Age and gender differences in grandchildren's relations with their maternal grandfathers and grandmothers

Working paper 209

Robin Mann
Oxford Institute of Ageing, University of Oxford

Hafiz T. A. Khan
Oxford Institute of Ageing, University of Oxford

George W. Leeson
Oxford Institute of Ageing, University of Oxford

Abstract

Recent trends in demographic ageing have prompted renewed research interest in relations between grandparents and grandchildren. In this research, grandmothers, particularly maternal grandmothers, are commonly represented as the primary grandparent, and there has been relatively little research into the role of grandfathers. In this paper, we provide a quantitative analysis of grandchildren's perceptions of their relations with maternal grandfathers and grandmothers. In so doing, we find significant age and gender differences in how grandchildren relate to their maternal grandparents. While the perception of maternal grandmothers as 'most involved' holds true overall, it is much less evident amongst older grandchildren. Moreover, teenage grandsons are more likely to view their maternal grandfathers as the grandparent they 'get on with best'. Hence the salience of grandfathers, relative to grandmothers, in the imagination of grandchildren, varies significantly by age and gender. In discussion of this, we argue that a comprehensive understanding of gender variations between grandfathers and grandmothers needs to account for how intergenerational relationships shift as grandchildren age.

Contact Information

Dr Robin Mann, Oxford Institute of Ageing, University of Oxford, Manor Road Building, Manor Road, Oxford OX1 3UQ. Tel: 01865 286193; Fax: 01865 286191;
E-mail: robin.mann@ageing.ox.ac.uk

Age and gender differences in grandchildren's relations with their maternal grandfathers and grandmothers[1]

Introduction

This article examines the significance of age and gender differences in grandchildren's relations with their maternal grandfathers and grandmothers. Recent trends in demographic ageing and family formation have prompted a renewed interest in multigenerational bonds (Bengtson 2001) and on the role of grandparents in particular (Clarke and Roberts 2004; Dench and Ogg 2002). Despite this, there has been little research focus either on grandfathers themselves (although see Cunningham-Burley 1984), or on grandchildren's perspectives of their grandfathers. It can be argued that existing understandings have implicitly accepted that a grandparent is synonymous with grandmother or more colloquially with 'grannies'[2] (Harper 2005).

The association of kinship obligations with women in modern societies has been a consistent feature of sociological studies, particularly in terms of the role of women as 'kin keepers' (Hagestad 1985). As Morgan (2004:385) has noted with regard to family and kinship studies, 'insofar as men have been considered it has been in terms of some kind of "deficit model", as being less involved in the everyday kin practices'. However, as he goes on to state, 'the problem of the simple "deficit model" of men in kinship is that it might smooth over considerable variations' between men. Research findings on gender differences between grandparents have tended to reproduce traditional gender roles, with grandfathers engaging in instrumental activities and grandmothers in 'warmer' more expressive activities. In these cases, grandfathers may focus less on child rearing and less on non-family issues and more on schooling, jobs and money. A corollary to this is the persistent finding regarding 'matrilineal advantage', particularly the connection between grandmothers and adult daughters, providing support and advice upon child rearing (Suitor and Pillemer 2006). Conversely, grandfathers focus more upon financial assistance and household tasks – practices which do not directly imply intimacy with grandchildren. In a pioneering study of grandfatherhood, Cunningham-Burley (1984) reflects how such gendered understandings of grandmothers as the primary grandparent permeated her research relationships with grandfathers:

> The grandmothers dominated the interview setting: they usually answered the door to me, and it was through them that I arranged the interview over the telephone. This was the case even when the grandfathers originally answered the telephone: on hearing what was being asked, they would always put me on to the grandmothers. At the time this seemed unremarkable to me, it was simply taken-for-granted that this should be the case (Cunningham-Burley, 1984:327).

However, despite their reticence, there is little clear evidence in support of the claim for the lesser embracement of the role by grandfathers. As Spitze and Ward note (1998), previous studies often rely upon 'fixed' and 'gender-biased measures' that themselves reflect traditional distinctions between what men and women do. Put simply,

'grandfathers may appear less involved if dimensions important to them are not measured' (Spitze and Ward 1998:125). More recent research suggests that the significance of grandfathers to the lives of grandchildren has been considerably underestimated. A handful of studies claim the surfacing of a more involved type of grandfatherhood compared to the picture of formal and distant grandfathers portrayed within longstanding grandparenthood research (see Mann 2007 for a review). Waldrop *et al* (1999) find grandfathers to express a strong desire for purposeful involvement with grandchildren. They argue that grandfatherhood rests upon an 'alternative discourse of masculinity' based upon a nurturing and mentoring role and to be stressing the need for balance between work and family, emphasising the importance of both 'hard work' and 'spending time with loved ones'. Similarly Roberto *et al* (2001) found that grandfathers spoke freely about relationships with their grandchildren, demonstrating a fair amount of knowledge, whilst also tending to incorporate the 'good provider' aspect of fatherhood into their new roles.

There is even less research on gender differences in grandchildren's perspectives of their grandparents. However, a study by Mills *et al* (2001) came to similar conclusions, finding that 'grandchildren feel emotionally closer to maternal grandparents in general, and to maternal grandmothers in particular' (2001:450). Similarly a Scottish study by Ross *et al* (2006) found that 'gender and lineage appeared important in grandchildren's selection of a closest grandparent. 48 per cent cited a grandmother as most close with 11 per cent choosing a grandfather…more than twice as many favoured maternal grandparents as paternal'. Research has also found that grandchildren themselves perceive grandmothers as being more involved in their lives compared to grandfathers (Roberto and Stroes 1992) and that it is grandmothers, rather than grandfathers, who figure more prominently in the stories and narratives of grandchildren (Thompson, Itzin and Abendstern 1990). A revealing cross-national study of children's drawings of their grandparents found significant differences in representations of grandmothers and grandfathers (Hummel, Rey, and Lalive 1995). In Switzerland and the Netherlands, for example, grandmothers were represented as wives orientated to the household and domestic chores and grandfathers depicted around activities such as sitting and reading the newspaper, going for a walk or in the garden.

In light of this knowledge gap, we provide exploratory analysis of new data regarding relations between grandchildren and their grandfathers and, by comparison, to their grandmothers. We examine how these relations vary by grandchildren's age and gender. Whilst maternal grandmothers appear closer to grandchildren on the whole, we find that older teenage grandsons report great preference for maternal grandfathers when compared with grandmothers. This suggests that an assessment of grandfathers, and of the differences between grandmothers and grandfathers, requires looking beyond a principal focus upon grandparents' child care role with young grandchildren, and to consider how these relations unfold as both they and grandchildren age.

Given that grandparenthood on the whole has received little sociological attention in Britain, we, by way of background, we wish consider grandparents within the broader picture of demographic and social change in Britain. This will be followed by an outline

of the study, the sample and methodology. We then present our results. Finally, we discuss the implications of this research for a re-appraisal of grandfatherhood.

Grandparenting in Britain: Change and Diversity

The last decade or so has witnessed an emerging interest in grandparenting in Britain. This is mostly reflected in policy concerns over the role of grandparents around childcare (Gray 2005; Harper *et al* 2004; Wheelock and Jones 2002), divorce and family breakdown (Ferguson and Douglas 2004; Smith and Drew 2001; Thompson 1999) and older peoples well-being (Clarke and Roberts 2004). Despite these concerns, grandparents continue to receive little recent attention within mainstream British sociology (although see Mason, May and Clarke 2007). Grandparents have been the 'great "forgottens" of sociology' (Attias-Donfut and Segalen 2002: 281). One explanation for this neglect is a stereotypical, yet increasingly inaccurate, association of grandparents with old age. The historical devaluation of older people has contributed to persistent labels of grandparents as 'passive' and 'irrelevant' figures within families, and thus of little sociological significance. However, in the context of longer life expectancy, healthy ageing and of relatively higher living standards during retirement, an active space beyond the key moral careers of parenting and work is created. In addition, changing family formations mean that grandparenting will be as much a characteristic of mid-life as it is of late-life, occurring whilst grandfathers, and to a lesser extent grandmothers, are engaged in full time employment. Grandparenting has become an increasingly heterogeneous experience and there are at least three interrelated developments that are contributing to this diverse picture.

Demographic Ageing and Family Transitions
Current demographic changes mean that families in advanced societies will be increasingly multigenerational – that is, characterized more so by ties across generations and less so by ties within generations (Bengtson 2001). The combination of lower mortality and fertility rates results in families having increasingly fewer members and longer gaps between generations, and thus more likely to be slim or 'beanpole' (Harper 2003). With reference to the United States, Uhlenberg and Kirby (1998) argue that grandparenthood has become increasingly salient over the 20th century as a result of demographic ageing. They project that more than two-thirds of those born in 2000 will still have both sets of grandparents alive when they reach 18. They suggest this may generate a 'competitive' environment amongst grandparents: 'children now, compared to the past, on average have more living grandparents and have fewer siblings who compete for the attention of their grandparents' (1998:38).

In the UK, there is evidence that around a third of the population are grandparents, and will remain so for an average of 25 years (Dench and Ogg 2002). Moreover, that around three-quarters of the population will at some stage become grandparents (Dench and Ogg 2002). There is a greater likelihood of a new born child having a living grandmother aged under 70 (Gray 2005). For instance, Clarke and Roberts' (2003) sample of grandparents ranged from 37 to 94, one-third of whom were under 60. Our own sample of grandfathers (described below) ranged from 47 to 94. Harper (2005:423) also argues that earlier

demographic trends, when people married earlier, and had more closely spaced children, have meant that grandparenting will be increasingly experienced at younger ages and for a longer duration. However, Dench and Ogg (2002) argue that the postponement of childbirth by younger women means grandparents are older than they were for previous generations of mothers. While Pahl (2000) suggests that rising life expectancy means older women have a longer 'empty nest' phase, after child rearing but before old age, in which active grandparenting can potentially occur. In turn, it is likely that grandparenting will increasingly take place alongside other time-engaging activities such as work, volunteering and other family responsibilities, such as caring for an elderly parent. The complexity of dissolved and then reconstituted family relationships also has implications for how grandparenting is perceived and enacted. For example, a full-time employed grandfather in his early 50s within a reconstituted family may still be an active father to his child from a second marriage, whilst simultaneously acting as grandparent to grandchildren from the oldest child of his first marriage. In this complex scenario, grandparenting overlaps with employment and active parenting. This raises both practical and normative questions: How might the grandfathers' second wife, perhaps in her mid 40s, feel about being a grandmother? How might ambivalence towards grandparenting be expressed in practice? This is merely one scenario, but it should at least dispel any doubts that contemporary grandparenting is of little concern to sociologists.

Geographical proximity and migration
The increased opportunities for grandparenting provided by demographic ageing noted above may be off set by geographical dispersion of family members, in particular, the exodus of older people, often in retirement, to rural areas, seaside resorts or even abroad (see Oliver 2008). While this has raised questions about the capacities of families to care and support each other, family sociologists have continually emphasized the reality of kinship in Britain. Even when families have become dispersed, such as in transnational families, new studies continue to emphasize the considerable time and energy people put into maintaining meaningful kinship ties (Finch 2007). The assertions by early sociologists that 'traditional' wider kinship ties were being replaced by isolated nuclear families were to be proved unfounded by studies of urban communities in 1950s and 1960s Britain (Young and Wilmott 1957, Rosser and Harris 1965). Although not living in the same household, families continued to live near enough for regular visiting and exchange of mutual kinship. And whilst such descriptions have been criticized for romanticizing female domesticity, more recent studies of families have also pointed to the reality of kinship (Phillipson *et al* 2001). Murphy *et al* (1999) report that 60 per cent of adults aged 30-50 with their mother alive live within a 30 minute journey of their mothers' homes. Dench and Ogg (2002) find that over a third of grandchildren have a grandparent living within a 15 minute journey. Whilst Clarke (2004) found that three quarters of those under the age of 70 live within 30 minutes journey of at least one grandchild. Today's grandparents are also more mobile, and thus able to move to live nearer their children and grandchildren. Retirement flats are commonly advertised by estate agents and property developers to older people as opportunities to relocate to live nearby their children and grandchildren.

Clearly a sole focus upon face-to-face contact would generate a distorted picture of the impact of migration given changing patterns of communication. As Crow and McLean (2004:80) conclude, '…migration strategies have the potential to recreate as well as to break the links with wider kin and with place…geographical distance is not necessarily a bar to the maintenance of supportive family networks, although this is something that varies with social class and access to the means of communication'. Yet despite the reality of widespread kinship networks, there can be little doubt that geographical proximity is a significant influence on the frequency and nature of interaction, and the type of grandparenting that occurs. Cherlin and Furstenberg (1986) argue that geography is the single greatest factor influencing contact between grandparents and grandchildren. They found that when adult children move away, the older generations access to the grandchildren drops dramatically. Finch and Mason (1993) found that geographical distance is a commonly cited reason people use to explain their inability to provide care and support; whilst those who do live nearby are commonly assumed caring responsibilities (Mason 1999).

Overall, whilst families have been increasingly dispersed, it remains that in the majority of families, at least one adult child continues to live close to their parents. This could potentially mean that for every grandchild living close by to their grandparents is another grandchild living much further a field. Thus variations in grandparent-grandchild relations may be as significant *within* families as they are between families. Because grandparenting studies often focus upon grandchild to whom they are closest to, these intra-family variations have not been systematically captured.

Gender, work and family care
A third area in which grandparenting has been receiving significant attention is in relation to social policy concerns around childcare (Wheelock and Jones 2002) and as a resource allowing lone mothers greater participation in the labour market (Harper *et al* 2004). As Clarke and Roberts (2002) note, the attention towards grandparents, like fathering earlier, reflects the increasing number of women in paid work. Using Time Series data, Gray (2005) finds grandparents to form a regular source of help with child care for around a quarter of working mothers. Grandparents are seen to offer greater working flexibility, for example, in evenings when formal services are not available. Gray (2005) also finds an association between mothers' employment and grandparents providing childcare for longer weekly hours. There is a suggestion that the opportunities provided to women of one generation may to an extent *rest upon the confinement to the family of the parent generation* (as alluded to by Attias-Donfut and Arber 2000:**page numbe**r). Yet while there is a greater prevalence of informal care-giving amongst grandmothers compared to grandfathers, in keeping with the bulk of care-giving done by women over the life course, it is also the case that care-giving amongst men increases with age (see for example Arber and Gilbert 1989). Another way of posing this is that *of* the lesser number of male carers, the vast proportion are likely to be grandfathers. Moreover as current cohorts of working mothers become working grandmothers, then families may require a more even distribution of caring responsibilities between grandmothers and grandfathers.

There remains little understanding of the effect of grandparent employment upon their caring and family practices. Gray (2005) raises concerns that grandparent care might be declining due to rising employment rates amongst older women. However Dench and Ogg (2002) find that two-thirds of women under 60 have paid jobs but that this did not reduce contact with grandchildren. Similarly, the greater likelihood of ill health during retirement for grandfathers has often meant that employed grandfathers have more contact.

The Study

The paper will draw on data collected as part of the *Contemporary Dynamics of Grandfatherhood* project funded by the Leverhulme Trust. The aim of the research was to examine the roles and relationships of grandfathers within contemporary families within the UK. The concern was to understand the caring and family practices of grandfathers; the differences between younger and older grandfathers, and the significance of work/retirement in this regard; the circumstances under which grandfathers became actively involved; and the meanings they ascribe to grandfatherhood. The research also aimed to consider nature of grandfather-grandchild relationships, as well as the perspectives of grandchildren upon these relationships.

In order to address these concerns, we drew upon both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. In the first instance, this involved the distribution of a questionnaire to be completed by both children and parents. Initially, a 'questionnaire pack' was mailed to parents via an address list of all students attending two schools in Oxfordshire. The 'pack' consisted of a cover letter explaining the project, a short 'background' questionnaire to be completed by parents, and two identical questionnaires to be completed by the grandchild attending the school and a school age sibling. Approximately 2000 questionnaires were distributed to parents via the address list. Of this, a total of 350 questionnaires were returned by grandchildren who had at least one living grandfather, around 30% of whom provided a telephone number and/or email address in order to be contacted further. Contact with parents then facilitated contact with grandfathers. The questionnaire provides information on family background; on the nature, type and extent of contact; and on grandchildren's perceptions of their relationships with grandfathers. Secondly, we then conducted 60 in-depth interviews with grandfathers. The 60 grandfathers interviewed were accessed via the questionnaire distributed to grandchildren and comprise of a range of occupational and age groupings, as well as both maternal and paternal grandfathers. This 'mixed-method' approach allows us to analyse the in-depth interview material within the context of the quantitative data collected via the questionnaires. Moreover, through capturing the perspectives of both grandchildren and grandfathers, we were able to provide 'multiple voices' (Connidis 2004) from the same families.

The Schools

Our sample consists of families who have children attending the two selected schools in Oxfordshire – a private school and a state secondary. The method of accessing children

and families via schools raises wider questions about the relationship between education and social class, and about how these shape this relationship shapes the lifestyles and family practices of grandparents. While this method of achieving samples is non-representative, it does provide access to a specific socio-economic stratum of professional families in Oxford. Taken together, the two schools provide a contrast between highly prosperous and mixed (professional and lower socio-economic) class locations amongst students and their families.

The Grandchildren and their Grandfathers

The 350 grandchildren completing questionnaires with at least one grandparent alive came from 256 families (some were completed by siblings), with a relatively even split between the two schools (181 for the private school, and 170 for the state school). This comprised of 208 granddaughters aged between 4 and 18 and 142 grandsons aged between 6 and 18. Of the 256 families with at least one grandparent still alive, were 208 maternal grandmothers, 180 maternal grandfathers, 189 paternal grandmothers and 148 paternal grandfathers. The table below provides a breakdown of the grandfathers within the 256 families as reported by parents:

Table I: *Breakdown of Grandfathers within Sample*

	Maternal Grandfathers		Paternal Grandfathers	
	No.	%	No.	%
Age (missing = 13)				
50-59	1	0.01	4	0.03
60-69	39	21.91	28	20.00
70-79	87	48.88	65	46.43
80+	48	26.97	43	30.71
Retired (missing = 5)	143	80.34	125	86.21
Married (missing = 7)	154	86.52	132	91.03
Good/V. Good Health (missing = 7)	109	61.24	77	53.10
Close Enough to Visit (missing = 8)	121	67.98	100	69.44
N	180		148	

Compared to other major survey research in this area, the mean age of 74 amongst our respondents is relatively high. This also links to the overwhelming proportion of retired grandfathers and to the relatively low proportion of grandfathers considered to be in at least 'good' health with our sample. In many ways this was a trade off between the need to gain a sample of older grandchildren (thus older grandparents) able complete the questionnaire independently and a desire to capture younger grandfathers (but inevitable with younger grandchildren). As stated above, an older grandchildren sample allows us to consider aspects of relations beyond a principal focus upon child care, which have hitherto gone unnoticed.. Also of interest, is that around two-thirds of the grandfathers

were considered by parents to living close enough in order for them to visit. This suggests what was stated earlier in this paper that, in the majority cases, grandparents continue to live close to at least one child.

Methodology

The paper provides a quantitative analysis based on the questionnaire data described above. We present data resulting from grandchildren's responses to two questions:

> ***Which grandparent do you have most contact with?***
> Your mother's mother ☐
> Your mother's father ☐
> Your father's mother ☐
> Your father's father ☐

> ***Which grandparent do you get on with best?***
> Your mother's mother ☐
> Your mother's father ☐
> Your father's mother ☐
> Your father's father ☐

We explore the significance of age and gender to grandchildren's responses to these questions. This is in order to examine the extent to which notions of grandfathers as 'less involved' compared to grandmothers are held equally by grandsons and granddaughters of different ages. To do this, we do two things: firstly, we divide the sample (n=350) of granddaughters and grandsons into three age bands – under 11 (n=85); 12-15 (n=199); and 16 and over (n=66) – corresponding to primary education; compulsory secondary education; and those within optional 16+ secondary education or about to commence tertiary education; Secondly, we focus on these differences in relations with *maternal* grandfathers and grandmothers. We perform Chi-Square in order to test the significance of age effects at the grandchild level and gender effects at both grandchild and grandparent levels.

Findings

A general overview of grandchildren responses to these two questions is provided in the Table II below:

Table II: *Grandchildren's responses on contact with and best grandparent*

	Contact		Best	
	n	%	n	%
Grandparents				
Maternal grandmother	138	39.4	112	32.9
Maternal grandfather	36	10.3	70	20.6
Paternal grandmother	43	12.3	46	13.6
Paternal grandfather	14	4.0	27	7.9
Both maternal grandparents	62	17.7	28	8.2
Both paternal grandparents	24	6.9	5	1.5
All grandparents	21	6.0	30	8.8
Other	12	3.4	22	6.5
Total	350	100.0	340	100.0

Certainly, the data is consistent with the general finding of previous studies, namely, that grandchildren have much more contact with their maternal grandmother than any of their other grandparents. This said, the percentage of grandchildren choosing maternal grandmothers is particularly high, and this may reflect some methodological choices. For example, the questionnaire asks grandchildren to select one grandparent and therefore to an extent may reflect a 'forced' choice, treating grandparents as mutually exclusive categories. This potentially leads to an over-emphasis of differences between grandparents, amplifying what may simply be marginal leanings or tendencies. As we can see, in a number of cases, grandchildren would tick more than one grandparent (for example, maternal or paternal grandparents or both grandmothers or grandfathers), thus suggesting a reluctance amongst grandchildren to distinguish between their living grandparents. In addition, it is important to consider the role of parents in this regard. While we focus on grandchildren and grandparents, it is well understood that it is parents who mediate these relationships. Moreover, as in this research, the involvement of children in research is often accessed through parents, who in turn act as gatekeepers. One of the difficulties here is the extent to which grandchildren's reports are shaped by their parents. For example, parents peering over children's answers. The focus upon older grandchildren facilitates the possibility of independent reports, but we cannot be sure. Given that it was predominantly mothers who completed the parent's section of the questionnaire, then the leaning towards the maternal grandparents maybe overemphasized.

Nevertheless, as the table does show, greater contact does not necessarily translate into grandchildren's feelings towards their grandparents, which are more evenly split. For instance, the number of grandchildren choosing grandfathers as their 'best' grandparent is almost the double the number of those choosing grandfathers as who they have most contact with. Thus some children will report having most contact with grandmothers, whilst simultaneously viewing grandfathers as whom they get on with best. Questions thus arise as to for *which* grandchildren are relations with grandfathers strongest? Are there significant variations between grandmothers and grandfathers when we breakdown responses by age and gender of grandchildren? Between grandsons and granddaughters?

Or between older or younger grandchildren? In order to explore this, and because of their greater numbers, we look solely at maternal grandmothers (Mat gm) and grandfathers (Mat gf). Table III presents findings in relation to contact (question 1):

Table III: *Contact with grandparent by age and gender*

	Mat gm		Mat gf		
	n	%	n	%	Significance
Age					
<12	41	29.7	3	8.3	P-value = 0.018
12-15	76	55.1	23	63.9	
16+	21	15.2	10	27.8	
Gender					
Granddaughter	90	65.2	17	47.2	P-value = 0.048
Grandson	48	34.8	19	52.8	
TOTAL	138	100.0	36	100.0	

And best (question 2) grandparent in Table IV:

Table IV: *Best grandparent by age and gender*

	Mat gm		Mat gf		
	n	%	n	%	Significance
Age					P-value = 0.013
<12	34	30.4	9	12.9	
12-15	64	57.1	45	64.2	
16+	14	12.5	16	22.9	
Gender					
Granddaughter	77	68.8	33	47.1	P-value = 0.004
Grandson	35	31.2	37	52.9	
TOTAL	112	100.0	70	100.0	

In relation to both *contact with* (Table III) and *best* (Table IV), we find a decreasing percentage share for grandmothers relative to grandfathers, and a respective increasing percentage share for grandfathers, as grandchildren age. In addition, we find a marginal preference for grandfathers amongst those grandchildren aged 16 and as the grandparent with whom they get on with best. In relation to gender, granddaughters report more contact and greater preference for grandmothers (77 out of 110, 70 per cent). However, in Table IV, we find a preference, albeit marginal, for grandfathers (37 out of 72, 52.3 per cent) over grandmothers (35 out of 72, 47.7 per cent) amongst grandsons. Furthermore, the difference between grandsons and granddaughters in response to the second question is highly significant. These findings are interesting because while the overall picture of the 'primacy' of maternal grandmothers identified is identified in Table II, our data also suggests that there are life stages, and certain types of relations and practices associated with these stages, in which grandfathers play a more prominent if not equal role. In the

following Tables V to VIII, we then combine age and gender for the two questions, firstly for granddaughters (Tables V and VI) and then for grandsons (Tables VII and VIII):

Table V: *Granddaughter contact by age*

	Mat gm		Mat gf		
	n	%	n	%	Significance
Age					
<12	26	28.9	1	5.9	P-value = 0.117
12-15	44	48.9	12	70.6	
16+	20	22.2	4	23.5	
TOTAL	90	100.0	17	100.0	

Table VI: *Granddaughter best by age*

	Mat gm		Mat gf		
	n	%	n	%	Significance
Age					
<12	23	29.9	4	12.1	P-value = 0.109
12-15	41	53.2	20	60.6	
16+	13	16.9	9	27.3	
TOTAL	77	100.0	33	100.0	

Hypothesis: there is no significant relationship between granddaughter's age and differences in relations with maternal grandparents.

Table VII: *Grandson contact by age*

	Mat gm		Mat gf		
	n	%	n	%	Significance
Age					
<12	15	31.2	2	10.5	P-value = 0.001
12-15	32	66.7	11	57.9	
16+	1	2.1	6	31.6	
TOTAL	48	100.0	19	100.0	

Table VIII: *Grandson best by age*

	Mat gm		Mat gf		
	n	%	n	%	Significance
Age					
<12	11	31.4	5	13.5	P-value = 0.034
12-15	23	65.7	25	67.6	
16+	1	2.9	7	18.9	
TOTAL	35	100.0	37	100.0	

Hypothesis: there is a significant relationship between grandson's age and differences in relations with maternal grandparents.

The above tables identify differences relating to granddaughter's age and grandson's age for our two questions. While age and gender differences are not particularly significant for granddaughters (Tables V and VI), they are highly significant for differences in relations between grandsons and maternal grandmothers and grandfathers (Tables VII and VIII). Each of the four tables suggests that grandfathers have greater salience amongst both older granddaughters and grandsons. Of greater significance however is Table VIII, in which we see a clear majority of grandsons aged 12 and over selecting maternal grandfathers (32 out of 56, 57.1 per cent) rather than maternal grandmothers (24 out of 56, 42.9 per cent) as the grandparent 'they get on with best'. This supports the claim made at the beginning of the paper, that the overall 'deficit' model applied to men in families, can gloss over changes and variations in men's relationships with, in this case, grandchildren. While the general notion of the 'greater involvement' of grandmothers holds true overall, there are particular stages and situations in which this general pattern is reversed.

Discussion

How might we interpret these findings? Spitze and Ward (1998) argue that gender patterns in grandparent-grandchildren may also depend on age of grandchildren, thus offering support to the findings from our study. As they go on to state: 'Gender patterns in grandparent-grandchild relations may also depend on age of grandchildren. Grandmothers appear to have greater involvement than grandfathers with young grandchildren, a view expressed and supported by both grandmothers and grandfathers' (1998:123). On one hand, grandfathers become more involved because they feel they have something to offer older grandchildren's who are experiencing a transition from education to employment, a contribution which reinforces their masculinity. Waldrop *et al* (1999) found grandfathers to emphasize a mentoring role in which they may provide grandchildren with moral guidance. On the other hand, these shifts may reflect a decreasing sense of closeness towards grandmothers rather than any real rising sense of closeness towards grandfathers. Furthermore, gendered practices may still be in evidence with grandfathers emphasizing outdoor activities and sport.

Mills *et al* (2001) also indicate that grandparents' larger family size may limit the interaction between granddaughters and the maternal grandfather, thus suggesting that grandfathers are able to develop closer relations with the first grandchildren. If so then a shift from extended to multigenerational or 'bean-pole' families may be conducive to a greater involvement of grandfathers. Sprey and Matthews (1982) find that while the grandparent-grandchild relationship is initially mediated by the parents, as time passes, the bond becomes more direct, albeit in ways which still requires active negotiation on the part of grandparents. Nevertheless, they describe older teenage and adult grandchildren as constituting a third 'independent' stage in grandparent-grandchild relations in which grandchildren are able to bypass parents completely (1982:99). Moreover, grandparents are also in a position to mediate between older children and the

14

middle generation. As stated earlier, researchers have long commented upon the matrilineal advantage within families, particularly in terms of the strong link between mothers and their married daughters. It may be that as grandchildren age and begin to assert their own relational identities, the significance of this connection for children's family relationships is lessened. Diminishing differences between grandmothers and grandfathers may also reflect the concomitant rise in levels of education as grandchildren age (Mills *et al* 2001); there may be an educational bias amongst those who returned questionnaires; and whose parents emphasized the completion of the questionnaire by grandchildren as an educational tool.

Wheelock and Jones (2002) study into the complementary care provided by maternal and paternal grandparents in the north of England found that while the care of children is mostly likely to be undertaken by maternal grandmothers, maternal grandfathers came second and faired better than paternal grandmothers and grandfathers. Their evidence suggests that it is the distinction between maternal and paternal grandparents that is crucial rather than a distinction between grandmothers and grandfathers *per se*. This may also reflect the dyadic nature of grandparenting whereby maternal grandfathers are carrying out caring duties as part of their partnership with grandmothers. In other words grandfathers are involved when their spouses are involved.

These differences, and the shift towards grandfathers with age, could simply reflect differences in the number of grandparents alive. Of course, the grandmothers and grandfathers of older grandchildren are more likely to be lone grandparents. Thus there is a question as to whether grandfathers are being chosen over grandmothers or grandfathers simply being selected because grandmothers are no longer alive. In other words, grandfathers are only favoured when grandmothers are no longer available. However, this would also go against the prevailing view that lower death rates for females compared to males, combined with age differences between spouses, have made it more common for young persons to have grandmothers rather than grandfathers alive. As Uhlenberg and Kirby (1998:26) state, 'lower death rates for females compared to males over the twentieth century, combined with age differences between spouses, have made it more common for young persons to have grandmothers alive than grandfathers'. More analysis is needed here, but our initial investigation of this suggests that differences between spousal or lone grandparents in response to either question are not significant for either grandfathers or grandmothers.

Conclusion

In this paper we have provided a quantitative analysis of grandchildren's perspectives on relations with grandfathers and grandmothers. Maternal grandmothers are commonly perceived and often found to be the 'most involved' grandparent. While this holds true overall, there are certain stages and situations, in which grandfathers attain a greater salience in the imaginations of grandchildren. The findings presented here indicate both significant age and gender differences in how grandchildren relate to their maternal grandfathers and grandmothers. The primacy of grandmothers is less apparent amongst older grandchildren, and even less again amongst older grandsons. In addition, the

grandparents with whom grandchildren have most contact with are not necessarily those with whom they get on with best. Moreover grandsons aged 12 and over are more likely to choose maternal grandfathers as the grandparent they get on with best. Hence the *salience* of grandfathers, relative to grandmothers, in the imagination of grandchildren, varies significantly by age and gender. These findings vindicate specific attention to grandfathers, and support our arguments that the general notion of maternal grandmothers as the primary grandparent can smooth over significant variations in relations between grandchildren and grandfathers. Further consideration should be given to how children's relations with grandparents evolve over time, as both they and their grandparents age. In addition, qualitative studies should be undertaken in order to examine the kinds of practices and circumstances under which grandfather-grandchild relationships are enacted.

Notes

[2] For example, in August 2008 *The Observer* newspaper covered a story on the setting up of a new support website which whilst designated for all grandparents, but which was entitled www.grannynet.co.uk (see Hill 2008). Such common sense elisions of *grandfathers* have tended to go unremarked upon.

References

Arber, S. and Gilbert, N. 1989 'Men: The Forgotten Carers', *Sociology* 23(1): 111-118.

Arthur, S. Snape, S. and Dench, G. 2003 'The Moral Economy of Grandparenting', *Generations Review* 13(2): 10-12.

Attias-Donfut, C. and Segalen, M. 2002 'The Construction of Grandparenthood', *Current Sociology* 50(2): 281-294.

Attias-Donfut, C. and Arber, S. 2000 'Equity and Solidarity Across the Generations' in S. Arber and C. Attias-Donfut (eds.) *The Myth of Generational Conflict*, London: Routledge.

Bengtson, V. L. and Robertson, J. F. (eds.) 1985 *Grandparenthood*, London: Sage Publications.

Bengtson, V. L. 2001 'Beyond the Nuclear Family: The Increasing Importance of Multigenerational Bonds', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63(1): 1-16.

Clarke, L. and Roberts, C. 2004 'The Meaning of Grandparenthood, and its Contribution to the Quality of Life of Older People' in A. Walker and C. Henessey (eds.) *Growing Older: Quality of Life*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Cherlin, A. J. and Furstenberg, F. F. 1986 *The New American Grandparent: A Place in the Family, A Life Apart*, New York: Basic Books.

Connidis, I. A. 2004 'Stability and Change in Childhood and Parenting: Observations Across Three Generations' in M. Silverstein and K. Warner Schaje (eds.) *Annual Review of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, New York: Springer.

Crow, G. and MacLean, C. 2004 'Families and Local Communities' in J. Scott, J. Treas and M. Richards (eds.) *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Families*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Cunningham-Burley, S. 1984 '"We Don't Talk About It…" Issues of Gender and Method in the Portrayal of Grandfatherhood', *Sociology* 18(3): 325-338.

Davidson, K. Daly, T. and Arber, S. 2003 'Exploring the Social Worlds of Older Men' in S. Arber, K. Davidson and J. Ginn (eds.) *Gender and Ageing: Changing Roles and Relationships*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Dench, G. and Ogg, J. 2002 *Grandparenting in Britain: A Baseline Study*, London: Institute of Community Studies.

Douglas, G. and Ferguson, N. 2003 'The Role of Grandparents in Divorced Families', *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family* 17(1): 41-67.

Drew, L. A. and Smith, P. K. 1999 'The Impact of Parental Separation/Divorce on Grandparent-Grandchild Relationships', *Journal of Aging and Human Development* 48(3): 191-216.

Finch, J. 2007 'Displaying Families', *Sociology* 41(1): 65-81.

Finch, J. and Mason, J. 1995 *Negotiating Family Responsibilities*, London: Routledge.

Gauthier, A. 2002 'The Role of Grandparents', *Current Sociology* 50(2): 295-307.

Gray, A. 2005 'The Changing Availability of Grandparents as Carers and its Implications for Childcare Policy in the UK', *Journal of Social Policy* 34(4): 557-577.

Hagestad, G. O. 1985 'Continuity and Connectedness' in V. L. Bengtson and J. F. Robertson (eds.) *Grandparenthood*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Harper, S. 2003 'Changing Families as European Societies Age', *European Journal of Sociology* 44(2): 155-84.

Harper, S. 2005. 'Understanding Grandparenthood' in V. L. Bengtson and M. L. Johnson (eds.) *Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Harper, S. et al. 2004 *Grandmothercare in Lone Parent Families*, Research Report, Oxford Institute of Ageing, University of Oxford.

Hill, A. 2008 'Grandparents Demand their Charter of Rights', *The Observer* 24 August 2008; 13.

Hummel, C. Rey, J. C. and Lalive, C. J. 1995. 'Children's Drawings of Grandparents: A Quantitative Analysis of Images' in M. Featherstone and Andrew Warnick (eds.) *Images of Ageing: Cultural Representations of Later Life*, London: Routledge.

Kenner, C. et al. 2007 'Intergenerational Learning Between Children and Grandparents in East London', *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 5(3): 219-243.

Littler, K. 2008 'Who Says Grandparents Matter?' *Journal of Believes & Values* 29(1): 51-60.

Mann, R. 2007 'Out of the Shadows? Grandfatherhood, Age and Masculinities', *Journal of Aging Studies* 21(4): 281-291.

Mason, J. 1999 'Living Away From Relatives' in S. McRae (ed.) *Changing Britain: Families and Households in the 1990s*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mason, J., May, V. and Clarke, L. 2007 'Ambivalence and the Paradoxes of Grandparenting', *The Sociological Review* 55(4): 687-706.

Mills, T. L., Wakeman, M. A. and Fea, C. B. 2001 'Adult Grandchildren's Perceptions of Emotional Closeness and Consensus with Maternal and Paternal Grandparents', *Journal of Family Issues* 22(4): 427-455.

Morgan, D. 1992 *Discovering Men*, London: Routledge.

Morgan, D. 2004 'Men in Families and Households' in J. Scott, J. Treas and M.Richards (eds.) *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Families*, Oxford: Blackwell

Murphy, M., Grundy, E. And Shelton, N. 1999 'Looking Beyond the Household: Intergenerational Perspectives on Living Kin and Contact with Kin in Great Britain', *Population Trends* 97: Autumn 19-27

Neugarten B. L. and Weinstein, K. K. 1964 'The Changing American Grandparent', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 26: 199-204.

Oliver, C. 2008 *Retirement Migration: Paradoxes of Ageing*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Pahl, J. 2000 'Our Changing Lives' in G. Dench (ed.) *Grandmothers of the Revolution*, London: Institute of Community Studies/Hera Trust.

Parsons, T. and Bales, R. F. 1956 *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Phillipson, C. et al 2001 *The Family and Community Life of Older People*, London: Routledge.

Roberto, K. A. and Stroes, J. 1992 'Grandchildren and Grandparents: Roles, Influences, and Relationships', *International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 34(3): 227-239.

Roberto, K. A., Allen, K. R. and Blieszner, R. 2001 'Grandfathers' Perceptions and Expectations of Relationships with their Adult Grandchildren', *Journal of Family Issues* 22(4): 407-426.

Ross, N. et al. 2004 *Grandparents and Teen Grandchildren: Exploring Intergenerational Relationships*, Report to the ESRC.

Rosser, C. and Harris, C. 1965 *The Family and Social Change*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Scraton, S. and Holland, S. 2006 'Grandfatherhood and Leisure', *Leisure Studies* 25(2): 233-250.

Szinovacz, M. E. (ed.) 1998 *Handbook on Grandparenthood*, London: Greenwood Press.

Spitze, G. and Ward, R. A. 1998 'Gender Variations' in M. Szinovacz (ed.) *Handbook on Grandparenthood*, London: Greenwood Press.

Sprey, J. and Matthews, S. H. 1982 'Contemporary Grandparenting: A Systematic Transition', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 464(1): 91-103.

Suitor, J. J. and Pillemer, K. 2006 'Choosing Daughters: Exploring Why Mothers Favor Adult Daughters Over Sons', *Sociological Perspectives* 49(2): 139-161.

Thompson, P. 1999 'The Role of Grandparents When Parents Part or Die: Some Reflections on the Mythical Decline of the Extended Family', *Ageing and Society* 19(4): 471-503.

Thompson, P., Itzin, C. and Abendstern 1990 *I Don't Feel Old: The Experience of Late Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Uhlenberg, P. and Kirby, J. B. 1998 'Grandparenthood Over Time: Historical and Demographic Trends' in Szinovacz, M. E. (ed.) *Handbook on Grandparenthood*, Westport CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.

Voas, D. 2006 *The Intergenerational Transmission of Churchgoing: A Working Paper*, Manchester: University of Manchester.

Waldrop, D. P. et al. 1999 'Wisdom and Life Experiences: How Grandfathers Mentor Their Grandchildren', *Journal of Aging and Identity* 4(1): 33-46.

Wheelock, J. and Jones, K. 2002 'Grandparents are the Next Best Thing: Informal Child Care for Working Parents in Urban Britain', *Critical Social Policy* 31(3): 441-463.

Young, M. and Wilmott, P. 1957 *Family and Kinship in East London*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.