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Case Study

*College Student’s* Relationships *with their Grandparents*

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Communication Problems with the Aging

**Literature Review and Research Questions**

Research shows that changes in the grandchild-grandparent relationship certainly occur over time. A recent study showed that approximately 65% of all adult grandchildren experience some change in their relationships with their grandparents as they go from childhood to adulthood (Monserud, 2010).

Statistics also indicate that these types of relationships now exist for longer periods of time since the grandparents are living longer lives. One study, conducted in 1998 estimated that 70% of grandchildren have all of their grandparents still living at the time of their birth (Uhlenberg and Kirby 1998). That particular study was carried out 13 years ago, one would imagine that these figures would be even higher today. In, fact newer figures indicate that an estimated 75% of all grandchildren at age 30 had at least one living grandparent (Soliz, Lin Anderson and Harwood, 2006).

Given the information that has been discussed, one would assume that a large percentage of college students would have many of their grandparents still living. One would also assume that their relationships with their grandparents are dynamic and always changing.

Some of the research that has been carried out on the grandparent-college aged grandchild relationship has indicated that this relationship improves when the grandchildren enter college (Crosnoe and Elder, 2002).

This case study will examine college student’s relationships with their grandparents. It aims to shed some light on the following research questions:

1. How many grandparents do college aged grandchildren have living?
2. Do grandchildren’s relationships with their grandparents change as they go from childhood to young adulthood and enter university?
3. How do these relationships change in a) closeness and b) contact?
4. Is there a particular grandparent grandchildren tend to be closer to?
5. What factors effect these changes?

**Method**

This study was carried out through the use of an anonymous survey (attached). 5 fulltime college students took the survey, which took about ten minutes to complete. The participants were aged between 18 and 22 years old and included 2 males and 3 females. In the survey participants were first asked basic information about themselves such as age and gender.

They were then asked questions about their relationships with their parents for example they were asked to describe the role each of their parents played in their childhood and also how close they presently feel to each of their parents.

Finally they were, asked questions pertaining to their relationships with their grandparents. Given the time constraints a longitudinal study would have been impossible. Instead, participants were asked to think back to when they were ten years old and rate firstly how often they saw each of their grandparents at that time and also how close they were to them during that time period. They were then asked the same questions about their current relationships with each of their grandparents. If one of the participants’ grandparents was not living they were asked not to answer questions about them.

This study was both quantitative and qualitative because while the survey required check the box scale based answers these scales were designed based on examples of types of relationships and not just numbers. For example if a participant rated their relationship with their grandmother as extremely close it meant that they viewed her almost as a second mother.

**Findings**

How many grandparents do college aged grandchildren have living?

100% of the participants had at least one grandparent still living. 40% of the participants had all of their grandparents still living. 60% of the participants had at least three of their grandparents still living.

Figure 1

Do grandchildren’s relationships with their grandparents change as they go from childhood to young adulthood and enter university? How do these relationships change in a) closeness and b) contact?

A total of 13 different grandparent-grandchild relationships were examined. Relationships with grandparents who were no longer living were not examined. Of these 13 relationships, 8 reported some change in contact. Contact remained the same in 5 of these relationships. Of the 8 relationships that did experience change in contact; 7 decreased in contact while 1 increased in contact.

Figure 2

Of the 13 relationships examined, 10 did not change in closeness at all from ages 10 to when they entered college, 2 decreased in closeness while only one increased in closeness.

Figure 3

Is there a particular grandparent grandchildren tend to be closer to?

On average the participants of this study tended to be closest with their paternal grandmother. They tended to be the least close with their paternal grandfather. The closeness rating was as follows; 1 = extremely close, 2 = Very Close, 3 = Pretty Close, 4 = somewhat close, 5 = Not close at all. Therefore lower scores mean higher rates of closeness within each relationship.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Average scores of grandchildren’s closeness to each of their grandparents.** | | | | |
| Grandparent: | Maternal Grandmother | Maternal Grandfather | Paternal Grandmother | Paternal Grandfather |
| Closeness Score: | 2.75 | 3 | 2.667 | 4.33 |
| Closeness Score description: | Very close; an important family member that you talk often with. | Pretty close; talk often but would not discuss intimate/personal issues with. | Very close; an important family member that you talk often with | Somewhat close; would only really talk superficially. |

What factors affect the changes in the grandparent grandchild relationship?

This study was not detailed enough to really examine all of the factors that may influence grandchildren’s relationships with their grandparents. It did however; attempt to examine how their relationship with their own parents affects their contact and closeness to their grandparents. All of the participants reported that their mother played a traditional role in their childhood. They all also reported that their relationship with their mother was at least “pretty close” or better. The same results hold true for 4 out of the 5 participants in regards to their relationship with their father. One participant (participant 2) reported that they only saw their father occasionally during their childhood and that their relationship is only somewhat close at present. Given the fact that this father and son relationship is different to the other participants relationships with their fathers it is a point of interest to examine how this relates to the participants relationships with his paternal grandparents.

Figure 4

* The above figure illustrates one participant’s closeness level to his father and how it correlates to his closeness to his paternal grandparents. Axis: 0 = no relationship, 1 = not close at all, 2 = somewhat close, would only really talk superficially, 3 = Pretty close, would talk often but would not discuss intimate/personal issues with, 4 = Very close, an important family member that you talk often with, 5 = extremely close, almost like a second mother or father.

**Observations and suggestions for further research**

This study was minute in terms of detail and participants. Therefore, not many overarching conclusions can be drawn from it. It did however; provide us with some interesting results which give good insights into the college aged grandchild – grandparent relationship. These findings were looked at on a case by case basis since each individual relationship is so unique.

For instance, when looking at participant 2’s relationship with his father and how this relates to his relationship with his grandparents. One would assume that his low level of closeness to his father would also result in low levels of closeness with his father’s parents. In reality this is not the case, participant 2 reported that he has an extremely close relationship with his maternal grandmother and views her almost as his second mother. This is a dynamic that could certainly be taken further. It would be interesting to gather data and examine grandchildren’s relationships with a particular parent’s parents when they do not have a good relationship with their own parent.

Another point of interest, can be noted when we examine participant 5’s relationship with her maternal grandfather. Participant 5 reported that she only saw her grandfather 3 or 4 times a year when she was ten years old, she now sees her grandfather 2 or 3 times a month. This is a big increase in contact levels and it seems to have had a direct impact on the closeness of the relationship. Participant 5 reported that she was only somewhat close with her grandfather when she was ten years old and they would only really talk superficially. Now, she considers herself pretty close to her grandfather and they talk often but they still do not discuss intimate or personal issues. It would be most interesting to examine how much physical contact and geographic proximity affect the closeness of these relationships.

Another research possibility would be to examine the effect of technology on grandparent grandchild relationships when the grandparents do not live in close geographic proximity to the grandchildren. It would be interesting to examine the closeness levels when programs such as Skype are available and when they are not.

**Conclusions**

Overall, the results of this study are not very positive. The study indicated that college aged grandchild – grandparents relationships are likely to decrease in quality as the grandchildren get older. Contact in these relationships is more likely to change than closeness. When contact does change it is more likely to decrease than increase. Similarly, when closeness changes it is more likely to decrease than increase.

Perhaps, if studies of this nature were published more frequently on college campuses, people would become aware of the importance of maintaining the adult grandchild- grandparent relationship. Thus, future results of studies may portray a more positive spin on the topic.

**References**

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