildren can represent an opportunity for grandparents to re-live early parts of their lives; and 5) *indulgence* refers to the spoiling many grandparents associate with their family role. Ultimately, though, very little attention has been paid to examining if and how these dimensions of meaning continue or change over time, and there has been considerably less given to how grandchildren conceptualize their relationships with their grandparents.

Regarding, the grandparent-*adult* grandchild relationship, early work by Cherlin & Furstenberg (1986) described grandparenthood as career-like beginning with the birth of a grandchild and ending in an all but symbolic way when the grandchild reaches adulthood. While not dismissing the important processual and temporal imagery evoked by the notion of career (see Hughes, 1997), more recent and convincing research suggests that far from being over, many grandparents and adult grandchildren share vital, significant and enduring bonds (e.g. Hodgson, 1992; Kivett, 1996; Roberto & Stroes, 1992). Cumulatively, existing work, although largely quantitative, demonstrates that many grandparents and adult grandchildren describe their relationships as close, express warmth for one another (Hodgson, 1992; Kennedy, 1990; Roberto & Stroes, 1992) and maintain regular, often frequent contact, whether in-person, via telephone or through

written correspondence (Harwood, 2000; Harwood & Lin, 2000). Moreover, relationships have been found to involve love, the provision of emotional comfort and instrumental assistance (Langer, 1990), cultural transmission (Wiscott & Kopera-Frye, 2000) and sharing family history (Kennedy, 1990).<sup>1</sup>

Hill et al. (1970) found the passage of time important. In their study, as grandchildren grew from teenagers to adults, they tended to renew and strengthen their relationships with their grandparents. This finding is consistent with one of Hodgson's adult grandchild survey respondents who explained her increasing closeness for her grandmother in adulthood by stating "I think I got old enough to see her as a real person and I found out we had a lot in common" (1992:221). From the grandparents' perspective, recent longitudinal data demonstrated a steady decline in affection towards grandchildren over the first 14 years, at which point the trend reversed and a curvilinear relationship between time and affection emerged (Silverstein & Long, 1998). Meanwhile, Roberto, Allen & Blieszner's (1999:79) qualitative study on the family relationships of older women revealed that grandmothers believed as their grandchildren grew older, contact declined and their relationships became "secondary," yet the bonds remained personally meaningful.

As interpersonal relationships, the boundaries, content and quality of grandparent-adult grandchildren bonds are negotiated over time. Survey research among college students indicates that grandparents' negotiation partners tend to shift from the second to

third generation as grandchildren age (Roberto & Stroes, 1992). However, the power to negotiate the relationship and set the boundaries and terms, as well as the amount and degree of contact appears to reside with the adult grandchild generation. In one of the few qualitative inquiries into this extended family bond, Harwood & Lin, (2000:42) concluded, “the relationship is not perceived to be particularly negotiable from many grandparents’ perspectives. It is a meaningful and valuable relationship, but one that grandparents “take as it comes”, with few attempts to direct or change it”. Further, Harwood and Lin (2000) suggest that grandparents are more invested in their relationships with their grandchildren finding support for the “intergenerational stake” hypothesis, which suggests that parents and their off-spring have different stakes, or investments in their relationships (Bengtson & Kuypers, 1971; Giarruso, Stallings, & Bengtson, 1995). Ultimately, generational position shapes the subjective experiences and meanings of particular familial relationships. The current research attempts to contribute toward an understanding of the grandparent-adult grandchild relationship from the perspectives of both generations.

## **THE GRANDPARENT-ADULT GRANDCHILD STUDY**

The present grandparent-adult grandchild research is theoretically and methodologically guided by a dual-perspectives approach, which combines interpretive thought (Marshall 1996, 1999) and tenets of the life course perspective (e.g. Giele &

Elder, 1998). Applied to grandparent-adult grandchild relationships, an interpretive approach affords analytic priority to the subjective meanings and experiences of grandparents and adult grandchildren and emphasizes agency, negotiation, process and fluidity as features of the social world and relations. Analytic attention is also given to the interplay between agency and the surrounding social structure and context—which are created by individuals and influence social action and meaning.

The life course perspective attends to the interplay between structural conditions and individual agency and highlights the interconnectedness of family members and the passage of time— whether in the form of individual aging and maturation, the timing of life course events, or the passage of socio-historical time as a key factor in the organization and experience of social life. The life course perspective challenges researchers to view grandparent-grandchild relationships as processual and characterized by continuity as well as change (e.g., Roberto, Allen & Blieszner, 2001).

This dual-perspective framework, with its particular view of the social world, necessitates the use of a methodological approach capable of capturing both subjectivity and the temporal embeddedness of social experience. In order to articulate these dimensions of social life, this research draws on qualitative life-history interviews with grandparents and adult grandchildren. This approach accesses personal experiences, particularly the taken-for granted aspects of everyday life (Kaufman, 1994) and social life's inherent contradictions and tensions (Sankar & Gubrium, 1994).

## **The Sample**

The study's sample consists of a convenience, purposive sample of grandparents with at least one adult grandchild (defined as age twenty-one or over<sup>2</sup>) and adult grandchildren with one or more living grandparent. Participants were self-selected and volunteered after learning of the study in various ways: ads posted on the Internet and in public libraries; community contacts; and other participants.<sup>3</sup> The sample is not representative and findings, therefore, offer an exploratory look at the grandparent-adult grandchild relationship.

Fifteen grandmothers, 3 grandfathers, 10 granddaughters and 9 grandsons participated in the study for a total of 37 qualitative life-history interviews. For methodological and pragmatic reasons, including a desire for participants to feel comfortable disclosing information about their relationships, as well as issues of geography and time, no attempt was made to actively recruit same-family dyads. However, 4 same-family dyads participated in the study. In these instances, the original study participants recruited their own grandparents (n=2) and grandchildren (n=2) to volunteer.

The grandparents involved in the study ranged in age from 67 to 91 years. Equal numbers of grandparents were married (n=8) or widowed (n=8) and 2 grandmothers were divorced. The self-reported health status among grandparents ranged from poor to excellent, with most people experiencing fairly good health. With the exception of one

grandmother, all grandparents were living independently at the time of the interview. On average, grandparents had approximately 6 grandchildren each, including roughly 3 adult grandchildren. Overall, the grandparent accounts yielded information on 57 grandparent-adult grandchild relationships.

The adult grandchildren ranged in age from 21 to 36 with nearly two-thirds above the age of 24. The majority were married, including 4 grandchildren with children. Most were employed full-time and a few were enrolled full-time in university at the undergraduate and graduate levels. A majority of the grandchild sample had more than one living grandparent at the time of the interview. In total, their accounts offer information about 42 grandparents-adult grandchild relationships.

### **Qualitative Life History Interviews**

The interviews ranged from one to four hours, were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Qualitative interviews with grandparents explored memories of their own grandparents, their parents' involvement in their children's lives, as well as their reflections on becoming grandparents. Both generations were asked to recount the history of *each*<sup>4</sup> grandparent-adult grandchild relationship from earliest recollections to perceptions of the present-day relationship. Interviews probed the nature of each relationship, types and frequency of interactions within relationships and how each generation theorizes their relationships, similarities and differences within the family

and by family member. The interviews also examined the influence of time, aging, life events and maturity on grandparent-grandchild relationships, the personal and social meanings associated with the ties and roles.

### **Data Analysis Process**

Interview transcripts were read multiple times and examined comparatively for similarities and differences within and between biographical accounts. This process allowed for the development of several thematic coding categories. NUD\*IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing) –a qualitative analytic computer program– was used in the development and identification of key themes and coding categories. The program also assisted in the storage, management and retrieval of passages. The data employed in this article represents one coding category, “Conceptualizations of Grandparent-Adult Grandchild Relationships”. This category and its sub-categories shed light on the ways in which grandparents and adult grandchildren theorize and give meanings to their relationships.

### **FINDINGS**

Analyses of the experiential accounts generated several specific observations about the experiences and meanings associated with this intergenerational relationship. First, although there were notable variations, including differences between and within

families in terms of perceived closeness, frequency of contact, and geographic proximity, each participant conceived of their ‘grand’ relationships as distinct kinship ties associated with unique meanings and characteristics. Second, a considerable number of grandparents and grandchildren added to the kin conceptualization by *also* defining their relationships as unique intergenerational friendships. Finally, as continuity and change were pervasive themes— according to these individuals, longevity and the passage of time have meaningful implications for grandparent-grandchild relationships.

### **Grandparent-Adult Grandchild Relationships as Distinct Kin Ties**

Regardless of the perceived closeness associated with individual grandparent-adult grandchild relationships, each generation described their relationships with one another as family relations with specific properties, that were different from other family ties, especially the parent-child relationship. Grandparents and adult grandchildren alike, conceptualized their relationships as “second-tier parent-child relationships”, viewed one another as linkages through time and keys to self-identity, and understood their ties as products of familial processes and obligation.

*Second-tier parent-child relationships.* According to both generations, the grandparent-grandchild relationship is literally once removed from parent-child relationships in terms of responsibility and accountability for and judgment of one another. At the same time, however, it is also viewed as an extension of all that can be

positive about the parent-child tie: love, support, nurturing and companionship. As second-tier parent-child relationships, both generations perceived grandparent-adult grandchild ties as mutual *latent reserves of unconditional support*.

In all accounts, this was a taken-for-granted feature of the grandparent-adult grandchild relationship. Although not claiming direct responsibility in terms of providing or receiving material, instrumental or emotional support for one another (something they associated with the parent-child tie), all grandparents and adult grandchildren indicated that if they ever needed anything, they ‘just knew’ that they could rely on the other generation to help out. Likewise, they defined themselves as sources of unconditional support for whom the other generation could approach when needed. For this group of grandparents and adult grandchildren, the relationship acts as a “safety net”.

[My grandparents] can *also* know that they’ve got a support system too. So, if they need it, like if somebody needed to go to the doctor or somebody needs to get groceries, they can call me. *Granddaughter, Age 32*

I don’t really have that close of a relationship, but it’s a strong bond. My grandparents are still there for me and I’m there for them. We might not have the closest relationship, but that’s it. *Grandson, Age 21*

It’s mutual support and, but I just think you’re there for them when they need you and that’s my main contention about grandparenting. To love and support. *Grandmother, Age 78*

As alluded to above, the potential *reciprocal* nature of support— whether enacted or not—within grandparent-adult grandchild relationships sets them apart from young ‘grand’ relationships where the emphasis is almost exclusively placed on grandparents’

giving. And, while there remains more emphasis on grandparents' contributions to grandchildren's lives even in adulthood, adult grandchildren were able to cast themselves in the role of *potential* supporter.

The passage of time is also central to understanding of the types of potential support that can be exchanged within the relationship. For example, many grandparents had provided or were willing to provide assistance to their adult grandchildren with home purchases, home renovations, wedding plans and receptions, child-care and so forth. Meanwhile, grandchildren did not see themselves as the first line of assistance for providing support or care to their grandparents,<sup>5</sup> yet they saw themselves as able and willing to help in the event that it was necessary. A number of grandchildren had assisted their grandparents with transportation, medical appointments, banking and care. Beyond receiving respect and minimal attention, however, both generations, especially grandparents, said that they had little or few *actual* expectations of their adult 'grand' relationships. For example, according to a sixty-nine year old grandmother, "adult grandchild should respect their grandparents...They should care about them if they are sick, maybe visit them if they're sick...At least inquire about them". Yet, as illustrated by this eighty-six year old grandmother, most were reluctant to state any expectations, "Well, you'd like them to like you...You like to see your grandchildren do well in school, be polite and considerate and all that sort of thing. But you can't either demand or expect it".

Distinct from parent-child relationships, both generations agreed that grandparents were neither responsible for how their grandchildren “turned out”, nor in legitimate family positions for disciplining them. Consequently, grandparent-young grandchild relationships were described as based on a “love ‘em and leave ‘em” approach associated with fun and spoiling. This view of grandparent-grandchild relationships extended into and provided a foundation from which participants explicated their current relationships. The following representative account illustrates the residual effects of the past on the present in grandparent-grandchild relationships:

The role of the grandparent is to love the child like the parent without any of the negative responsibility. They don’t have to punish them. They can just have fun...the grandparents are there to spoil...Even now they still say, “Well, if you really want to get this, then, I can give you the money to buy it”. So that’s what grandparents do. They’re unconditional love without any of the problems.  
*Grandson, Age 23*

In keeping with the spirit of grand relationships, grandparents viewed themselves as bounded by norms of non-interference and avoided passing judgment on their grandchildren. Interference and judging were deemed the middle generation’s responsibility. Because most grandparents adhered to these behavioral norms, the grandparent-adult grandchild relationship was generally identified as a site and source of unconditional love and support. And, as explicated by grandparents and adult grandchildren, their bonds are unique because of the relatively lower levels of conflict or tension brought about by criticism and judgment frequently associated with parent-child relationships.<sup>6</sup>

There is an unconditional love [for my grandmother]. There is an unconditional love that is there for my mother, but it's a different type of unconditional love. It's a love of, it's a reciprocal, unconditional love that, I mean, my grandmother might get angry with me, but she forgives me a lot sooner, you know, or she'll make more sacrifices.

*Granddaughter, Age 23*

[Grandparents] are support and it never comes with any real criticism that I sometimes think you get from parents. There are no expectations from them necessarily, other than just to be good kids. *Granddaughter, Age 32*

I mean I think that you get parent-like feedback without parent-like scrutiny or judgment. It's like, so you could say, you'll get the kind of advice you would get from a parent, but it will be less biased in terms of judging you. That I know is true. *Grandson, Age 24*

For a number of participants, the centrality of unconditional love, paired with the relatively low levels of conflict influenced their perceptions of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships as “more pure”, “less complicated”, and “more loving” relative to parent-child relations. There were variations to this view as grandparents and grandchildren who reported very close, personal relationships offered the most positive images of the relationship, describing it as “safe”, “comfortable,” and “familiar”.

*Linkages through time: Keys to self-identity and self-affirmation.* For both generations, the extended generational overlap brought about by grandparents' longevity was experienced as personally meaningful, particularly among those searching for clues to self-identity and existential meaning. For most grandparents, adult grandchildren symbolize the future, simultaneously representing and affirming the culmination of their lifelong efforts and contributions to family life. They also identify adult grandchildren as

guarantors of personal and family continuity. According to a sixty-nine year old grandmother, “They mean continuity. It means that I was not here for nothing. I’ve done good and it’s something of me that will continue”. Therefore, in what they defined as their last stages of life, grandparents indicated that the experiences of knowing grandchildren as adults, (including seeing them as spouses, parents, employees) becomes an important resource for coming to terms with and recognizing the purposes and products of their existence.

[A]dult grandchildren and great-grandchildren are a form of *eternal life*...it certainly gives me a feeling of continuity...I think it’s through the sense of your own part of history.

*Grandfather, Age 88*

Moreover, involvement in adult grandchildren’s lives also keeps grandparents focused on their grandchildren’s present and future, distracting them from thoughts of their own futures.

...they keep you young with their coming and telling what they’ve been doing...It gives you an ongoing view of something, instead of, ‘oh well, I’m getting near the end of my life and what is there to show for it?

*Grandmother, Age 78*

Overall, for grandparents, relationships with adult grandchildren shed light on the meaning and purpose of their lives, while providing self-affirmation and an ongoing view of life and the future by securing continuity of the family, even through times of personal and familial change.

For adult grandchildren, grandparents represent the past, and act as their keys to personal history and self-identity. Regardless of the degrees of closeness with

grandparents, the majority of grandchildren defined their grandparents as exclusive proprietors of very personal and specific information relating to their childhood, as well as their parents' and grandparents' past and their family's place in history.

I've experienced stuff with her that she can actually tell me about, like when I was younger sort of thing. She can tell me about things over the course of the years that I wouldn't think about that type of thing. But now, certain things mean more to me.  
*Grandson, Age 34*

I would say that there is something special about the grandparent-adult grandchild relationship. It is very important for knowing your roots and for family history and for knowing where you came from. I think that's one of the most important things because that's what I have found. It's like a key.  
*Grandson, Age 29*

You get a sense of history. It's who you are. You really do and then, as you learn more about their parents, where they came from, you can appreciate maybe why they are stubborn about some of the things they are or where they get some of their ideas from, that sort of thing.  
*Granddaughter, Age 32*

Ultimately, through the development of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships, grandparents have the opportunity to impart information which adult grandchildren can use as clues in exploring, examining and making sense of themselves, their own lives and their familial roots. And, as the above quote illustrates, adult grandchildren also use this information in order to interpret the lives and behaviors of other family members.

For many adult grandchildren, first hand knowledge of grandparents' hardships, struggles and survival, particularly through the Great Depression and WWII, symbolized the moral constitution, character and resolve contained in their familial roots. Therefore, adult grandchildren not only hold their grandparents in high esteem, appreciate their

experiences and view them as important role models, but they also interpret their grandparents' survival stories as representative of their own personal potential resolve, resourcefulness and strength. In the following passage, a granddaughter illustrates this point while discussing how she feels about her grandparents:

[L]ots of love and respect. Um. Those are the two strongest feelings. And a desire to be able to be that strong. That if I ever needed to be, to know, that if I come from that kind of background, I have that strength. That I would like to think that it is in me and that if I needed to be that strong, that I would be able to be. *Granddaughter, Age 32*

From the perspective of most adult grandchildren, grandparents' ties to the past also render them important sources of historical information, making events seem "more real". Speaking of his grandmother, a thirty-four year old grandson offered, "She can tell me about what happened...I can listen to the historical events and stuff like that. And through her, I can live some of these things". Most grandchildren agreed that accessing their grandparents' experiences and links to the past occurred over time and upon reaching adulthood. For example:

[My grandparents] really taught me more about what they went through. They felt more comfortable telling me [as an adult], I guess, feeling that I would have a better appreciation for it. I found my relationship changed. It became more adult. *Grandson, Age 30*

In grandchildren's youth, grandparents did not always share their experiences.

*Products of Family Processes and Obligation.* Grandparents and grandchildren identified a number of taken for granted assumptions surrounding intergenerational family life, which in part produce, motivate and maintain their relationships. These

assumptions pertain to perceived normative family roles, processes and expectations of familial obligation. For instance, grandparents and grandchildren, took for granted that the older generation would and should *want* to have relationships with their grandchildren. Among grandparents, the idea of family obligation as a motivation for relationships did not arise. The belief that grandparents should ‘just want to’ was repeatedly presented as an accepted part of intergenerational family life and the grandparent role. According to grandparents, being a grandparent to adult grandchildren required them to, “be interested in what [grandchildren] are doing and in their lives”, “be there if you’re needed”, and “just kind of stand by”.

Owing to norms of non-interference and a view of adult grandchildren as entitled to independent lives, grandparents reportedly adopted a “laissez-faire”, “let them come to you” approach to their relationships:

I think my grandchildren are very dear to me. I never [pause], I remember reading, I think it was a poem years ago about happiness or something, is like a bird. It will struggle to get away and if you open your hand it will sit on your hand. So, I think that is where my philosophy with grandchildren came from.

*Grandmother, Age 89*

In other words, most did not attempt to exert control over the terms of the relationship or place demands on or have expectations of their grandchildren. Consequently, grandparents did not report having have equal power to define the conditions or frequency of interactions with adult grandchildren. Instead, this control reportedly resides more with grandchildren, whose youth and busy lives were cited as reasons why they were the appropriate, legitimate definers of the relationship.

I get along with [my grandchildren] and I'm happy with them. I don't expect to see them a lot because they have their own lives—you know, each person as they grow up has. They have more things come into their life, so they don't have the same time. And, I think time is much shorter to day than it was for my generation....Everybody's working and work is not always near home. It's all over the place. *Grandmother, Age 79*

In this sense, the social and familial contexts promote asymmetry in grandparent-adult grandchild ties. Asymmetry was expressed as an expectable and acceptable dimension of being a grandparent to adult grandchildren and did not diminish the satisfaction or meaning derived from the bond.

From the perspective of adult grandchildren, familial obligation was a pervasive theme. Most grandchildren felt some degree of obligation towards their grandparents, identifying obligation and guilt (arising from not full-filling their perceived obligations) as motivational. Specifically, as adult grandchildren they felt they should be obliged to maintain contact with grandparents and check in with them from time to time, particularly if it was viewed as important to the older generation. Grandchildren reportedly received little pressure from their grandparents suggesting that feelings of obligation towards grandparents are 'felt' and emerge from their own perceptions of family life and of the adult grandchild role.

This is going to sound horrible, but it's more like an obligation. You know, it's not that I don't enjoy talking to them. I'm like, "Oh my gosh, I haven't talk to her in a month". And then, I'm like, "It's my grandma. I have to go over there"....Just out of pure respect for family values....I *feel* obligated to, just because if it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be here and I'm thankful for my life...I feel bad for grandparents, because they've given so much to their family and sometimes it seems, I don't feel like I'm giving enough back to them. *Granddaughter, Age 22*

As above, in most accounts, obligation towards grandparents was cast positively and associated with enjoyable activities and interactions. Adult grandchildren contextualized their feelings of obligation by drawing on notions of equitable family exchange, as well as appreciation and respect for the oldest generations, particularly their contributions to intergenerational family life. Ultimately, grandchildren expressed the view that they *should* participate in grandparents' lives because the older generation deserves love and attention.

A number of grandchildren held other views of grandfilial obligation, suggesting that they 'chose' to be obliged. For these grandchildren, personal choice and enjoyment were important motivators. Consequently, they could not adequately conceptualize their relationships exclusively using a kinship framework. They also discussed intergenerational family friendships.

### **Grandparent-Adult Grandchild Relationships as Friendships**

Although not all grandparents and adult grandchildren conceptualized their ties as friendships, roughly three-quarters of participants defined at least one of their grandparent-adult grandchild relationship(s) as a friendship or friendship-like. Those who drew on notions of friendship described their relationship as having a history of closeness and personal connection. In this sense, continuity and change characterized the grandparent-adult grandchild relationship accounts. The past formed an important explanatory backdrop to explaining and understanding the adult relationship. According

to this twenty-four year old grandson, “We already had a very strong relationship all through my childhood. In adulthood, I find it to be more a friendship”.

Both generations identified the passage of time, particularly the grandchild’s maturity and the influence of pivotal life events such as death or illness in the family as catalytic to the addition of friendship to the relationship or the development of personal connections. From the perspective of adult grandchildren who were friends with their grandparents, their own adulthood and grandparents’ longevity created the opportunity to know their grandparents as people:

When you are a child, you know stories, you kind of know your grandparents, but you don’t know them as a person, you know them as a grandparent. Now that I am an adult, I have definitely been able to know her more as a person, as we’ve both matured. And I am glad for that. I am glad for that time.

*Granddaughter, Age 23*

Understanding them as people as opposed to just a person, not to stereotype, but as a certain figure. It’s like breaking out of that role as grandma and maybe it’s just a social perception, but everybody thinks that a grandma should be, not should be, but grandmothers are all caring and giving you cookies. With my grandmother, she is a real person and I think that it is rewarding to be able to talk to them openly and realize that you are knowing them as a person as opposed to not getting the opportunity.

*Grandson, Age 24*

Knowing each other as individuals, rather than occupants of specific family roles is a consequential implication of increasing longevity for the grandparent-adult grandchild relationship as it provides a foundation and opportunity for the development of an intergenerational friendship.

When the grandparent-grandchild relationship involves two adults,

companionship, which might have characterized the younger relationship, can give way to an intergenerational friendship that was not possible in the child's youth. Over time, the nature and complexity of the grand tie change. In the words of one grandmother, interaction and communication become more of a "two-way street". Relative to the grandchild's youth there is greater give, take and sharing in interactions and consequently, new levels of enjoyment and satisfaction for both generations.

When they're more on your level, you become more friends instead of this grandmother-small grandchild relationship where they're not...that interesting for a long evening of conversation or anything. Whereas the older children, you have a lot more give and take and ideas and someone to talk to.

*Grandmother, Age 78*

I know with my grandmother, she's opened up and told me so much about herself and what's she's been through and horrible things I didn't know and good things I didn't know...So in some ways our relationship can include an element of friendship as well. When you're a kid, it's not at a stage where you could have that kind of relationship.

*Granddaughter, Age 27*

The above quotes, from a grandmother-granddaughter same-family dyad illustrate how their interactions and the nature of their relationship have changed over time. Similar to these participants, other grandparents and adult grandchildren viewed their friendships or friend-like relationships as characterized by reciprocal and balanced exchanges.

*Sites of interpersonal trust and shared confidences.* Reciprocal trust and shared confidences were among the defining features of the grandparent-adult grandchild friendship. These grandparents and grandchildren viewed one another as confidantes whom they could always trust with deeply personal or sensitive information. Within

these relationships, participants reported having open-dialogues and exchanges with little fear of being judged, even in the case of dissenting or divergent opinions. Both generations expressed these views:

I feel my grandmother and I can be totally and completely honest. I can tell my grandmother more honestly about what I think...I can engage her in challenging conversations and political conversations because that kind of conversation is important to me. To be able to talk to her about these things as openly as I can and be willing to share exactly how I feel about things and not think that I'm offending her or hurting her feelings or offending people or something that she cares about. Even if I am, I know that she's not going to hold it against me. *Grandson, Age 28*

I'm older. She's younger, but she respects me. She loves me. She knows if she tells me something in confidence, it'll never go any further than that. And, I know the same with her, like, I can tell her anything and say, "This is between you and me", and I know that it will never go any further. *Grandmother, Age 69*

Most participants indicated that the extension of their relationships into grandparents' later lives and grandchildren's adulthood facilitated opening up to one another and sharing personal thoughts.

Grandparents and adult grandchildren also said that they could trust one another with sensitive family information. Arising from the trust in their intergenerational friendships, many used their relationships as a refuge from the family, within the family. For example:

We just have open dialogue. I think that [my grandmother] *also* tells me things that she would like to get off her chest with the family, but doesn't because it might stir the pot or whatever. *Grandson, Age 24*

I find if I have a problem I'll phone [my granddaughter] and you know, [my husband] has Alzheimer's, not badly, but you know, I feel sometimes

I need help...I don't ask people for much. But maybe more to say, you know, 'I'm sort of fed up. What am I going to do?'. *Grandmother, Age 78*

For a number of individuals, adult 'grand' relationships represented a safe environment where confidential discussions of family members, family politics or problems could take safely take place. Moreover, for others these relationships helped to deal with their families or cope with situations.

*Products of personal choice and freedom.* Many perceived their relationships as friendships that are motivated by personal choice, as opposed to family obligation. However, as these friendships are formed between younger and older generations within the family, processes of choice and obligation become less straight-forward and more complex. Despite the asymmetrical nature of the grandparent-adult grandchild relationship— with choice residing more clearly with grandchildren—personal choice and freedom were central to both generations' experiential accounts of their intergenerational friendships.

Grandchildren's choice and freedom were key to grandparents' perceptions of their relationships and conceptualizations of intergenerational friendships. Because grandparents viewed grandchildren as relatively free from grandfilial obligation, grandchildren with whom they have close relationships, are understood to do so out of personal choice and desire, for example:

It's the attention that they give you that they don't have to. Your children give you attention, but your children also feel responsible to give it to you...but with grandchildren. It's a different thing. *Grandmother, Age 79*

Grandparents whose grandchildren were their friends indicated that because their grandchildren maintained relationships with them and were under no obligation to do so, this evidenced the strength of their relationships and formed the foundation of their friendships.

Meanwhile, for grandchildren who were friends with their grandparents, contact was defined as initiated and maintained out of enjoyment, fun and choice. They viewed their grandparents as individuals whom they wanted to spend time with and share their lives with. Moreover, as they found their interactions personally rewarding and chose to maintain close, personal ties with their grandparents, many avoided or resisted use of the term 'obligation'. In the words of a twenty-eight year old grandson, "I don't really think of them [visits] so much as obligations and responsibilities because I enjoy doing them". And, in the following passages two grandchildren discuss choice, obligation and friendship in relation to their grandparents:

So I feel like I *want* to just see how they're doing...My grandfather on my father's side, he's just not a home person, he's like me. So somehow we just get together on the weekend and grab a bite to eat or something...Like I said, *it's more choice, the word shouldn't be obligation.*

*Grandson, Age 30*

They are my grandparents and they're like my best friends. It's so great, it's not like "Oh, I *have* to go to my grandma's for dinner". It's like, "Oh, I'm going to go and sit down with my grandparents and see you know, chat with them. And, I like it.

*Granddaughter, Age 21*

For grandchildren who viewed their grandparents as friends, adulthood gave them the

ability and personal freedom to negotiate friendships with their grandparents.

*Family-Friends?* The presentation of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships as places of open dialogue and products of personal choice was accompanied by somewhat contradictory behavior. As friends, grandparents and adult grandchildren set boundaries for themselves in terms of what they viewed as acceptable and unacceptable for the grandparent and grandchild roles. For instance, most individuals, but particularly those reporting friendships, made efforts to produce and maintain ‘good’ grand identities. Among grandparents this was accomplished by not being meddlesome or placing demands on the relationship, as well as deliberately not interfering in grandchildren’s lives. Speaking of friendships with her adult grandchildren, a seventy-eight year old grandmother, concluded, “So, you don’t push them, you just let them do their own thing”.

For adult grandchildren, being a ‘good’ grandchild meant earning grandparents’ praise, being respectful and not being a disappointment. This was accomplished by deliberate and regular contact and keeping grandparents’ personally informed about their lives, even when they did not feel like it or were busy. Also, many adult grandchildren carefully monitored their interactions with grandparents, selectively disclosing information about activities, avoiding topics, and screening out what they determined to be undesirable or bad as evaluated by their grandparents’ standards. For instance, a thirty-five year old grandson confessed, “I tell little white lies” because “I don’t want to

let [my grandfather] down. And, when asked about her motivations for selectively disclosing information, a twenty-one year old granddaughter replied, “I guess that sounds back to wanting them to be proud of me, right? I don’t want them to think, ‘Oh, bad judgment call’”. Thus, although conceived of as friendships, grandparent-adult grandchild relationships also remained heavily influenced by perceptions of normative intergenerational roles and associated behavioral patterns. Consequently, limits were imposed on the nature and degree of sharing and the exercise of choice within these family friendships.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Although exploratory and derived from an unrepresentative sample, the findings of this research confirm and enhance existing knowledge, at the same time contributing additional insight into grandparent-adult grandchild relationships. These relational accounts confirm that both generations view their relationships as important, personally meaningful and socially significant. Despite variations in the properties of the tie both generations offered a rather consistent account of their relationship as being a unique family bond, separating it in meaning and significance from other familial relationships. For many, friendship was also a key dimension of the relationship. Further, it is clear that nature of the grandparent-adult grandchild tie was conceived of in positive terms.

Findings suggest that grandparents and adult grandchildren have few explicit

expectations of one another. The data also add insight into the relationship, including perceptions of the tie as unconditional and latent reserves of support. The adult relationship is understood to act as a “safety net” for both generations. As grandparents and adult grandchildren age, needs and abilities change, and, as Langer (1990) suggests, they become members of a ‘convoy of social support’—the ever-changing social networks that support individuals throughout the life course (Kahn & Antonnuci, 1980). And, although certain types of support may never be exchanged, potentiality and the unconditional nature of support remain important features of the relationship and represent a form of security for both generations. In this sense, longevity adds adult grandchildren and their grandparents to a “matrix of latent relationships,” (Riley, 1983) which can potentially be activated.

Findings also confirm that spoiling or leniency (Kivnick, 1982) remains central to how grandparents and adult grandchildren reflect on and conceptualize their relationships. The near absence of moral judgments and criticism in these relational accounts was an important extension of the leniency associated with the young relationship, which extended into adult experiences. In fact, this dimension of the relationship illustrates Mead’s theory of temporality (1929, 1932, 1934). As Mead suggested, the past “structures and conditions experiences found in the present” (Maines, Sugrue & Katovich, 1983:163; see also Chappell & Orbach, 1986). Grandparents and adult grandchild drew on the past using it as a key resource in conceptualizing their present

relationships.

Both grandparents and adult grandchildren confirmed that their relationships can be valuable keys to identity, self-hood and self-discovery. Grandchildren cast their grandparents in the role of ‘valued elder’ (Kivnick, 1982), supporting the conclusion that “grandchildren are interested and eager to have grandparents teach them about their own familial past” (Wiscott & Kopera-Frye, 2000:210). For most grandchildren this interest and appreciation was something they associated with their own maturity and an opportunity arising through their grandparents’ longevity.

For the aging grandparents in the study, Kivnick’s (1982) notion of “reinvolvement in the past” was not noted as a key dimension of meaning, rather relationships with adult grandchildren were more meaningful as engagements with the present and future. In other words, relationships with adult grandchildren provide an ongoing view and future perspective during the last stages of life. And, although these accounts attest to grandparenthood as “immortality through clan”, grandparents articulated the view that because they have shared more life experiences and witnessed more growth and life transitions in their adult grandchildren’s lives, the relationships were self-affirming and guaranteed continuity and immortality in ways not possible with younger grandchildren.

In the relational accounts, both personal choice and obligation entered into and were pervasive in the conceptualizations of grandparent-adult grandchild relationship.

This potentiality confirms Beck (1999, 2001) and Giddens' (1992, 1994) contentions about the nature of interpersonal relationships in late modern society. As well, there is evidence to suggest that obligation also operates within these ties indicating that choice and obligation can co-exist within the family.

Ultimately, however, generational position and perceptions was influential, almost pivotal, in shaping who exercises choice and how obligation is manifest. Grandparents confirmed Harwood & Lin's (2000) conclusions that grandparents' do not perceive their relationships as particularly negotiable. Social constructions of youth as deserving autonomy and lives of their own (Beck, 1998) and norms of non-interference (Aldous, 1995) operate to shape the distribution and exercise of choice in the relationship, giving greater choice to grandchildren.

At the same time, obligation was an equally important dimension of grandparent and adult grandchild conceptualizations. Although grandparents' resisted the idea that obligation motivated their relationships, they were very clear and consistent in defining how grandparents *should* feel and behave towards their grandchildren. Grandparents' hesitation to call this obligation is likely a result of its negative connotations, particularly those linked to family life.

Grandchildren were freer in defining the term obligation in ways that challenge common understandings. For example, by associating obligation towards grandparents with activities from which pleasure, enjoyment and satisfaction are derived, adult

grandchildren recast the notion of obligation in positive ways. As a motivator for adult grandchildren to engage in relationships with their grandparents, obligation also assumed a productive, rather than a constraining form. Moreover, as a number of grandchildren indicated that they *chose* to be obligated to their grandparents, this blurs traditional conceptualizations of obligation within the family, making it more negotiated and fluid (see Finch & Mason, 1993).

Conceptualizations of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships as friendships confirm, yet enhance Gratton & Haber's (1996) suggestion that grandparenthood is currently dominated by discourses of companionship, as the adult tie is more complex, profound and meaningful. Moreover, in keeping with anthropological work (see Ikels, 1998) and other work on 'fictive kin' (e.g. Burton & Dilworth-Anderson, 1991; MacRae, 1992), conceptualizations of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships as friendships, challenge commonly held distinctions that tend to treat family and friends as mutually exclusive social groups. The interviews with grandparents and grandchildren in this study suggest that family life is much more complex, textured and less clearly defined.

Use of the term 'friend' subtly indicates that this bond can not always be adequately described purely in terms of a family tie—at least not within what these grandparents and grandchildren perceived as the confines of family. Reluctance to explain the relationship exclusively in terms of familial ties signifies that 'family' is not necessarily understood of as a guaranteed site of trust, but rather as one where

relationships tend to be complex and interactions are often rooted in obligation. Yet, as these grandparent-adult grandchild relationships suggest, family relationships can and do also involve sharing and confidences and to a certain extent, choice. At the same time, however, these accounts do confirm distinctions made between family and friends, as both generations reportedly place boundaries on their friendships. Ultimately, though, the friendship conceptualization attests to the existence of negotiable and fluid family relationships.

Although presented as somewhat negotiable, particularly on the part of the grandchild, the fact that both generations discussed the ways in which they maintained ‘good’ or desirable ‘grand’ identities indicates that there may be influential underlying patterns and behavioral expectations associated with these roles, which are built up in families over time. In Finch & Mason’s (1993:170) work on family responsibility they argue, “people’s identities as moral beings are bound up in... exchanges of support, and the processes through which they get negotiated”. Thus, although not always exchanging support per se, grandparents and adult grandchildren in interactions with and behavior towards one another, are in a sense “constructing, confirming, and reconstructing” their respective moral identities and familial reputations. And, despite being demographic pioneers, these processes suggest the possibility that patterned social scripts emerge and guide both generations as they develop their relationships over the life course. Determining the extent of these patterns and processes of identity is, however, a matter

for future research.

Overall, the present study confirms that grandparent-adult grandchild relationships can and in many cases, do exert positive influences on the lives of each generation and the experiences of family life. For many, the ties are meaningful as unique familial relationships, distinct from parent-child ties and young grandchild ties, and often include elements of friendship. And, although further research is necessary in order to more fully understand this tie, including how it operates in the lives of family members and how variation and difference can be accounted for, it is not premature to suggest that there is tremendous continuity in the relationship over time, and further, that perceptions and experiences of the relationships are also marked by change— bonds tend to grow more profound and assume new forms and meanings as grandparents and grandchildren age and move through the life course.

## **Notes**

1. Additionally, factors such as geographic proximity (Kivett, 1996), gender and lineage (Block, 2000; Spitze & Ward, 1998; Thomas, 1995), race (Hunter & Taylor, 1998; Kennedy, 1990), education (Crosnoe & Elder, 2002), economic status (Eggebeen & Hogan, 1990; Parrott & Bengtson, 1999) and health (Silverstein & Long, 1998), all likely influence the formation of bonds between generations.
2. Largely out of convenience, a significant number of studies on adult grandchildren have used college student samples. Consequently, studies have relied heavily on younger adult grandchildren. For the purposes of this research, an adult grandchild was defined as 21 years of age or over. In selecting 21 years of age as the definition of adult, the intention was to tap into the experiences of older adult grandchildren, particularly those in their late twenties and thirties who are more likely to have varied life, family and work experiences relative to younger adult grandchildren.
3. Four individuals responded to the Internet ad and 4 were obtained using the other publically posted ads. A considerable portion of participants were located and made aware of the study and volunteered to participate through the use of community contacts (n=16) and a number volunteered as a result of being recruited by study participants themselves (n=12).
4. This approach differs from a number of adult grandchild studies which have focused solely on the 'closest' relationship. In order to examine the full-range of experiences associated with grandparent-adult grandchild relationships, it was necessary to have participants discuss and theorize each of the relationships, not just the closest one.
5. The exceptions to this view included grandparent-adult grandchild relationships which were notably different as a result of an absent middle-generation (through death) and as a result of the adult grandchild having been raised by the grandparent-generation. In the former instance both grandparent and grandchild (one of the same-family dyads) viewed themselves as the first line of assistance for one another as did the grandchild raised by grandparents.
6. It should be underscored that owing to the self-selective sample, most of the participants had relationships that they were proud of and wanted to talk about. Consequently, what emerges is a very positive image of the grandparent-adult grandchild relationship and most likely the best-case scenario.

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**CHAPTER IV:      ‘Grand’ Expectations: The Experiences of Older  
Grandparents and Adult Grandchildren**

*Abstract:*

Within the context of social and demographic change, this paper explores the existence of normative ‘grand’ role expectations among older grandparents and adult grandchildren. The data from qualitative life history interviews with both generations (n=37) indicate that while sometimes proscriptive rather than prescriptive, there are identifiable, albeit general, normative behavioral expectations associated with both familial roles. According to both generations’ accounts, these expectations are instructive and provide a general framework as individuals negotiate and evaluate their interactions and relationships with one another. Placed within a wider social context, these expectations reflect and reinforce cultural emphases on personal freedom and independence, as well as prevailing social discourses relating to youth, old age and family life.

## INTRODUCTION

Increasing longevity in Western societies has created the opportunity for grandparents and grandchildren to be in their respective family roles and to know one another for historically unprecedented amounts of time (Hagestad, 1988; Uhlenberg, 1993). In fact, most grandparents and grandchildren will experience at least twenty years of intergenerational overlap, and in many cases their lives will overlap for thirty, possibly even forty years or more (Kemp, 2003a; Uhlenberg & Kirby, 1998). To date, these demographic trends are well established, yet the roles and behaviors of *older* grandparents and *adult* grandchildren, as well as interactions between them, have received insufficient scholarly attention.

Against the backdrop of social and demographic transformation, this paper is concerned with the demographically ‘new’ phenomenon of older grandparent-adult grandchild relationships. Drawing on qualitative life history interviews (n=37) conducted in an urban, industrial city in Southern Ontario, this paper explores older grandparents’ and adult grandchildren’s perceptions of their family roles, examining what, if any, normative prescriptive and proscriptive expectations each generation has of one another and of themselves. Further, it considers how the presence or absence of behavioral expectations guides interactions, enters into the negotiation of grandparent-adult grandchild ties and sheds light on the character of contemporary family life, intergenerational relationships and obligations.

## **THE CHALLENGE OF DEFINING ‘GRAND’ ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS**

The identification of normative behavioral expectations for the roles of older grandparent and adult grandchild is potentially complicated by two main factors. First, within the wider social context, ongoing social, demographic and economic transformations<sup>1</sup> are creating new, diverse patterns of family life calling into question how family life is constituted and how family roles are defined. According to certain social theorists, tradition and obligation are increasingly being replaced by choice and negotiation as the foundation for interpersonal relationships, especially those within the family (e.g. Beck, 1999, 2001; Beck-Gernshiem, 2002; Giddens, 1992, 1994). Presumably, under these conditions, older grandparents and adult grandchildren are required to negotiate their new roles and relationships with little guidance from well-established normative behavioral expectations.

The second potentially complicating factor is the character of present-day grandparent-grandchild relationships. Family scholars generally agree that demographic and social change has created extreme heterogeneity in grandparent-grandchild relationships (Bengtson, 1985). This variation is largely attributable to the fact that “there is no single ‘grandparent role’” (Giarrusso, Silverstein & Bengtson, 1996:20). Ranging from remote and detached to highly influential, the documented grandparenting styles, types and degrees of involvement with grandchildren are highly variable (see Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986; Mueller, Wilhelm & Elder, 2002; Spence et al., 2001). As Giarrusso

and colleagues suggest, however, “it is important not to confuse variance in styles of role enactment with lack of role definition” (1996:20).

Despite diversity, scholars have identified appropriate grandparenting behaviors, such as being a family historian, mentor, role model, nurturer (e.g. Kornhaber & Woodward, 1981) or ‘family watchdog’ (Troll, 1983), as well as inappropriate behaviors, including interfering in the lives of the middle (Johnson, 1983) and/or grandchild generation (Kemp, 2003b). In general, however, the role has been described as governed by weak (Troll, 1985), proscriptive (Johnson, 1983) and often contradictory norms (Aldous, 1995). These descriptions can be linked to the fact that relative to parent-child ties, there are fewer perceived obligations of support (Rossi & Rossi 1990) and there is therefore, greater choice and freedom in defining the roles of grandparent and grandchild (Connidis, 2001).

The ambiguity or lack of clear definition surrounding the grandparent-grandchild relationship is presumed to become even more apparent as both generations age and the grandchild enters adulthood (Hodgson, 1998). In fact, young adult grandchildren articulate few clear expectations regarding what roles they feel their grandparents should play in their lives (Roberto & Strokes, 1992; Roberston, 1976). However, some adult grand relationships have been found to involve the provision of instrumental assistance (Langer, 1990; Roberto, Allen & Blieszner, 2001), cultural transmission (Wiscott & Kopera-Frye, 2000), sharing of family history (Kennedy, 1990), unconditional support

and friendship (Kemp, 2003b).

Regarding the role of adult grandchild, Kennedy's (1990) work concluded that young adult grandchildren felt that they should express love and provide help to their grandparents. The latter requirement is echoed by Hodgson (1998:173), who suggests that one implication of increasing longevity for family life is that "adult grandchildren become another potential thread in the fabric of support available to older men and women". Empirical research confirms this characterization, concluding that adult grandchildren can be providers of emotional meaning, social support and instrumental assistance to their older grandparents (Kemp, 2003b; Langer, 1990; Silverstein & Long, 1998). From the perspective of the older generation, the younger generation can serve as a source of self-identity, affirmation, companionship and assistance, but beyond having minimal expectations of being treated in a polite and respectful manner, grandparents make few demands and claim to have few actual expectations of their adult grandchildren (Kemp, 2003b). Thus, to this point, the identification of normative behavioral role expectations, particularly among older grandparents and adult grandchildren, remains elusive. In response, this research seeks to examine what, if any, normative behavioral expectations guide older grandparents and adult grandchildren as they negotiate their relationships. What expectations do they have? And, what do their accounts reveal about the nature of contemporary family life and intergenerational interactions?

## **THE GRANDPARENT-ADULT GRANDCHILD STUDY**

The data for this paper are drawn from a wider study aimed at understanding grandparent-adult grandchild relationships from the perspective of both generations. Theoretically and methodologically, this study is underpinned by an approach combining assumptions of life-course and interpretive perspectives. A life course perspective emphasizes the temporal embeddedness of social life and social relationships, as well as the interconnectedness of family members' lives (see Giele & Elder, 1998). This view of the world requires life-history methods as they are able to identify continuity and change over time and reveal connections between individual, familial and historical contexts. Meanwhile, an interpretive perspective places subjective experiences, meanings and negotiation processes at the fore of the research agenda (see Marshall, 1996, 1999). Because an interpretive approach endeavors to access taken-for-granted assumptions (Kaufman, 1994) and the contradictions and tensions inherent in everyday life (Sankar & Gubrium, 1994), qualitative methods are required. In order to reflect the underlying epistemological assumptions of this dual-perspectives approach, qualitative life-history methods were employed.

*Sample Recruitment, Data Collection and Analyses* The convenience sample was purposive, consisting of grandparents with one or more grandchildren aged 21 years or over, and grandchildren with one or more living grandparent drawn from an urban, industrial in Southern Ontario and its surrounding areas. Participants were self-selected

and volunteered after learning of the research project through ads posted on the university website (n=4) and in local public libraries (n=4), as well as through community contacts (n=16) and other participants (n=13). Overall, 15 grandmothers, 3 grandfathers, 10 granddaughters and 9 grandsons participated for a total of 37 qualitative life-history interviews.<sup>2</sup>

Lasting between 1 and 4 hours, interviews with both generations explored the history of each grandparent-adult grandchild relationship, from earliest memory to accounts of the present.<sup>3</sup> Interview topics examined, for example, the frequency and nature of interactions, as well as similarities and differences within families.<sup>4</sup> Interviews were transcribed, read multiple times and thematically analyzed with the use of NUD\*IST.<sup>5</sup> The data presented in this article were taken from participants' accounts of grandparent and grandchild roles, including expectations they have of themselves and their relationship partner(s) and any reflections they articulated regarding what constitutes 'good' and/or 'bad' grandparent and grandchild behaviors and represent the coding category, "'Grand' Expectations" and its subcategories.

*The Sample* Selected sample characteristics appear in Table 1. Grandparents ranged in age from 67 to 91 years and each had an average of approximately 6 grandchildren, including 3 adult grandchildren. The younger generation ranged in age from 21 to 36 years. The majority had more than one living grandparent. In terms of geographic proximity, most participants had at least one grandparent or grandchild who

Table 1. Selected Demographic Characteristics of Sample

<b>GRANDPARENTS</b>	<b>Women (n=15)</b>	<b>Men (n=3)</b>	<b>Total (n=18)</b>
<b>Age Group</b>			
65-74	3	-	3
75-84	7	-	7
85+	5	3	8
<b>Martial Status</b>			
Married	6	2	8
Widowed	7	1	8
Divorced	2		2
<b># of Adult Grandchildren</b>			
1-2	7	3	15
3+	7	-	3
<b>GRANDCHILDREN</b>	<b>Women (n=10)</b>	<b>Men (n=9)</b>	<b>Total (n=19)</b>
<b>Age Group</b>			
21-24	4	3	7
25-29	3	2	5
30+	3	4	6
	7	6	13
<b>Married (yes)</b>			
	2	2	4
<b>Parent (yes)</b>			
<b>Employment</b>			
Full-time	7	7	14
Student	3	2	5
<b># of living Grandparents</b>			
1	1	5	6
2	2	3	5
3+	7	1	8

lived in the same city or was within a one hour drive. The sample was primarily white and middle-class, although 2 granddaughters were black and 2 grandmothers were in low-income situations. Four grandmothers, 1 granddaughter and 3 grandsons were Jewish. Given the minimal diversity and the voluntary nature of the sample, what emerges from these interview data can not be generalized to the population, but rather, provides an exploratory look at the experiences of older grandparents and adult grandchildren.<sup>6</sup>

## **IDENTIFYING 'GRAND' EXPECTATIONS**

This group of grandparents and grandchildren articulated few normative expectations of themselves in their respective family roles and had even fewer expectations of one another (Kemp, 2003b). How grandparents and grandchildren acted and reacted towards one another was diverse, not only between families but also within them. This provides some evidence of the fluid, negotiated and dynamic nature of these particular family roles. In fact, there was no set pattern for how these roles and relationships operated in the lives of each generation. Rather, the accounts of each relationship indicated that the actual roles older grandparents and adult grandchildren played in one another's lives were individually negotiated over time with and in response to interpersonal, familial, and social contexts.

At the same time, the experiential accounts also suggest that behavioral guidelines do exist, whether in the form of prescriptive or proscriptive expectations, for both family

roles. Among each generation, there was general consensus regarding how grandparents and adult grandchildren should behave. And, despite being somewhat vague or general, these perceived expectations clearly entered into grandparent-adult grandchild interactions shaping how they negotiated their relationships and evaluated their own and others' role performances. There were certain shared expectations pertaining to the provision of support and assistance, but owing to culturally prevalent ideas regarding youth, old age, independence, individual rights, family obligation and intergenerational relationships, the roles of grandparent and adult grandchild were guided by somewhat different norms and responsibilities.

### ***Behavioral Expectations and Responsibilities of Grandparents***

Grandparents consistently described how they should behave toward their adult grandchildren. Proscriptively, they were guided by the norm of non-interference, as well as expectations of unconditional acceptance. Prescriptively, grandparents felt they should provide support to their grandchildren, including the adults, and assume a role of teacher within the family.

*Expectations of non-interference* Without doubt, the norm of non-interference was the most instructive behavioral expectation guiding grandparents' approach to their adult grandchildren. Owing to its considerable behavioral consequences, this norm shaped accounts of grandparent-adult grandchild interactions and relationships. As will be seen,

the norm of non-interference generally assumed precedence over other behavioral expectations and can be considered an overarching or ‘master’ norm which governs most grandparents’ actions.

Grandparents viewed their family role as requiring discretion, caution and to an extent, being a spectator until cued otherwise. While the older generation felt they should be interested in their adult grandchildren’s lives, they were equally ardent in their view that they should not interfere directly or indirectly in the younger generations’ lives. Translated into behavior, the norm of non-interference instructs older grandparents to be unassuming and supportive in exchanges with their adult grandchildren.

I think being a grandparent is...to listen. And not to criticize. I don’t think a grandparent should criticize anything about a grandchild, even if they do think maybe it is not the right thing. Just go along with it. *Grandmother, Age 91*

This grandmother illustrates that as a dimension of the norm of non-interference, being unassuming, also requires grandparents to be unconditionally accepting and prohibits criticism.

Guided by this norm, grandparents did not feel at liberty to engage in behaviors such as giving unsolicited advice, attempting to change or sway their grandchildren’s life choices, or prying or meddling in the younger generations’ private lives, even if they wanted to be informed.

With an adult grandchild, you don’t pry. If they volunteer information, fine. You can sort of put a feeler out, but if they don’t respond you sort of kind of shut your mouth and just wait and hear...We like to know what is going on, but if they don’t want to tell you, you can’t get it out of them anyway, so why make them

feel unhappy and angry with you?

*Grandmother, Age 80*

I listen and stay out of the advice part unless it's something simple. I don't get involved. Sometimes if you give advice, but say something that fits the situation to make them think it out themselves, you're better...[but, even then] you're liable to say something that will upset them one way and they'll be upset with you too and then, they're not going to confide because they don't want the advice. Or it can be the other way, you can give them advice and it will be bad advice.

*Grandmother, Age 79*

This group of grandparents equated their role with listening and responding rather than questioning and initiating. Their accounts also demonstrate that grandparents' adherence to the norm of non-interference, including the prohibition on criticism, can be strategic.

Not intervening was often a conscious attempt to avoid unwanted consequences: undesirable conflict; making grandchildren upset or angry with them; and earning a reputation for giving bad advice or being meddlesome. Interference, in these and other forms was deemed by grandparents to carry negative consequences. Not interfering was pragmatic for grandparents because they believed that attempting to meddle would either have no effect, yield undesirable results, or worse, place the relationship at risk. Grandparents linked these perceptions to wider cultural patterns of youth and independence.

Failure to be unassuming towards adult grandchildren was perceived as risky because the norm of non-interference was viewed not only as a role expectation, but also a responsibility and obligation. According to one grandmother, "there's a responsibility that I'm not going to interfere in their lives". Older grandparents associated their sense of

responsibility to not interfere in the lives of their adult grandchildren with the young adult identity, and its accompanying rights and entitlement to lead lives relatively free from family intrusion.

You can't interfere in their lives....[Sometimes] you want to, you want to say, "Hey, I did that and it ain't gonna work. Don't do that". You want to say a lot of things. But it's hard to. You don't feel like it's interfering because you love and you care. I mean, I never say to them, "Do it this way, because..." I mean, you just say, "Hey, be careful, you know, think about it". *Grandmother, Age 69*

I think it is foolish for grandparents to try to run their grandchildren...Not only foolish, but sometimes impossible...I think some grandparents do try to influence their grandchildren and I don't think that's fair. *Grandmother, Age 86*

The evidence indicates an underlying sense that interfering, at least within the parameters of the grandparent-adult grandchild relationship, is neither morally right, nor justifiable.

Adult grandchildren placed less emphasis on explicitly identifying norms of non-interference, largely because most of their grandparents had never attempted to intervene in their lives. A few grandchildren overtly stated that because grandparents "don't have to claim responsibility", they "don't have the right to interfere" the way parents do. Of course, some grandparents had made efforts to influence their adult grandchildren's lives by attempting to impose their own desires and sway the outcome of life decisions. These grandchildren did not allow their grandparents' efforts to succeed, upholding a belief in their right to independence. Speaking of grandparents, one granddaughter said, "They just have to learn, love and accept".

In keeping with the adage, 'respect your elders,' grandchildren afforded

grandparents opportunities to speak their minds, but rejected moves to interfere, either by dismissing the attempts or by endeavoring to negotiate acceptance, rather than approval of their choices.

You take it in stride. They're older and set in their ways and that's how it is. I mean, I just let it go in one ear and out the other...Me, I just let it roll off...as I say, they don't necessarily understand my choices, I hope they can appreciate them.  
*Granddaughter, Age 32*

She'll speak her mind about my relationship....I convey to her that the things that are important to me are going to continue. And that the things that aren't important to me, may be important to her and I'm sorry, but it's my life and our life and we do what we want. And I say to her, I have said to her that she doesn't need to worry that she's in my heart and the things that she's given me will always be there, but it is sort of my way of saying, "I'm not sorry, but I'm okay". And for her just to try and accept that and go on.

*Grandson, Age 31*

In addition to endorsing the view that the grandparent role is not accompanied by the right to interfere, the above passages also suggest that grandchildren expect unconditional acceptance, even in the face of disapproval or an inability to understand. Non-interference, with unconditional acceptance is not an optional dimension of the grandparent role. Rather, it is obligatory if older grandparents are to have a positive relationships with their adult grandchildren.

*Expectations of Support and Assistance* Despite discussions of young adults' entitlement to autonomous lives, the biographical accounts endorse the belief that family members remain an important, legitimate and anticipated source of assistance from which adults continue to draw support; grandparents' roles are intimately connected to this view.

Grandparents viewed themselves and were viewed by adult grandchildren as ‘second-tier parents’ and therefore, important contributors or potential support providers to the younger generation (Kemp, 2003b).

As an extension of the parent role, most grandparents felt some form of responsibility for their children’s children. This obligation included helping to meet grandchildren’s social, emotional and material needs, including contributions of encouragement, time and money. If the middle generation was, for whatever reason, unable to instrumentally assist their children and/or grandparents were in a position to help, they felt they should assume responsibility. For example:

I always figured it was our place to help the others, our grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I always will. I figure it is our place to help them [with] any thing they want. I guess that’s what it is. We have lent money to them, to my first grandson, never to the other, he never asked us for any. *Grandfather, Age 85*

Underpinning the final sentence of this grandfather’s account is the recognition that the provision of support and assistance to adult grandchildren violates and, hence, contradicts the norm of non-interference. Given the pervasiveness of non-interference, it shaped how the need for help was identified. In keeping with the passive, reactive nature of the role, many grandparents waited for their adult grandchildren to come to them and provided help if they were able and mainly when it was requested (Kemp, 2003).

Rooted in passivity, the main dimension of grandparents’ supportive role is the notion of being available for grandchildren, providing love and encouragement. Thus conceived, grandparents reported having an obligation to just be there for their adult

grandchildren and also to create a safe, supportive environment.

I hope that [my grandchildren] have a feeling of security that I am here. If they have any needs, that they will come and tell me about it and if there is anything I can do for them, that they would come and ask me. And, I think they would.

*Grandmother, Age 88*

Just to be there for them. If something is wrong, they can always feel free to come to you...I said to [my grandson], "If you need me or something, I'm here. You know where I live and if I move, I'll let you know". In my opinion, that's what being a grandparent is about. It's just to be there and to be supportive of them.

*Grandmother, Age 68*

In these accounts, being supportive means that grandparents should be available to provide social, emotional and material security and safety at their grandchildren's request.

The expectation of support from grandparents was also articulated from the perspective of adult grandchildren. For this generation, grandparents symbolize and are expected to be providers of love, support and encouragement, as well as assistance. The role of the grandparent, was characterized as responsive to grandchildren's needs.

Grandparents are just supposed to be there when you need them and they always are...Just anything. They're always there and they always have time for you. They're willing, able, ready, always. And, my grandparents, they don't give advice unless you ask for it. They're the wise ones.

*Granddaughter, Age 22*

Again, this granddaughter underscores her grandparents' responsibility to not interfere in her life unless invited and her right to ask for help.

Naturally, not all grandparents fulfill the behavioral expectations relating to giving support and assistance. And, some grandchildren felt they should not have to ask for help if they were in need and grandparents could assist. Below, one grandson discusses how

his grandparents violated the taken-for-granted expectation regarding the provision of support.

I think that grandparents should be there for support...I believe in certain circumstances, if they can do it, they should. I think that is something that has always bothered me. When I wanted to go to university, I knew my grandparents were able to help out financially, and they didn't. I didn't understand why. I always say to myself, when I am a grandparent one day, I want to help my grandchildren out when it comes to schooling..I think that's important if you can do it...That and, just emotional and moral support, really...I didn't get a whole lot of that myself. Maybe that's why I want that. I had friends that had that.

*Grandson, Age 28*

What emerges from this grandson's account is a clear disjuncture between normative expectations of his grandparents and the reality, which was a lack of financial, emotional and moral support. Of particular interest is the sentiment that this was undesirable and incomprehensible grandparenting behavior relative to perceptions of what others, namely this grandson's friends, were experiencing. In this instance, while his grandparents adhered to the norm of non-interference, expectations of providing desired support were not fulfilled and from the grandson's perspective, this created strain and negativity within the relationship.

*Teaching and Mentorship Expectations* Articulating wider discourses equating old age with wisdom and worldly experience, the grandparents' family identity was routinely linked to teaching and mentorship. Both generations expressed ideas about grandparents as an important presence in the family, acting as role models, sources of family and social history, wisdom and lived experience. According to grandparents:

I think story telling is perhaps one of the main roles...true stories too that could give you a sense of history that a lot of families lose. *Grandfather, Age 88*

It's being part of their lives. Trying to teach them, instill in them values, like you did with your own children. Trying to be patient and to love them no matter what, unconditionally. *Grandmother, Age 69*

Being a grandparent is to set a good example and to listen. *Grandmother, Age 91*

Although most viewed themselves as teachers and role models in the family, the final quote is very representative. Many grandparents were reluctant to identify themselves as teachers and role models without also qualifying their position on interference.

Similar to expectations of support, grandparents' teaching role was viewed as a potential contradiction to the norm of non-interference. Consequently, non-interference also left its mark on accounts of this prescriptive norm. Grandparents characterized their subtle approach to influencing their grandchildren's lives by saying, for example: "I don't ever think of influencing them, except by osmosis" and "I hope...that something of me, of my personality, of the way I am has rubbed off on them". Here again, non-interference remains central to grandparents' accounts of their teaching role, including what and how they transmit information to adult grandchildren.

Adult grandchildren placed greater emphasis and importance on the teaching dimension of the grandparent role. These grandchildren elucidate some fairly representative expectations they have of their older grandparents:

To instill values, morals, beliefs in their grandchildren and great-grandchildren...I think too, the role of the grandfather, not only teaching-providing, he is still providing me with his life experiences which influence my

decisions. When he tells me something, it might influence my decisions about how I do things...I think his role is still to teach about his generation, my mom's generation, and my generation-for my kids. *Grandson, Age 35*

You know, they really are who you look up to...I think you still look up to your grandparents [as an adult] and still want them there because of their stories, because of their history in terms of your family. *Granddaughter, Age 27*

While grandparents' accounts of their mentor role placed non-interference at the fore, adult grandchildren clearly desire grandparents' continued involvement in their socialization (and their children's). In fact, barring uninvited interference, most welcomed and had great respect for their grandparents' experiences and several took this knowledge into account when making decisions.

### ***Behavioral Expectations and Responsibilities of Adult Grandchildren***

Unlike discussions of the grandparent role, most grandparents and adult grandchildren were initially at a loss to identify any behavioral expectations associated with the younger generation. Several individuals responded by saying, for example, "I wouldn't begin to say what a grandchild should or shouldn't do" and "I don't really think [grandchildren] really have a role in the family". After suggesting that there were no behavioral expectations or normative role patterns for adult grandchildren, many went on to contradict themselves, indicating that the younger generation should be respectful of their grandparents, 'give back', and 'help out'.

*Expectations of Respect and Consideration* Much like the norm of non-

interference for grandparents, expectations of respect and, relatedly, consideration, permeated most accounts of the adult grandchild role and normative behavior, particularly from the perspective of the younger generation. Respectfulness was a taken-for-granted part of being a grandchild.

The role of the grandchild, it's funny because I'm not all that close to them. Like I know when I see them I have to be respectful, I have to talk to them a little bit, greet them, I give them a kiss or shake their hand kind of, stuff like that. And just be friendly with them, just to be warm around them is kind of my role.

*Grandson, Age 21*

Grandchildren displayed their respect a number of ways, but at base, it meant behaving in a polite, cordial manner, and giving time and attention to their aging grandparents.

For many grandchildren, the obligation to respect existed by virtue of grandparents' family identity. Their age and family position was equated with making enormous sacrifices and contributions to the family, which, according to one grandson, has "earned" grandparents "the right to speak" their "minds". Translated into behavior, this means being respectful by spending time with grandparents and when doing so, listening to grandparents:

I think sometimes there's expectations like in the sense of respecting your elders. You know, make sure your grandparents are okay and that kind of thing. There's definitely a sense of...okay, [my grandfather] is not going to change his way, just let him say what he wants to say, kind of thing. I'll respect what he says or whatever his beliefs or reason or whatever.

*Granddaughter, Age 27*

Just spend time with our grandparents, listen to what they have to say. Like don't, if they're giving me advice, I don't, even though I don't agree with it, I don't necessarily say to them, "Shut up". I just say "okay", but I don't necessarily do it either.

*Granddaughter, Age 22*

While not opposed to hearing grandparents' opinions, as the above passages suggest, doing so was often a courtesy. Based on personal experience or old age stereotypes, a number of grandchildren perceived their grandparents as set in their ways or unlikely to change. They viewed being respectful as practical and wise. Much like grandparents' views of grandchildren, the younger generation felt that they would be unable to alter the older generation's opinions and that attempting to do so would likely result in unnecessary conflict or hurt feelings.

For most adult grandchildren, the notion of feeling obliged to respect their grandparents emerged from an appreciation of their grandparents' life experiences. A number of the older adult grandchildren displayed great reverence for their grandparents whose lives and experiences they perceived as unimaginable from the context of their own life experiences. For example:

I think what it means to be a good grandchild as an adult is being respectful of everything that my grandmother has experienced in her life. She's experienced so much more than I have. You know, she's lived through the Second World War... People of our generation have a hell of a lot more privilege and so being respectful of everything that she's had to endure in her life.

*Grandson, Age 28*

The historical conditions of each generation's lives, including the great Depression, WWII, and immigrating to Canada for grandparents, were not inconsequential for their relationships. These conditions entered into grandchildren's accounts of their roles and promoted enduring respect.

Being respectful was also discussed within the context of grandparents' aging and old age. Most grandchildren were conscious of negative stereotypes associating old age with a time of severe physical and mental decline and a state of dependence. As stereotypical descriptive images of older persons – including frailty, an inability to learn new things, being out of date and somehow less than equal – influence the ways individuals tend to communicate with older adults, a number of grandchildren practiced respect by deliberately attempting to avoid reinforcing ageist stereotypes in interactions with their aging grandparents.

One thing I try never to do is to talk to them like they are old. I don't like to patronize them...I don't like to talk to them like they are children, which some people do with some of the elderly. If they don't understand something, or don't hear something, then, I'll repeat it, but I just don't treat them like they're going away like a lot of people do.

*Grandson, Age 31*

From a sense of respect, I think, treating [my grandmother] as an equal and not thinking that she's weak and frail...I don't ever feel sorry for her and so I think it is an obligation and responsibility to not feel that way about her.

*Grandson, Age 28*

For many older grandparents, frailty and declining health were undeniable realities, but based on perceptions of their grandparents' family position and lives, many grandchildren believed it was their responsibility to reinforce the older generation's independence and autonomy.

Mainly because most grandchildren respect their grandparents, they placed more emphasis on respect in accounts of their own family role. Some grandparents discussed respect as something they desired (and received). Their definitions of respect reflected

many of the same meanings contained within grandchildren's accounts, for example, not being disrespectful out of ageist attitudes and having a responsibility to respect older family members:

I haven't been apace with anything like that [but] I wouldn't want them ordering me around or treating me as if I was an imbecile or because I am getting on in my years that I haven't got my faculties. I think I'd take a dim look at that.

*Grandmother, Age 80*

I think you should respect, you know? Someone that's been so good to you and treated you good and never gave you a reason to disrespect, then you should respect them. As adults, that's part of the responsibility, to respect your elders.

*Grandmother, Age 69*

Unlike grandchildren who were generally willing to give grandparents unconditional respect because of their age and family position, a few grandparents, such as the grandmother above, discussed respect as dialectic. They expected respect, but felt it was earned and exchanged.

*Expectations of 'Giving Back'* The expectation of 'giving back' arose from respect and the idealized notion of grandparents as family members who contribute unconditional love, support, and nurturing to the extended family and often make sacrifices for others, with few expectations in return. Grandchildren viewed giving back as one of their primary responsibilities.

I would think that the adult grandchild role might be some sort of, kind of returning, say justifying that they have done everything right...Like I look at my relationship with my grandmother and I think the fact that I turned out to be what I consider half decent and that I spend time with her as proof. *Grandson, Age 23*

This intergenerational reciprocity was expressed in a number of different ways. Being

sources of pride and spending time with grandparents were among the most common ways of 'returning'.

In terms of acting as sources of pride, most grandchildren agreed that they wanted to make their grandparents proud and that doing so was a way to affirm grandparents' contributions and inspiration to the family. Grandchildren stated that it was their role to be a source of pride:

I don't know what my role, or the adult role is. I just think I'm something for them to be proud of and be happy about. Almost sort of further success for them that they had children who have gone on to have successful children.

*Granddaughter, Age 22*

The fact that they are able to see what I've become, see who I've married, see what I've become professionally and hopefully just give them some pride. I think that's it. That's my favorite thing in that I can return some of the pride that they've given me. I can never come close to matching what they've given to me, but that they know that means a lot to me.

*Grandson, Age 31*

Grandchildren viewed their accomplishments as reward for grandparents' efforts within the extended family. And, implicitly located in grandchild accounts, not being a disappointment was an equally important, albeit proscriptive, expectation of the adult grandchild role.

Although rarely characterized as expectations of giving back, grandparents also expressed hopes that their grandchildren would be successful, happy (sources of pride) and not disappoint.

Oh, I don't know, they've never done anything bad. You don't want them to get into trouble with drugs or alcohol or marital troubles. You want them to be happy.

*Grandmother, Age 78*

I don't care whether they achieve a lot money-wise. I would far rather see them have a happy life, a happy balanced life and feel successful with any of their accomplishments.

*Grandmother, Age 79*

You hope that they'll do certain things and do them well, but I'll just have to sit back and watch.

*Grandmother, Age 86*

From grandparents' perspectives, grandchildren's successfulness was articulated as an aspiration, something they hoped for rather than expected; this reinforced for grandparents the value of the norm of non-interference and to the entitlement of youths to lead their own lives.

The other way grandchildren felt that they should show appreciation for their grandparents was by spending time with them, checking-in, having concern, visiting, and being informed about one another's lives. This aspect of the adult grandchild role includes:

I just think to be there, make her years as comfortable and enjoyable as possible. Maybe it means taking her out for a walk, or taking her for a drive or visiting her friends or whatever. I think grandchildren should be doing that if they can, if it's feasible.

*Granddaughter, Age 32*

Being obliged not to forget about [my grandmother]. To feel obliged to spend time, even if I'm really busy, to make time to go and see her if I know that it's important to her. Given the option, I probably would not go because I've got too much to do. Feeling obliged and responsible to call her... just to see how she is doing...those are the sorts of things I suppose a grandchild should do for their grandparents.

*Grandson, Age 27*

For adult grandchildren, giving back often meant giving time. Because most grandchildren did not want to disappoint their grandparents or let them down, giving time sometimes involved giving up or changing plans even if it was not desirable or

convenient to do so, particularly when the older generation initiates contact, for example:

Sometimes my grandfather will show up out of the blue in the summer and he'll be at the house in the back about 10:30 and I'm like, 'uh'. Like, I've had a whole day planned for doing things. Well, now I feel obligated to cancel all of my plans and stay home. I would never dare tell him. *Grandson, Age 35*

Still others felt that they should be giving back more of their time to their grandparents and experienced guilt stemming from what they should be, but were not doing.

They never want to intrude, but I'm like, "Come over or phone me" because it is hard to make the time...you've got to live your life and at the same time and there's so much going on with work and everything else. I feel bad for grandparents, you know, just because they've given so much to their families and sometimes, I don't feel like I'm giving enough back. *Granddaughter, Age 22*

This representative quote illustrates a desire to give back and also the assumption that older family members generally give more than they receive in family relationships. However, as the right to lead one's own life as a young adult was central to the practices associated with these intergenerational relationships, there were fewer expectations of adult grandchildren on the part of both generations.

Once again, grandparents' views were governed by their acceptance of young adults being entitled to lead their own lives and the ensuing busy-ness of their demanding lifestyles:

They're growing up and getting into their own life. Grandparents are there, but they're not your top priority. I mean, I understand that and I don't expect that. I just hope that they'll find their own place and have happy lives and remember me once in a while. *Grandmother, Age 88*

Grandparents expressed a hope that their grandchildren would demonstrate interest in

their lives and welcomed additional grandchild contact, but because they observed the boundaries of their family role, they rarely demanded or expected it.

*Expectations of 'Helping Out'* Emerging from a view of the family as natural providers of informal support, particularly to older family members, and from normative expectations of respect and of reciprocity, a key dimension of the adult grandchild role was described as 'helping out'. Somewhat telling is the following account from the grandson whose grandparents failed to provide the support he expected; despite his disappointment, he felt his role was to help.

I feel my role is that if they need me to help, I can help...I think that they have paid their dues, grandparents [and] I turned out all right. My Dad's all right. So obviously they did something right. I'm kind of proud of my family.

*Grandson, Age 28*

Thus, similar to the expectation that grandparents should provide support and assistance in the event that it is desired, needed and can be given, there exists an underlying expectation of adult grandchildren to fulfill a supportive role with respect to their aging grandparents.

Both generations referred to an established hierarchy of help providers which casts adult children as the appropriate first line of assistance, but additionally, there were expectations that adult grandchildren can be (and are) called on to participate in support processes.

I suppose in the case of something happening to either my husband or myself, say we weren't physically able to look after ourselves or something needed to be done and our children were not available and the grandchildren were, it would

probably come down to them to sort of step in at that time.

*Grandmother, Age 80*

I do my best [providing support], but I also sort of think that it's the kids who really need to be the ones, it's not really a grandchild's role to. I love them and I want to be there for them, but I also think my father needs to take some responsibility in planning my grandmother's care.

*Grandson, Age 31*

While grandchildren are willing and to a certain extent, expected, to assume some responsibility for assisting their grandparents, generally, this responsibility comes as a second-tier child with secondary responsibilities. It is an extension of the link to the middle generation.

Normative patterns of support in intergenerational families cast adult grandchildren in the role of potential helper within older grandparents' supportive network. When given, this help generally takes one of two forms: direct and indirect. The form of help given is largely determined by the situation, including the availability and capabilities of the middle generation. Direct and indirect forms of help are, of course, not mutually exclusive – grandchildren's efforts to help out, whether directly or indirectly, generally supports both generations.

I have offered to my grandmother numerous times, you know, 'Do you need me to take you grocery shopping?' 'Do you want me to help out with something?' Or if you need me to move something that is heavy in the house, just let me know?...So, I think as an adult grandchild, you have a, your duty is to help out if they need to be helped, whether it's directly or indirectly. If I have to help my dad help my grandmother then, I should do that.

*Grandson, Age 28*

I think a grandchild should be willing to give up a little bit for a grandparent, if it is necessary. I remember one time when I was very ill and my son used to come and see me often and he had to drive a long way alone. He would bring my granddaughter with him and I think that was a good deed that granddaughter did

for me and for her dad. And I can remember once when I was ill, my oldest granddaughter was the first one they called because there was nobody else around. I always did appreciate that. *Grandmother, Age 91*

Helping was presented as a wider obligation and contribution to family life and as an act of reciprocity, respect and appreciation for the older generation.

The degree and nature of adult grandchildren's involvement in their grandparents' supportive network was, of course, variable and influenced by countless configurations of factors, including, geographic proximity, birth order, gender, individual needs, interpersonal and family history, as well as the availability of family members. In most cases, grandchildren would neither expect nor be expected to provide support in the form of decision-making, providing or arranging for grandparents' care. However, consider the following account from a granddaughter in a family where all members of the middle generation were absent as a result of death:

So, suddenly, I felt responsible...I felt I needed to call every week and check in on them and when they were worried about something, I would need to be the one to jump in and make a suggestion about the cottage or selling the house or Grandpa's Alzheimer's, or whatever the case may be...Legally, I am the power of attorney and executor of the estate. So legally, it falls to me. Morally, it falls to me because I'm there. *Granddaughter, Age 27*

This woman's siblings assumed less responsibility and she did not play an instrumental role on her paternal side where a middle generation still existed. Ultimately, circumstances vary between and within families, and this non-normative experience demonstrates the potential extent of grandchildren's supportive role in aging families, whether a legal or moral responsibility.

## **INTERPRETING ACCOUNTS OF ‘GRAND’ EXPECTATIONS**

These relational accounts illuminate how some older grandparents and adult grandchildren conceive of their family roles, and provide insight into the negotiation of intergenerational exchanges and relationships within aging families. These experiences demonstrate that certain normative ‘grand’ expectations do exist. Although general, these guidelines did enter into relationships and provided a framework for [re]acting within relationships and evaluating grandparent and grandchild behaviors.<sup>7</sup> Based on participants’ analyses of their relationships, the very nature of the behavioral expectations identified by both generations, as well as the absence of more specific prescriptive norms can be interpreted in light of wider patterns of social life, particularly those highlighted by theories of individualization.

In an effort to account for social change, particularly transformations to the contours of family life, theorists such as Beck (2002), Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and Giddens (1994) have focused analytic attention on the processes of individualization within late-modernity. This perspective identifies shifts in the industrial and commercial economies as catalytic to the changing nature of dependencies in which individuals’ lives are embedded (Allan, Hawker & Crow, 2001). This theory is based on two main assumptions, both of which are echoed in participants’ accounts.

The first assumption is that traditional social relationships (including the family) and value systems that once defined individuals' lives have lost much of their meaning and determinism. New options and possibilities exist for shaping individuals' lives as men and women "can and should, may and must decide for themselves how to shape their lives" (ix). There is cultural emphasis on individualism, rights of independence and personal freedom, as well as an increasing prioritization of "individuals' rights to aspire to self-fulfillment" (Allan, 2001:332).

Articulated in very different ways, these patterns were apparent in both generations' accounts and experiences. Trends toward individualization were most evident in accounts of adult grandchildren's lives. Adult grandchildren viewed themselves and were viewed by grandparents as entitled to lead independent lives of their own making. Beck (1998) refers to this as the 'biographization of youth' which not only enjoins, but demands that younger generations define their identities and life course paths, actively seeking to design lives of their own. By acknowledging these rights, the norm of non-interference was agreed upon by both generations and entered into relationships by setting boundaries for behavior and expectations.

In terms of grandparents' lives, the emphasis on autonomy was not as evident, however, the older generations' decision to not interfere in their grandchildren's lives was motivated in part by a desire to maintain reputations as independent and undemanding family members. A number of grandchildren deliberately tried to reinforce their aging

grandparents' sense of autonomy and independence, often in response to their grandparents' increasing frailty and poor health. Thus, while grandchildren were attempting to establish their independence, grandparents were intent on maintaining their autonomy in later life. Each generation respected the other's right to do so.

The second assumption underlying the theory of individualization highlights the fact that individuals' lives are embedded in wider social institutions, including the labour market, educational system and the welfare state. In late-modernity, rights, entitlements and responsibilities associated with these institutions are largely designed for individuals rather than the family. Most entitlements assume employment and by corollary education. Both presuppose mobility, which in many instances, forces people away from their families and other established ties (Beck 2001; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

Conceptualizations of adult grandchildren's lives conformed to this characterization of life in late-modern times. Descriptions of the multiple demands within grandchildren's everyday lives including those of school, work, social and other familial obligations were presented as expected challenges to maintaining grandparent-adult grandchild relationships. The centrality of grandchildren's right to pursue their own lives reconciled this challenge in such a way that grandparents accepted that grandchildren's being busy was a 'legitimate excuse'<sup>8</sup> for not visiting, helping more or establishing anything beyond minimal behavioral expectations.

The lack of abundant explicit behavioral expectations and normative role

prescriptions is also very telling. The absence of more specific and numerous expectations can also be linked, in part to the freedom, choice and negotiation so characteristic of relationships in late-modernity (see Beck, 1999, 2001; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1992, 1994). This shift away from tradition and obligation means that the social relevance of relationships is being substituted by personal significance (Allan, 2001). Under these conditions, the implications can be positive as interpersonal relationships can potentially be more rewarding than in the past (Giddens, 1994).

Without institutionally defined roles, older grandparents and adult grandchildren are more free to design their relationships based on personal need and personal history. Such freedom translates into new opportunities and possibilities, particularly when paired with grandchildren's maturity. For instance, this scenario allows for the possibility of developing close, personal, connections, including friendships or friend-like relationships. However, there is "asymmetry" or "intergenerational imbalance" in grandparent-adult grandchild relationships as the proscriptive norm of non-interference means that younger generations have greater choice and more power to decide than do older generations (Kemp, 2003b).

The experiences of this group of older grandparents and adult grandchildren indicate that the presence of choice, freedom and negotiation in interpersonal relationships does not necessarily replace tradition or obligation. In the current social context, traditional views of family life and generations persist and obligation has not

disappeared. Rather, they co-exist along side cultural emphases on choice and freedom, and often reemerge in new forms. The traditional view of the family as a proper source of support was evident in both generations' accounts. The family, at least for this group of participants, remains a key institution of social support, help and assistance, at any age. Individuals' needs and abilities likely influence the provision and receipt of support, yet there remains a taken-for-granted assumption that, if circumstances permit, the roles of older grandparent and adult grandchildren can include the provision and receipt of support as a normative practice of intergenerational exchange.

At the same time, the 'new' obligation to respect young adults' right to lead lives free of grandparent interference potentially complicates the traditional obligation to help within the family. Moreover, acceptance of grandchildren's busy lives provides them with "legitimate excuses" which can excuse them from helping. Because of personal connections to grandparents and a sense of individual accountability, some adult grandchildren in this study could not legitimately excuse themselves; they experienced guilt and/or were motivated to spend time/help their grandparents. Obligations do not disappear in these family relationships, they are personally chosen and improvised mainly in response to individual, familial and social circumstances. They are also personally sanctioned, which motivates individuals differently.

Within grandparent-adult grandchild relationships, the convergence of the norm of non-interference and the norm of respect, in tandem with the tensions between choice,

obligation and tradition can create contradictions with relationships. For instance, while choice sets the stage for the development of close grand ties, the expectation of non-interference meant that some grandparents restricted themselves from speaking their minds or offering certain opinions when interacting with adult grandchildren. Likewise, out of respect for their grandparents and a desire to not disappoint, a number of grandchildren also felt they should censor themselves in interactions with their grandparents. Of course, the extent to which these observations were true varied from relationship to relationship.

Beyond cross-sectional, survey data, future research would do well to consider how, in what ways and under what circumstances grandparent-adult grandchild relationships vary and how and why individual relationships themselves vary over time.<sup>9</sup> Future research agendas might also wish to address the ways in which grandparent-grandchild relationships differ from or are similar to other intergenerational family ties, especially those between aging parents and adult children. Expectations of non-interference likely apply to older parent-child relationships, but because of the history and nature of the ties, expectations are not likely as strong. Norms governing the provision of assistance, giving back and mentoring are presumably stronger between parents and children, but such a conclusion remains somewhat speculative. There are other important questions. For example, if the combination of normative guidelines for grandparents and adult grandchildren can create contradictions and tensions, how is increasing longevity in

a late-modern age negotiated in parent-child relationships which are, as some scholars have argued, well-suited to a framework of sociological ambivalence (e.g. Connidis & McMullin, 2002a, 2002b; Luescher & Pillemer, 1998)? There remains much more to learn about family relationships in an aging society under the conditions of late-modern times, particularly at the level of lived experience.

In closing, these grandparent and grandchild accounts attest to the diversity and complexity of contemporary family life. Cumulatively, the individual experiences support the notion that family roles are fluid and interpersonally negotiated over time, within particular circumstance and in response to the wider family network. At the same time, this group of grandparents and grandchildren had clear ideas regarding appropriate and inappropriate role behaviors. What they identified were basic 'grand' expectations. The lack of specific, numerous or grand 'grand' expectations means the possibility of substantial challenges for aging families, for instance a lack of contact between generations. However, this situation also means the possibility of significant personal rewards within older grandparent-adult grandchild relationships as individuals are somewhat free to fashion their relationships (particularly the grandchildren). Demographic conditions have created the opportunity for the development of adult grand relationships and wider social practices mean an opportunity for these ties to be individually negotiated based on personally, rather than socially prescribed norms. Interpreted in a positive light, this is but one implication of increasing longevity and

intergenerational overlap in an era of late-modernity.

## **Notes**

1. Increasing life expectancy and decreasing fertility are occurring along side, often in response to changing gender roles, patterns of work, marriage, divorce, cohabitation and remarriage, as well as technological advances (Beaujot, 2000; Milan, 2000).
2. Owing to issues of geography and time, as well as concern regarding the open disclosure of information, no attempt was made to actively recruit grandparents and grandchildren from the same families. However, 4 same-family dyads did participate in the study. In all of these cases, participants recruited their own family member to participate. Two grandparents recruited their grandchildren and 2 grandchildren recruited their grandparents.
3. Participants spoke about all of their grandparent-grandchild relationships, but particular attention was paid to the grandparent-adult grandchild relationships they were involved in at the time of the interview. In total, grandparents chronicled 57 grandparent-adult grandchild relationships and grandchildren chronicled 42 relationships.
4. In addition, grandparents were also asked, if possible, to retrospectively recount their experiences of being grandchildren and to reflect on their own parents as grandparents.
5. Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing is a qualitative analytic computer program.
6. It should be stated that there was an overwhelming response to the recruitment processes. Presumably this indicates that individuals wanted to talk about their grandparent-adult grandchild relationships. In most cases, as will be seen, interest was expressed because of the positive nature of participants' experiences. The images emerging from these accounts can, to a certain extent be assumed to represent best-case scenarios.
7. The data support Strauss' (1959) enduring contention that a social role is best conceived as a general framework for action and behavior.
8. Finch and Mason (1993) refer to 'legitimate excuses' in their work on negotiating family responsibility. For example, employment demands and geographic distance were viewed by family members as acceptable reasons for not fulfilling family responsibilities.
9. For example, the data spoke to few gender differences, but with the limitations of the sample including its size and composition, it is difficult to conclude that gender is not

influential. This is particularly true for the differences among grandparents as 3 grandfathers participated in the study. Ultimately, this study cannot address the presence or absence of gender variations.

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## **CHAPTER V: Rethinking Grandparent-Grandchild Relationships and Family Ties**

*There is a tendency for contemporary research on grandparent-grandchild relationships to be ahistorical—to give little attention to how intergenerational relationships are conditioned by particular social structures...Demographic change, social change, and ideological change all influence the nature of grandparent-grandchild relationships in a society.*  
Uhlenberg & Kirby (1998:39)

### **Introduction**

Through an exploration of demographic, social, historical and ideological conditions, as well as effort to link social structure and individual experience, this dissertation represents an attempt to advance knowledge pertaining to grandparent-grandchild relationships and family life in late-modern society. In order to accomplish these objectives, the dissertation began with an analysis of the social and demographic patterns of grandparenthood in Canada, comparing figures with the United States and establishing the contours of grandparent-grandchild ties at the population level. Using the findings of this quantitative analysis as a departure point, the dissertation then took up a specific macro-level finding—the high prevalence of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships—investigating its meanings, significance and processes at the level of lived experience from the perspective of both generations. In dialogue with theories of individualization and related theoretical currents, it also sought to link the microsociological level of analysis with the social and ideological transformation at the macrosociological level in order to provide an understanding of how, why and in what

ways present-day grandparents and adult grandchildren account for their relationships with one another. Cumulatively, these research efforts also explored the nature of family life and interpersonal and intergenerational relationships in contemporary society.

Organized in three main sections, this concluding chapter provides an overview of the dissertation's key findings and accomplishments in an integrative fashion. First, I examine the ways the research presented in Chapters II, III and IV advances existing work in the area of grandparent-grandchild relationships theoretically, substantively and methodologically. Next, I consider how the findings shed scholarly light on family life in contemporary society. Finally, in the last section, I reflect on the questions generated by the research findings, concluding with suggestions for future research.

### **Grandparent-Grandchild Relationships: Advancing the Research**

This dissertation contributes to scholarly knowledge on grandparenthood and grandparent-adult grandchild relationships in three main ways. First, based on an assessment of existing work in the area, this research was aimed at exploring demographic and qualitative dimensions of the grandparent-grandchild relationship about which very little was known (i.e. the demographics of Canadian grandparenthood and the experiences of older grandparents and adult grandchildren). Next, the use of interpretive and life-course perspectives, in addition to theories of individualization (which formed the backdrop for the qualitative research), connected individual experiences in a dynamic

way to broader social conditions— a task generally not accomplished in research on grandparent-grandchild relationships. Finally, the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches to the study of grandparent-grandchild relationships provided macro and micro-level analysis, including an examination of the grandparent-adult grandchild tie from the perspective of both generations— a task also rarely accomplished in most grandparenthood studies. The contributions to knowledge brought about by the combination of the dissertation's substantive foci, theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches are discussed in greater detail below.

### *The Demographic Study and Quantitative Analysis*

While there can be little doubt that grandparent-grandchild relationships are influenced by demographic processes, current demographic patterns remained largely unestablished in the Canadian literature. Beginning with the use of data from Canada and existing findings from the United States (Szinovacz, 1998) in Chapter II, this dissertation offers a comprehensive analysis of grandparenthood in North America drawing on nationally representative data. Use of these data permitted the establishment of the contours of grandparenthood in Canada at the population level. Moreover, the comparative analysis revealed similar patterns between Canada and the United States, but also important differences. For example, relative to Canada, the American situation is characterized by: higher percentages of grandparents in the population; grandparenthood

beginning, on average, at younger ages; higher average numbers of grandchildren and higher rates of multi-generational households and step-ties. And, while greater percentages of Canadian grandparents were married, American grandparents reported higher rates of employment and were more likely to report having a dependent child in the household or at least one parent living. Given these variations, it is possible to speculate that Canadian grandparents and American grandparents, while sharing certain commonalities, are apt to face somewhat different grandparenting experiences as they develop relationships with their grandchildren. Although these similarities and differences hold explanatory promise for understanding grandparent-grandchild relationships in both countries, including what transpires on the level of lived experience, prior to this demographic research, they had not been established in the literature.

*The Grandparent-Adult Grandchild Study: Qualitative, Life-History Approach*

Seeking to connect the demographic realities of contemporary grandparenthood with the lives and experiences of grandparents and grandchildren, Chapters III and IV, examined the under-investigated area of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships. These chapters built on existing work in the general area of grandparenthooood (e.g. Kivnick's (1982) dimensions of meanings associated with grandparenthood and Aldous' (1995) characterization of grandparenthood as an ambiguous role) as well as the smaller, body of research pertaining to adult grand relationship (e.g. Hodgson's (1992) survey of

college students' relationships with their grandparents). This body of research has generally lacked theoretical guidance (Aldous, 1995; Robertson, 1995; Szinovacz, 1998c) and has relied heavily on survey methods (Hodgson, 1998). These research practices have meant that a number of questions about the grandparent-adult grandchild relationship remained largely unanswered. The grandparent-adult grandchild study was designed to overcome these research practices and address the qualitative aspects of the tie.

The use of an interpretive-life course perspective along with the guidance of theories of individualization offers a new way of analyzing these intergenerational ties. In prioritizing subjectivity, the passage of time and the inter-connectedness of individual lives and social structures, as well as ideological change, a dynamic, multi-dimensional and complex understanding of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships has emerged to complement existing cross-sectional, quantitative research. A retrospective longitudinal approach, namely qualitative life-history interviews, facilitated a more advanced understanding of the adult relationships.

This research furthers understandings of the differences between young grand ties and adult grand ties and how the relationships change the life course. Previous research has demonstrated that contact and feelings of closeness between the two generations are apt to change with the passage of time (Hill, 1970; Silverstein & Long, 1998). The grandparent-adult grandchild study's findings confirm that perceptions of the relationships change over time and offer information about these differences. Relative to

the younger tie, the biographical accounts document the reciprocal nature of the adult relationship in terms of material, instrumental and emotional exchanges, grandchildren's increased appreciation for grandparents and grandparents' heightened sense of self-affirmation related to knowing their grandchildren as adults (i.e. witnessing their personal and professional accomplishments). And, while change was an important theme, continuity was equally important; the past was central to understanding how grandparent-adult grandchild relationships come to be as they are.

The use of an interpretive approach partnered with qualitative methods generated detailed accounts of what grandparent-adult grandchild relationships mean, providing additional information beyond existing survey research which characterizes the ties as "significant and meaningful" from the viewpoint of younger adult grandchildren (Hodgson, 1992). The biographical narratives support such characterizations and move beyond them. The data establish in what ways the ties are significant and meaningful, not only from the grandchild perspective, but also from the grandparent perspective. For both generations, they represent distinct family ties, sources of support and personal and familial identity. Also, for many grandparents and grandchildren, the ties represent valuable intergenerational friendships characterized by trust and shared confidences.

Findings also enhance Kivnick's (1982) work on the meanings of grandparenthood by suggesting that the meanings associated with having adult grandchildren can be more profound than those associated with younger grandchildren.

The lengthy generational overlap and shared lives can magnify the meanings of grandparenthood for older grandparents. To this point, however, little attention had been paid to how meanings or for that matter, how grand relationships change or stay the same over time, as well as how they are similar or different from the perspective of each generation.

Seeking to understand the tie from grandparent and grandchild perspectives also sheds further light on the centrality of age and generational position in the negotiation and experiences of the adult roles and relationship. This methodological decision revealed that in general, grandparents and adult grandchildren conceptualize their roles and relationships with one another in relatively similar ways— a finding that speaks to the positive nature of the tie. The accounts also demonstrated that grandparents and adult grandchildren do not experience their roles and relationships in the same ways. Through an examination of wider social processes, it became possible to understand how social constructions of young and old, in addition to generational position entered into the negotiation of relationships and behavioral expectations.

In contrast to existing work on grandparent-grandchild ties, the use of theories of individualization along with the qualitative data provided a deeper understanding and analysis of how and under what contemporary conditions (i.e. multiple demands, heightened mobility etc.) the ties are negotiated. Interpreted within the context of individualization, it was possible to put forth explanations regarding the distribution of

power, choice and obligation in grandparent-adult grandchild relationships. With the possible exception of Harwood & Lin's (2000) research on communication between grandparents and adult grandchildren (from the grandparent's perspective), studies have glossed over how generational imbalance or what I have referred to as "asymmetry" characterizes and shapes these particular intergenerational relationships. The dynamics that arise from youth's entitlement to live lives free from interference is generally not captured in the research literature on grandparents and grandchildren.

These dynamics were apparent in the dissertation's investigation of the grandparent and adult grandchild roles. While there was evidence to suggest that grand roles are highly individualized (i.e. they are negotiated individually and by relationship partners in response to contextual factors, as opposed to being determined by institutionalized roles rooted in tradition or normative patterns of obligation) and can to a large extent be understood within the context of a particular dyad's history, grandparents and adult grandchildren were able to identify and articulate certain acceptable and unacceptable behaviors for their own roles and their relationship partners' roles. These normative patterns differed according to social constructions of young and old, as well as generational position. As elder family members, grandparents conformed to the norm of non-interference. Along with adult grandchildren, the older generation felt they should act as family mentors and be available for guidance and support should they be called on by their grandchildren. Meanwhile, adult grandchildren adhered to the adage, "respect

your elders”. Both generations felt adult grandchildren should give back to the family through their accomplishments, and in the event that it was necessary, through the provision of support to aging grandparents. Ultimately, however, there was great variation in terms of the actual roles grandparents and grandchildren played in one another’s lives, which, to reiterate, attests to the highly individualized character of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships and quite possibly, family life in late-modern society.

### **Rethinking the ‘Family’ and Family Relationships**

As suggested above, the dissertation’s relevance extends beyond the scope of understanding grandparent-grandchild relationships. Its findings also offer insight into the study and conceptualization of family ties and personal relationships. The data call into question certain taken-for-granted assumptions about the family and how it is currently studied and understood.

#### *Who is Family in Contemporary Times?*

In general, recent research in the area of the family has successfully drawn attention to the changing nature of family life in contemporary society. The largely unforeseen trends of the past 30 years such as the increase in divorce and remarriage, step-ties, lone-parent families and common-law unions have been well documented.

There is much evidence to support Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) claim that in present-day Western societies, the family is being reinvented. Personal relationships are increasingly founded on democratic principles and lifestyle options continue to grow more diverse. Among these transformations, intimate partnerships have received the greatest scholarly consideration. To a lesser extent, parent-child relationships have also been a subject of academic interest. And, while there can be little debate that the structures and compositions of families are very different than they were in the past, the fact that the re-invention of the family also includes and intersects with increasing generational overlap of lives and multi-generational ties is often overlooked in the mainstream literature on family change.

In light of the dissertation's findings, sociologists of the family might wish to consider expanding their notions of the family and rethinking what family ties are included when conceptualizing or studying 'the family'. Scholars working specifically in the areas of aging family life have long recognized the social significance of intergenerational relationships; the data presented here uphold these claims. The quantitative evidence, presented in Chapter II, indicates that multi-generational family structures are the norm in North America. Grandparents and grandchildren, including adults, are increasingly common features of the twenty-first-century family. Within the context of other social trends such as divorce, remarriage and lone-parenthood, and women's increasing labour force participation, conceptualization of the family requires

expansion to include grandparents as well as other kin who are not only part of the family's structure, but are also increasingly vital to family practices and processes (Bengtson, 2001), especially under the conditions of late-modernity and individualization.

This dissertation does not compare grandparent-grandchild relationships over centuries or even decades and it cannot support the claim that multi-generational relationships are becoming more important than in the past, as Bengtson (2001) suggests. Yet, the qualitative data reported in Chapters III and IV do support the fact that multi-generational family ties are important features of many individuals' lives. In a number of cases, grandparent-adult grandchild ties were presented as vital to the experience of family life. For many, their everyday family life experiences included grandparent-grandchild relationships whether it was in the form of thinking about the other person, seeing them, telephoning or e-mailing them. In other words, multi-generational family ties and the effects of increasing longevity were apparent in the subjective definitions of family, yet they are often overlooked in scholarly discussions of the changing nature of family life.

#### *Increasing Longevity and Family Life*

Naturally, scholarly work on aging and the family contains speculations about the existence of multi-generational family types and the implications of increasing longevity on family life. On the whole, this area of study has narrowly defined what transpires in

aging families by emphasizing caregiving or informal help to older family members (Marshall, Matthews & Rosenthal, 1993) to the neglect of other issues and implications. Arising from discourses pertaining to old age, the retraction of the welfare state and increasing reliance on family, the study of aging families has mainly asked research questions regarding who will provide and receive support and what the costs will be to individual caregivers. These issues dominate the research literature. And, while not dismissing the very consequential realities and importance of informal caregiving to members of aging families, increasing longevity undoubtedly has other consequences for family life. As Rosenthal (2000:45) suggests, “there is more to family life than caregiving...we very much need research that goes beyond caregiving in studying what these changes mean ”.

The quantitative and qualitative data reported in this dissertation address the fact that increasing longevity means more to family life than caregiving. The demographic data reveal that living longer also translates into greater opportunities within the life course, new types of family relationships and forms, such as grandparent-adult grandchild relationships. Changes to the life-course, including the separation of grandparenthood and active parenthood and the institutionalization of retirement are also changing opportunities for the development of bonds between grandparents and grandchildren. The qualitative life-history data illustrate the ways in which significant intergenerational overlaps can be meaningful and rewarding family experiences. Grandparents’ longevity

affords an opportunity for grandparents and adult grandchildren to know one another in different ways than is possible in the grandchild's youth. As Chapter III discusses, the significant generational overlap and the passage of time, including grandchildren's maturity and grandparents' transitions into later life often introduced more mature interactions, tensions between choice and obligation, as well as friendship-like interactions or friendship as a dimension of the grandparent-adult grandchild relationship.

### *Family and Friends*

The biographical narratives, particularly those which characterized the grandparent-adult grandchild relationship as a friendship or 'friend-like', confirm that increasing longevity means more to family life than caregiving. This finding also requires further rethinking of what the family is or can be. Contemporary historical, social and ideological conditions make, "the boundaries between family and non-family...less tightly constructed" (Allan, Hawker & Crow, 2001:834), relative to the past. Research on family ties as well as friendship generally explore this convergence of family and friend in one direction. For example, anthropologists and sociologists such as Burton & Dilworth-Anderson (1991), Ikels (1998), and MacRae (1992) have documented the existence of fictive kin— individuals who are not related biologically or through marriage, but are considered family.<sup>1</sup> And, originating from gay and lesbian communities, the expression 'families of choice' also echoes the notion that those who are not family can come to be family members, whether in an objective or subjective

sense, based on the behaviors, activities, feelings and attachments that transpire within the relationship and between individuals and groups of individuals. Presumably, naming or perceiving non-kin as kin is a way to elevate the relationship to a status that is not typically afforded by the classification of friend alone. Moreover, it symbolizes individuals' abilities to choose and create their own personal communities (Pahl, 2000). Democratic ideals, freedom and choice resonate with this particular social practice.

Friendship is an achieved status and therefore it is of particular interest when it is used in the context of the family and accounts of familial relationships which are typically considered ascribed relations. What does it mean when family members refer to one another as friends or their relationships as friend-like as was the case with the grandparents and adult grandchildren in the qualitative study? Similar to considering friends members of one's family, for those describing their kin as friends, this was a means of elevating the status of the tie based on its subjective or inter-subjective meanings, projecting to others that it is more than a family tie, it also has elements of friendship. Participants' references to friendship were essentially abbreviated ways of saying that they associated their grand relationships with the fundamentals of modern friendships and personal relationships: trust; shared confidences; a degree of choice (versus obligation) (see Giddens, 1992; Pahl, 2000); as well as fun and companionship. Classifying their relationships as friend-like was a way to articulate what was occurring within their adult grand dyad(s) — that they had achieved a closer, more meaningful and different bond than what is commonly associated with family relationships.

In Chapter III, I posited that the boundaries separating family and friends are commonly assumed to reside mainly in the distinction between ties of obligation and those of choice. Furthermore, I suggested choice was one-sided, residing more resolutely with the grandchild generation. In certain cases, grandchildren and grandparents felt they wanted to maintain particular family identities and reputations; the generations were not completely free, open and honest in their interactions with one another. The evidence confirmed at the same time as it challenged the common distinctions made between family and friends— namely that the former is non-voluntary or rooted in obligation and the latter is voluntary, rooted in choice.

Yet, friendships are to a certain extent non-voluntary. According to Friedman (1993:216), “Having committed ourselves to someone else as a friend...we now fall under certain special but non-voluntary requirements that we are not at liberty to negotiate away”. However she argues that family ties lack equality and mutuality which are essential features of friendship and that family relationships, “frequently feature great differences in status and power between family members. Age differences are often the cause of this...” (214). As with grandparent-adult grandchild relationships, while family relationships can contain elements of friendship, those friendships developed within the context of the family often retreat to some extent to interpretations of the expectations associated with the particular family roles and relationships. However, it is important not to lose sight of the blurring boundaries between family and friend. They are not necessarily separate categories— a finding which can be linked to the changing nature of

choice and obligation in contemporary relationships.

### *Obligation and Choice<sup>2</sup>*

Obligation and choice were pervasive themes, but they were not entirely mutually exclusive as is typically assumed. The convergence of choice and obligation in family relationships reflects processes of individualization and the increasing emphasis on negotiation in interpersonal relationships, especially for younger generations. The multiple demands on and within individuals' lives, paired with the decline of tradition means that individuals must choose how to live out their lives. As discussed in Chapters III and IV, obligation does not disappear altogether. It is not entirely replaced by choice. Inevitably, social circumstances dictate that individuals must select what and to whom their obligations will be. Oftentimes choice involves some form of rationalization on the part of individuals for not fulfilling certain subjectively defined personal obligations. Take for example, the busy lives of grandchildren as 'legitimate excuses' (Finch & Mason, 1993) for not visiting or contacting grandparents. These rationalizations are aimed at reconciling compromises individuals make when debates— whether internal or external—arise over behavioral expectations.

The qualitative data suggest that family obligation still exists, but the obligations grandparents and grandchildren identified were not necessarily rooted in instrumental or material factors. Another form of family obligation emerged— moral obligation.

Rooted in social and economic transformations of previous centuries, the decline of material dependency of younger generations on older generations is accompanied by an increase in family obligation with a greater ethical and moral character than was historically the case. In the qualitative study, for example, most adult grandchildren reported that they visited or contacted their grandparents because it was the right thing to do and because doing so would more than likely please their grandparents, which was also considered a good thing. Although it is possible that calculations regarding material and instrumental gains might be taking place privately, not one of the grandchildren suggested that they visited their grandparents in the hopes of seeing material rewards. In most instances, they enjoyed their grandparents' company, but also felt guilty if they did not visit their grandparents. Given the participants' abilities to identify 'good' and 'bad' grand behaviors (see Chapter IV), grandchildren's feelings of guilt can be interpreted in light of the overtly ethical or moral character of family obligation in contemporary society.

It appears that considerable amounts of negotiation are occurring, entering into and giving rise to contemporary grandparent-adult grandchild relationships. Some emotional bargaining and manipulation likely occur and, in some cases, grandparents' obligation to not interfere and grandchildren's obligation to not neglect their grandparents was negotiated *between* the generations (see Chapter IV). Yet, most negotiation is not conducted outwardly or inter-subjectively between the generations. A great deal of negotiation takes place inwardly and takes the form of inner-dialogue, that grandparents

and adult grandchildren reportedly engaged in. They routinely questioned themselves about whether or not they were living up to their own expectations of themselves in their particular family role and the expectations they believed others had of them. In the end the ways in which obligations are chosen and inwardly negotiated are related to grandparents' and adult grandchildren's investments in self-identity, and desires to project particular (desirable) moral and family reputations (See Chapter III, and Finch & Mason, 1993). For many, self-evaluations were aimed at developing positive grandparent-grandchild relationships and feeling good about themselves and their family ties. Many had strong emotional attachments to one another and wished to maintain strong, positive bonds. To a certain extent, this underlying moral character of obligation found woven throughout the accounts, means that individuals' biographies and self-identities are bound up in these relationships to a greater degree than material interests.

The loosening of instrumentally or materially rooted family obligation and the presence of moral obligation does not mean, as the grandparent and adult grandchild accounts indicate, that instrumental and material exchanges do not take place. The accounts clearly demonstrated that exchanges of help, emotional and financial support do take place between the two generations and within the family. Moreover, they also reinforce the belief that as an institution, the family is, within reason, considered the first line of assistance for its members. Of course, as was evident in Chapter IV, in the hierarchy of desired helpers, parents and children are ahead of grandparents and grandchildren. Ultimately, generational positions are central to the discussion of choice

and obligation in the negotiation of family relationships. For instance, it is likely that the parent-child tie also operates on moral obligation, but material and instrumental factors are likely more profound in the case of adjacent kin. Nevertheless, the data speak to the complexities of choice and obligation in families, as well as their often overlooked, multi-dimensional and contextual character.

The qualitative data provided a clear sense that while choice was an undeniable theme, having the ability to choose the conditions of the relationship was not distributed equally between the generations. Social constructions of young and old, and generational positions emerge as influential. In general, the passivity of contemporary grandparenting for those with adult grandchildren attests to the importance of considering age norms. To reiterate Beck's expression, the 'biographization of youth' equates being young with a right and entitlement to freedom to choose. Grandparents were (here again, morally) obligated to respect this entitlement by not interfering and many held themselves up to these behavioral expectations as did the adult grandchildren. Rather than create distance between the generations, grandparents 'laissez faire' approach alongside grandchildren's choice and the younger generation's sense of moral obligation, often meant the development of close, personal relationships between aging grandparents and adult grandchildren and for some, friendships within the family.

### *Family Roles*

What is also in question, in Chapter III and particularly in Chapter IV, is the

applicability of the sociological concept of role as it is traditionally defined. Originally, the concept of a social role emerged from functionalist thought and placed emphasis on normative expectations, as well as functional value—the contribution that roles make to integrate and reproduce systems (in this case the family). The moral character of family obligation as articulated by grandparents and adult grandchildren can be linked to the normative expectations surrounding both generational positions. Insofar as the accounts identified ‘grand’ expectations, these normative expectations were motivated by moral factors, personal obligation, identity and reputation.

The functional value of these particular family positions, while evident to a certain extent in the exchanges of support between generations, is not as apparent in grandparents’ and grandchildren’s discussions of expectations. Instead, there is evidence of the individualization and inter-personalization of the functional value of these family relationships. That is to say, they are individually negotiated and the relationships are more about social integration and the quality of individual lives, selfhood, identity and moral obligation, than about the family as a functioning system. This is not to say that the activities of grandparents and adult grandchildren do not reproduce the family; however, given the individualization of family roles, it becomes difficult to apply, with any precision the sociological concept of role, except as sociologists from the interpretive tradition have long conceptualized role. From this perspective a social role is best understood as a general framework for behavior (see for e.g. Strauss, 1959).

What becomes of increasing importance in understanding contemporary

relationships, in this case those between grandparents and adult grandchildren, is the past and how the products of previous negotiations serve as an important foundation for action and behavior in the present (see Allan 2002; Finch & Mason, 1993). At the same time, as situations arise, it also becomes necessary to improvise roles and relationships as opposed to having socially prescribed or scripted responses. Put otherwise, family life and relations possess continuity as well as a dynamic and processual character. These characterizations have been theorized, but the dominant use of survey methods by family researchers and researchers in the field of aging has glossed over the dynamic and contradictory nature of family life, including the definition of roles and relationships (Marshall, Matthews & Rosenthal, 1993).

### *Family as Process*

As ‘the family’ continues to be reinvented (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) and the meanings and forms of family come to be less clearly defined and more fluid (to borrow Bauman’s (2000) term) than in the past, its processes become more difficult to capture in sociological analysis. In terms of theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of family life, the findings of this dissertation reinforce the need to understand family as process, rather than as a fixed structure (see Allan, 2001). This research demonstrates the benefits of using theories and methods capable of capturing how family relationships develop over time, in response to the individual timing of life events, family time and historical time—relationships are not static. The use of an interpretive approach and life-

course methods, as well as an ongoing dialogue with theories of individualization, identified the interconnectedness of individuals' lives and lifeworlds, as well as the interplay between personal biography and historical circumstances and how these change or stay the same over time. Without such an approach, it would have been difficult, if not impossible to capture the dynamic, processual nature at the very core of social relationships and family life. Like other relationships, those between grandparents and grandchildren are conditioned by particular structures, processes and the conditions of one another's lives, including the interplay between individual, familial, social and historical factors (see Szinovacz, 1998; Uhlenberg & Kirby, 1998). To a certain extent, continuity and change affect each of these factors. Overall, the qualitative data reinforce Allan's (2001) claim that the family is best understood as an ongoing process which is created and recreated with the practices of family members, rather than a constant, fixed structure. The categories and boundaries typically assumed to contain family life are, in the everyday lives of family members, simply not as tightly constructed as researchers present.

To this point, I have suggested that based on the quantitative and qualitative data, it is time to rethink the family and family life, including who and what social relationships and activities are included in discussion of the family, as well as processes of obligation and choice in family life and the notion that family and friend are mutually exclusive categories. Current conceptualizations of family do not account for demographic change, ideological transformation and historical conditions. Not only are

the structures of families changing, but alongside these, subjective definitions of family are growing increasingly important expanding who is included in the category, 'family', and for that matter, 'friend'. Further, the data reinforce the view that families and familial ties are best conceived of as process, rather than structure. Ultimately, this dissertation offers alternative ways to think about and study family ties compared to those which inform current family research. New research questions also arise from the quantitative and qualitative data.

## **Future Research**

In an effort to accomplish the goals of the dissertation, due to time, space and the scope of the research, certain questions remain unanswered and findings give rise to some possible future directions. This final section explores the questions and future directions generated by the grandparenthood and grandparent-adult grandchild relationship findings.

### *Addressing Variations*

The quantitative portion of the dissertation identified certain variations in the demography of grandparenthood. Gender, lineage and age group were all associated with slightly different patterns of grandparenthood. What remains to be known, however, is how these and other variations play out in the lives of individual family members and influence the nature and quality of grandparent-grandchild relationships. For instance, what are the subjective experiences of living in various aging family structures like bean

pole, age-condensed or age-gapped families (see Bengtson, Rosenthal & Burton, 1990)? What is it like to age as a member of a step- family? Given the somewhat individualized nature of grand roles and the ambiguity surrounding how step-relatives ought to behave, how the ties between step-grandparents and step-grandchildren are experienced is not widely known. And, although not speculated to be a highly prevalent occurrence in Canada, what meanings and experiences are associated with living in a multi-generational household that includes grandparents, including one in which grandparents are raising their grandchild? How do these experiences enter into and shape the nature of the ties between grandparents and grandchildren, particularly as adults?

The qualitative study's sample included a grandson whose grandmother lived in his childhood home as well as a granddaughter who lived with and was raised by her grandparents. Based on these accounts, I speculate that in the former case, the grandson did not necessarily see his relationship with his grandmother as particularly special, relative to other family ties. In the latter case, it seems that the bond between granddaughter and grandparents was more similar to one between parents and child. However, additional information and cases are required to understand how these non-normative experiences shape later-life relationships. Such experiences are nevertheless important and reveal how complicated and contingent family life can be.

In previous survey research, factors such as geographic proximity (Kivett, 1996), gender and lineage (Block, 2000; Spitze & Ward, 1998; Thomas, 1995), race (Hunter & Taylor, 1998; Kennedy, 1990), education (Crosnoe & Elder, 2002), economic status

(Eggebeen & Hogan, 1990; Parrott & Bengtson, 1999) and health (Silverstein & Long, 1998), have all been found to influence the formation of bonds between generations. Unlike the nationally representative data which permitted conclusive findings about variations according to gender, lineage and age, the qualitative study's small sample size and its relative homogeneity made it difficult to conclusively examine variations in the grandparent-adult grandchild relationships. However, in the interviews, grandsons and granddaughters reported similar experiences to one another as did grandmothers and the few grandfathers in the study. And, with the exception of cases of divorce where the paternal lineage suffered, there was little evidence that privileged the maternal over the paternal lineage. In terms of geographic proximity, most grandparents and adult grandchildren reported frequent contact even in the face of considerable geographic distance, which did not always negatively influence feelings towards one another. Given the unrepresentative nature of the sample, it would be useful if future research examined these influences using qualitative data in order to make sense of and analyze the quantitative results pertaining to variations in grand relationships. What are the differences, how are they distributed and experienced? For example, how are choice and obligation influenced by gender, education, geographic proximity, socio-economic status and cultural background?

### *Negative Relationships*

Family life is dynamic and multi-dimensional and can hold negative as well as

positive experiences. While the qualitative study was particularly successful at capturing the positive dimensions of family life and grandparent-adult grandchild relationships, the negative dimensions of family life require further consideration. The nature of the study's sample, in particular, their enthusiasm for their grandparent-grandchild relationships and the positive experiences they associated with the ties meant that negative experiences were not described and therefore not explored to any great extent. There were some accounts, for example, of lack of contact between the generations as a result of divorce and/or remarriage in the middle generation and even cases where participants felt their family members could or should have behaved differently, but overall negative experiences were simply not part of the biographical accounts. At the end of the study several questions remained: Where are the bad experiences? Do grandparents and adult grandchildren ever argue or disagree? How do certain grandparents and grandchildren come to be estranged from one another and who decides if and when to reconcile? How do negative experiences fit in with or impact the wider functioning of the family?

### *The Middle Generation*

Previous research suggests that the middle generation is pivotal in establishing and maintaining relationships between grandparents and young grandchildren. In fact, the parent generation can, more or less, act as gatekeepers, monitoring, permitting or denying grandparents' access to their grandchildren. Therefore, it might be assumed that the keys

to understanding negative or non-existent grandparent-adult grandchild relationships, in many instances, reside with the middle generation parents and their shared histories with their parents and children.

What happens when grandchildren get older and become adults? Roberto and Stroes (1992) have established that negotiation partners switch as grandchildren grow more mature such that over time, grandparents negotiate more with the grandchild than the parent generation. However, does the middle generation fade into the background? Based on the life-history interviews, it seems that parents do not disappear. They are often, but not always, present during grandparent-grandchild interactions and sometimes act as grandchildren's conscience, asking or reminding them to call or write their grandparents. The middle generation was not the focus of the study, but it was apparent that in cases where the grandparent and middle generations were close, so too were the grandparents and grandchildren. What remains unknown is: How does the middle generation perceive the relationships between their adult children and aging parents? How do they see their parents aging and their children's maturity changing the nature and dynamics of the family? And, what, if anything, does the middle generation feel they themselves contribute to the development and maintenance of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships? Related, how, if at all, does the middle generation monitor and perhaps encourage or discourage, the development of relationships between aging grandparents and adult grandchildren?

Additionally, although not a normative experience, the experiences of one

grandmother-granddaughter dyad spoke to the absence of the middle generation. The lack of members from the bridging generation noticeably altered the relationships between the grandparent and grandchild generations in this particular family. This circumstance raises additional questions about the absence of the middle generation, which could not be answered on the basis of one case. For example, it remains to be known how the absence of the middle generation comes to be negotiated, if at all, within the extended family and how such absences influence family members differently based on age, gender and even birth order.

*The applicability of findings to other family ties*

Future research might also wish to consider the findings pertaining to the character of family life in late modernity. Specifically, although based on the experiences of grandparents and adult grandchildren, the changing nature of obligation and choice, as well as generational imbalance, are likely applicable to other family ties, for example, sibling ties or parent-child relationships. Also, the blurring boundaries between family and friends are also likely to be found between other kin relationships that share lengthy histories. Here again, generational position and the specific generations involved in a given dyad (e.g. brother-sister or mother-daughter) might influence degrees of choice, types of obligations and the development of friendships within the tie. These questions remain to be addressed.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In many ways, this dissertation has been an attempt to render family life and the relationships between grandparents and grandchildren much less elusive and less lifeless than too often characterized in the research literature. It has been an exercise in linking macro-level phenomena to micro-level experiences and in turn, understanding and interpreting everyday life within the broader social and cultural structures. The research contributes to the knowledge of grandparenthood and grandparent-adult grandchild relationships and invites scholars to rethink how family life is conceptualized and studied. And, in the spirit of the academic pursuit, it challenges researchers to take up new questions and build on its findings.

## **Chapter 5: Notes**

1. For example, in Chapter 2, the notion of choosing family members was underlying the measure I used to estimate the prevalence of grandparenthood in Canada. The measure relied on self-reports which essentially afforded grandparents to define grandparenthood themselves. Biological, adopted, step or fictive grandchildren could all mean that a individual is a grandparent.
2. The discussion of obligation and choice and the subsequent discussion pertaining to Zombie sociology are informed by personal communications with Graham Knight (2003a; 2003b).

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**APPENDIX A:**

**PARTICIPANT  
RECRUITMENT AD**

## **Grandparent & Adult Grandchild Volunteers Needed**

Grandparent and adult grandchild (21 or over) volunteers are needed to participate in doctoral research aimed at learning more about grandparent-adult grandchild relationships based on the experiences of both generations.

If you are a grandparent with at least one grandchild aged 21 or over, or you are an adult grandchild with at least one living grandparent, you are invited to participate in this study. Participation in the study would involve sharing your experiences and stories about being a grandparent or an adult grandchild. Your assistance would be greatly appreciated. You will be making an important contribution to knowledge of intergenerational relationships and family life.

If you are interested in learning more about this project, or know someone who might be, please feel free to contact:

Candace Kemp  
Department of Sociology  
McMaster University

(905) 308-8356  
kempc@mcmaster.ca

## **APPENDIX B:**

### **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION**

**Grandparent Participant Profiles**

Code	Age	Marital Status	Number of Grandchildren	Number of Adult Grandchildren	Interview Date	Contact Source
<i>Grandmothers</i>						
GM01	82	Widowed	5	5	Feb. 13/02	GS01
GM02	69	Divorced	6	3	Feb. 18/02	Community
GM03	69	Married	12	1	Feb. 26/02	GM02
GM04	79	Widowed	10	2	March 01/02	Community
GM05	75	Married	7	1	March 11/02	Community
GM06	78	Married	3	2	March 11/02	GM05
GM07	78	Divorced	6	1	March 13/02	Community
GM08	87	Married	3	3	March 19/02	GF01
GM09	89	Widowed	5	3	March 20/02	GF01
GM10	91	Widowed	7	7	March 30/02	Community
GM11	89	Widowed	3	3	April 9/02	Library Ad
GM12	79	Widowed	7	2	April 10/02	GM05
GM13	69	Married	11	2	April 15/02	GM05
GM14	88	Widowed	5	5	April 17/02	GF01
GM15	78	Married	6	3	April 25/02	Library Ad
<i>Grandfathers</i>						
GF01	88	Married	9	9	March 14/02	Community
GF02	89	Married	3	3	March 19/02	GF01
GF03	85	Widowed	2	2	Oct. 29/02	GS09

**Grandchild Participant Profiles**

Code	Age	Marital Status/ Parental Status	Number of Living Grandparents	Employment Status	Interview Date	Contact Source
<i>Granddaughters</i>						
GD01	23	Single	2	Student	Feb. 19/02	Web Ad
GD02	32	Married	4	Full-time	Feb. 20/02	Web Ad
GD03	34	Married w/ 2 children	3	Full-time	Feb. 22/02	Web Ad
GD04	22	Married/expecting	4	Full-time	March 12/02	Community
GD05	32	Married w/1 child	1	Mat. Leave	March 22/02	Community
GD06	22	Single	2	Student	April 21/02	Web Ad
GD07	28	Married	3	Grad Student	April 22/02	Community
GD08	22	Single	4	Student	May 24/02	Library Ad
GD09	27	Married	2	Full-time	June 06/02	GM12
GD10	29	Common-law w/ 2 children	3	Full-time	Aug. 10/02	Community
<i>Grandsons</i>						
GS01	28	Married	1	Grad Student	Feb. 01/02	Community
GS02	24	Single	1	Full-time	March 08/02	GM04
GS03	36	Married w/ 2 children	1	Full-time	March 18/02	GD03
GS04	28	Married	1	Full-time	March 20/02	Community
GS05	31	Married	2	Full-time	April 8/02	Community
GS06	23	Single	2	Student	April 30/02	Library Ad
GS07	31	Married	3	Full-time	May 28/02	GD07
GS08	21	Single	2	Student	June 26/02	Community
GS09	35	Married w/ 2 children	1	Full-time	Oct. 10/02	Community

## **APPENDIX C:**

### **LETTERS OF INFORMATION**

### **Grandparent Letter of Information**

This letter is intended to inform you about the study “Extending the Duration of Family Ties: A Qualitative Exploration of Grandparents and Adult Grandchild Relationships”. This research is being conducted as doctoral dissertation research by Candace L. Kemp, a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario.

The overall aim of this research is to learn more about the relationships between grandparents and adult grandchildren from the point of view of each generation. Because very little research has specifically examined everyday experiences within the family, particularly those among grandparents and adult grandchildren, your participation in the study will make a valuable contribution towards understanding family life in an aging society.

More specifically, your participation in this study would involve an audio-taped interview. The interview would start by gathering background information about your family life and relationships beginning with your childhood experiences and memories. Interview questions would then ask you to discuss your experiences of being a grandchild in general terms and relationships with all grandchildren (if applicable). The final section of the interview would examine your relationship with your adult grandchildren. The interview will require a time commitment of approximately 1.5 to 2 hours and will take place at a mutually agreed upon location. The interviewing process will only proceed with your informed, verbal and written consent. You will have the right to withdraw from the study and/or refuse to answer any question(s) you do not wish to respond to at any time without consequence.

Regarding confidentiality, any information that is obtained in the interview and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. For purposes of anonymity, you will be assigned a pseudonym. No one will hear, or have access to the recordings with the possible exception of a transcriber. The transcriptions will not be read by anyone but myself, and the dissertation committee members. Interview tapes and transcriptions will be stored in a secure location, locked in a filing cabinet within my home office. After the dissertation is complete, the audio recording will be destroyed and the transcriptions will remain securely stored under the supervision of the researcher.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me, directly at (905) 308-8356 or by email, at [kempc@mcmaster.ca](mailto:kempc@mcmaster.ca). Additionally, you can contact Dr. Carolyn Rosenthal, my doctoral supervisor, at (905) 525-9140, ext. 22517.

*C. L. Kemp, McMaster-Sociology, PhD Thesis*

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the McMaster Research Ethics Research Board (MREB). However, if you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please do not hesitate to contact the MREB Secretariat at (905) 525-9140, ext. 23142, or by email, at [srebsec@mcmaster.ca](mailto:srebsec@mcmaster.ca).

### **Adult Grandchild Letter of Information**

This letter is intended to inform you about the study “Extending the Duration of Family Ties: A Qualitative Exploration of Grandparents and Adult Grandchild Relationships”. This research is being conducted as doctoral dissertation research by Candace L. Kemp, a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario.

The overall aim of this research is to learn more about the relationships between grandparents and adult grandchildren from the point of view of each generation. Because very little research has specifically examined everyday experiences within the family, particularly those among grandparents and adult grandchildren, your participation in the study, will make a valuable contribution towards understanding family life in an aging society.

Specifically, your participation in this study would involve an audio-taped interview. The interview would start by gathering background information about your family life and relationships beginning with your childhood experiences and memories. You would then be asked to discuss your experiences of being a grandchild in general terms and reflect on your past and present relationships with all of your grandparents (if applicable). The final section of the interview would examine your adult relationship(s) with your living grandparent(s). The interview will require a time commitment of approximately 1.5 to 2.5 hours and will take place at a mutually agreed upon location. The interviewing process will only proceed with your informed, verbal and written consent. You will have the right to withdraw from the study and/or refuse to answer any question(s) you do not wish to respond to at any time without consequence.

Regarding confidentiality, any information that is obtained in the interview and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. For purposes of anonymity, you will be assigned a pseudonym. No one will hear, or have access to the recordings with the possible exception of a transcriber. The transcriptions will not be read by anyone but myself, and the dissertation committee members. Interview tapes and transcriptions will be stored in a secure location, locked in a filing cabinet within my home office. After the dissertation is complete, the audio recording will be destroyed and the transcriptions will remain securely stored under the supervision of the researcher.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me, directly at (905) 308-8356 or by email, at [kempc@mcmaster.ca](mailto:kempc@mcmaster.ca). Additionally, you can contact Dr. Carolyn Rosenthal, my doctoral supervisor, at (905) 525-9140, ext. 22517.

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## **APPENDIX D:**

### **LETTERS OF CONSENT**

## **Grandparent Consent Form**

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Candace L. Kemp, Ph.D. candidate at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario. This results of this research will form the basis of a doctoral dissertation. The overall objective of this study is to learn more about the relationships between grandparents and their adult grandchildren based on the experiences of both generations. Your participation in this study will make a valuable contribution to the overall understanding of family life in an aging society.

This form is to obtain your consent to participate in an audio-taped interview. The interview begins by gathering background information about your family life beginning with your childhood experiences. Interview questions then ask about your experiences of becoming and being a grandparent in general terms. Finally, the interview examines your relationship with your adult grandchildren.

Regarding confidentiality, any information that is obtained in the interview and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. For purposes of anonymity, you will be assigned a pseudonym. No one, with the possible exception of a transcriber, will hear, or have access to the recordings. The transcriptions will not be read by anyone but myself and the dissertation committee members. Interview tapes and transcriptions will be stored in a secure location, locked in a filing cabinet within my home office. After the dissertation is complete, the audio recording will be destroyed. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any question(s) you do not wish to respond to.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me, Candace Kemp, directly at (905) 308-8356 or by email, at [kempc@mcmaster.ca](mailto:kempc@mcmaster.ca). Additionally, you can contact Carolyn Rosenthal, my doctoral supervisor, at (905) 525-9140, ext.22517. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the McMaster Research Ethics Research Board (MREB). However, if you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please do not hesitate to contact the MREB Secretariat at (905) 525-9140, ext. 23142.

I understand the information provided for the study “Extending the Duration of Family Ties” as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I

agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

In my judgement, the participant is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent and possess the legal capacity to give informed consent in this research study.

Signature of Investigator \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Adult Grandchild Consent Form**

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Candace L. Kemp, Ph.D. candidate at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario. This results of this research will form the basis of a doctoral dissertation. The overall objective of this study is to learn more about the relationships between grandparents and their adult grandchildren based on the experiences of both generations. Your participation in this study will make a valuable contribution to the overall understanding of family life in an aging society.

This form is to obtain your consent to participate in an audio-taped interview. The interview begins by gathering background information about your family life beginning with your childhood experiences. Interview questions then ask about your experiences of being a grandchild in general terms. Finally, the interview examines your adult relationship with your living grandparent(s).

Regarding confidentiality, any information that is obtained in the interview and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. For purposes of anonymity, you will be assigned a pseudonym. No one will hear, or have access to the recordings with the possible exception of a transcriber. The transcriptions will not be read by anyone but myself, and the dissertation committee members. Interview tapes and transcriptions will be stored in a secure location, locked in a filing cabinet within my home office. After the dissertation is complete, the audio recording will be destroyed. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any question(s) you do not wish to respond to.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me, Candace Kemp, directly at (905) 308-8356 or by email, at [kempc@mcmaster.ca](mailto:kempc@mcmaster.ca). Additionally, you can contact Dr. Carolyn Rosenthal, my doctoral supervisor, at (905) 525-9140, ext. 22517. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the McMaster Research Ethics Research Board (MREB). However, if you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please do not hesitate to contact the MREB Secretariat at (905) 525-9140, ext. 23142.

I understand the information provided for the study “Extending the Duration of Family Ties” as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I

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Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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Signature of Investigator \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX E:**

### **GRANDPARENT INTERVIEW GUIDE**

## Grandparent Interview Guide

### Section One: Family Context

I would like to begin by asking you to describe your life at the present. Age, children, grandchildren, proximity, ages, employment, etc.

Describe each of you children's lives and your relationship with them and their families.

Probes: Education, work, geo-proximity, contact, marriage, children

Now switching back in time...

Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood and youth?

Probes: Where were you born?

What was it like growing up in your family?

How would you describe your relationship with your: mother, father, siblings?

What is your most vivid memory of growing up in your family?

Can you tell me about your grandparents?

Probes: What did you know about your grandparents' lives when you were growing up? What role did your grandparents play in your childhood?

*For grandparent(s) living during childhood:*

\*\*\*\*explore gender and lineage differences\*\*\*\*

How often did you see your grandparent(s)?

What did you do together?

How would you describe your relationship with each grandparent?

What do you remember most about your relationship with each grandparent?

In your opinion, what impact did your relationship(s) with your grandparent(s) have on you life?

What did these relationships mean to you as a child? as an adult?

Grandparents' death [work in where appropriate] (circumstances, age, impact)

*For grandparents not living during childhood:*

Based on what you know about your grandparents, what, if anything, do you think you might have missed out on by not knowing your

grandparents?

What do you think they missed out on by not knowing you?

Can you tell me about your early adulthood? What was your life like as a young adult?

Probes: School, work, marriage, children, parents, hobbies etc.

What were your relationships (if applicable) like with your parents and your parents-in-law when your children were growing up?

Probes: Were your parents active in your children's lives?

What role did your husband's (if applicable) parents play in your children's lives?

Ask about frequency of contact, differences between grandmothers and grandfathers, nature of relationships etc.

How do you think your children would describe their relationships with their grandparents?

Can you explain what it was like becoming a grandparent?

Probes: Most vivid memory.

What did it mean to you, your family?

How were the birth (or arrival) of subsequent grandchildren different?

How many grandchildren do you have?

Ask about spouse.

Although I am primarily interested in your relationships with [your adult grandchildren], I would like to know about your relationships your other grandchildren. Can you tell me about each of them?

Probes: nature of relationship, ages, contact, etc.

## **Section Two: Experiential Accounts of the Relationship**

Describe each of your adult grandchildren.

Tell me about your relationship with each adult grandchild beginning with their birth.

Probes: Youth, teen years, entry into adulthood

Discuss frequency, type and initiation of contact, exchange and feelings of closeness, middle generation

Can you describe a typical visit with each adult grandchild? Alternatively, your most recent visit.

Probes: On what occasions do you get together?

What do you do together?

What do you talk about?

How important are discussion of the past/present/future?

What kind of advice do you give to one another regarding your lives?

What kinds of differences are there between adult grandchildren? How would you explain the differences?

If applicable, ask about spouse's relationships with grandchildren

Can you tell me about anything that you think has prevented you from seeing one another or becoming close? Follow-up: Anything that has facilitated your relationship?

If you could change anything about the relationship you have with your adult grandchildren what would it be? Why?

Can you tell me about any events or moments in your life or your grandchildren's that you think changed your relationships? Explain.

How do you think your grandchildren becoming adults has influenced your relationships?

Probes: Transitions such as school, work, friends, relationships, marriage etc.

How has getting older [your own aging] influenced your relationship with your grandchildren, particularly the adult grandchildren?

Probes: could include: health, deaths of family, friends, retirement

In your experience, how is it different being the grandparent of an adult grandchild, as opposed to being the grandparent of a young child?

Naturally, there are generational differences between you and adult grandchildren. How different/similar are you life experiences? Follow-up: How do feel these influence how you relate to one another?

### **Section Three: Meaning and Significance**

In your opinion, what does being a grandparent involve? (Obligations, expectations, etc.) Follow-up: what does being a grandchild entail? Or What role should grandparents play

in the extended family? What about grandchildren? Grandmother/grandfather granddaughter/grandson?

How does your relationship with your adult grandchildren differ from other relationships? For example, other grandchildren, children, friends. Similarities? Put otherwise, what, if anything is unique about grandparent-adult grandchild relationships?

How would you like your adult grandchild to describe you? If you do not get a chance to know your great grandchildren (assuming you have them), particularly as adults, what types of things would you hope your grandchildren would tell them about you?

Tell me about what you would like your adult grandchild to get out of your relationship? Why?

What do you feel you get out of the relationship with your adult grandchildren?

How does the relationship influence your life?

What is/are the most important part about your relationships with your adult grandchildren? Why? (Maybe different for each)

What are your least favorite aspects of your relationships with your adult grandchildren? Explain.

What feelings do you get when you think about your grandchildren? Is it any different for your adult grandchildren?

What does the relationship with [grandchild X] mean to you? Has this remained constant over time? Explain. What role do these relationships play in your life? How important are they? Has their significance changed over time?

The last question, gives you an opportunity to add or underscore anything that you feel is important for me to know about being an adult grandchild or having an older grandparent. Is there anything you would like to add?

**APPENDIX F:**

**GRANDCHILD  
INTERVIEW GUIDE**

## **Grandchild Interview Guide**

### **Section One: Family Context**

Can you tell me about your life at present?

Probes: Age, school, work, marriage, children, contact with parents, siblings, living grandparents, extended family, geographic proximity

Can you tell me about your early childhood?

Probes: When and where were you born?

What was it like growing up in your family?

How would you describe your relationship with your: mother, father, siblings?

What is your most vivid memory of growing up in your family?

Extended family, cousins, aunts, uncles etc.

What role did your grandparents play in your childhood?

Probes: What did you know about your grandparents' lives when you were growing up? What types of activities did you do together?

*For grandparent(s) living during childhood:*

\*\*\*\*explore gender and lineage differences\*\*\*\*

How often did you see your grandparent(s)?

What did you do together?

How would you describe your relationship with each grandparent?

What do you remember most about your each grandparent growing up?

From your childhood, what is your most vivid memory of each grandparent?

What did these relationships mean to you as a child?

Grandparents' death [work in where/if appropriate] (circumstances, age, impact)

*For grandparents not living during childhood:*

Based on what you know about your grandparents, what, if anything, do you think you might have missed out on by not knowing your grandparents?

What do you think they missed out on by not knowing you?

Can you tell me about your early adulthood? What was your life like as a young adult?

Probes: School, work, marriage, children, relationship with parents, extended family, hobbies, aspirations etc.,

Can you tell me a little bit about the relationships (if applicable) between your parents and your grandparents? Follow-up: Have they changed over the years? (Who sees/contacts your grandparents more often, you or your parents?)

## **Section Two: Experiential Accounts of the Relationship**

How would you describe [each (living) grandparent]?

Beginning with your earliest memory, can you tell me about your relationship with [each living grandparent]?

Probes: Youth, teen years, entry into adulthood

Discuss any transitions in own life: school, work, marriage, divorce etc

Discuss any transitions in grandparent's life: widowhood, retirement etc.

Discuss frequency, type and initiation of contact, exchange and feelings of closeness, middle generation throughout the years

Can you describe a typical visit with [each (living) grandparent]? Alternatively, your most recent visit.

Probes: On what occasions do you get together?

What do you do together?

What do you talk about? What have you learned about family history?

Do you talk about the past?

How important are discussion of the future?

What kind of advice do you give to one another regarding your lives?

Can you tell me about anything that you think has prevented/prevents you from seeing one another or becoming close? Follow-up: Anything that has facilitated your relationship?

If you could change anything about the relationship you have with [each (living) grandparent] what would it be? Why?

Can you tell me about any events or moments in your life or your grandparent's that you

think changed your relationship? Explain.

How do you think becoming an adult has influenced your relationship? Follow-up: The way you see and related to [each (living) grandparent].

How has your grandparents' getting older influenced your relationship?  
Probes could include: health, deaths of family, friends, retirement

In your experience, how is it different being an adult grandchild, as opposed to being a young grandchild?

Naturally, there are generational differences between you and grandparent(s). How different/similar are you life experiences? Follow-up: How do feel these influence how you relate to one another?

### **Section Three: Meaning and Significance**

In your opinion, what is the role of a grandchild, particularly an adult grandchild, in the extended family? Follow-up with: What role should grandparents play in the extended family?

In your opinion, what does it mean to be a grandchild? (Obligations, expectations etc.)  
Follow-up: What should/does being a grandparent entail? Are there different expectations surrounding grandmothers and grandfathers and granddaughters and grandsons?

How does your relationship with [your (living) grandparents] differ from other relationships? For example, siblings, parents, friends. Similarities? What, if anything, is unique about the grandparent-grandchild relationship?

How would you like your grandparent to describe you? Why?

What are the best things about knowing your grandparent now that you are older? Why?

What are your least favorite aspects of your relationship with [your grandparent(s)]?  
Explain.

What are the most important aspects of you relationship with [your grandparent(s)]?  
Why?

What feelings do you get when you think about [your grandparent(s)]?

Tell me about what you would like your grandparent to get out of your relationship?

What do you feel you get out of the relationship with [your grandparent(s)]? Why?

How does the relationship influence your life?

What role does the relationship play in your life? How important is it to you?

What does the relationship with [grandparent X] mean to you? Follow-up: Has this remained constant over time? Explain.

What, if anything, do you feel you would have missed out on by not knowing [grandparent X] as an adult? Explain.

If for some reason, your children do not know your grandmother/father, particularly as adults, what will you tell them about their great-grandmother/father?

The last question, gives you an opportunity to add or underscore anything that you feel is important for me to know about being an adult grandchild or having an older grandparent. Is there anything you would like to add?



Dear Colleague,

Thank you for submitting an abstract to GSA's 55th Annual Scientific Meeting. Until April 15, 2002, you may edit your abstract by visiting this link and using the identification information listed below. Notification of acceptance will be sent in June. We look forward to seeing you in Boston in November!

LINK: <https://www.eshow2000.com/gerontologicalsociety/abstract.cfm>

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Date: April 07, 2002

Title: WHO SHOULD PROVIDE WHAT? CANADIANS REFLECT ON THE ALLOCATION OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR LATER LIFE

Summary:

First Name : Candace  
Last Name : Kemp  
Job Title :  
Organization : McMaster University, Department of Sociology  
Address : 1280 Main Street West  
City : Hamilton  
State/Prov. : ON  
ZIP/Postal Code : L8S 4M4  
Country : Canada  
Phone Number : 905-525-9140  
E-mail Address : kempc@mcmaster.ca

Sincerely,

Johanna Merryman  
Director of Conferences and Education  
The Gerontological Society of America



GSA 2002

Candace L. Kemp and Margaret Denton

#### WHO SHOULD PROVIDE WHAT? CANADIANS REFLECT ON THE ALLOCATION OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR LATER LIFE

Set against the backdrop of an aging population and discourse surrounding old age, risk and the welfare state, this paper draws on semi-structured life history interviews (n=50) to examine how mid-to-later life Canadians discuss and allocate responsibility for the provision of social, financial and medical supports in later life. Despite personal circumstances, most individuals articulate sentiments of personal responsibility. Individual planning and preparation are defined as necessary to secure against the perceived potential individual and collective risks associated with becoming and being old. The role of the state is intimately connected to individual responsibility as 'deserving' citizens are understood to have rights and entitlements to state supported pensions, health care and social programs. Meanwhile, minimal expectations surround employers and families. It is concluded that individual perceptions of risk and responsibility have profound connections to state support, public policy and normative patterns of family and employer assistance in later life.

STEPGRANDPARENTS AND STEPGRAND-CHILDREN: EXPLORING AN AMBIGUOUS FAMILY TIE. Carolyn J. Rosenthal and Candace Kemp, Department of Sociology, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada M5S 4M4, and Laura Hurd Clarke, School of Social Work and Family Studies, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C. [crosest@mcmaster.ca](mailto:crosest@mcmaster.ca)

Step-ties between grandparents and grandchildren are formed as a result of life course transitions (death, divorce, remarriage) in the grandparent or adult child generation. While a substantial minority of contemporary families include such step-ties, the nature and negotiation of these step-relationships have received little research attention. This paper considers conceptual and methodological issues involved in studying the stepgrandparent-stepgrandchild tie and suggests some potentially useful concepts (e.g. ambiguity, contradictions, contingent ties) in exploring how this intergenerational step-tie is negotiated in the context of the lineage as a whole. Comparisons are made between biological grandparent-grandchild ties and stepgrandparent-stepgrandchild ties. Pertinent questions for future research are identified. The paper draws illustratively on data from a qualitative study on grandparent-adult grandchild relationships and from a qualitative study of remarriage in later life.

**100 word abstract**

**WHO SHOULD PROVIDE WHAT? CANADIANS REFLECT ON THE ALLOCATION OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR LATER LIFE**

Set against the backdrop of an aging population and discourse surrounding old age, risk and the welfare state, this paper draws on semi-structured life history interviews (n=50) to examine how mid-to-later life Canadians discuss and allocate responsibility for the provision of social, financial and medical supports in later life. Individual responsibility dominates, but is intimately connected to state support. Meanwhile, employers and families are not expected to contribute substantially. It is concluded that individual perceptions of risk and responsibility have profound connections to state support, public policy and normative patterns of family and employer assistance in later life.

**full abstract**

**CANADIAN REFLECTIONS ON THE ALLOCATION OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR LATER LIFE: INDIVIDUAL, STATE, EMPLOYER AND FAMILY ROLES**

Set against the backdrop of an aging population and discourse surrounding old age, risk and the welfare state, this paper draws on semi-structured life history interviews (n=50) in order to examine how Canadians allocate responsibility for the provision of social, financial and medical supports in later life. From the perspective of mid to later life adults, we explore what individuals feel they are responsible for providing in their old age and consider how they define the roles of the state, family and employer in supporting the needs of older adults. Regardless of personal circumstances, the majority of individuals articulate a sentiment of personal responsibility for later life. Individual planning and preparation are defined as necessary to secure against the perceived potential individual and collective risks associated with becoming and being old. Individuals identify the inability to maintain a desired lifestyle of leisure and consumption and relatedly, the loss of independence and self-sufficiency— often brought about by deteriorating physical, social and financial conditions— as risks which should be secured against. The role of the state is intimately connected to individual responsibility. ‘Deserving’ citizens are understood to have rights and entitlements to state supported pensions, health care and social programs in exchange for having and continuing to lead ‘responsible’, prudent lives. Employer responsibility is not emphasized and beyond emotional support, family members not expected to provide substantial support in later life. Ultimately, the allocation of responsibility for later life and the parameters within which individuals define who is responsible for what in old age are somewhat fluid and malleable, but nevertheless, consistently connected to issues of citizenship rights and responsibilities and the balance of individual and collective good. It is concluded that the individual reception of risk and responsibility pertaining to later life has profound social consequences which simultaneously reflect and are reflected in public policy and state assistance, as well as normative patterns of family and employer assistance in later life.

## **100 word abstract**

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## **full abstract**

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## Who should provide what? Canadian reflections on the allocation of responsibility for later life

Set against the backdrop of an aging population and discourse surrounding old age, risk and the welfare state, this paper draws on semi-structured life history interviews (n=50) ~~in order~~ to examine how <sup>mid to later</sup> Canadians allocate responsibility for the provision of social, financial and medical supports in later life. From the perspective of mid to later life adults, we explore what individuals feel they are responsible for providing in their old age and consider how they define the roles of the state, family and employer in supporting the needs of older adults. Regardless of personal circumstances, the majority of individuals articulate a sentiment of personal responsibility for later life. Individual planning and preparation are defined as necessary to secure against the perceived potential individual and collective risks associated with becoming and being old. Individuals identify the inability to maintain a desired lifestyle of leisure and consumption and relatedly, the loss of independence and self-sufficiency— often brought about by deteriorating physical, social and financial conditions— as risks which should be secured against. The role of the state is intimately connected to individual responsibility. ‘Deserving’ citizens are understood to have rights and entitlements to state supported pensions, health care and social programs in exchange for having and continuing to lead ‘responsible’, prudent lives. Employer responsibility is not emphasized and beyond emotional support, family members not expected to provide substantial support in later life. Ultimately, the allocation of responsibility for later life and the parameters within which individuals define who is responsible for what in old age are somewhat fluid and malleable, but nevertheless, consistently connected to issues of citizenship rights and responsibilities and the balance of individual and collective good. It is concluded that the individual reception of risk and responsibility pertaining to later life has profound social consequences which simultaneously reflect and are reflected in public policy and state assistance, as well as normative patterns of family and employer assistance in later life.

- Short statement of specific problem
- methods
- results
- conclusions

Themes include

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The guidelines listed below should be read by the author(s) of the paper(s) to be presented at the meeting. The guidelines are intended to help authors prepare their papers for presentation. The guidelines are intended to help authors prepare their papers for presentation. The guidelines are intended to help authors prepare their papers for presentation.

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Preferred Choice. Check only one.

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- ☐ Poster
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If your choice of presentation type is unavailable, will you accept an alternative?

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Symposia may be sponsored by more than one section. But for papers, posters and media, check only one box.

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- ☐ If you are a graduate student and are exempt from paying the fee.

Make all checks payable to The Gerontological Society of America.

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- ☐ The Aubin block Post-Doctoral Fellow Award

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- ☐ Behavioral & Social Sciences Award -- Dissertation
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## Objectives

Please list the objectives of your presentation below, or attach a separate piece of paper. Poster presentations need objectives. Paper presentations need objectives only if the topic is controversial or controversial as it is expected to be controversial or controversial. Please type or print clearly.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

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4. \_\_\_\_\_

## The Allocation of Responsibility for Later Life

Set against the backdrop of an aging population and discourse surrounding the welfare state, old age and citizenship rights and responsibilities, this paper focuses how individuals discuss the allocation of responsibility for the provision of social, financial and medical supports in later life. Drawing on data from a larger study of planning for later life, semi-structured life history interviews from a diverse sample of 60 mid to later life Canadians are used to explore the perceived responsibilities of state, employer, individual and family support old age. Regardless of personal circumstance, the majority of individuals articulate a sentiment of individual responsibility for later life. The majority suggest that individual planning and preparation are necessary to secure against the potential risks they associate with becoming and being older. Individuals identify the inability to maintain a desired lifestyle of leisure and consumption and relatedly, the loss of independence and self-sufficiency as risks which should be secured against. The role of the state is also intimately connected to individual responsibility. Deserving citizens have rights and entitlements to state supported pensions, health care and social programs in exchange for having and continuing to lead 'responsible', prudent lives. Employer responsibility is not emphasized and beyond emotional support, the family is not expected to provide support in later life. Ultimately, the allocation of responsibility for later life and the parameters within which individuals define who is responsible for what in old age are somewhat fluid, malleable and relative to personal circumstance, but always connected to issues of rights and responsibilities. Most individuals engage in projects of self-development and maintenance aimed at maximizing independence, prudentialism, selflessness and minimizing dependence on others as well as frivolity and greediness.

Collective  
Resp.

apocalyptic  
demographic

Context in  
Ontario

Collective  
Resp.

5-6 pages  
Lit. review - Context  
Analysis - Individual  
+ Collective  
Risk