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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. Pairs of grandparents and grandchildren completed a brief online survey 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.

On average, grandparents reported significantly more favorable self-reports of emotional closeness than their grandchildren, $t(78) = 4.71, p < .001, d = .61$. However, proxy reports revealed that grandparents were actually quite accurate at predicting their grandchildren’s relational closeness responses, $t(77) = .44, p > .05$. Moreover, difference score calculations identified a portion of the dyad sample that appeared to refute the hypothesis in their relational closeness responses.

Results from this study support the intergenerational stake hypothesis in the grandchild/grandparent relationship, at least in terms of perceived emotional closeness. However, the degree to which grandparents perceive their grandchildren’s attitudes may deviate considerably in ways that are not yet fully accounted for by the generational stake hypothesis.

INTRODUCTION

The **intergenerational stake hypothesis** describes how older people in a family tend to overestimate positivity in their relationships with younger relatives because they have a greater perceived “stake” in the relationship (Giarrusso, Stallings, & Bengtson, 1995). The hypothesis was first used to describe parent-child relationships (Bengtson & Kuypers, 1971). The field has subsequently turned to examine the hypothesis in the context of grandparenting. Grandparents and grandchildren can form close bonds that provide great emotional intimacy and influence. Harwood (2001) employed a dyadic survey method in which Likert-type relational closeness measures were self-reported by both relational partners. Support for the hypothesis was found, whereby grandparents reported more positively than their grandchildren.

The current study replicates Harwood (2001) and seeks to explore if the hypothesis holds in other reporting methods. I hypothesized findings consistent with the intergenerational stake hypothesis, whereby grandparents report more positively on self- and proxy- reported relational closeness measures than their grandchildren. I also investigated the relationship between dyad gender concordance and perceived relationship quality.

METHOD

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 endorsements 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.

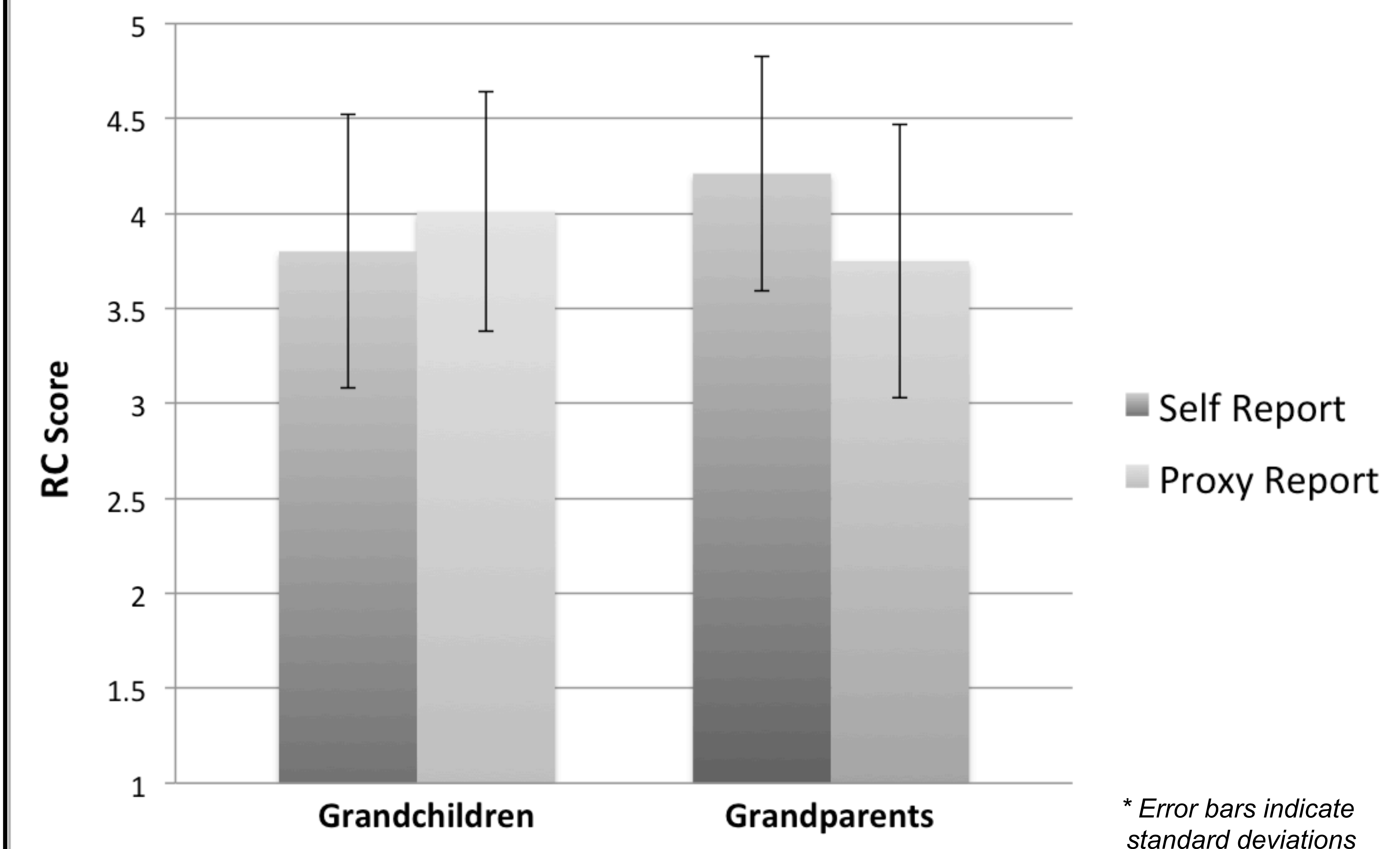
- **Relational Closeness:** 5-point Likert scale, average RC score calculated across items
- **Contact Frequency:** multiple choice item measuring contact over past 6 months, including video chatting and texting
- **Shared Activities:** “check all that apply” from a list of activities which participants might have shared with relational partner (e.g., chatting)
- **Influence on Beliefs and Values:** “check all that apply” from a list of beliefs which participants might have felt had been influenced by their relational partner (e.g., work ethic, morals, religious beliefs)

RESULTS

- 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, total 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, $X(3) = .73, p > .05$, nor with contact frequency as self-reported by grandparents, $X(4) = 7.21, p > .05$, and by grandchildren, $X(4) = 6.34, p > .05$.

RESULTS

Average Relational Closeness (RC) Scores*



KEY FINDING: Grandparent self-reported RC scores were significantly higher than those of grandchildren, $t(78) = 4.71, p < .001, d = .61$, which is **consistent** with the hypothesis. However, grandparents were highly accurate at predicting grandchildren’s RC scores, $t(77) = .55, p > .05$, which appears **inconsistent** 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.