Young Adults’ Relations With Grandparents Following Recent Parental Divorce

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This study employed a large survey of young adults to consider the association between recent parental divorce and intergenerational solidarity between adult grandchildren and their grandparents. The results indicate no significant association between parental divorce and young adults’ reports of affective, associational, or functional solidarity in relation to either maternal or paternal grandparents. Adult grandchildren from divorced families, however, were more likely than those from intact families to initiate contacts with their grandparents on their own, and to see their paternal grandparents without their fathers accompanying them. We conclude that parental divorce does not influence adult grandchild-grandparent relations because, at least in part, adult grandchildren are less dependent than young children on the middle-generation parent to facilitate this relationship.

As a result of reduced mortality rates, an increasing proportion of individuals today have the opportunity to experience the grandparent-grandchild relationship (Uhlenberg, 1980), yet several aspects of modern family life appear to limit interaction within this relationship. Geographic mobility and reduced proximity to relatives, which are common today, are known to weaken the bond between grandparents and grandchildren (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986; Hodgson, 1992; Kivett, 1991). The increase in divorce also raises concern for the stability of extended family ties; its implications for grandparent-grandchild relationships, at least those involving young children, are gaining greater attention (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986; Clingempeel et al., 1992; Gladstone, 1988; Matthews and Sprey, 1984). This study examines the impact of recent parental divorce on several aspects of intergenerational solidarity between adult grandchildren and grandparents. This issue is highly relevant today as rates of later life divorce rise (Uhlenberg, Cooney, and Boyd, 1990) and a growing number of “children of divorce” are adults.

Parental Divorce and Grandparent-Grandchild Relations

The few studies of the effects of parental divorce on grandparent-grandchild ties indicate fairly consistently that divorce has significant consequences for the relationship. Past work, however, focuses primarily on young children; thus, it is unclear whether current findings also apply to relations among adult grandchildren and their grandparents. Moreover, the factors that appear to condition this relationship following parental divorce may be different for adult grandchildren and grandparents. For example, in studies involving young grandchildren and grandparents, lineage appears central in determining how relations with grandchildren may be altered by the middle-generation parents’ divorce (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986; Matthews and Sprey, 1984). Specifically, when relations with maternal grandparents are considered, findings indicate heightened contact with, affective closeness to, and instrumental assistance from grandparents in cases involving parental divorce (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986; Clingempeel et al., 1992; Matthews and Sprey, 1984). Conversely, in focusing on relations with paternal grandparents, contact between grandparents and grandchildren is more limited and geographic distance is greater in families experiencing parental divorce (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986; Matthews and Sprey, 1984).

These divergent findings are largely attributed to parental custody patterns (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986; Matthews and Sprey, 1984). Because custodial parents — typically mothers — often become more dependent on their own parents in adapting to single parenting, maternal grandparent-grandchild relationships generally are intensified. In contrast, because noncustodial fathers often experience reduced interaction with their offspring following divorce, the children’s interactions with the paternal grandparents are likely to become more limited as well.

Using parental custody to explain past findings is reasonable given the focus on relations between young children and their grandparents in past research. Clearly, when children are minors their ties to grandparents are heavily dependent on the mediation of the middle-generation parent (Hagestad and Burton, 1986). However, the extent to which adults depend on their parents to mediate relations with their grandparents is less apparent. This issue is therefore important to consider when examining the impact of parental divorce on adults’ relations with grandparents. In the next section, the limited information that exists on factors influencing relations between adult grandchildren and grandparents, in general, is reviewed, as is the meaning of this relationship for the younger generation.

Adult Grandchild-Grandparent Relationships

Findings from two recent studies are consistent in showing the value adult grandchildren place on their grandparents, and high levels of closeness and contact between these two generations. In both Hodgson’s (1992) national sample of more than 200 adult grandchildren and Kennedy’s (1989, 1990) sample of about 700 college students, respondents report high levels of affection for their “closest” grandpar-
ent. To illustrate, over one-third of the college sample noted being “very close” or “intimately close” to their closest grandmother, while 19 percent noted the same in reference to their closest grandfather (Kennedy, 1989). Regarding contact, the majority of Hodgson’s (1992) sample and over half of Kennedy’s (1989) sample saw their grandparents monthly or more. Thus, both affective and associational bonds between the two generations appeared strong in these studies.

Several factors influenced relations between adults and their grandparents in these studies. When the grandparent in question was female, grandchildren reported more positive relationships (Hodgson, 1992; Kennedy, 1990). Although no differences in actual relationship quality based on the grandchild’s gender were reported in either study, Kennedy (1990) noted that females were more in agreement than males with views that the grandparental role involves closeness and involvement. Hodgson (1992) also found that these grandchildren who lived nearer to their grandparents and who were younger had more contact with them. Although neither study examined grandparents’ age or socioeconomic status as significant factors in the relationship, studies with young children have found both factors to be critical (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986; Troll, 1980). Thus, their role in relations between adult grandchildren and grandparents deserves further consideration.

While parental mediation of adult grandchild-grandparent relations was not widespread in either Kennedy’s or Hodgson’s study, the parents’ influence was still evident. One-third of Kennedy’s (1989) sample reported that visits with grandparents were initiated by their parents, while only 13 percent said these visits were their own idea. More often than not, visits between grandparents and grandchildren, as reported in Hodgson’s (1992) study, included a middle-generation parent. In addition, contact with grandparents occurred more when these adult grandchildren maintained high levels of contact with their own parents. In sum, the presence of parents on grandparental visits and parental suggestions of visits with grandparents appear common. These factors, along with levels of contact with the middle-generation parent, may all be critical in shaping relations between adult grandchildren and grandparents.

Finally, it is not clear from either of these studies what types of interactions occur in these relationships. Clearly, more information is needed to determine what actually goes on between adult grandchildren and grandparents. Still, as Bengtson (1985) points out, in merely “being there,” grandparents may bolster family identity and prevent against family upheaval when disruptive events, such as divorce, occur. Similarly, grandparents may serve a “watch dog” function (Troll, 1983), being on guard, ready to help, when the need arises. Both functions may be especially salient in the event of divorce, even when grandchildren are adults.

**Dimensions of Intergenerational Solidarity**

To examine whether recent parental divorce is associated with adult grandchild-grandparent relations we employ components of Bengtson’s (Bengtson and Roberts, 1991; Mangen, Bengtson, and Landry, 1987) family solidarity framework. According to this perspective, family cohesion or solidarity is based on sharing and consensus between the generations along six independent dimensions, the first three of which we consider: associational solidarity, affective solidarity, functional solidarity, normative solidarity, consensual solidarity, and intergenerational family structure. Associational solidity reflects the extent to which family members share in activities with one another; affective solidity refers to the positive sentiment felt between the generations; and, functional solidity denotes the exchange of assistance between the generations. High levels of solidarity are believed to reflect stronger family bonds.

Our analysis of the association between parental divorce and intergenerational solidarity for adult grandchildren and grandparents is limited to perceptions of the younger generation who were involved in a larger study of the consequences of parental divorce for young adults. While we cannot assume that the two generations agree on the level of solidarity in their relationship (Bengtson and Kuypers, 1971), we consider the perspective of the younger generation to be critical in their assessment of familial support during the highly transitional period of young adulthood.

**METHODS**

**Sample.** — The data come from a longitudinal study of young adults’ experiences with recent parental divorce. In 1990, 485 White young adults, ages 18–23, were initially interviewed by telephone about their personal and family lives. Names of 257 of these youth, who had experienced parental divorce within 15 months prior to the study, were drawn randomly from their parents’ divorce decrees which were filed across a Mid-Atlantic state during 1989 and 1990. Names for an intact-family comparison group were then drawn randomly from a roster of licensed drivers in the same state who were of the same age and race. Initial telephone contacts were made to determine parents’ marital status and to eliminate those persons whose parents were divorced. Of the remaining group, 228 eligible respondents were interviewed. Response rates were high for both groups, with 81 percent of those from divorced families and 78 percent from intact families completing interviews after being located.

Relationships with grandparents were assessed during a two-year follow-up interview (1992) that involved 86 percent of the original sample who were relocated. Only those respondents with surviving grandparents were included in the present analyses. This included 312 persons (75%) who reported having a surviving maternal grandparent and 277 persons (66%) with a living paternal grandparent.

**Questions and measures.** — Grandparent-grandchild relations were assessed in terms of affectional, associational, and functional solidarity. Affective solidarity was measured with a single item: “Is your relationship with your mother’s/father’s parent(s): (1) not very close, (2) fairly close, (3) quite close, or (4) extremely close? Associational solidarity was based on in-person and telephone contact using two items that tapped frequency of contact with grandparents over the past 12 months. For both contact questions, response choices ranged from (1) “more than weekly,” to (7) “not at all” in the past year. These responses were recoded into the approximate number of contacts per year that each
represents (e.g., more than weekly = 104, monthly = 12, several times a year = 6) and then summed to create a total contact variable indicating the number of days per year that the respondent had some contact with each set of grandparents. A natural log transformation was then used on this figure to form a continuous variable suitable for use in OLS regression. Finally, functional solidarity was based on the grandchildren’s reports of the receipt and provision of various types of support over the past 12 months. They were given a score of “1” for each type of help they reported giving to and receiving from their grandparents (the two dimensions reported separately) from the following list: “helped with something [the other] was doing or making,” “ran some errands for [the other] or helped [the other] with some chores,” and/or “bought or made [the other] something.” Because the respondents also answered the question, “Over the past three years, have you received any financial help from your mother’s/father’s parents?,” the total possible score on the receipt of support was 4, while the support given to grandparents had a maximum score of 3.

Control variables used in the analyses were those known to have consistent effects in the literature reviewed above. They included the grandchild’s and grandparent’s gender (the latter coded as a dummy variable indicating whether there was a living grandmother), geographic distance from grandparents, frequency of contact with each parent, and a dummy variable indicating whether the parents accompanied the grandchild on visits with the grandparents. In addition, parent’s age and education level were used as proxy variables for grandparent’s relative age and education level since this information was not gathered in reference to the grandparents. Finally, a series of five dummy variables was constructed to indicate who initiated visits with grandparents: the parent, the grandparent, the grandchild, someone else, or the person varies from time to time. Because preliminary analyses found no consistent effects of grandchild’s age (perhaps because the age range of this sample was more limited than Hodgson’s), that variable was dropped from the analyses.

**RESULTS**

Table 1 compares young adults’ relationships with each set of grandparents based on their parents’ marital status. As shown, there were no significant differences in grandchild-grandparent solidarity for grandchildren from divorced and intact families, in either maternal or paternal lineage. The only significant differences revealed here pertain to who typically initiates visits and participates in them. Young adults from divorced families were significantly more likely than those from intact families to take the lead in initiating visits with grandparents; with paternal grandparents they were nearly three times as likely to do so. In addition, young adults with divorced parents were substantially less likely to be accompanied by their fathers in visits with their paternal grandparents than were those from intact families (34% vs 62%). These same trends were observed in relation to maternal grandparents, yet differences based on parents’ marital status were not significant.

To determine what factors condition relationships between adults and their grandparents, and how parental divorce fits into this multivariate picture, OLS regression models were estimated. All of the predictor variables were simultaneously entered into the equations to examine their joint association with the four measures of grandparent-grandchild solidarity. These results are presented in Table 2.

As expected based on the above results, the coefficient for parents’ marital status (1 = divorced, 0 = married) was not significant in any of these models. The other findings are useful to summarize, however, given the paucity of research on adult grandchild-grandparent relations in general. Distance from grandparents had the most consistent association across the four measures of solidarity; in general, increased geographic distance predicted lower levels of intergenera-

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**Table 1. Bivariate Comparisons of Young Adults’ Reports of Relationships with Grandparents, by Lineage and Parents’ Marital Status. Means, (Standard Deviations), and Percentages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Maternal Grandparents</th>
<th>Paternal Grandparents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents’ Marital Status:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Divorced n = 168</td>
<td>Intact n = 144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance from grandparents (miles)</td>
<td>308.35 (370.80)</td>
<td>260.90 (326.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective solidarity (1-4, 4 = very close)</td>
<td>2.48 (.97)</td>
<td>2.51 (1.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associational solidarity (days of contact, unlogged)</td>
<td>21.32 (26.96)</td>
<td>23.40 (30.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional solidarity — Types of help received</td>
<td>1.55 (1.15)</td>
<td>1.55 (1.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional solidarity — Types of help given</td>
<td>1.58 (1.14)</td>
<td>1.71 (1.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandchild initiates visits</td>
<td>24.42% (144)</td>
<td>16.43% (121)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparent initiates visits</td>
<td>22.09% (121)</td>
<td>20.71% (121)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother initiates visits</td>
<td>25.00% (121)</td>
<td>32.86% (121)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father initiates visits</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent is along on visits</td>
<td>49.42% (121)</td>
<td>52.86% (121)</td>
</tr>
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*p < .05; **p < .01.
The major finding of this analysis was that recent parental divorce was not associated with levels of affective, functional, or associational solidarity between adult grandchildren and grandparents, as reported by the younger generation. This result contrasts sharply with those of studies of younger children of divorce in which relationships with maternal grandparents appear to intensify after divorce and those with paternal grandparents weaken (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986; Matthews and Sprey, 1984). These differences, which seem to be linked to the age of grandchildren, require explanation.

The role of parental custody has been heavily emphasized in explanations of post-divorce grandparent-grandchild relationships. Men’s reduced contact with their children is considered central in the weakening of children’s ties to paternal grandparents after divorce. Mothers’ assumption of sole parenting, on the other hand, is viewed as an important determinant of increased involvement with maternal grandparents. With adult children of divorce, however, the issue to manage relations with their grandparents on their own.

Finally, the variables pertaining to parental mediation showed that, in both lineages, when someone other than the parents (the omitted comparison category) initiated contact, associational and functional solidarity were significantly stronger. (These variables were not used to predict affective solidarity because the temporal ordering in this relationship is less obvious.) Still, contact with a given parent was positively associated with contact with the grandparents on that side of the family.

**DISCUSSION**

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Indeed, our findings demonstrate that most parents do not directly mediate contacts between adult grandchildren and grandparents, in either divorced or intact families. More importantly, this study reveals that the role of the grandchild as the initiator of contacts stands out in cases of divorce, especially in regard to visits with paternal grandparents. Kennedy's (1989) finding, that only 13 percent of college students initiated visits with grandparents, was similar to our figures for respondents with married parents (10–16%); yet, it was much lower than the figures obtained here for adults from divorced families (25–29%). Furthermore, the multivariate results indicate that when someone other than the parent initiated grandparental visits, all four types of solidarity between grandchildren and grandparents were heightened. Therefore, the fact that young adults with divorced parents more often assumed responsibility for initiating visits with grandparents, than did their peers from intact families, may partly explain how grandchild-grandparent solidarity was maintained in divorced families, despite high levels of instability in other post-divorce family relationships, such as the parent-child relationship (Cooney, 1994).

In terms of general factors that condition relations between adults and their grandparents, these findings were generally in agreement with past work. The most consistent effects in this analysis applied to geographic distance and grandparent's gender. Specifically, the kinkeeping role of women that others have described (Rosenthal, 1985) was clearly evident in these data, as the presence of a grandmother was critical for experiencing higher levels of contact with grandparents. Greater contact and other forms of solidarity were also dependent on geographic proximity to grandparents, which research on younger children and grandparents also has documented (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986). These and the few other effects that were found indicate that the social and background factors that are known to play a role in relations between grandparents and young children generally apply to these relations for adult grandchildren as well.

In sum, this study demonstrated the durability of the adult grandchild-grandparent connection in the midst of family change brought about by divorce. Given the highly transitional nature of the young adult years in general, the strength and stability of relations with their grandparents may be particularly beneficial to young adults' adjustment. This issue, and others pertaining to the content and meaning of relationships between adults and their grandparents, warrants far greater research attention.

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REFERENCES


