The Good, the Bad, and the Worrisome: Emotional Complexities in Grandparents’ Experiences with Individual Grandchildren

Karen L. Fingerman**

Researchers have treated the grandparenting role as though it were a unitary role within an individual’s role portfolio. There has been little consideration of how distinct relationships with different grandchildren shape grandparents’ well-being. Ninety-one grandparents, evenly divided by gender and age, provided information about their relationships with each of their grandchildren (n = 346 grandchildren). They also provided descriptions of a grandchild who is particularly special, one about whom they worry, and a subset of grandparents described a grandchild who irritated them. The characteristics that render a grandchild emotionally salient to a grandparent and the association between these characteristics and grandparents’ well-being are considered.

The importance of the grandparenting role for middle-aged and older adults’ well-being has been largely ignored outside the context of grandparents who care for their grandchildren. Until quite recently, researchers interested in intergenerational relationships and individual well-being focused primarily on aging parents and their middle-aged children (e.g., Mancini & Blieszner, 1989). From this literature, it is clear that offspring continue to have an impact on their parents’ psychological and physical states into midlife and old age. For example, Ryff, Lee, Essex, and Schmutte (1994) found that middle-aged parents’ perceptions of how their grown children had turned out were associated with their own well-being; parents who felt their children had turned out all right also felt better about themselves. As an extension of the parenting role, grandparents may evaluate how well their offspring perform as parents and consider their grandchildren to be a reflection of their own parenting abilities (Troll, 1985). More specifically, grandchildren who are doing particularly well or particularly poorly may have an impact on their grandparents’ well-being. A grandparent may incur anxiety over a grandchild who suffers problems, a grandparent may swell with pride over a grandchild with unique talents, or a grandparent may grow annoyed with a grandchild who misbehaves.

This study examined grandparents’ descriptions of a grandchild who is special to them, a grandchild about whom they worry, and for a subgroup of grandparents, a grandchild whom they find irritating. These grandchildren are referred to as “emotionally salient” throughout this paper. None of the grandparents in this study had primary care responsibilities for their grandchildren, and thus, their feelings reflect psychological aspects of their relationships rather than actual demands. Three questions are addressed: (a) What are the characteristics that distinguish special, worrisome, or troublesome grandchildren from grandchildren who are not emotionally salient?; (b) How do grandparents describe emotionally salient grandchildren?; and (c) Which characteristics of these grandchildren are associated with grandparents’ well-being?

Distinct Relationships with Different Grandchildren

The majority of studies addressing grandparenthood have treated it as a unitary role within an individual’s role portfolio. For example, researchers have classified grandparents into different typologies (e.g., Neugarten & Weinstein, 1964; Roberto, 1990). Moreover, certain aspects of these typologies appear to be associated with individual well-being (Kivnick, 1982). Such research, however, does not capture the impact that relationships with individual grandchildren have on well-being. Although individuals’ reactions to the grandparenting role may reflect aspects of their personalities and life circumstances, relationships with specific grandchildren may also contribute to individuals’ experiences of the grandparenting role. For example, a grandparent who maintains a distant and formal approach may experience more problems with a specific grandchild who is noisy and destructive on those ritual occasions when the family is together.

Prior studies suggest that grandparents do possess different feelings for different grandchildren (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986; Troll, 1983). Yet, much of that research has focused on either the grandparenting role or on relationships with a target grandchild. Examination of grandparents’ relationships with each of their grandchildren may provide increased understanding of the association between grandparenting and well-being. Indeed, some grandchildren may have an influence on their grandparents’ well-being, whereas other grandchildren may not.

Characteristics that Render Grandchildren Emotionally Salient

Grandchildren may be emotionally salient to their grandparents in either positive or negative ways. Grandparents may derive benefits from grandchildren who are distinct by virtue of their achievements, shared interests, or attributes. Alternately, grandparents may incur negative consequences from grandchildren who have intractable difficulties or who generate problems on the basis of their behavior. With the exception of studies of caregiving grandparents, few studies have considered the negative impact that grandchildren may have on their grandparents’ lives.

Grandparents’ relationships with emotionally salient grandchildren are considered in two ways in this study. First, we examine the factors that distinguish emotionally salient grandchildren from other grandchildren. Then, grandparents’ subjective ideas about what makes a grandchild special, worrisome, or irritating are considered. In combination, these two dimensions may contribute to differences in grandparents’ well-being. For example, a grandparent who feels demanded upon by a grandchild’s learning disability may differ from a grandparent who has only some mild

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concerns that a grandchild remain in good health. A grandparent who has frequent contact with a grandchild whom he feels is fulfilling his own lost dreams may differ from a grandparent who enjoys infrequent contact with a grandchild who is special by virtue of being first born.

Factors that might differentiate emotionally salient grandchildren include frequency of contact, the nature of that contact, and the general caliber of the relationship. The more often a grandparent visits a grandchild, the greater the likelihood that the grandchild will have an emotional impact on that grandparent (Johnson, 1983). Moreover, emotionally salient grandchildren may differ from other grandchildren in terms of the nature of their relationships with grandparents. Grandparents might enjoy spending time with special grandchildren and consider these relationships to be of higher quality than relationships with other grandchildren. Grandparents may feel more demanded upon by grandchildren who create worries, and may feel more tired by time spent with irritating grandchildren. Moreover, the degree of enjoyment, of fatigue, or the level of demands might contribute to variation in grandparents’ well-being.

In addition to such features that differentiate emotionally salient grandchildren, grandparents themselves may have ideas about why certain grandchildren are special, worrisome, or irritating. A framework from existent literature pertaining to the grandparenting role was applied to grandparents’ subjective sense of why a given grandchild is special, worrisome, or irritating. The grandparenting literature has differentiated a normative versus a personal dimension of the role (Roberto, 1990; Wood & Robertson, 1976). The normative aspect of the grandparenting role involves what society considers typical of a grandparent and the more formal, less individual functions of grandparenting. The personal dimension might be construed as the factors that define grandparents’ relationships with their own grandchildren.

Individuals who experience their emotionally salient grandchildren in personal terms were expected to be more affected by those grandchildren than individuals who viewed their emotionally salient grandchildren in normative terms. This premise reflects theories of emotional experience as well as literature pertaining to relationships. According to Lazarus (1991), individuals who view a situation as personally relevant have more emotional reactions to the situation. In the context of intergenerational relationships, the sense that a situation involves specific characteristics of a child or grandchild may render that situation personal to the parent or grandparent. For example, Fingerman (1996) examined negative emotions in mother/daughter relationships and found that older mothers and daughters who were able to see the other party’s faults without taking the other person’s behavior personally got along better than mothers and daughters who took behaviors personally. Likewise, grandparents who view emotionally salient grandchildren in terms of normative social issues (e.g., age, gender, or the future of the world) may be less affected by those grandchildren than grandparents who have more personal reasons for feeling a grandchild is salient. Expected patterns for special, worrisome, and irritating grandchildren are described below.

Special grandchildren. Cultural norms deter individuals from expressing out-right preferences for particular children or grandchildren (Aldous, Klaus, & Klein, 1985), but grandparents may nonetheless make such distinctions. Aldous, Klaus, and Klein (1985) found that middle-aged parents generally preferred children who shared their religion and levels of achievement, regardless of contact. Thus, grandparents might view a sense of similarity with a grandchild as what makes him or her special. Alternately, grandparents might focus on aspects of the relationship that are not personal to the grandchild, but rather, are more global such as gender or being the first born.

In keeping with a model differentiating personal versus normative relationships, grandparents who described specific similarities between themselves and their special grandchild were expected to derive greater benefits from that relationship than were grandparents who attributed their grandchild’s specialness to such normative features as birth order, age, or gender.

Worrisome grandchildren. When grandparents step in to be caregivers for grandchildren, their anxieties and concerns for these grandchildren have been associated with decreased well-being (Burton, 1992). Grandparents may, however, worry about grandchildren even when they are not actively engaged in providing for them. Indeed, the grandparenting role has been viewed as a family position that is dormant until emergencies arise that require the grandparents’ input (Johnson, 1983; Robertson, 1995; Troll, 1983). Yet, grandparents may not be able to do much about grandchildren’s problems and, thus, may feel helpless and frustrated.

Grandparents were expected to experience two types of worries in this study, general worries about how their grandchildren were doing or would turn out, and specific worries about a particular grandchild who was experiencing difficulties. In the former context, grandparents might be viewed as fulfilling their normative roles, or being what Troll (1983) referred to as the “family watch dog.” They are vigilant for possible problems, but do not see such problems at present. In the latter situation, grandparents were expected to incur negative consequences, given their sense that something was wrong with a specific grandchild.

Irritating grandchildren. Finally, a grandchild who is experienced as annoying may be particularly harmful to his or her grandparents. Negative social relationships appear to have a greater impact on individual well-being than positive relationships (Rook, 1984, 1992). In an early study of the meaning of grandparenthood, Neugarten and Weinstein (1964) found that nearly a third of respondents reported difficulties being grandparents. Grandchildren can also serve as a source of tension between older parents and grown offspring (Fingerman, 1996).

As with worries and special attributes, sources of irritation may vary across grandchildren. Studies addressing parents’ disappointments in grown children suggest that parents are more distraught when children differ from themselves in achievement or values (Aldous et al., 1985; Suitor, 1987). As grandparents, individuals who feel that their grandchildren differ from themselves and do not behave according to their values may suffer increased irritations. Moreover, grandparents generally adhere to societal norms that deter interference in their children’s childrearing (Hall & Cumming, 1997). Thus, they may not feel free to correct their grandchildren’s behavior. Grandparents who perceive a grandchild’s annoying ways as inevitable and as something he or she will outgrow may be less upset by these annoyances than grandparents who wish they could alter their grandchild’s ways.
Grandparent Characteristics and Relationships with Grandchildren

The grandparenting experience may vary as function of gender and age, and lifestyle differences associated with these variables. For example, women tend to be more invested in their roles as grandmothers than are men (Aldous, 1995; Brubaker, 1990; Troll, 1983). As a consequence, a woman’s sense that she is a poor grandmother, or that her grandchildren are worrisome or irritating may have an impact on her own well-being (Henwood, 1993). Little is known about the association between men’s roles as grandparents and their psychological well-being. Given that men generally place less emphasis on intergenerational relationships (Rossi & Rossi, 1990), relationships with grandchildren may not be important for grandfathers’ well-being. On the other hand, Kivnick (1982) found grandfathers were more affected by their childhood memories of a favorite grandfather than were grandmothers. She argued that women have many nurturing and special relationships throughout their lives, so that any given relationship is unlikely to have an impact on their well-being, whereas men may be more affected by any one relationship.

It is also unclear whether grandparents of different ages react differently to their grandchildren. Studies have examined how grandparents’ relationships with grandchildren vary as a function of a grandchild’s age (e.g., Creasey & Kaliher, 1994; Kahana & Kahana, 1970), but little research has addressed grandparents’ age, unless the grandparent is exceptionally young. In the United States, on average, individuals become grandparents between the ages of 40 and 60, and given current life expectancies, they may then spend over a third of their lives as grandparents (Aldous, 1995; Hagestad, 1988; Kivett, 1991). Grandparent/grandchild relationships may reflect both parties’ developmental stage. As grandchildren grow up, they seem less interested in their grandparents (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986; Kivett, 1991). Middle-aged grandparents may be caught up with their grandchildren because these grandchildren are likely to be younger and, thus, to interact with their grandparents more. On the other hand, family appears to gain increasing importance to adults in the later years compared to the middle years of adulthood (Carstensen, 1992; Troll, 1988), and older grandparents might derive a sense of their life’s accomplishment from their grandchildren (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986; Stewart & Vandewater, in press). Yet, individuals experience health declines and losses in old age that may interfere with their ability to invest in relationships with grandchildren. In summary, gender and age differences were examined, but not specified, in this study.

Finally, grandparents’ relationships with their own children may be associated with their reactions to their grandchildren (Roberto, 1990). Relationships with grandchildren’s parents were considered briefly in this study. (For a detailed discussion of grandparents’ ties to their children and grandchildren in this sample, see Fingerman, 1998.)

Methods

Participants

The data presented here are part of a larger study involving a cross-sectional comparison of middle-aged grandparents (ages 45 to 60) and older grandparents (over the age of 70). This design maximizes opportunity to observe age differences (though not developmental change) in grandparents’ experiences. This sample precludes grandparents under the age of 45 because they appear to have distinct reactions to the grandparenting role (Hagestad & Burton, 1986).

Twenty-four middle-aged grandmothers (M = 54.67 years, SD = 4.85), 22 middle-aged grandfathers (M = 55.95 years, SD = 3.57), 22 older grandmothers (M = 76.50 years, SD = 7.11), and 23 older grandfathers (M = 74.33 years, SD = 3.73) participated (N = 91). None of these grandparents were related. Table 1 contains background information for this sample.

All participants were European Americans. The majority of grandparents had more than a high school education, M = 4.95, SD = 1.53 (1 = grade school, 2 = some high school, 3 = high school, 4 = technical school, 5 = some college, 6 = Bachelor’s degree, 7 = advanced degree). The ethnicity and education level of the sample reflect the composition of the county in which the study was conducted (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990). These education levels may correspond to those obtained by future cohorts of grandparents, but the homogeneous nature of the sample does not allow generalization of findings to the current population of grandparents in the United States.

Procedure

Grandparents were recruited through a variety of sources, including: advertisements in local newspapers and newsletters, word of mouth, community groups, and individuals attending football games at a state university. Grandparents were interviewed individually in their homes or at the study location. Interviews lasted one and a half to three hours, depending upon the number of grandchildren a particular grandparent had.

Measures

Background information. Education level, employment history, age, and other demographic variables were obtained at the start of the interview.

Relationships with grandchildren. Prior to the questions about emotionally salient grandchildren, grandparents provided information about their relationships with each of their grandchildren and each of the grandparents’ parents. For grandchildren, they indicated: age, location, how often seen, how often spoken to, how tiring time spent with them is, how enjoyable time spent with them is, and how much the grandparent feels she or he must do

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Proportions of Grandparents Fitting Each Demographic Characteristic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle-aged Grandmother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>(n = 24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remarried</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/None</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment Status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently works</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for pay</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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for them. Grandparents also rated the quality of their relationships with each grandchild and each of the grandchild’s parents. Prior research has revealed a positive bias in adults’ ratings of intergenerational relationships, with averages between the upper scale points “4 = very good” and “5 = excellent” (e.g., Aldous, 1987; Bengtson & Schrader, 1982). In an effort to obtain a wider distribution of ratings, the anchors of the scale were disproportionately positive (1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = good, 4 = very good, 5 = excellent, 6 = superior, 7 = outstanding).

Assessment of special, worrisome, and irritating grandchildren. After grandparents provided closed-ended ratings of their relationships with their children and grandchildren, they answered a series of open-ended questions about a grandchild they defined as special, one about whom they worry, and one who causes irritation. For example, the interviewer asked, “Although you may love all of your grandchildren a great deal, you probably have distinct feelings for each grandchild. Is there a grandchild whom you consider to be particularly special?” Grandparents were asked to describe a special, rather than a favored grandchild in order to make this selection more palatable. Participants who hesitated were assured, “Of course they are all special, but we would like to know about one that has a special meaning or relationship with you.” Participants were then asked, “Can you tell me a little about that grandchild and why the grandchild is special?” The same series of questions were repeated with regard to a worrisome and an irritating grandchild. Due to a clerical error, only 44 grandparents were asked about irritating grandchildren. These grandparents were evenly distributed across age and gender groups.

Grandparents also rated the degree of worry or irritation these grandchildren cause using a 5-point scale (1 = very little, 5 = a great deal). Ratings of degree of “specialness” were not obtained, under the assumption that a special grandchild was selected because this grandchild was unique in some way, rather than that this grandchild rated higher along a continuum of “specialness.”

Coding of Responses

The open-ended responses were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Content codes were derived from the written transcriptions of descriptions of emotionally salient grandchildren using a procedure described by Comnides (1992). First, participants’ responses to each question were read and subthemes were generated. Each subtheme was found in at least two participants’ responses. Independent raters coded 10 cases for each subtheme, reliability ranged from Kappa = .77 for relationship with special grandchild to Kappa = .99 for worrying about a grandchild who has personal problems. The subthemes were then grouped under larger themes that fit the working rubrics of a personal versus normative framework.

The larger themes and subthemes for each type of emotionally salient grandchild are found in Tables 4, 5, and 6. For special grandchildren, the following subthemes were considered personal: individual personality, health or emotional problems, and the relationship itself. References to the grandchild’s gender or birth order were considered normative. For worrisome grandchildren, descriptions of the grandchild’s personality, individual problems, and comments about the immediate home environment were considered personal. General worries about the future of the world, the American education system, or potential health problems that did not already exist were considered normative. Remarks such as, “He was held back in third grade” or “She dated someone seriously I felt was no good” were deemed personal. Remarks such as, “Well, you always worry that something bad could happen when they’re teenagers” were deemed normative. Finally, with regard to irritation, issues such as a grandchild who is stubborn or problems with the grandchild’s parents were considered personal. Comments that indicated a “kids will be kids” attitude were considered normative. For example, “He is a bit pouty and talks back to me” was considered personal, whereas, “Well, you know how kids are, sometimes she is a bit noisy” might be said of children of comparable age.

Outcome Measures

Emotional health. The Positive and Negative Affect Scale (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) was used to assess well-being and distress. Participants indicated the degree to which they have experienced 10 positive emotions (e.g., excited, strong, proud) and 10 negative emotions (e.g., hostile, ashamed) in the past week using a 5-point scale (1 = not at all, very slightly, 5 = extremely). In this study, alpha = .82 for the negative scale and .87 for the positive scale.

Physical well-being. Participants rated their health using a 5-point scale (1 = poor, 5 = excellent). Subjective ratings of health have been shown to correlate highly with other indicators of physical status in later life (Kane & Kane, 1985). In addition, 5 items assessing physical functioning such as, “Can you walk a block without assistance?” were included. All but four participants indicated they were capable of completing the physical tasks; those four participants indicated that they could not walk a mile or engage in heavy exercise.

Results

First, information about all grandchildren is presented. Next, characteristics that render emotionally salient grandchildren distinct are considered. Third, grandparents’ subjective ideas about what makes a grandchild special, worrisome, or irritating are described. Finally, the association between emotionally salient grandchildren and grandparents’ individual well-being is examined. Grandparents were divided into two age groups for purposes of analyses, middle-aged and older grandparents. Age and gender differences are considered throughout the analyses.

General Characteristics of Grandchildren

Grandparents provided information pertaining to 346 grandchildren, ranging in age from one month to 39 years (M = 10.8, SD = 7.7). Characteristics of these grandchildren are found in Table 2. Nearly all of the grandchildren were the biological children of the grandparents’ children or step-children. Differences in the number and ages of grandparents’ grandchildren were examined using 2 Age Group X Gender ANOVA’s presented in Table 2. Older grandparents had a greater number of grandchildren and older grandchildren than did middle-aged grandparents. Indeed, the average ages of grandparents’ grandchildren correlated highly with their own ages, r = .75, p < .001. There were no gender differences in family structure.

Table 3 contains grandparents’ ratings of their relationships with their grandchildren. Age and gender differences in frequency of contact were considered first. Bartlett’s test of sphericity is used to determine whether one dependent variable can be expressed as a linear function of another dependent variable, and thus, whether multivariate analyses are warranted. Bartlett’s test of sphericity determinant was small, −.58, indicating that seeing
and speaking to grandchildren were correlated. A 2 Age Group by Gender MANOVA was calculated, and the findings from this analysis were significant, Hotelling’s $F(2, 86) = 6.54, p < .002$. Univariate $F$’s (see Table 3) show that middle-aged grandparents reported visiting with their grandchildren more often in person and also speaking with them more often by phone. Surprisingly, there were no significant gender differences in frequency of contact with grandchildren. To limit the number of analyses computed, only visiting with grandchildren was considered subsequently, under the assumption that visits provide more fodder for emotional reactions than phone calls do.

Age and gender differences in grandparents’ ratings of different aspects of their relationships with their grandchildren were considered next. Bartlett’s test indicated that multivariate analyses were not warranted with regard to: how much grandparents enjoy grandchildren, how tiring they find them, the degree to which they feel demanded upon by them, and the quality of relationships with them. Univariate Age Group × Gender ANOVA’s were conducted. Statistically significant age differences were found for only one of these four variables, how tiring grandparents find their grandchildren; middle-aged grandparents found their grandchildren more tiring. This ANOVA is found in Table 3. Non-significant findings are not presented in the tables.

Variables explaining grandparents’ ratings of grandchildren. Characteristics of grandchildren that might be associated with variation in grandparents’ relationships were also considered. Grandparents reported visiting more frequently with younger grandchildren $r(343) = -.22, p < .05$. Grandparents also rated younger grandchildren more tiring, $r(339) = -.31, p < .01$. Thus, middle-aged grandparents may find their grandchildren more tiring because the grandchildren are younger.

Grandparents’ ties to their grandchildren’s parents were also examined. As in other studies, grandparents’ ratings of the global quality of their relationship with each grandchild corresponded to their ratings of the global quality of their relationships with the grandchild’s mother, $r(341) = .38, p < .01$, and father, $r(341) = .30, p < .05$. Analyses examining age and gender differences in grandparents’ ratings of relationships with their grandchildren were conducted again with ratings of relationship with grandchild’s mother entered as a covariate. Although the covariate (ratings of relationship with grandchild’s mother) was significant in some analyses, the pattern of findings with regard to grandparent age and gender differences did not change in these analyses. More specific features of grandparents’ relationships with grandchildren such as enjoyment of time together and how tiring a grandchild is were not associated with grandparents’ ties to the grandchild’s parents either, suggesting that grandchildren themselves are responsible for specific features of the relationship.

Comparisons of Emotionally Salient Grandchildren to Other Grandchildren

Our first question addresses the factors that distinguish emotionally salient grandchildren from other grandchildren. Grandparents named 87 grandchildren as special, 87 grandchildren as worrisome, and 37 grandchildren as irritating (only 44 grandparents were asked about irritating grandchildren). Emotionally salient grandchildren were compared to other grandchildren with regard to: (a) structural aspects of the relationship (e.g., frequency of con-
Table 3  
Grandparents’ Average Ratings of Relationships with All of Their Grandchildren

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Grandparents</th>
<th>Grandmother (n = 24)</th>
<th>Grandfather (n = 22)</th>
<th>Grandmother (n = 22)</th>
<th>Grandfather (n = 23)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How often see grandchild</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>5.15</td>
<td>5.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 = daily, 7 = less than 1 x year)</td>
<td>(1.88)</td>
<td>(1.93)</td>
<td>(1.81)</td>
<td>(1.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often speak to grandchild</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>4.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 = daily, 7 = less than 1 x year)</td>
<td>(1.78)</td>
<td>(1.92)</td>
<td>(1.45)</td>
<td>(1.52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often talk about grandchild</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>3.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 = daily, 7 = less than 1 x year)</td>
<td>(1.30)</td>
<td>(1.69)</td>
<td>(1.62)</td>
<td>(1.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much enjoy time with</td>
<td>6.47</td>
<td>6.51</td>
<td>6.22</td>
<td>5.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 = not at all, 7 = a great deal)</td>
<td>(1.16)</td>
<td>(0.88)</td>
<td>(1.26)</td>
<td>(0.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How tiring find time with</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 = not at all, 7 = a great deal)</td>
<td>(2.08)</td>
<td>(1.82)</td>
<td>(1.36)</td>
<td>(1.39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much demands</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 = very little, 7 = a great deal)</td>
<td>(1.17)</td>
<td>(2.32)</td>
<td>(1.23)</td>
<td>(1.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of relationship</td>
<td>5.62</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>5.23</td>
<td>5.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 = poor, 7 = outstanding)</td>
<td>(1.29)</td>
<td>(1.14)</td>
<td>(1.27)</td>
<td>(1.02)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 Age Group x Gender ANOVA for Frequency of Visiting with Grandchildren

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Variation</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age group</td>
<td>31.48</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>31.48</td>
<td>13.81***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>1.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age group x gender</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>34.34</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11.45</td>
<td>5.02**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>191.41</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 Age Group x Gender ANOVA for Frequency of Speaking with Grandchildren

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Variation</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age group</td>
<td>8.15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.15</td>
<td>4.30*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age group x gender</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>9.16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>1.61</td>
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<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>159.05</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td></td>
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2 Age Group x Gender ANOVA for How Tiring Grandchildren Are

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<tr>
<th>Source of Variation</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>20.12</td>
<td>8.09***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age group x gender</td>
<td>11.95</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11.95</td>
<td>4.81*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Model</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>11.68</td>
<td>4.69**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>206.39</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. Standard deviations, unless otherwise noted, appear in parentheses.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

...tact, age of grandchild) and (b) positive and negative aspects of the relationship (e.g., how much grandparents enjoy time with them, find them tiring, etc.). Interfamily analyses comparing emotionally salient grandchildren to all other grandchildren at an aggregate level were conducted. By contrast, intrafamily analyses would involve comparisons between emotionally salient grandchildren and other grandchildren within their own families. Intrafamily analyses can only be conducted where there is sufficient variation on the independent variables of interest (e.g., gender, age, frequency of contact) within each family (Aldous et al., 1985). Moreover, intrafamily comparisons such as those used here are more appropriate when examining features of family members that might contribute to variation in individual well-being. These analyses were calculated separately by grandparents’ age group and gender. In other words, middle-aged grandmothers’ special grandchildren collectively were compared to middle-aged grandmothers’ other grandchildren collectively, older grandfathers’ worrisome grandchildren were compared to older grandfathers’ other grandchildren and so forth. Irritating grandchildren were compared to all other grandchildren of the 44 grandparents who answered questions about these grandchildren because there were so few individuals involved.

Eleven grandparents had only one grandchild (n = 5 for middle-aged grandmothers, n = 4 for middle-aged grandfathers and n = 1 each for older grandmothers and grandfathers) and, therefore, had no latitude in selecting grandchildren for different categories of emotional salience. Grandparents with only one grandchild were excluded from analyses involving comparisons to other grandchildren. As is described later, these grandparents’ subjective sense of what makes their grandchild special, worrisome, or annoying were examined for personal versus normative themes.

In addition to the grandparents who had only one grandchild, 15 grandparents named the same grandchild as special and worrisome, and 8 of these grandchildren were also considered irritating. One grandparent named the same grandchild as worrisome and irritating. In other words, although they had more than one grandchild to choose from, eight grandparents felt one particular grandchild fit all three categories of emotional salience, seven more felt their special grandchild was also the one who generated wor-
ties, one felt the worrisome grandchild was irritating. To take into account that some grandparents found the same grandchild emotionally salient in more than one way, analyses were conducted twice. First, all emotionally salient grandchildren of a particular type (e.g., special, worrisome, or irritating) were compared to other grandchildren, then the same analyses were repeated, excluding cases that overlapped with another type of emotional salience.

It should also be noted that t-tests were calculated comparing grandparents’ relationships with the parents of emotionally salient grandchildren to their relationships with parents of other grandchildren. Parent was considered as a unit of analysis, and thus, ratings of other grandchildren with the same parent were removed from calculations. Findings were scarce, but in the expected direction. Middle-aged grandmothers rated their relationships with their special grandchildren’s fathers higher and the quality of relationships with worrisome grandchildren’s fathers lower. Grandparents rated the quality of their relationships with irritating grandchildren’s mothers lower than their relationships with mothers of other grandchildren.

Comparisons of special grandchildren to other grandchildren.

As was mentioned previously, variables assessing grandparents’ relationships with grandchildren were not correlated. Thus, a series of independent t-tests examined differences between the special grandchild and other grandchildren with regard to structural variables (e.g., age of grandchild, frequency of contact). There were few significant differences, middle-aged and older grandmothers did report seeing special grandchildren more often $t(78) = 1.96$, $p < .05$, and $t(91) = 2.15$, $p < .05$, respectively.

As expected, special grandchildren were distinct from other grandchildren based on positive features of their relationships. Most grandparents enjoyed the time they spend with a special grandchild more: $t(78) = 3.26$, $p < .005$ for middle-aged grandmothers, $t(91) = 4.06$, $p < .001$ for older grandmothers, and $t(92) = 2.48$, $p < .05$ for older grandfathers. Older grandmothers also rated the quality of their relationships with these grandchildren higher, $t(92) = 3.97$, $p < .001$.

When analyses were conducted a second time excluding the cases that were named as emotionally salient in more than one way (e.g., special grandchildren also named as worrisome or irritating), differences in grandparents’ ratings of how much they enjoy the time they spend with special versus other grandchildren appeared even stronger. Grandmothers did not report visiting more often with special grandchildren when these cases were excluded, however.

Comparisons of worrisome grandchildren to other grandchildren.

Worrisome grandchildren did not differ from other grandchildren in terms of structural aspects of the relationship such as age of grandchild or frequency of contact. Grandparents generally rated the quality of their relationships with worrisome grandchildren as being less positive in some way. Middle-aged grandfathers considered worrisome grandchildren more tiring, $t(57) = 2.14$, $p < .001$. Older grandmothers rated the quality of their relationships with these grandchildren lower, $t(94) = -2.31$, $p < .05$, and older grandfathers rated the quality of relationship lower, $t(95) = -2.04$, $p < .05$, and considered these grandchildren more tiring, $t(95) = 2.22$, $p < .05$.

When analyses were conducted a second time excluding cases that overlapped with the special or irritating categories, differences between worrisome and other grandchildren appeared even more pronounced. In addition to rating the quality of relationships lower, older grandmothers claimed to enjoy time with these grandchildren less, $t(76) = -2.47$, $p < .05$, and to find them more tiring $t(76) = 2.37$, $p < .05$, and older grandfathers claimed to enjoy time with them less $t(87) = -3.45$, $p < .05$.

Comparisons of irritating grandchildren to other grandchildren. Finally, irritating grandchildren were compared to other grandchildren of the 44 grandparents who were asked about such grandchildren. These analyses should be considered with caution, given that so few grandparents were involved. Irritating grandchildren were younger, $t(103) = -3.75$, $p < .001$, and were seen more often than other grandchildren, $t(103) = 2.04$, $p < .05$. Grandparents enjoyed the time they spent with these grandchildren less $t(103) = -2.49$, $p < .05$, and found these grandchildren more tiring $t(103) = 4.36$, $p < .05$.

When analyses were conducted a second time excluding cases that were also named as worrisome or special, grandparents enjoyed irritating grandchildren even less and found them more tiring. There were no significant differences in the frequency of contact grandparents had with irritating grandchildren versus other grandchildren when overlapping cases were excluded.

Grandparents’ Descriptions of Special, Worrisome, and Irritating Grandchildren.

Grandparents’ subjective reports of emotionally salient grandchildren were examined next. Tables 4, 5, and 6 include the proportion of grandparents whose responses for special, worrisome, and irritating grandchildren fit each theme. As was mentioned previously, a given response could fall under more than one theme. Logistic regressions were estimated with a dichotomous variable as the outcome, 1 = described a personal reason why grandchild is emotionally salient and 0 = described a normative reason why grandchild is emotionally salient. Only significant findings are presented in the tables.

These regressions were also estimated a second time, including ratings of relationships with the grandchildren’s parents. Entering ratings of relationships with grandchildren’s parents did not alter the pattern of findings and therefore, only analyses pertaining to relationships with grandchildren are included here.

Descriptions of special grandchildren. Logistic regression revealed no significant association between grandparents’ age or gender and their likelihood of describing personal issues as what made a grandchild special. Most grandparents considered their grandchild special for personal reasons. Indeed, grandparents who did describe demographic factors (e.g., grandchild’s age, gender, birth order) also tended to describe personal characteristics. Many grandparents described a specific trait or aspect of the grandchild’s personality, such as the grandchild’s gentle nature or intelligence. Approximately a third of grandparents indicated that the grandchild’s love for them made that grandchild special. For example, one grandfather was pleased that his special grandchild made a sign that said, “I love my grandpa” and put it on the refrigerator. A grandmother was touched that her special grandchild bought her a Get Well card.

A smaller proportion of grandparents indicated that a grandchild’s personal problem made that grandchild special. One grandfather described his anguish over a genetic disorder that his grandson suffered that was not diagnosed until that child was over a year old. He expressed his guilt and love for that grandchild, blaming himself for failing to see the problem and for passing on
the genes resulting in the child’s affliction. Another grandparent commented, “Why is she special? Because she has developed slowly . . . Children in her class are obviously more mature than she is.” Eight of these grandparents also listed this grandchild as their worrisome grandchild.

Finally, some grandparents expressed difficulty selecting a special grandchild. A logistic regression shown in Table 4 shows that grandfathers were 1.31 times as reticent to make comparisons between grandchildren, “You really shouldn’t be saying one is better than the other. I don’t choose like that . . .” Some of these grandparents still went on to make such comparisons after stating their disdain for doing so.

Descriptions of worrisome grandchildren. Logistic regression revealed no significant association between grandparents’ age or gender and their likelihood of describing personal issues that rendered particular grandchildren worrisome. Over a third of grandparents confined their answers to general worries such as, “Well, you always worry that they’ll get sick” or “The future of the world is frightening . . . you never know what is going to happen.”

There was variation in the types of personal issues that made particular grandchildren worrisome. Post-hoc logistic regressions were estimated for each subtheme. As can be seen in Table 5, grandmothers were nearly three times as likely as grandfathers to worry about a grandchild’s personality traits. Older grandparents were nearly four times as likely as middle-aged grandparents to worry about a personal problem a grandchild was incurring. Although the overall regression was not significant, middle-aged grandparents were more likely to describe worries about the grandchild’s home context. Qualitative examples suggest that this pattern may reflect the ages of the grandchildren. For example, grandparents worried about role models in the home for school-aged grandchildren, about a problem with drugs or alcohol in teenage grandchildren, and about an inappropriate relationship for young adult grandchildren. In addition, although the logistic regression was not significant, grandfathers tended to be more likely to indicate that they did not worry about their grandchildren.

Descriptions of irritating grandchildren. Table 6 shows the proportions of grandparents who described irritating grandchildren in personal and normative ways. About half of grandparents who answered these questions considered something personal about the grandchild annoying or thought the grandchild’s parents were doing an inadequate job, whereas half appeared to take a “kids will be kids” attitude towards these annoyances. Seven grandparents who were asked about irritations indicated that their grandchildren were never annoying; five of these grandparents were male.

Emotionally Salient Grandchildren and Well-being

In general, participants scored high on the PANAS positive mood scale, $M = 36.17, SD = 5.55$ (possible range = 10 to 50) and low on the PANAS negative mood scale, $M = 17.14, SD = 5.33$ (possible range = 10 to 50). Participants also indicated that they were generally in good health, $M = 3.76, SD = .86$ (1 = poor health, 5 = excellent health). Age, as a continuous variable, was negatively correlated with the PANAS positive mood scale, $r(90) = -.28, p < .05$, indicating that older grandparents rated their mood as moderately less positive. Neither negative mood nor health ratings were associated with grandparent’s age.
First, associations between specific features of relationships with emotionally salient grandchildren and grandparent well-being was examined. Then, grandparents’ attributions about emotionally salient grandchildren and their well-being was examined. Regressions were calculated with the PANAS positive and negative mood scales and the health variable as outcomes. Findings from significant regressions are found in Table 7. Again, regressions were also conducted a second time controlling for ratings of relationships with grandchildren’s parents. Relationships with grandchildren’s parents were not significant predictors of grandparent well-being in this context nor did the pattern of findings change when these ratings were included in the equations. Therefore, only findings pertaining to emotionally salient grandchildren are presented here.

Grandparents’ reports of frequency of contact, level of enjoyment, sense of fatigue, and rated quality of relationship were entered in separate equations for special and worrisome grandchildren. Grandparents’ age (as a continuous variable) and gender (dummy coded) were entered as control variables. Given the small number of grandparents mentioning irritating grandchildren, a regression with 6 predictors could not be calculated. As can be seen in Table 7, the regression for special grandchild and PANAS positive mood scale was significant with quality of relationship and age of grandparent as significant predictors. Aspects of the relationship with the worrisome grandchildren did not predict emotional or physical well-being. When analyses for special and worrisome grandchildren were repeated, excluding the cases named as emotionally salient in more than one way the pattern of findings was parallel to that shown in Table 7.

Grandparents’ subjective descriptions of what made their emotionally salient grandchild special, worrisome, or irritating were considered next. Regressions were calculated for each type of emotionally salient grandchild involving a dummy variable for grandparents’ attributions about that grandchild (1 = mentioned personal issues and 0 = mentioned normative issues), and age and gender as control variables. Attributions about special grandchildren did not predict grandparents’ well-being. This non-significant finding may stem from the fact that nearly all grandparents described their special grandchildren in personal terms. Age of grandparent and worries about personal issues predicted decreased positive mood.

Nonparametric correlations were used to examine the association between grandparents’ descriptions of irritating grandchildren and well-being. Grandparents who took the “kids will be kids” approach to annoyances scored higher on the PANAS positive mood scale, $r(36) = .38$, $p < .05$, and grandparents who described their irritation with their annoying grandchildren in personal terms scored lower on the positive mood scale, $r(36) = -.34$, $p < .05$.

To test whether relationships with one type of emotionally salient grandchild contributed more to grandparents’ well-being, a regression was estimated including grandparents’ attributions about special, worrisome, and irritating grandchildren simultaneously with positive mood as the outcome. The equation was significant, but only making personal attributions about the worrisome grandchild was a significant predictor of decreased positive mood. A regression was estimated examining the association between having a grandchild who was considered emotionally salient in more than one way and well-being, controlling for age and gender of grandparent. This regression was not significant. Finally, a regression was estimated predicting PANAS positive mood from grandparents’ relationships with non-emotionally salient grandchildren, including frequency of contact, enjoyment, sense of fatigue, quality of relationship, grandparent age, and gender. The regression was significant, but only grandparent age was a significant negative predictor. These analyses parallel other findings and are not shown here.

### Discussion

Grandparents appear to have unique relationships with grandchildren that they consider to be distinct in positive and negative ways. Not surprisingly, grandchildren whom they see more frequently tend to be emotionally salient. Indeed, grandchildren who were emotionally salient in more than one way (e.g., special and worrisome) were those seen most often. In addition, different features distinguished different types of emotionally salient grandchildren. Grandparents reported enjoying time with special grandchildren more, and feeling more fatigued by worrisome and irritating grandchildren. Grandparents’ relationships with their grandchildren’s parents differed in expected ways, but emotionally salient grandchildren also appeared to contribute to these relationships independently of their parents. Most importantly, grandparents were affected by different types of grandchildren in different ways.

It should be noted that this study was conducted in a university town set in a rural region and is constrained by the homogeneous ethnicity and education levels of the local population. The grandparents who participated in this study do not represent the general population of grandparents in the United States today. This study did, however, include information about grandparents’ relationships with each of their grandchildren and qualitative descriptions of emotionally salient grandchildren. Such in-depth information may be more difficult to obtain in large national samples, given the time researchers must take to build rapport with participants. This regionally based study suggests that for some grandparents, emotional reactions to their grandchildren do influence their individual well-being, even when controlling for relationships with the grandchildren’s parents. Research on relationships suggests that personal investment in emotionally meaningful others may be associated with well-being, but that cultural context may determine what makes someone personally mean-

### Table 7

<table>
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<th>Predicators</th>
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<td>Grandparent’s age</td>
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<td>0.01</td>
<td>-2.82***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyment of grandchild</td>
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<td>0.14</td>
<td>-0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of relationship with grandchild</td>
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<td>0.07</td>
<td>2.52*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of fatigue from grandchild</td>
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<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frequency of contact with grandchild</td>
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<td>0.61</td>
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<td>$F(6, 72) = 3.33, p &lt; .01, R^2 = .24$</td>
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<td><strong>Attributions about Worrisome Grandchild</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>9.69***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grandparent’s gender</td>
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<td>0.15</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grandparent’s age</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-3.01***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal attributions of why grandchild is worrisome</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-2.54*</td>
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<tr>
<td>$F(3, 78) = 4.98, p &lt; .005, R^2 = .17$</td>
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* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. 

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1998, Vol. 47, No. 4
ingful. Grandparents from different ethnic and educational back-
grounds might describe different qualities as rendering their 
grandchildren emotionally salient, but may still be affected by 
these grandchildren.

Personal Relationships with 
Emotionally Salient Grandchildren

Early research on grandparenting suggested that links be-
tween this role and individual well-being were tenuous, given the 
myriad of factors that might shape an individual’s reaction to this 
role (Kivnick, 1982; Troll, 1983). The findings from this study 
suggest that relationships with grandchildren are an important 
aspect of understanding how grandparents experience their roles. 
Grandchildren might be perceived as emotionally distinct for a 
variety of reasons, and variation in these reasons may explain 
how grandparents are affected by their relationships with these 
grandchildren. Grandparenting might be considered as a series of 
relationships, rather than a single role in an individual’s life.

In this study, grandparents’ open-ended descriptions of emo-
tionally salient grandchildren revealed a range of features that 
they felt contributed to their reactions to these children. For spe-
cial grandchildren, it is the quality of the general tie that matters, 
rather than the reasons why grandparents consider the grandchild 
to be special. Nearly all grandchildren, however, defined their spe-
cial grandchildren in terms of the grandchild’s personal attributes, 
accomplishments, or love. Indeed, the question itself may have 
elicted responses pertaining to personal features of the grand-
child, as the word “special” subsumes the word “unique.” Unfor-
unately, a more felicitous term for “special” is not readily 
available that permits grandparents to describe favored grand-
children without admitting to outright preferences. Several grandpar-
ents, particularly grandfathers, expressed their hesitancy to 
discuss a special grandchild as it was. On the other hand, features of 
relationships with worrisome and irritating grandchildren did 
not seem important for grandparents’ well-being. A high quality 
relationship with a special grandchild may represent a psycholog-
ical resource available to grandparents that provides a sense of 
love, esteem, and belongingness.

For worrisome and irritating grandchildren, the more impor-
tant issue seems to be what the grandparent thinks about the 
grandchild. Grandparents who perceived a grandchild as worri-
some or irritating due to a personal characteristic reported de-
creased positive mood. This pattern parallels other research 
where negative aspects of relationships have been found to have 
an impact on well-being (Rook, 1992). Research pertaining to 
parent/child relationships in adulthood has also shown that how 
individuals frame their problems may be important in under-
standing whether tensions in the relationship affect individual 
well-being (Fingerman, 1996). For grandparents, it is not the 
quality of the relationship or the frequency of contact, but the 
attributions about the worrisome or irritating grandchild that seems 
to be important.

Of note is that grandchildren who were considered emotion-
ally salient in more than one way did not have a distinct impact 
on their grandparents. This finding seems counterintuitive, in that 
relationships characterized by high levels of positive and negative 
emotion might be expected to have the strongest impact on indi-
vidual well-being. On the other hand, the difference in factors 
that contributed to well-being for special versus worrisome grand-
children may explain why these grandchildren did not contribute 
more to their grandparents’ well-being. A grandchild who is spe-
cial due to a personal problem may have a grandparent who is 
able to overlook the problem and does not take it personally 
(though he or she does worry about it), and who derives benefits 
from a high quality relationship with this grandchild. On the 
other hand, a grandparent who worries about a grandchild’s per-
sonal problem might suffer decreased positive mood because the 
grandchild is special to him or her.

Grandparents’ worries and irritations were not associated 
with their ratings of health. Moreover, the only significant find-
ings in this study for well-being involved decreased positive 
mood, rather than increased negative mood. Cumulatively, these 
findings may stem from the relatively healthy nature of the sam-
ple physically and emotionally. Alternately, grandparents’ well-
being may not be strongly associated with their grandchildren 
due to the more distal position that grandchildren seem to occupy 
in their grandparents’ lives (Troll, 1983). Relationships with 
spouses, children, and friends may be more important in individu-
als’ lives.

Yet, if the impact that grandchildren have on their grandpar-
ents’ well-being were simply a matter of the grandparents’ invest-
ment in the role, one might expect all grandchildren to affect 
grandparents in similar ways, and that was not the case. Personal 
attributions about worrisome grandchildren appeared to be more 
important than attributions about special grandchildren. (Of course, 
most grandparents described their special grandchild in personal 
terms, and lack of variation in responses about special grandchild 
may partially explain this finding). Quality of relationship with 
special grandchild was more important than other factors in 
accounting for grandparent well-being as well. Moreover, aspects 
of relationships with non-emotionally salient grandchildren were 
not associated with individual well-being, whereas relationships 
with emotionally salient grandchildren were. It seems that when 
grandchildren stand out in distinct ways, they may have an effect 
on their grandparents. On the other hand, the fact that an individu-
al has grandchildren does not mean that those grandchildren 
will have an effect on them. Rather, quality of positive relation-
ships and attributions about negative ones seem to be key in under-
standing grandparents’ ties with grandchildren.

Although gender and age of grandparent were examined as 
key variables in this study, grandparents’ relationships with indi-
vidual grandchildren appeared to vary more as a function of the 
grandchildren themselves. It was not possible to separate age of 
grandparent from age of grandchild in this study, but it seems that 
the fact that younger grandparents have younger grandchildren ex-
plains several age differences in this study. In addition, although 
grandmothers did not have more contact with their grandchildren 
than grandfathers did, they seemed to be more emotionally in-
vested in individual ties with their grandchildren. Grandfathers 
were more likely to state that they did not make comparisons be-
tween their grandchildren and did not worry about them. These 
findings are in keeping with other research that has found women 
to be more invested in intergenerational relationships (Rossi & 
Rossi, 1990).

Practical Implications

In a therapeutic context, clinicians might ask grandparents 
who are suffering from decreased positive mood about problems 
they feel their grandchildren are incurring or irritating behaviors 
in which they feel their grandchildren engage. Although informa-

Family Relations
tion was limited in this sample, a sense that a grandchild has specific traits that make him or her annoying or worrisome appears to damper positive mood. From a cognitive perspective, grandparents might be encouraged to reframe their conceptions of the grandchild’s difficulties. They might try to think about the issues that concern or irritate them as normal or general. The sense that “All kids are noisy” or “Many young adults go through bad relationships” may help modify the effect these emotionally salient grandchildren have on their lives, particularly since cultural norms may preclude grandparents from attempts to actively change or improve the lives of their grandchildren.

From a family systems perspective, therapists might educate grandparents and their parents about the impact that the grandchild’s problems or poor behavior may have on the grandparents. Indeed, although parents may benefit from their own parents’ support when their adult children are not doing well (Ryff, Lee, Essex, & Schmutte, 1994). The findings from this study suggest a similar reaction to problematic grandchildren. Although grandchildren appear to be more removed from an individual’s sense of self, grandchildren represent a particular dilemma because grandparents often have little latitude in helping to alleviate problems. Clinicians may need to help parents determine whether they truly want the grandparents’ (their own parents’) advice or whether they are using the grandparents as a source of support. In the latter case, the trade off against the grandparents’ decreased positive mood should also be considered.

Finally, clinicians should consider the positive influences that special grandchildren can bring to their grandparents’ lives. From a social support perspective, special grandchildren might be considered a particular type of resource for enhancing in-the-moment pleasure. Grandparents reported increased pleasure from these grandchildren relative to other grandchildren. Individuals who suffer from stress, depression, anxiety, or related disorders may derive enjoyment from time spent with special grandchildren. Of note were the number of grandchildren who commented on the love their special grandchildren showed them. Grandchildren are sometimes considered recipients for grandparents’ love and spoiling (Neugarten & Weinstein, 1964), but the findings in this study suggest that special grandchildren also provide these things for their grandparents.

Prior research has considered grandparenting a unitary aspect of an individual’s sense of self. The findings of this study suggest that grandparents differentiate amongst their grandchildren, and that their emotional reactions to different grandchildren can have an impact on their well-being.

References


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25 ACADEMIC PROGRAMS APPROVED BY NCFR COMMITTEE!

The Academic Program Review Committee has now approved twenty schools representing 25 undergraduate and graduate programs. The Committee reviewed the course offerings and determined that they covered the content needed for the Provisional CFLE designation. Additional applications are currently under review. Graduates of these approved programs qualify to complete an abbreviated application process for Provisional certification and pay a reduced application fee. Congratulations to these schools!  

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE MOST RECENTLY APPROVED SCHOOL:

University of New Hampshire - Family Studies - undergraduate

Anderson University - Family Science - undergraduate
Andrews University - Family Studies - undergraduate
Auburn University - Human Dev. & Family Studies - undergraduate & graduate
Brigham Young University - Family Sciences & Human Dev. - graduate
California State University - Long Beach - Family and Consumer Sciences - Child Dev. and Family Studies Option - undergraduate
Indiana University of PA - Child Dev. & Family Relations - undergraduate
Kansas State University - Family Life & Community Service - undergraduate
Kent State University - Individual/Family Studies - undergraduate & graduate
Messiah College - Family Studies - undergraduate
Miami University - Individual & Family Studies - undergraduate; Family & Child Studies - graduate

South Dakota State University - Human Dev. & Family Studies - undergraduate
Spring Arbor College - Family Life Education - undergraduate
University of Nebraska - Kearney - Family & Consumer Sciences - undergraduate
University of North Texas - Child/Human Development and Family Studies - undergraduate & graduate
University of Southern Mississippi - Child & Family Studies - undergraduate
University of Tennessee - Knoxville - Family Studies - undergraduate
University of Wyoming - Child & Family Studies - undergraduate
Warner Pacific College - Human Dev. and Family Studies - undergraduate
Weber State University - Child and Family Studies - undergraduate