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Examining the Intergenerational Stake Hypothesis: Relationships & 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 were asked to complete a survey that included measures of contact frequency, total activities, 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. Results: The current study replicates Harwood (2001) and seeks to explore the hypothesis in the context of grandparent-grandchild relationships. 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

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)

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.

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.