Examining the Intergenerational Stake Hypothesis: Relationships and Closeness in Grandparent-Grandchild Dyads

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ABSTRACT

The intergenerational stake hypothesis posits that older people tend to feel more positively about relationships with younger people in their family because they have a greater perceived “stake” in the relationship. The purpose of the current study was to explore this hypothesis in the context of grandparent-grandchild relationships. Participants included grandparents and grandchildren who completed a survey online that asked questions about relational closeness, shared activities, and relationship quality. Proxy reports were also gathered in which participants responded from the perspective of their relational partner. One-way ANOVAs revealed significant differences between relational partners. Participants reported more positively than their grandchildren.

RESULTS

Participants 79 grandparent-grandchild dyads
- Undergraduate psychology students over age 18 with at least one living grandparent
- Older adults over age 55 with access to an email account and at least one young adult grandchild
- Once individually recruited, participants referred their relational partner to the study by sending them a link to an online survey.

Data Analysis Paired-sample t-tests compared grandparent and grandchild average responses on measures of shared activities, beliefs, and relational closeness. Chi-square analyses evaluated endorsement of specific activities and beliefs and also investigated the role of certain variables (i.e., gender concordance) in dyads that demonstrated inconsistency with the hypothesis.

Measures The online survey was first completed as a self-report and then as a proxy-report, where respondents were asked to answer the same questions from the perspective of their relational partner.

One-way ANOVAs: no differences between gender concordance and self-reported RC scores. No differences between grandparents and grandchildren in self-reported measures of contact frequency, total activities, and values. On average, grandparents gave significantly more positive self-reported RC scores than grandchildren. Difference score calculations between grandparent and grandchild average self-reported RC scores:
- 30 dyads inconsistent with hypothesis, meaning that grandchildren gave higher RC ratings than grandparents.
- Consistency with hypothesis not associated with dyad gender concordance. Undergraduate students, t(77) = 7.21, p < .001, d = .61, which appears consistent with the hypothesis. However, grandparents were highly accurate at predicting grandchildren's RC scores, t(77) = 4.71, p < .001, d = .61, which is consistent with the hypothesis.

CONCLUSIONS

These findings support the application of the intergenerational stake hypothesis in comparisons of self-reported relational closeness between grandparents and grandchildren. More objective relationship measures, such as contact frequency and shared activities, do not exhibit a similar trend in support of the hypothesis. Furthermore, proxy-reported relational closeness revealed how grandparents can understand that their grandchildren feel less close than they do. The hypothesis also does not fully account for inconsistencies, such as relationships in which grandchildren report similarly or more positively than their grandparents.

Future work with this hypothesis may take a more nuanced approach to address qualitative differences between relationships. As grandparenting relationships become more prevalent and prolonged in families, there is a growing need to explore these dynamics and ensure optimally healthy relationships.