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# Transfers between grandparents and grandchildren: The importance of taking a three-generation perspective

Transfers zwischen Großeltern und Enkelkindern – Warum es wichtig ist, eine Drei-Generationen-Perspektive einzunehmen

## Abstract

The key argument in this article is that recent demographic change, with unprecedented duration of intergenerational ties and shifting balance between old and young in family lines necessitates three-generational views of transfers between grandparents and grandchildren. Much support from grandparents comes through continued parenting of the middle generation, the grandchildren's parents. Using recent data from Norway, such indirect support is explored through three avenues: ideal role perceptions, actual help in parenting, support in difficult times and potential help. In most instances, there is considerable evidence that grandparents represent a "reserve army" for their children and grandchildren, especially grandmothers in the maternal line. Divorce may represent structural obstacles to the flow of support, especially in the paternal line. In designing and executing studies of modern grandparents, researchers need to be aware of asymmetry as a potential problem and be very clear on where in vertical connections the research is anchored.

*Keywords:* Grandparents, grandchildren, indirect support, role perceptions, asymmetry

## Zusammenfassung

Der demographische Wandel mit der beispiellos langen gemeinsamen Lebenszeit und der sich verschiebenden Balance zwischen Alt und Jung in der Familie erfordert in Hinblick auf Transfers zwischen Großeltern und Enkeln eine Drei-Generationen-Perspektive. Ein großer Teil der Hilfen von Großeltern besteht in ihrer fortwährenden Unterstützung für ihre erwachsenen Kinder, also die Eltern ihrer Enkelkinder. Mit aktuellen norwegischen Daten wird diese indirekte Unterstützung auf drei Ebenen untersucht: Wahrnehmung von Rollenmodellen, tatsächliche Hilfen bei den elterlichen Aufgaben sowie Unterstützung in schwierigen Zeiten und potenzielle Hilfe. Dabei existieren deutliche Hinweise, dass die Großeltern eine „Reservearmee“ für ihre Kinder und Enkelkinder darstellen, und zwar insbesondere die Großmütter mütterlicherseits. Scheidungen weisen hingegen auf strukturelle Hindernisse für fortwährende Hilfeleistungen hin, insbesondere auf Seiten der Großeltern väterlicherseits. Beim Forschungsdesign und der Durchführung von Studien über heutige Großeltern muss man sich des potenziellen Asymmetrie-Problems bewusst sein und klare Entscheidungen darüber treffen, an welcher Stelle in der Generationenlinie die Untersuchung verankert wird.

*Schlagwörter:* Großeltern, Enkel, indirekte Hilfeleistung, Rollenwahrnehmung, Asymmetrie

## 1. Focus of the paper

The main purpose in this paper is to stimulate researchers to consider ties between grandparents and grandchildren within a three-generational perspective and to heighten awareness of some conceptual and methodological issues in such work. In a recent volume that provides a comprehensive overview of recent work on grandparenthood, the editor concludes: "Neglecting the multiple linkages among grandparents, grandchildren, and the middle generation (the grandchildren's parents) constitutes a serious limitation of current research and theorizing" (Szinovacs, 1998, p.258). The present paper represents a small effort to rectify these shortcomings. Taking a three-generational perspective on grandparenthood could entail two quite distinct approaches: gathering data from grandparents, parents and grandchildren in a given family, or obtaining data from one generation while considering two other generations. The best known example of research on three generations is Bengtson's complex study which by now has followed about 300 families for more than three decades (e.g., Giarrusso, Silverstein and Bengtson, 1996). A similar, dyadic, approach was used in a University of Chicago study in the 1970s (Hagestad, 1985). While this design yields rich illustrations of inter- and intrafamily variability, it also represents many headaches. Sampling becomes difficult and costly because one refusal often means losing the family. In addition, there are potential "contamination" issues if family members are interviewed at different times. For example, they may discuss questions and responses among themselves and "harmonize" answers. Finally, statistical analyses present problems of dependent samples. The recent research in Norway has focused on one generation at the time, but obtaining information on two other generations, as well as data on the wider intergenerational context of respondents.

The present paper builds on the author's work on intergenerational ties in North America and Northern Europe over three decades, but will draw most of the illustrations from recent and ongoing research on Norwegian families. These studies are briefly described below.

The discussion of modern grandparenthood starts with a brief overview of how demography has reshaped kin networks in which grandparent-grandchild relations are embedded. The next sections provide illustrations of how new intergenerational structures pose both challenges and opportunities for our understanding of transfers between grandparents and grandchildren.

## 2. Recent Norwegian data on grandparenthood

Here, illustrations of grandparent-grandchild relations in an ageing society are mostly taken from two recent studies: NorLAG and NorGRAND. NorLAG, the Norwegian study of life course, aging and generation, is designed as a longitudinal study. Baseline data collection was carried out in 2002-2003. A stratified random sample of the population aged 40-79 was drawn from 30 local communities in four

different regions of the country. Three types of communities were included: city, small town and rural municipalities. The study is based at NOVA<sup>1</sup>, where the author is a member of the research team. Data collection was carried out by Statistics Norway over the period March 2002 through March 2003. Data were obtained through telephone interviews, postal questionnaires, and national registries. Registry information was added after respondents gave informed consent. The response rate for the telephone interviews was 67%, of which 75% subsequently answered the postal questionnaire (combined response rate 50%). The final NorLAG sample contains 5,589 respondents. In 2007, NOVA and Statistics Norway will follow up the NorLAG sample, which at that point will be part of a much larger study under the umbrella of the UN GGP (Generations and Gender Program). NorLAG contains data from grandparents aged 40-79 (N= 2660 for telephone interviews and registry information; 1770 for questionnaires). About 600 respondents had own parents living and children under the age of 13. The study focuses on four key life domains: work and retirement, health and care, coping and well-being, family. Thus, the data on grandparenthood are not very detailed, but contain information on family structure, role perceptions, rates of contact and transfers between grandparents, middle generation parents, and grandchildren. Two perspectives are represented: those of grandparents and parents.

NorGRAND, the Norwegian grandparent study, has as its main focus the role of grandparents in children's networks. The study, for which the author is principal investigator, has two main components: a survey by mailed questionnaire to parents of 10-12 year-old children (N= 959) and personal interviews with 270 children in this age range. The sample was drawn from seven municipalities in one of the four regions covered by NorLAG: Agder in southern Norway. Parents were asked to focus on their 10-12-year-old and to characterize the child's relations with grandparents. Most of these parents were born in the 1960s, i.e. they were aged 35-45 at the time of data collection. The majority of grandparents were between the ages of 65 and 70. On the maternal side, about one in four still worked, – grandmothers as well as grandfathers. On the paternal side, the corresponding figure was one in seven.

Families were recruited through public schools in these communities. Questionnaires were sent home with students, (asking alternately by classroom that the father or mother respond) and returned directly to the research team. Data collection was carried out in 2005, and final response rate was approximately 65 per cent. Students also brought requests and consent letters regarding interviews home. To protect privacy, questionnaires and interviews were not gathered from the same families. The children were interviewed at their schools during normal school hours. Interviews had an average duration of 30 minutes.

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<sup>1</sup> Norwegian Social Research, <http://www.nova.no/subnet/lag/index.htm>

### 3. Structural imperatives: Grandparenthood and demographic shifts

One of my treasured pictures from early years is one of my paternal grandfather, then in his eighties, sitting on his farm, surrounded by more than twenty grandchildren, who ranged in age from toddlers to teenagers. Many of the grandchildren never knew my grandmother, who died in her early seventies, and a number of them never had the opportunity to know grandfather well. He, for his part, had trouble remembering all their names. Keeping track of birthdays, on the average two a month, – was more than he could handle. In sharp contrast to the black and white picture from the late 1950s are today's colored digital photos of young children's birthdays in the same community. A rather common one shows a preschool child at the centre, with four adoring grandparents competing for her attention, and a great-grandmother watching from the sidelines. By the time the grandchild is posing for her wedding picture, she most likely still has at least one grandparent extending best wishes and offering gifts.

These brief glimpses illustrate some dramatic changes in vertical family connections over the last century. A combination of mortality and fertility decline has altered the balance between young and old. "Top-heavy" family lines, with more grandparents than grandchildren, are increasingly common. Furthermore, altered mortality patterns have given links between grandparents and grandchildren an unprecedented duration. As is well-known, these shifts reflect macro-level mortality and fertility decline that produced ageing populations. In many societies, 80 years of life are expected for women, and a number of populations currently have about equal proportions of children and people over 60. By 2050, the old will outnumber children by a ratio of two to one in most of them. On the micro-level of the family, intergenerational structures have become less "bottom-heavy" and more vertically extended. Horizontal ties, *within* generations (to siblings, cousins) are shrinking, while vertical ties along generational lines are more durable and complex than ever before in history.

#### 3.1 Duration of ties

Co-longevity has greatly increased the duration of family ties. The parent-child relationship may last 6-7 decades; the grandparent-grandchild bond 3-4 decades. Data from a current study of ten European societies, SHARE<sup>2</sup>, show that seven of the ten have a majority of respondents aged 50-59 with at least one parent living. The NORLAG study finds that about 86 per cent of Norwegians aged 40-49 have at least one parent living; more than half among those in their fifties. Even in the sixties, substantial numbers have parents: 19 per cent. As will be discussed below, this new

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2 SHARE, The Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe is a multidisciplinary, cross-national data base on health, socio-economic status and social networks of some 22,000 Continental European individuals over the age of 50. <http://www.share-project.org>

stability of parent-child ties, combined with reduced numbers of children, has strong implications for grandparent-grandchild relations.

Ties between grandchildren and grandparents also have an unprecedented duration. A British study reported that 80 per cent of twenty year olds had at least one grandparent living (Grundy, Murphy and Shelton, 1999). Data from the OASIS study<sup>3</sup>, which includes urban samples from England, Germany, Israel, Norway and Spain, show that about one third of individuals in their thirties had grandparents (Hagestad & Herlofson, forthcoming). NorLAG finds that 10 per cent of Norwegians aged 40-44 are still grandchildren. Clearly, such numbers suggest that multi-generational families are quite common, since the transition to grandparenthood typically occurs in the forties and fifties. At that point in the life course, a number of new grandparents still have their own parents living.

### 3.2 Multi-generational links

In the OASIS sample, nearly one in five urban Norwegian grandparents aged 50-59 had own parents living (Hagestad & Herlofson, forthcoming). Among grandparents in NorGRAND, we find the same figure- 20 per cent. SHARE found 25 per cent of respondents aged 50-60 in Austria, Denmark, France and Sweden to be in four-generational structures (Kohli, Künemund & Lüdicke, 2005).

The new demographic picture should compel us to recognize that often, a given intergenerational tie, such as that between grandparent and grandchild, is embedded in a complex web of interconnected, vertical connections. In order to understand the dynamics of a given relationship, the wider generational fabric needs to be taken into account, and inter-family variability in fertility and mortality patterns needs to be taken seriously.

### 3.3 Number of grandparents and number of grandchildren

Individuals who lived to old age have typically had children and grandchildren, but under conditions of high mortality, many children had no surviving grandparents, and a relatively high proportion also lost parents before reaching adulthood (Uhlenberg, 1996). As we saw above, declining adult mortality has produced dramatic historical increases in the supply of grandparents. Based on United States Census figures, Uhlenberg (2005) estimates that the proportion of ten-year-olds with all four grandparents living increased seven-fold over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from 6 to 41 per cent. In NorGRAND, a remarkably similar figure emerged: 40 per cent of children currently aged 10-12 have all four grandparents living.

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3 OASIS (Old Age and Autonomy. The Role of Service Systems and Intergenerational Family Solidarity), a cross-sectional survey carried out in 2000-2001. N= 6,106 community-dwelling urban individuals aged 25 and over. <http://oasis.haifa.ac.il>

As was illustrated in the opening glimpses, recent demographic change has given children more grandparents, while grandparents have fewer grandchildren. According to parents of 10-12 year olds in NorGRAND, the average number of grandchildren among grandparents is 7, with a median of 5.5. Two factors need to be considered here: the south has somewhat higher fertility than some other parts of Norway, especially the Oslo area. Secondly, the grandparents, most of whom are now in their sixties, are parents of baby boomers. The post-war baby boom lasted well into the 1960s in Norway. The baby boomers themselves, who are now beginning to move into grandparenthood, have significantly lower fertility.

Uhlenberg (2005) also points out that it is important to look at the number of *grandchild sets*. Children of one child constitute a set. Uhlenberg estimates the number of grandchild sets for US women aged 60-64 in different birth cohorts and finds that the proportion with four or more sets declined, from 24 to 15 per cent between 1950 and 1970. By 2000, about one half of the women had 1 or 2 sets. In NorGRAND, we found that among the grandparents of children aged 10-12, about 40 per cent had one or two sets, while 25 per cent had four or more. The average was 2.8 sets. It is important to keep in mind that this study is anchored in the grandchild generation, with a sample of 10-12-year olds, while Uhlenberg anchors in the grandparent generation and only discusses women. When Uhlenberg (2005) focuses on children, his figures are quite similar to those in NorGRAND. He estimates that between 1950 and 1980 in the United States, the proportion of family lines with four or more sets of cousins competing for grandparental attention was reduced by one half, from 48 to 24 per cent. He suggests that by 2010, the figure will be down to 10 per cent.

Why are sets important? From a grandparental perspective, the number of sets says something about potential demands for their presence, time and resources. A grandparent with four grandchildren in four sets is likely to spend more time with grandchildren than a grandparent with one set of four, but not four times as much (Uhlenberg and Hamill, 1998). Total time, resources, and attention spent per grandchild are likely to increase as the number of sets decreases. Said differently: grandparents with fewer sets might have more intense relationships with their grandchildren. Even if they invest less total time in the grandparent role than individuals with more sets, they can invest more in the grandchildren they do have.

Sets are also a reminder of the central importance of the middle generation, – the grandchildren's parents. The number of sets says something about the grandparents' parenting experience. The new demography of families has altered the relationship between parenting and grandparenting in some significant ways. Declining adult mortality has increased the likelihood that the middle generation will mediate the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren, a point that has been central in the limited efforts so far to take three-generational views of grandparenting. According to Uhlenberg (2005), about one fourth of U S women who reached the age of 25 in 1900 died before reaching the early 50s. In 2000, the figure was 4 per cent. We also need to consider fertility change. First, there is the timing of parenting and grandparenting in the life course of women. In historical times when they bore children throughout their fertile years, there was more "competition" between the roles

of mother and grandmother than is currently the case. The births of children and grandchildren are now more clearly sequenced. By the time grandchildren arrive, most women are in the empty nest phase; they are typically middle aged, healthy and vigorous. In many societies, among them Norway, people in middle age and the third age also control a wide range of material resources; they are relatively affluent. All these changes mean that grandparents have a new potential for being a presence in the lives of children and grandchildren. It also means that we need to keep in mind the powerful new continuity in parent-child ties, and the possibility that much *grandparenting is done through continued parenting*. We are now at the central issue of why new intergenerational constellations make it necessary to think three or more generations. However, before turning to some substantive issues in the study of grandparent-grandchild relations, we need to consider some methodological issues in this research domain.

### 3.4 Anchors: Whose families?

Confronting the task of describing a range of intergenerational constellations, we encounter the thorny issue of *asymmetry*, which is often overlooked by researchers. In most cases, structures and relationships look different, depending on where in the web we *anchor* our observations: bottom, middle or top. It is absolutely essential that we choose an *anchor*, or what Attias-Donfut (1995) calls a *pivot*, and then ask about available kin above and below the anchor (Hagestad, 2001). Whose families are we discussing? Many families are quite asymmetric: they look different from the top down than they do from the bottom up. One gets different descriptions of generational structures, depending on where they are anchored. Anchoring is critical if we are trying to estimate the prevalence of given generational structures, because the age range of anchor informants will influence estimates. For example, if we are interested in knowing how prevalent four-generation families are, we need to be clear on where we focus our attention. Among young adults? The oldest old? Typically, we would find relatively few among young adults, since they are too old to be great-grandchildren and too young to have produced a new generation. The oldest-old, however, typically have a number of potential "candidates" in younger generations who could have given birth to great-grandchildren. The relative scarcity of four-generational structures in the well-known study by Rossi and Rossi (1990) is most likely due to the fact that the respondents were too young to be great-grandparents and too old to be grandchildren.

The issue of asymmetry is greatly neglected in contemporary demographic work and has received inadequate attention in sample selection for survey research on family relationships. It also haunts gerontological research on kin networks. An example would be data on rates of contact. It is not uncommon to see figures on the proportion of old people who see at least one child or grandchild weekly uncritically reversed. In other words, it is assumed that if 80 per cent of old parents have weekly contact with at least one child, individuals in middle age have the same rate of contact with parents.

Asymmetry is more of a challenge to those of us who study western, industrialized societies with bilineal kin systems, compared to anthropological work on unilineal, – usually patrilineal and patrilocal, systems of descent. The old looking down see straight lines of descent; the young looking up see forked lines. This issue also reminds us that the difference between maternal and paternal lines is defined by middle generations. In addition to descriptions of intergenerational structures, anchoring is also important if we are interested in cross-generational ties from a social-psychological perspective. In psychology, the issue of asymmetry has been discussed as *the class room problem*: pupils see only one teacher; teachers see 20-30 students. Consequently, their perspectives, for example in recall, will be quite different. My grandfather saw more than 20 grandchildren; we grandchildren saw only one of him. When a team of us studied Chicago area families in the 1970s, we used a dyadic design. In a given intergenerational dyad, both partners were interviewed. When interviewers compared reports from grandparents and young adult grandchildren, they found considerable more detail in the latter. Typically, they attributed the difference to memory deficits among the grandparents. It became important to point out the asymmetry problem to them! The Chicago study also suggested that grandchildren see grandparents as more significant than the grandparents see themselves. Again, this may be due to asymmetry in perceptions. In the current work on Norwegian grandparents, we do not have data on grandparents' views of their significance in grandchildren's lives. However, there are significantly more reports of mutual support and learning between grandparents and grandchildren in interviews with children than what emerges in data from parents.

Several authors have discussed how altered fertility patterns have created increasingly symmetrical families, with about equal numbers of children and parents, – grandchildren and grandparents. Harper (2005) reminds us that demographic shifts have increased the number of generations but decreased the absolute number of relatives. She suggests that as a consequence, given intergenerational connections, such as the grandparent-grandchild tie, may become more socially prominent and personally significant for those involved.

Such discussions often start from the premise that parental and grandparental time, attention and material resources are finite entities and suggest that with increasing symmetry of children and adults in family units, ties are intensified, and each child receives more adult resources (e.g. Blake, 1989; Zajonc, 1976) than in traditional, bottom-heavy structures.

Most descriptions of contemporary kin networks have been anchored at the top from the perspective of older people. Research on children tends to take a truncated, nuclear view of only two contiguous generations, and we have quite limited knowledge about the intergenerational worlds of children. This is striking and unfortunate, since the most dramatic increase in the availability of vertical ties has occurred among the young.



#### 4. Beyond two-generations in studies of grandparent-grandchild relations: Past work

In the literature on modern grandparenthood, two reasons have typically been given for taking a three-generation perspective, indicated by the key words *bridges* and *squeezes*. The most common theme is that the middle generation serves as gatekeepers, mediators and facilitators, especially when the grandchildren are young (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986; Hodgson, 1998; King & Elder, 1995; Robertson, 1975; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Thus, the quality of parent-child relationships in the two adult generations is seen as critical for the quality of ties between grandparents and grandchildren. Here, there is fairly unison agreement in the literature on grandparenthood that the most active, complex grandparent-grandchild ties are found in the maternal line, with the maternal grandmother as the star actor. NorGRAND confirms this picture, both in reports from middle generation parents and grandchildren. However, it would be important in future work to explore whether this “matrifocal tilt”, as it has been called, in part involves issues of asymmetry. In NorLAG, grandfathers and grandmothers were asked if there was one grandchild with whom they felt a particularly strong connection. No clear trends emerged. Similarly, when we examined grandparent reports of closeness to their oldest child and compared families where the oldest was a son to those in which it was a daughter, mothers and fathers did not show clear differentiation. In contrast, when views from middle generation sons and daughters who “looked up” and described relationships with mothers and fathers were compared, clear differentiation was evident. Here, the mother-daughter connection emerged as particularly strong. The complex issues of gender and lineage differentiation in three-generational networks are now being explored in the doctoral work of Katharina Herlofson, who builds on data from both NorLAG and NorGRAND.

The phenomena of bridging and gate keeping are often brought up in discussions of divorce. Here, it is argued that because mothers still get custody of children in a majority of cases, the paternal line suffers from “broken bridges”. Furthermore, since the woman serves as “kin keeper” she often facilitates contact between her husband and his parents. Divorce not only signals loss of custody for the father, but loss of kin-keeper. In a study of midlife divorce in the United States, we saw this quite clearly: many of the men had reduced contact and communication with their parents following the break-up (Hagestad, Smyer & Stierman, 1984). Here, modern Scandinavian families pose some interesting potential comparisons, since both culture and social policy encourage strong involvement of men in parenting and family activities. Herlofson will also examine family ties of “modern” fathers in her doctoral thesis.

The second theme which has emphasized three-generation views is a discussion of “generational squeezes”, “women in the middle”, etc. (Soldo, 1996). This literature emphasizes the *cost* of multi-generation structures, especially for women who in kin-keeping and care activities relate both up and down generational lines. While most of such accounts have focused on conflicting demands from parents and chil-

dren, there are also discussions of middle generations being caught between the needs of grandchildren and parents. Recent research has questioned such views. Data suggest that cases of coinciding responsibilities for parents and young children are relatively rare. Second, we have little evidence that intergenerational support is a zero sum phenomenon, i.e. that what is given to one generation is taken from another. A symposium at a recent meeting of the Gerontological Society of America (2004) showed clear convergence in findings from four countries (The Netherlands, Norway, United Kingdom, and United States): when individuals are faced with both younger and older generations, they give to both. In the symposium, Grundy and Henretta (2004) reported that middle generation individuals both in the United Kingdom and the United States give up and down, – to parents and to adult children. They concluded that some families are “high exchangers” across several intergenerational links. In such families, those who provide help “up” also give “down”. Based on data from NorLAG, Hagestad and Oppelaar (2004) reported that grandparents with own parents still alive provide the same amount or more help to children and grandchildren, compared to grandparents without living parents. In NorGRAND, the same pattern emerged when we asked middle generation parents about support from their parents. If there was a difference, *more* support flowed in four-generation structures, although the differences were not significant. After further analyses of their data Grundy and Henretta, (forthcoming) warn that it is important to consider the relative size of generations. Among middle generation members with three or more children, there was a reduced likelihood of providing help to parents.

## 5. Emerging perspectives

A recent theme in literature on grandparenthood is what we might call “skip patterns”: cases in which we miss some important aspects of intergenerational transfers if we only focus on two generations. Let me give a couple of examples. Because of the close and complex ties between parents and adult children, this is often where we find intergenerational dyads with much help exchanged. However, help in one dyad may indirectly aid another dyad higher up or further down in the intergenerational chain. For example, in a Norwegian study of the oldest old (Romøren & Hagestad, 1988), it was not uncommon to find adult daughters who helped their mothers with housecleaning, so that the mother could provide the same service to her own mother, the grandmother.

We also see skip patterns in inheritance, what Kohli (1999) refers to as “cascading”. In countries where direct inheritance is limited to contiguous generations, as is the case in Norway, inheritance from old parents is often swiftly passed on to the next generation, the grandchildren. Inter-vivos transfers and inheritance follow a skip pattern, in which middle-aged children initially receive funds or property, but pass them on to grandchildren. A Norwegian study (Gulbrandsen and Langsether, 1997) found that adults typically inherit when they are in their 50s, a phase of life

when they are the least likely to be in financial need. On the other hand, their children are at that time often still paying for education, have high housing costs and young children to provide for. The study found that among individuals over the age of 55 who received inheritance, more than 40 per cent passed on part or all of it to children or grandchildren.

The most significant instance of skip patterns, in my view, is found in help and support from parents to adult children who themselves have young children and face complex life course demands on their time, energy and financial resources. In some fundamental ways, being a grandparent means continuing to be a parent, what Gutmann (1987) calls being “an emeritus parent”. Thus, *much support from grandparents to grandchildren is indirect*. The grandparents help provide a secure and stable environment for the grandchildren by supporting the middle generation- the parents. Here several factors discussed above converge: increased health, vigour and relative affluence in the third age, fewer grandchildren and grandchild sets. From a sociological point of view, it is also important to consider the issue of normative structuring. While grandparenthood has very loose normative regulation, and is rarely incorporated into a society’s laws, parenting has clear and strong institutionalized normative regulation while children are minors. This lays the foundation for a strong role relationship that continues after the children are adults and have own offspring.

Elder and Conger (2000) have recently described grandparents in well-functioning two-parent families as “socially redundant”. I would disagree and argue that part of what makes them well-functioning is the sense that they have potential back-up from an older generation – the grandparents. In talking with grandparents, as I have done in focus groups, there is much mention of the “being there” function. When asked what is the most important thing that they do for children and grandchildren, the most common response is “letting them feel that I am here, should they need me”. Not infrequently, they also mention that their own parents were not able to provide this type of support when they themselves had young children. In earlier work (Hagestad, 1985), I discussed “The national guard” or “army reserve” functions of grandparents, arguing that both they and their adult children share *implicit understandings* that should the children need help, parents will supply it. Poet Robert Frost captured it well: “Home is where, if you have to go there, they have to take you in”. Such implicit understandings and army reserve functions are difficult to grasp in survey research; what is implicit is by definition not stated, and when life is moving in its normal rhythm, the fund of potential support is difficult to demonstrate. These “protection mechanisms” are particularly hard to detect by studying grandchildren. Most likely, they will not know that grandparents have helped with house payments. They will also not overhear phone conversations in which they are the topic of concern or where grandparents encourage parents by telling them that they are doing a fine job with the grandchildren.

## 6. Grandparents as a reserve army

In my own work, I have tried three avenues for studying the army reserve functions of grandparents:

- asking questions about *role perceptions*
- focusing on families in which there have been *stressful times* and asking if the grandparents mobilized to help
- posing hypothetical situations to assess *potential help*

### 6.1 Role Perceptions: What should grandparents do?

Both in NorLAG and NorGRAND, respondents were given a set of Likert-type items about what grandparents should do. Three of them are focused on here. As Table 1 shows, nearly all, both grandparents and parents of young children, agreed that grandparents should be available to grandchildren during crises, such as illness or divorce. In both generational groups of respondents, women were somewhat more likely to endorse these statements than were men. A strong majority also agreed that grandparents should encourage and support grown children in their role as parents. Again, more women agreed than did men. However, a diversity of responses emerged when the groups were asked if grandparents should contribute to the economic security of adult children and their families. Here, grandfathers were the most likely to agree (47 per cent); middle generation women were the least in agreement (25 per cent). Both among NorLAG grandparents and NorGRAND parents, men agreed significantly more than women.

### 6.2 Role behavior: Parents' reports of actual support

In NorGRAND, nearly 40 per cent of middle generation mothers and fathers reported receiving financial support from their parents during the last twelve months. In other words, *more* of them accepted financial help than the proportion of respondents who saw it as a part of grandparent responsibilities to provide such support. The grandparents, according to the middle generation's reports, acted pretty much in concordance with views expressed by the older generation in the NorLAG study.

With regard to *actual* support in the parent role, a majority of parents in NorGRAND agreed with the statement "supports me in my role as parent" as descriptive of their own parents (Table 2). Women perceived significantly more support than men, and both men and women saw mothers as more supportive than fathers. However, the rate of perceived support was somewhat below ideal role expectations of grandparents (Table 1). While 91 per cent of NorGRAND women agreed that grandparents should support adult children's parenting, 76 per cent of them reported receiving such support from their own parents. In further analysis, we will explore the potential influence of distance, sets and grandparental health.

If we turn to the role expectation that grandparents should be available to grandchildren in times of crises, NorGRAND has two measures that approximate actual support. We asked parents if they (the grandchild's nuclear family) had experienced any of the following problems during the preceding two years: serious illness, financial difficulties, conflict, work-related problems. We were surprised to find that 43 per cent of fathers and 48 per cent of mothers reported at least one of these problems. The most common difficulty was illness, followed by conflict. For those who said they had experienced at least one such problem, we followed up by asking if they received help from the grandparent generation, their parents, during the difficult period. Response categories were "to a great degree", "to a certain degree", "to a small degree" and "not at all". As Table 3 shows, 72 per cent of the women and 60 per cent of the men said that they had been helped by their parents to a great degree or to a certain degree. Women (36 per cent) were significantly more likely than men (19 per cent) to state that parents had helped "to a great degree". On the other hand, 40 per cent of the men said parents had helped to a small degree or not at all, compared with 28 per cent of the women.

Although the numbers are small, responses showed a striking pattern with regard to sets. (Data not shown). In families with only one set of grandchildren (in other words, the respondent's children), 43 per cent of the women, but only 10 per cent of the men said that parents had helped "to a great degree". On the other hand, 52 per cent of the men said parents had helped to a small degree or not at all, compared to 31 per cent among women. Such contrasts were only found in family lines with one set. Thus, it seems as if there are strong efforts to establish "the matrifocal tilt" in early phases of grandparenting, when there is no potential competition among sets.

In families with divorced parents in the middle generation, (N= 162), the parent was asked to what extent the grandparents were support persons for the child who is currently 10-12 years old during the process of separation and divorce. Response categories were the same as above, ranging from "to a great degree" to "not at all". As we saw in the role perceptions, more than 90 per cent of both parents and grandparents agreed that grandparents should be available to grandchildren in such a situation. Here, life falls quite short of ideal expectations. As Table 4 shows, the highest percentage is found among women talking about their own mothers, i.e. maternal grandmothers, where 57 per cent said the parent "helped a lot". In contrast, only 14 per cent of women said the paternal grandfather helped a lot, and 53 per cent said he did not help at all. As we see, the relatively strong position of the maternal grandmother is also reflected in men's descriptions of their ex-mothers-in-law, the children's maternal grandmothers. Structural factors, such as the mother having primary custody, appear to create barriers against enactment of cultural ideals regarding grandparents' support functions.

Using families with heightened need for support as a "window" for studying reserve army functions of grandparents is a useful strategy when sample size is large enough to be able to analyze cases in which stress is present. This is the approach taken in a recent interesting study by Park, Hogan and D'Ottavi (2005) in the United States. They focused on families in which a young child had serious health problems and found significantly higher grandparent involvement in these families. A point

worth noting is that they also report that cultural norms (e.g., contrasts across ethnic groups) did not predict who would help. There might be something *situationally compelling* about children and grandchildren needing help, which we might not capture when life is moving along in a normal rhythm and we ask about ideal expectations. When sample size does not allow a focus on recent or current problems, an alternative is to ask about *potential help* in hypothetical situations.

### 6.3 Potential help in parenting

In NorGRAND, middle generation parents were asked whom they would turn to in two situations: if they needed extra help with childcare and if they were worried about a child's behavior and needed advice. The results are displayed in Table 5. Again, we see the central role of grandmothers, especially on the maternal side. Among all respondents, parents were preferred over all other choices, which included siblings, friends and paid babysitters.

In interviews with children, we asked, "If your parents are away for a week-end, whom do you normally stay with?" The most common response was maternal grandmother, given by nearly 50 per cent. Twenty-nine per cent named paternal grandmother. A friend was the only other alternative listed by a substantial proportion, 25 per cent. When parents were asked about worries regarding a child, we again saw the centrality of mothers, especially for women. These modern parents also seek the advice of professionals (psychologists, teachers), who were more frequently nominated by men (46 per cent) than were mothers (23 per cent). Women still would turn to their mothers (43 per cent) rather than a specialist (29 per cent).

### 6.4 Indirect support from grandparents to grandchildren: Glass half full or half empty?

No doubt, readers have quite differing reactions to the above discussion. Do these grandparents *really* significantly contribute to their grandchildren's well-being? The efforts seem pale compared to grandparents who take full responsibility for grandchildren in families where the parental generation is not available or able, described in studies from poor communities in the United States, AIDS-ridden societies in Africa, or even Mediterranean countries in which grandmothers are the main child care providers for working mothers. Here, we need to consider what Kohli (2005) has called "transfer regimes", – the wider societal context of intra-family exchanges. Norway is a country in which care for the young and the old to a great extent is seen as a public responsibility. The "book-end generations", thus, have a greater degree of basic security than in most societies. It might be fruitful to draw on a lengthy international debate on "substitution" in securing the care and well-being of the old (Daatland & Herlofson, 2003) in discussions of children: does public care substitute for family care? Recently, some authors (e.g., Kohli 1999; Künemund & Rein, 1999) have argued that mature welfare systems do not "crowd out" family contribu-

tions, but “crowd in”. In other words, welfare state expansion increases rather than undermines family support and solidarity. Having a reserve army of grandparents may mean an extra safety net, filling potential gaps between what children need and what their nuclear families and social institutions can provide.

## 7. Summing up

Long lives and a shifting balance between young and old in society at large have created new patterns of relationships across family generations. These changes should propel researchers into new avenues for understanding intergenerational ties. Specifically, taking only two generations into account may often create serious limitations, if not false information. Grandparent-grandchild relations are a good illustration of how we need to widen the depth of field of our research lenses by taking a three-generational view. With parent-child relationships lasting five to six decades, much of modern grandparenting is done through continued parenting of adult children who are also parents. Furthermore, in researching interconnected relational links, we need to be alert to the issues of asymmetry and anchoring. Much work is needed to compare relatively symmetrical intergenerational structures to asymmetrical ones: “old-fashioned” bottom-heavy and “modern”, top-heavy lines. Here, contrasts between views from the top down and from the bottom up become central, for example in exploring connections in maternal and paternal lines. There is also a host of issues to explore in comparative work on different demographic regimes and how they interact with “transfer regimes” shaped by national laws and social policies towards old and young.

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## Appendix/Anhang

Table 1: Perceptions of Grandparent Role.

	Grandparents (NorLAG)		Parents (NorGRAND)	
	men	women	men	women
Per cent who agree that Grandparents should:				
Be available to grandchildren in crises (e.g., illness, divorce)	94	97***	90	97***
Provide encouragement to children in role as parents	89	91***	86	91***
Contribute to economic security of children and their families	47	34***	32	25**

\*\*\*p<.001, \*\* p<.01

Table 2: Reports of support from parents (NorGRAND).

	men	women
Received financial help during the last 12 months	38	40
"mother supports me in my role as parent"	67	76***
"father supports me in my role as parent"	57	66***

\*\*\*p<.001

Table 3: Reports of parental support in difficult period. NorGRAND (per cent).

	To a great degree	Certain degree	Small degree/not at all
men (N=142)	19	41	40
women ** (N=240)	36	36	28

\*\*p<.01

Table 4: Reports on parents' help to grandchild during divorce. NorGRAND (per cent).

	A lot		Certain degree		Not at all	
	men	women	men	women	men	women
Maternal grandmother	21	57	74	88	26	12**
Maternal grandfather	14	40	63	74	37	26*
Paternal grandmother	29	15	76	55	24	45*
Paternal grandfather	29	14	68	47	32	53 NS

\*\*p<.01, \*p<.05

Table 5: Potential help from parents (NorGRAND)

	men	women
Ask for extra help watching children: Mother	46	54**
Extra help: Father	17	18
Ask advice if concerned about child' behavior: Mother	23	43***
Ask advice: Father	8	9
Ask advice: Professional	46	29***

\*\*\*p<.001, \*\*p<.01