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## Grandparenthood from the Perspective of the Developing Grandchild<sup>1</sup>

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Studies of grandparenthood are usually focused on the grandparent and his views of the grandparental role. In this study grandparenthood was examined from the perspective of the other partner in the role relationship, the grandchild. The changing meaning of the grandparent for children of different ages (4-5, 8-9, 11-12) was explored. Children's views of grandparents paralleled developmental cognitive changes ranging from concrete perceptions of physical characteristics by the youngest children, through functional views of behaviors in the middle group, and finally to the emergence of an abstract interpersonal orientation among the oldest children. Major differences in quality of perception occurred between the youngest and middle-age groups. Young children valued grandparents mainly for their indulgent qualities, the middle group preferred the fun-sharing active grandparent, and the oldest group reflected distance from their grandparents. It is suggested by the findings that the meaning of the grandparental role for the aging grandparent must be understood in the context of the changing needs of the developing grandchild.

The purpose of this study was to examine differences in perceptions of grandparents and their significance for children of different ages and different levels of cognitive development. The child's perceptions of adult figures and especially of grandparents have seldom been studied as a function of developmental stages. Yet his changing perceptions of significant adults are essential factors which determine his relationships to the adult world. In addition, they serve as the basis for forming attitudes and stereotypes about adults and the aged. Since negative stereotypes toward the aged have been commonly observed (Becker & Taylor, 1966; Tuckman & Lorge, 1953), the development of such attitudes represents a significant

problem. The child's perceptions of the elderly are also important since it has been argued that "perceptions of roles entered into in maturity are based on early learning regarding these roles [Hickey, Hickey, & Kalish, 1968, p. 22]."

Children's perceptions of age differences have been studied by Stephens, Hawthorne, and Kagan (1959) and more recently by Britton and Britton (1968). In these studies the young child's ability to discriminate age differences accurately was examined and related to social and aesthetic values about people of varying ages. In both of these studies preschool children (ages 4-6) were the subjects. Stephens et al. (1959), in his study of middle-class high IQ children, showed that about 50% of 4-year-olds were capable of fairly accurate age discriminations based on physiognomic information, that is, judging ages of individuals in pictures. Subjects who were old enough to discriminate age accurately were also found to be much more favorably disposed to younger than to older persons. Based on this finding it appears that an important rela-

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relationship exists between the development of age discriminations and the development of attitudes regarding age differences.

Britton and Britton (1968) indicated in their study that young children are more able to judge younger than older persons correctly. Children were found to place all persons past the young adult level in one big category. Only 20% of children in the 4-6-age group were able to place older adults accurately in a specific age category. Both of the aforementioned investigations were based on preschool children. In Hickey, Hickey, and Kalish's (1968) study, social characteristics of older children (socioeconomic class, religion, family organization) were related to perceptions of the elderly. However, developmental studies of children's perceptions of and attitudes toward the aged could not be found in the literature.

The child's perceptions of those specific older adults who may be most directly involved in the formation of his perceptions and attitudes of the aged, that is, his grandparents, have also received little attention. A notable exception is Pihlblad and Habenstein's (1965) study. Those studies, touching upon the nature of the grandparent-grandchild relationship have examined the problem from grandparents' perspective, focusing on the significance of the grandparental role for the aged (Kahana, 1969; Neugarten & Weinstein, 1964). The importance of grandparents for the grandchild has been emphasized in psychoanalytic literature and in case studies of the grandparent-grandchild relationship (Abraham, 1955; Ferenczi, 1927; Hader, 1965). The focus of these clinical investigations is on the potentially pathogenic as well as the potentially beneficial effects of contact with grandparents from the child's perspective.

The child's relationship to his grandparents may be conceptualized as a function of several factors. These include the extent of his contact with them, the grandparents' behavior toward him, the parents' relationship with the grandparents, the child's perceptions of old people in general, and of his grandparents in particular. The greater the congruence between the child's needs and those of the grandparent, the more re-

warding one may expect the relationship to be. Thus, if very young children enjoy receiving favors and gifts and being given candy and other signs of affection, it is likely that the aged grandparent whose own affectional needs or passive indulgent qualities make him shower love and presents on the grandchild will have good rapport with young grandchildren. As the child gets older, however, concrete gifts and signs of affection may be valued less and he may enjoy a grandparent who will share his activities and have "fun" with him far more. If the grandparent retains his old styles of relating, rapport may decrease and distance may grow.

Neugarten and Weinstein, in their 1964 study of grandparenthood, found several styles of performing the grandparental role among middle-class grandparents in the United States. The role was found to vary from formal to fun seeking, parent surrogate, reservoir of family wisdom, and to distant figure. It is possible that different styles of grandparenthood fit in best with the child's needs at different stages in his development.

The present study represents a quantifiable inquiry into the changing meaning of the grandparent as a function of normal developmental stages of the grandchild. Questions were also raised about the relative importance of various styles of grandparent-grandchild relationships for children of different ages.

#### Method

##### *Subjects*

The sample consisted of 19 children aged 4-5, 33 children aged 8-9, and 33 children aged 11-12 divided about equally on sex. All of the children were white, of middle-socioeconomic-class background and attended a coeducational suburban nursery and elementary school.

##### *Procedures*

The youngest children (ages 4-5) were interviewed individually in their homes. Questions were administered in groups during a class period to the older children. These children were closely supervised and given individual help in understanding questions and in filling out questionnaires so as to make individual and group administrations of questionnaires as comparable as possible. It is recognized, nevertheless, that the two administrations were not strictly similar.

The questionnaire included open-ended and pre-

coded questions regarding frequency of contact with each one of the grandparents, activities done with each grandparent, favorite grandparent, reasons for preference of a grandparent and concepts about characteristics of the aged.

Questionnaires and interviews were coded and/or rated along the following dimensions.

1. Concepts of old age (i.e., How can you tell when someone is old?) were rated with regard to (a) structural aspects of thought (concrete, functional, abstract). These ratings were based on Rapaport's (1945) conceptual system, and (b) content categories in perceptions of the aged (specific physical characteristics, behaviors, psychological or social characteristics).

2. Relationship with grandparents were coded in terms of (a) frequency of contact with grandparents (ranging from weekly or more often to once a year or less frequently), (b) favorite grandparent (mother's mother, mother's father, father's mother, father's father), (c) age of grandparent, and (d) reasons for preferring a particular grandparent (value or significance of grandparent) in terms of egocentric versus mutually oriented reasons and styles of grandparenting (indulgent, intimate, fun sharing, familiar, instructive).

Reliabilities of ratings were computed for those items requiring judgment. Twenty records were independently rated by two investigators. Percentages of exact agreement were: 95% in rating thought processes (see Table 1), 90% in rating significance of grandparent (see Table 4) and 85% classifying reasons for favoring a particular grandparent (see Table 5). In data analyses, frequencies of different categories of response for each variable were compared for children in the three age groups. Chi-square statistics were computed to determine the degree of association between ages of children and frequency of different response categories.

### Results

Age-related differences appear consistently both in perceptions of the aged and

in the characteristics and significance of the grandparent-grandchild relationship.

Although there is evidence from other studies (Stephens et al., 1959) that by about age 5, children are able to discriminate age-related differences, 70% of the children in the youngest age group were unable to place the age of their grandparents in the appropriate decade. These results are consistent with Britton and Britton's (1968) findings which indicated that young children find it especially difficult to accurately discriminate older ages. Among the youngest children, 83% could not report any criteria or signs of old age. In contrast, older children (8 years and up) estimated grandparents' ages realistically. Significantly more of the older children than younger ones were able to state reasons for viewing someone as old (see Table 1).

For the two, older age groups, specific perceptual physical characteristics reflecting concrete forms of reasoning comprised the majority of responses. Wrinkles, white hair, and other specific physical signs were offered as the major indexes of old age in all age groups. Although the majority of responses were concrete even among older children, higher levels of thought progressively emerged with age; that is, functional and abstract responses were found to be more frequent among older children. Functional responses, that is, behaviors or activities signifying old age, were mentioned by 5.6% of the youngest group, 10.7% of the 8-9-year-olds and by 25% of the oldest age group. Such functional responses usually

TABLE 1  
AGE-RELATED DIFFERENCES IN CHILDREN'S CONCEPTS OF OLD AGE

Concepts of old age	Ages 4 & 5 N = 18	Ages 8 & 9 N = 28	Ages 11 & 12 N = 28	$\chi^2$
Wrong answer and I don't know	83.3	39.3	14.2	24.68*
Concrete	11.1	46.4	46.4	
Functional	5.6	10.7	25.0	
Abstract	0.0	3.6	14.2	
Total	100.0	100.0	99.8	

Note.—All values are percentages but  $\chi^2$ .  
\*  $p < .001$ .

centered around declining abilities, for example, "To be old means to sit around," "They cannot hear and see you," "Old people don't play with you." Abstract responses referring to generic characteristics or constructs regarding physical, psychological, or social characteristics were relatively infrequent among this sample. Nonetheless, the emergence of abstract responses at the oldest ages is clearly present (see Table 1). Abstract responses typically referred to generic physical or personality characteristics, for example, "Older people are weak, sick, experienced, friendly, nice to children, etc." Data from other studies (Coe, 1968) point to adults' use of combinations of physical, social, and psychological characteristics as indicators of old age.

Age-related differences were also apparent in descriptions of the relationship between grandparent and grandchild and in the significance of the grandparent for the growing child.

Frequency of contact with grandparents was ascertained separately for each living grandparent: mother's mother, mother's father, father's mother, and father's father. Older children tended to report more frequent contact with all four groups of grandparents than did the youngest group. However, age-related differences in reported frequency of contact were significant only for paternal grandfathers (see Table 2).

It is also interesting to note that more frequent contact was reported by all age groups with maternal rather than paternal grandparents. These findings may reflect an actual increase in contact with grandparents as the child gains independence and mobility with increasing age. It is also possible, however, that younger children perceive elapsing time periods as longer and, hence, erroneously report less frequent contact. Data from grandparents regarding contact with grandchildren of various ages may elucidate this problem.

Systematic differences between younger and older groups also appeared in the reasons for valuing a particular grandparent. The youngest children found it difficult to verbalize any reason for their preferences, although they overwhelmingly chose a favorite (see Table 3).

TABLE 2  
AGE-RELATED DIFFERENCES IN FREQUENCY OF REPORTED CONTACT WITH GRANDPARENTS

Frequency of contact	Maternal grandfather			Maternal grandmother			Paternal grandfather			Paternal grandmother		
	Ages 4-5 (N = 12)	Ages 8-9 (N = 28)	Ages 11-12 (N = 26)	Ages 4-5 (N = 8)	Ages 8-9 (N = 23)	Ages 11-12 (N = 17)	Ages 4-5 (N = 8)	Ages 8-9 (N = 23)	Ages 11-12 (N = 21)	Ages 4-5 (N = 8)	Ages 8-9 (N = 15)	Ages 11-12 (N = 17)
Every few weeks or more	50.0	60.7	69.2	75.0	63.6	70.6	37.5	56.5	57.1	12.5	52.3	52.9
Every few months	8.3	17.9	15.4	12.5	13.6	17.6	12.5	17.4	38.1	12.5	20.0	35.3
Once a year or less	41.7	21.4	15.4	12.5	22.7	11.8	50.0	26.1	4.8	75.0	27.7	11.8
Sum	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	99.9	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
$\chi^2$		3.5 (ns)			1.07 (ns)			9.02 (ns)				11.1*

Note.—All values are percentages but  $\chi^2$ .  
\*  $p < .025$ .

Among the oldest children, 48% declined a preference for any particular grandparent. In explaining their reluctance to choose a favorite, these children usually gave moralistic reasons, for example, "You have to love all your grandparents the same," or, "It is not right to pick a favorite," or "I love them all the same." Whenever older children indicated a preference, they were usually able to verbalize the reasons for their choice.

It is interesting to note that the maternal grandmother was most frequently favored by the children of all ages (see Table 3). This finding is consistent with those of several anthropological and sociological studies which point to a close and warm relationship between mothers, daughters, and grandchildren (Kahana, 1969; Wilmott, 1960) and suggest that the grandparent's place in the kinship system is an important determinant of their relationship with their grandchildren.

Reasons for preferences for particular grandparents were categorized in terms of their mutual or reciprocal versus their egocentric nature. Young children (ages 4-5) view the preferred grandparent almost exclusively in egocentric and concrete terms, that is, what the grandparent gives to the child in the forms of love, food, and presents. Their responses indicated no mutuality in the relationship (see Table 4). In contrast, responses of 8- and 9-year-olds focused on mutuality in the relationship, with some focus on grandparental characteristics and

some egocentric responses. Mutual responses usually involved shared activities, for example, "We go to the ball game together," "We play cards." Grandparent-oriented responses focused on some quality of the grandparent which was independent of his grandchild, for example, "He is a good man," "I look up to him because he is so smart." These responses were completely absent among the youngest children and increased linearly with age although they continued to represent the small minority of responses. The major difference in reasons for valuing grandparents appeared between the youngest and middle groups. The oldest group did not differ from 8- and 9-year-olds in proportion of egocentric responses and gave somewhat fewer mutual responses. This may, in part, be due to their low response frequency in expressing preferences.

In describing their interaction with their favorite grandparent, children referred to styles of grandparenting which overlap the styles of grandparenting described by Neugarten and Weinstein (1964) (see Table 5). Young children preferred indulgent grandparents who buy them treats and gifts. This fits in with the "formal" grandparenting style portrayed by 32% of Neugarten and Weinstein's sample of grandparents. Children in the 8- and 9-year-old groups expressed preferences for "fun-sharing" grandparents, who join them in playful leisure activities. Interestingly, in the oldest group (11- and 12-year-olds) a

TABLE 3  
FAVORITE GRANDPARENT

Favorite grandparent	Ages 4 & 5 N = 19	Ages 8 & 9 N = 33	Ages 11 & 12 N = 33	$\chi^2$
Mother's mother	42.1	36.4	21.2	15.40*
Mother's father	15.8	15.2	6.0	
Father's mother	15.8	3.0	6.0	
Father's father	5.3	6.0	6.0	
No preference	15.8	18.2	48.5	
No information	5.3	21.2	12.1	
Total	100.1	100.0	99.8	

Note.—All values are percentages but  $\chi^2$ .

\*  $p < .05$ .

TABLE 4  
SIGNIFICANCE OF GRANDPARENT

Significance of grandparent	Ages 4 & 5 N = 16	Ages 8 & 9 N = 28	Ages 11 & 12 N = 28	$\chi^2$
Egocentric	37.3	10.7	10.7	19.95*
Mutual	0.0	21.4	7.1	
Grandparent directed	0.0	7.1	14.3	
No favorite or only one living	6.3	25.0	35.7	
No information	56.3	35.7	32.1	
Total	99.9	99.9	99.9	

Note.—All values are percentages but  $\chi^2$ .  
\*  $p < .01$ .

preference for the indulgent grandparent emerged once again with less emphasis on the mutual aspects of the relationship.

Other specific categories of grandparenting style included references to physical expressions of affection (intimate-affective), references to the teaching functions of grandparents (instructive), and references to frequency of visiting or contact (familiar). These response categories appeared infrequently in all ages. An additional non-specific response category (global responses) was included to classify highly general, global, or poorly articulated responses for choosing a favorite grandparent, for example, "He is nice," "I like her." Such global responses occurred frequently among both the youngest and the oldest children.

It appears, however, that their meaning was different for the different age groups. Global responses given by very young children may represent undifferentiated forms of thinking which is characteristic of them. On the other hand, among the oldest group, global responses may imply an attitude of distance which is complementary to Neugarten and Weinstein's "distant" grandparents. There is evidence from other studies (Kahana & Coe, 1969) that grandparents feel increasingly distant from their grandchildren as the grandchildren grow older.

#### Discussion

In considering age-related differences in children's concepts and attitudes toward grandparents, major differences appeared

TABLE 5  
REASONS FOR FAVORITE—STYLES OF GRANDPARENTING

Styles of grandparenting	Ages 4 & 5 N = 19	Ages 8 & 9 N = 33	Ages 11 & 12 N = 33	$\chi^2$
Indulgent	42.1	18.2	33.3	45.75*
Intimate-affective	5.3	3.0	6.1	
Fun sharing	5.3	30.3	9.1	
Instructive	0.0	3.0	0.0	
Familiar	10.6	3.0	12.1	
Global nonspecific	10.6	0.0	21.2	
No information or preference	26.3	42.4	18.2	
Total	100.2	99.9	100.0	

Note.—All values are percentages except  $\chi^2$ .  
\*  $p < .001$ .

between children in the youngest (4-5) and middle (8-9) age groups. These results may be explained by the cognitive stages characteristic of these age groups (Piaget, 1954). Whereas the youngest children are just approaching the important shift to the age of concrete operations and thinking, children in the middle group have already mastered concrete operations and exhibit thought processes which are characteristic of a higher developmental stage. The oldest children, on the other hand, manifest thinking which is not qualitatively superior to the 8- and 9-year-olds, since children in this group have not yet undergone the latest shift in thinking, but were just approaching the critical point of transition to the stage of formal operations in thinking. Findings of this study call attention to the importance of considering differential needs of children as well as differences in their level of cognitive maturity in determining their perceptions of significant others.

In this study, some pilot data were reported in the much neglected area of the developmental aspects of grandparent-grandchild relationships. The focus was on the grandchild's changing perceptions of his grandparents. Such data are valuable in their own right since perceptions of significant others are crucial in shaping one's behavior toward them. In future studies, however, independent data from parents and grandparents regarding the overt nature of grandparent-grandchild relationships would provide important information for understanding the potential influence of grandparents on personality development of children of different ages. Such information would also be helpful in determining to what extent grandparental styles reported by grandchildren are actually experienced. A most fruitful approach of future investigations would be a simultaneous consideration of the changing needs of grandchildren and of their grandparents and their perceptions of one another. Data from such a study would yield information regarding potential areas of conflict or misunderstanding and would lead to a better understanding of the generation gap.

The sample for the present investigation consisted of middle-class, white suburban

children. Studies of children of other social class, cultural, and ethnic groups, with presumably different family constellations, would provide most interesting data about the extent to which observed developmental differences in perception of grandparents are invariant in different cultures. Findings of the present study regarding differences in children's perceptions and attitudes toward paternal and maternal grandparents could also be followed up in different social and cultural groups.

Children's views of and relationships to their grandparents may change as they grow older for many different reasons. Their perceptions of signs of aging are indications of maturational differences paralleling general cognitive shifts. It is possible, however, that differences between children of different ages are also affected by factors such as differential contact with grandparents, changing characteristics of the grandparent as the child gets older, changing equilibrium between needs of the grandparent and the grandchild. In the present study, the relative contributions of these factors could not be specified but attention was called to their presence. The importance of considering the complex set of factors which determine the nature of the relationship of the aging grandparent and his developing grandchild was underscored.

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