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Chapter 6

GRANDPARENT-GRANDCHILD RELATIONSHIPS
OVER THE LIFE COURSE:
CONNECTEDNESS AND CARE POTENTIAL

Summary and General Discussion

This dissertation aimed to advance knowledge about grandparent–grandchild relationships in the Netherlands. By relying on the life course perspective as analytical framework, I took a dynamic and multigenerational approach to understand diversity in grandparent–grandchild relationships. Using this framework, I emphasized that grandparents and grandchildren as well as their relationships change over individual time and that their life courses are contingent on the individual’s and historical context (Bengtson & Allen, 1993; Putney & Bengtson, 2003). More specifically, this dissertation departed from three overarching research themes that are central to life course research: individual time, earlier experiences, and historical time (Elder, 1994). As to individual time, I examined changes in contact frequency between grandparents and adult grandchildren and focused on the impact of major life course transitions and other age-related changes of adult grandchildren (Chapter 2). For earlier experiences, I examined the role of past relationship intensity for present grandparent–adult grandchild relationships (Chapter 3) and past child-care provision for present grandparent–adult child relationship respectively (Chapter 4). For the historical context, I examined how changes over the past few decades affected grandparent–grandchild relationships by looking at differences in child-care provision prevalence between 1992 and 2006 (Chapter 5). In the following pages, the findings of my studies are summarized, followed by an overarching discussion about connectedness between the generations and care potential within the relationship during the grandchild’s childhood and adulthood. This chapter ends with suggestions for future research.

Changes over Individual Time

Question 1: How and why does the grandparent–grandchild relationship change in grandchildren’s early adulthood?

In Chapter 2 I addressed this research question. I examined changes in the intergenerational relationship by looking at face to face contact frequency and contact by other means, such as phone, letter, and email—in short remote contact. The focus was on life course changes of adult grandchildren aged between 18 and 35. Their opportunities and preferences were considered to be of greater importance than the grandparents’ needs, opportunities and preferences. I assumed that life course transitions of adult grandchildren (e.g., marriage and parenthood) would negatively affect grandchild’s opportunities and priorities for maintaining the relationship: priorities for relationships shift toward age-peers and opportunities for contact decline as grandchildren take up more adult roles. Next to this dynamic perspective, I took a multigenerational perspective and assessed the relative importance of each generation by looking at the extent to which measured and unmeasured characteristics of each generation affect contact frequency. Moreover, I examined the role of the parents’ home by looking at whether or not grandchildren left the parental home, and included characteristics of parents (gender and divorce) and grandparents (gender) to account for their relevance.

The empirical findings from Chapter 2 indicated that a vast majority of young adult grandchildren have contact with their grandparents. The average frequency is however low. Adult grandchildren see their grandparents for about six times per year and have remote contact for about three times per year. The observed age differences in contact frequency suggested a decline in grandparent–grandchild contact across early adulthood. Multilevel regression analyses showed that grandchildren’s employment status, partner status, and parenthood status did not affect contact frequency with grandparents. Rather, the results pointed to the importance of the parental home: I observed that age-related differences are predominantly accounted for by whether grandchildren left the parental home. Furthermore, my results hinted at the importance of familial characteristics; most of the variance in grandparent–grandchild contact was attributable to differences between family of the mother’s and family of the father’s side. The results showed that contact between grandparents and adult grandchildren is presumably not affected by major life course transitions

of adult grandchildren except for leaving the parental home.

Evaluated on the basis of contact frequency, the lives of grandparents and grandchildren are little connected in terms of contact after grandchildren have left the parental home. During adolescence, the grandchild's needs and preferences concerning this relationship presumably already declined to a low level, leaving the opportunity structure provided by the parental home as the predominant driving force behind the intergenerational contact.

Past Experiences

Question 2: To what extent and why does an intense relationship during childhood increase the likelihood that grandparents identify grandchildren as important and frequent contacts later in life?

I addressed this research question in Chapter 3. The main idea for this study was that relationships between grandparents and grandchildren later in life are shaped by earlier experiences in the relationship. Thus, although the observations in Chapter 2 suggest that grandparent–grandchild relationships evolve into ones with little contact, I expected that this little contact can be counteracted by positive experiences earlier in the life course. A warm bond during the childhood years may promote continuation of the relationship into adulthood. To address the research question, I used data from the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam which allowed for the tracking of grandparent–grandchild relationships from the grandparent's perspective for up to 14 years. I examined the extent to which grandparents identify adult grandchildren as important and frequent contacts, and whether this identification is more likely when there had been more intense relationship during childhood. For the latter, I looked at contact frequency, voluntary contact frequency, overnight visits, and child-care provision during childhood as indicators.

The findings from Chapter 3 showed that one out of four grandparents identified at least one adult grandchild as a frequent and important contact. On average, grandparents had four adult grandchildren of whom about one was a frequent and important contact. The extent to which adult grandchildren belonged to grandparent's network was close to that of siblings. The results furthermore showed that contact frequency, voluntary contact frequency, overnight visits, and child-care provision during childhood all increased

to likelihood of network identification later in life. This suggested that relationships that were intense during childhood are more likely to continue into adulthood than relationships characterized by limited intensity. Contact frequency was of greatest importance, followed by contact frequency beyond family gatherings, overnight visits, and child-care provision respectively. These results supported the idea that an intense relationship during childhood promotes continuation of frequent and important contact when grandchildren mature.

Question 3: To what extent and why does past grandparental child-care provision influence support provision from adult children to parents later in life?

The positive influence of relationship intensity in grandchild's childhood for future grandparent–grandchild relationships may also pertain to the relationships of grandparents with their adult children, i.e. the parents of the grandchildren. Departing from this idea, I examined the extent to which grandparental child-care provision contributes to the grandparent–adult child relationship later in life. Using social exchange theory and the concept of delayed reciprocity, it was expected that past grandparental child-care provision creates a debt by adult children that is paid back later in life. I looked at instrumental support and emotional support given by adult children to grandparents.

The results of the analyses indicated that grandparents who frequently provided child care for sons in the past more often received instrumental and emotional support from these sons approximately 13 years later than grandparents who less frequently provided child care. Investments in daughters did not pay off. Instrumental support other than child-care provision, such as help with daily chores, did not predict receiving support from either sons or daughters, but emotional support did. These results support the notion of long-term reciprocity in parent–child relationships, but its importance depends upon the child's gender and the type of earlier investment. By means of child-care provision for sons, grandparents can store credit in their 'bank of support.' The credit can be tapped later in the life course when support is needed. The observation that other instrumental support did not increase the likelihood of receiving support from adult children suggested that grandparental child-care provision for sons is of particular importance in creating a debt that should be

restored later in the life course. The study suggested that grandparental child-care provision for sons can be conceived of as a relation-specific investment in adult children that leads to greater support from these adult children in later life because it creates a debt that is paid back later in life in order to restore the cost-benefit balance within the relationship. As such, grandparental child-care provision is beneficial for grandparents in later life since it increases the likelihood of receiving support.

Overall, the two studies reported in Chapters 3 and 4 about the importance of the earlier experiences for later outcomes demonstrated that investing in grandchildren pays off in later life. The early grandparent–grandchild relationship shapes the individual context of familial relationships that is of importance for how relationships with children and grandchildren develop over the course of life. An intense relationship during the grandchild’s childhood years can contribute to strong bonds across the generations later in the life course.

Changes over the Past Decades

Question 4: To what extent and why did contact between grandparents and grandchildren change between 1992 and 2006 in the Netherlands?

The third life course theme from which the grandparent–grandchild relationship was examined regarded changes over the past decades in contact between grandparents and young grandchildren. I focused on grandparental child-care provision. Recent social contextual changes were assumed to have altered the intensity of child-care provision (Bengtson, 2001; Fergusson, Maughan, & Golding, 2008; Gray, 2005; Hank & Buber, 2009; Hansen, Joshi, & Verropoulou, 2006; Kemp, 2007; Uhlenberg, 2009). My focus was on the role of increased maternal employment rates but I also looked at changes in other domains, i.e. the domains of grandparents’ and parents’ divorce, travel time between grandparent and parent, number of children, and grandparental employment. Changes within these socio-demographic characteristics were assumed to have their repercussions on the extent to which grandparents take care for grandchildren, since they reflect mother’s increased need for child care as well as changes in the grandparent’s opportunities for child-care provision. I looked at child-care provision for the grandparents’ daughters because

the focus was on increase in maternal employment and information about daughters-in-law was not available.

The results suggested that contemporary grandparents are more likely to provide child care than a few decades ago: the estimated probability for adult daughters receiving child care from grandparents increased from .23 in 1992 to .41 in 2006. This increase was linked to greater needs on the part of adult daughters as indicated by higher employment rates and an increase in single motherhood. In addition, the increase was linked to greater opportunities for grandparents to provide child care: there were fewer restrictions for child-care provision as indicated by a decrease in travel time and less competition between the children for child-care services as indicated by the decrease in the number of children. The probability in child-care provision by grandparents might have been higher if the employment rate of grandparents had not risen between 1992 and 2006.

The study showed that recent social contextual changes altered the grandparent–grandchild relationship when evaluated in terms of child-care provision. Grandparents more often provide child care, even though several developments in Dutch society a-priori predict a decrease in grandparental child care. For instance, parents’ opinion about the use of formal child care have become less negative over the past few decades (NBEP, 2008) and the number of children on the waiting list relative to the number of available slots decreased substantially. Yet, the study showed that grandparents from today are more involved in child care than a few decades ago.

General Discussion

By taking a life course perspective, the present dissertation contributed to research on grandparent–grandchild relationships in two ways. First, the dissertation extended previous studies by looking at grandparent–grandchild relationships from a dynamic perspective. Through this perspective, the present dissertation was one of the first studies to address changes over individual time, to look at the importance of earlier life course experiences, and to examine changes over the past few decades. Departing from the notion that people and sets of relationships change over individual time, I advanced our understanding of how grandparent–grandchild contacts change over the life course

of adult grandchildren. Moreover, I examined the extent to which earlier experiences within relationships contribute to how relationships take shape later in life. Furthermore, because a dynamic perspective calls for acknowledgement of changes in the context in which relationships are embedded, I examined historical changes in grandparent–grandchild contacts. Second, this dissertation took a multigenerational perspective. Unlike almost all previous studies that had relied on grandparent’s reports about their relationship with grandchildren, this dissertation included grandchild’s report about their contact with grandparents in Chapter 2. Moreover, I took into account that the middle generation plays an important role for the intergenerational relationship by accounting for their measured and unmeasured characteristics in each study. Through this dynamic and multigenerational perspective, the dissertation sheds light on the position of the intergenerational relationship in contemporary families. To evaluate this position, I will frame the results of this dissertation into the overarching subjects of connectedness between the generations and care potential within the intergenerational relationship.

Connectedness between Grandparents and Grandchildren

For evaluating the extent to which grandparents and grandchildren are connected, it is first and foremost important to recognize that the generation in between, i.e. grandparents’ adult children, plays a key role in connecting grandparents and grandchildren (Monserud, 2008). Adult children often serve as a “lineage bridge” by either facilitating or hindering contact (Hill, Foote, Aldous, Carlson, & MacDonald, 1970; Oppelaar & Dykstra, 2004). Furthermore, the middle generation often shapes the opportunity structure for intergenerational contact for instance through their choices regarding residential location (Uhlenberg & Hammill, 1998). Over individual time, however, the role of the middle generation as mediators between grandparents and grandchildren often declines in importance (Roberto, Allen, & Blieszner, 2001). When grandchildren become adults, they can maintain contact with their grandparents independently from their parents and may (re-)establish a relationship on the basis of their own and their grandparents’ terms (Kemp, 2005).

To understand connectedness across generations, researchers commonly draw on the intergenerational solidarity developed by Bengtson and Rob-

erts (1991). Although the intergenerational solidarity model was originally developed to understand parent–adult child relationships (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991), it is applied to grandparent–grandchild relationships as well (e.g., Silverstein, Giarrusso, & Bengtson, 1998). In particular research focusing on grandparent–adult grandchild relationships uses the model to understand the intergenerational relationship (e.g., Hoff, 2007). The model is however less suited to understand connectedness during the grandchild’s childhood. Because the focus is on dyadic relationships, it is unclear how intergenerational relationships should be understood when it is mediated by a third party. For instance, when grandparents provide child care, should this be understood in terms of solidarity between grandparent–adult child relationships (Leira, Tobio, & Trifiletti, 2005), grandparent–grandchild relationships (Silverstein et al., 1998), or both? As such, the mediating role of the adult children cannot adequately be accounted for when using this framework. I will take this limitation into account when evaluating connectedness during the grandchild’s childhood by focusing on solidarity within grandparent – grandchild relationships while paying attention to the role of the middle generation if warranted.

The model of intergenerational solidarity distinguishes between structural, consensual, functional, associational, affectual, and normative solidarity. Associational solidarity concerns the frequency of contact and shared activities between the generations. Affectual solidarity involves the amount of emotional closeness as perceived by both generations. Functional solidarity refers to the amount of help and assistance within the intergenerational relationship. Structural solidarity refers to factors that facilitate or hinder the opportunity for contact between generations. Consensual solidarity indicates the amount of agreement in beliefs and values. Normative solidarity refers to obligations felt regarding the other party in the relationship and expectations regarding the content of the relationship. Four out of these six dimensions of intergenerational solidarity were included in this dissertation, that is, associational solidarity (Chapter 2 about contact frequency between grandparents and adult grandchildren), affectual solidarity (evaluated in tandem with associational solidarity in Chapter 3 by looking at network membership), functional solidarity (support exchange between grandparents and adult children in relation to past childcare provision in Chapter 4), and structural solidarity (in Chapter 5 in which I examined the impact of social contextual changes on child

care provision). As such, the results from this dissertation can only partially shed light on connectedness within grandparent–grandchild relationships: it does not include consensual solidarity and normative solidarity. This limitation should be kept in mind when connectedness during the grandchild’s childhood and the grandchild’s adulthood is being evaluated in the following sections.

Connectedness during childhood

Evaluated by overnight visits of grandchildren and child-care provision of grandparents, the results from this dissertation indicated that the lives of grandparents and grandchildren are strongly connected during the grandchild’s childhood. Reflecting high levels of functional solidarity within grandparent–adult child relationships, I observed in Chapter 5 that 34% of daughters and 33% of sons reported that their parents sometimes or often provided grandparental child care. In addition, the results from Chapter 3 indicated that many grandchildren stay overnight with their grandparents. This observation suggests that the lives of grandparents and grandchildren are not connected merely as a consequence of grandparent’s support to parents. Although it could be argued that these overnight visits predominantly stem from the grandparents supporting their adult children, it seems at least equally reasonable to assume that grandchildren stay overnight because grandparents and grandchildren both enjoy deriving meaning, enjoyment and companionship from their relationship (Thomlin, 1998). Both parties may find it important to give shape to their relationship without interference of parents. In this dissertation, I however did not examine the reasons for why grandchildren stay overnight and therefore I cannot be conclusive about the extent to which their lives are connected beyond grandparents’ contribution to child care alone. Both child care and overnight visits at least indicate a strong connection between grandparents and grandchildren during the grandchild’s childhood in terms of associational solidarity, which is presumably not merely dictated by parents’ need for child-care support (that is functional solidarity within parent–adult child relationships).

Over the past few decades, grandparents and grandchildren became even more connected through grandparental child-care provision. In Chapter 5,

I observed that daughters were more likely to receive child care from their parents in 2006 than in 1992. To be more involved, today's grandparents in the Netherlands may move closer to their grandchildren (Mulder & Van der Meer, 2009) or even form a multigenerational household (Smits, van Gaalen, & Mulder, 2010). Likewise, some contemporary grandmothers may partially early withdraw from the labor market to be able to support their children by means of child-care provision. Changes in structural solidarity contributed to this stronger connection. In particular the transition from the traditional male breadwinner families towards dual income families plays a significant role (Chapter 5). The restructuring of gender roles and responsibilities created the need and opportunity for grandparents to become more involved in one of the most prominent functions of the family as an institute: socialization and nurturance of a child (Silverstein, Bengtson, & Lawton, 1997). Next to the shifts in gender roles and responsibilities, the increase in grandparental child-care provision can be understood by the increased complexity within families in terms of single-parenthood. While most earlier research indicated that divorce negatively affects the intergenerational relationships (e.g. Drew & Smith, 1999), the findings about child-care provision in Chapter 5 are in line with the few earlier studies on this topic indicating that divorce can have a positive influence on grandparent–grandchild relationships, in particular those from mother's side (e.g. Giarrusso & Silverstein, 1996). By responding to their daughter's need for child care due to divorce, grandparents act as a family 'watchdog' (Hagestad, 1985; Troll, 1983) demonstrating one of the virtues of intergenerational relationship, i.e. the potential of support that is present in the relationship. The trend of decreased fertility was in addition observed to play a significant role: grandparents became more involved over the past few decades due to less competition among children for grandparental child-care provision (Chapter 5). The observations support the proposition of Bengtson (2001) that grandparent–grandchild relationships are more important in contemporary families than in the more traditional families from a few decades ago. This dissertation therefore indicates that grandparents and grandchildren are strongly connected through grandparents' child-care provision, even more than a few decades ago. Their connectedness is presumably not only dictated by the parent's need for child care but also by the grandparent's and the grandchild's wish to spend time with each other in isolation of parents.

Connectedness in adulthood

When grandchildren become adults, grandchildren obtain the opportunity to develop a personal relationship with their grandparents as they grow more independent from their parents. Despite this opportunity, the results from Chapter 2 indicated that grandchildren do not (re-)establish a relationship with grandparents on their own terms. That is, grandparents and grandchildren are at best limitedly connected in terms of associational solidarity: contact frequency between adult grandchildren and grandparents declines to a low level when grandchildren move into adulthood. Both parties presumably only see each other in the context of family gatherings such as a Christmas dinner or a birthday party. The idea that grandparents and grandchildren are only weakly connected in adulthood is further strengthened by the observation in Chapter 2 that major life course transitions of adult grandchildren did not affect contact frequency except for leaving the parental home. This suggests that during the grandchild's adolescence, the relationship evolves into one in which the opportunity structure provided by the parental home is the driving force behind the intergenerational contact. The opportunities provided by parents to meet with grandparents at the parental home are reduced once grandchildren live independently.

The weak associational solidarity between grandparents and grandchildren in grandchild's adulthood can be linked to a new life phase of young adults that recently came to being due to historical changes. Over the past two centuries, young people changed considerably in how they shape their lives (Liefbroer & Dykstra, 2000). Between the nineteenth and mid-twentieth century, the life course became more orderly and predictable due to a reduced need for individuals to participate in the family's economy (Shanahan, 2000). This development eased individuals away from the obligations and needs of family of origin. In addition, life courses became more orderly and predictable because of the development of a welfare state came along with increased institutionalization (Kohli & Meyer, 1986). In the 1950's, 1960's and 1970's, younger people in general completed education, entered the labor force, left the parental home, got married, and became a parent—often in this specific order (Hareven, 1994). Since the 1980's, however, a de-standardization process gradually de-patterned the life course caused by socio-economic, cultural, and technological developments such as the introduction of contracep-

tive pills and increased education and employment among women (Inglehart, 1990). The life courses of young adults changed to such an extent that some scholars argue that a distinct life phase has emerged: one that can be characterized by high levels of exploration, instability, and predominantly weak normative expectations (Arnett, 2000; Vollebergh, 2008). New concepts were coined to capture and describe the new life phase that has emerged according to many scholars (Bucx, 2009). These concepts include “post-adolescence” (Buchmann, 1989), “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000), “early adulthood” (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005), “the boomerang age” (Mitchell, 2006), and “young adulthood” (Fussell, Gauthier, & Evans, 2007). It seems reasonable to assume that this new life phase plays an important role in grandchild’s opportunities and preferences for contact with grandparents. Although not examined in this dissertation, the opportunities and preferences for contact presumably declines during adolescence. The high levels of exploration, instability, and weak normative expectations in “young adulthood” may be the leading forces behind the observed low frequency of contact between adult grandchildren and grandparents after grandchildren have left the parental home.

Although adult grandchildren reported to have little contact with grandparents in Chapter 2, I observed in Chapter 3 that one out of four grandparents identified at least one adult grandchild as a frequent and important contact. At first sight, this observation yields the conclusion that connectedness between grandparents and grandchildren is strong for a significant number of intergenerational relationships in grandchild’s adulthood even though contact is on average low. Before discussing these findings from a theoretical perspective, it is important to underscore that both studies differed in their methodology for assessing contact in the relationship. Whereas adult grandchildren were asked to report about their contact frequency with all of their living grandparents in Chapter 2, grandparents in Chapter 3 were asked whether they have frequent and important contact with their adult grandchildren. The identification procedure in Chapter 3 not only includes an affective component to the assessment of contact, but also allowed adult grandchildren to qualify as important and frequent contacts rather easily (Broese van Groenou & Van Tilburg, 2007). The identification presumably includes those contacts that occurred only in the context of family events. As such, the observation

that many grandparents say to have frequent and important contact with adult grandchildren does not necessarily imply that these grandparent-adult grandchildren are strongly connected. Besides, the results from Chapter 3 also indicate that the majority of adult grandchildren was not a frequent and important contact for grandparents. The results in Chapter 3 are therefore in line with the conclusion of limited connectedness that I drew from the observations in Chapter 2 that most adult grandchildren contact their grandparents only in the context family gatherings, such as at a birthday party and at a Christmas dinner.

Even though the differences in observations in Chapters 2 and 3 are likely to stem from the different methodologies that were used, it is important to note that a theoretical explanation for the observed differences can be given as well. From a theoretical perspective, the observations in Chapters 2 and 3 could be understood by contrasting interests in the relationship that gradually come into being when grandchildren move from childhood into adulthood. While grandparents, parents and grandchildren have mutual interest in the relationship when grandchildren are young, in particular due to the grandchild's care needs, the interest in the intergenerational relationship predominantly continues on the part of grandparents when grandchildren become adults. Grandparent's interest continues because older people in general place emphasis on continuation of roles and relationships (Atchley, 1989), in particular those that are emotionally close (Carstensen, 1992). Grandparents may therefore have an interest maintaining contact with grandchildren as it can be seen as a prolongation of their parental role. Grandchildren's interest declines because they increasingly emphasize autonomy (Aquilino, 1999). Over the life course of grandchildren, age-peer relationships are increasingly preferred over relationships of the family of origin when grandchildren start to build up a living of their own; they increasingly prefer to draw instrumental and emotional support from their age-peer relationships. This idea of diverging interests is often captured in the concept called the generational stake, i.e. "the tendency for the young to emphasize autonomy and the old to emphasize continuity in relationships" (Chibucos, Leite, & Weis, 2005, p. 31). The diverging interests may explain the differences in my observations if the different methodological approaches are not the leading force behind the observed differences.

Taken together, the results presented in this dissertation signal that grand-

parents and grandchildren are strongly connected in childhood and little connected when grandchildren have become adults. When grandchildren are in childhood, the grandparent–grandchild relationship is even more important than a few decades ago. Even though families have grown more varied and complex over the past century (Van der Pas, Van Tilburg & Knipscheer, 2007), and some scholars even speak about family relationships as if they are eroding (Aboderin, 2004; Mancini & Blieszner, 1989; Popenoe, 1993), grandparents were observed to play a more important role than a few decades ago at the core of the nuclear family: the socialization and nurturance of a child. Little contact however remains when grandchildren become adults, suggesting a weak connection in adulthood.

Care Potential in an Aging Society

It is expected that many Western societies including the Netherlands will face major challenges in the care provision for its older people (Van Tilburg & van der Pas, 2008). Due to the aging of the population, the need for care is expected to increase while the availability of care providers is expected to decrease. The availability of care providers is expected to decrease not only because of fewer numbers of people in younger generations, but also because of increased labor participation of young and middle-aged women and decreased geographical proximity (De Boer, 2005). The possible assistance of adult grandchildren for their aging grandparents is therefore an important topic today, yet received little scholarly attention (Monserud, 2011).

At the same time, the aging of the population is expected to increase care potential for the younger generations. More than before, grandparents are available for child-care provision due to increased healthy life expectancy and decreased fertility (Harper, 2005). Although the issue of child care is a much debated topic in many Western societies (Saraceno, 2011), the extent to which the aging of the population may increase opportunities for grandparental child-care provision received little attention in scholarly research and political debate.

Most research on the consequences of the graying of the population rarely examined grandparent–grandchild relationships in the light of downward care potential within this intergenerational relationship (Attias-Donfut, Ogg,

& Wolff, 2005, Hank & Buber, 2009). As to political attention, policy officials predominantly focused on the increasing need for care for older people and opportunities to meet this need, and often neglected the productivity of older adults in terms of child-care provision. It should be noted, however, that the committee *Employment and Social Affairs* of the European Parliament recently called out the year of 2012 as the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations. This decision means that in 2012, European countries will make an effort “to facilitate the creation of an active ageing culture in Europe based on a society for all ages.” The aim includes the creation of opportunities for older men and women to contribute to the labor market and to participate within family life. The current dissertation not only sheds light on the extent to which Dutch grandparents are active in family life in terms of childcare provision but also the extent to which grandparents can rely on adult grandchildren for support.

The results from Chapter 5 show that many Dutch grandparents play a significant role in the care for grandchildren during the childhood years. When evaluated by grandparental childcare provision in other countries in Europe, childcare activities from Dutch grandparents are presumably best understood as care that is complementary to public services. Data from the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE; Attias-Donfut & Ogg, 2006) show that in most countries about 40% of the grandparents look after their grandchildren on a regular basis whereas in the Netherlands this figure is about 58% (only preceded by Norway: 60%). When looking at daily care, however, there are only few Dutch grandparents who provide for this (about 4%) while in countries such as Spain, Italy and Greece, this is much more frequent (between about 40% and 50%). These differences are presumably related to the availability of public policy arrangements such as childcare services and parental leave (Dykstra, 2011) and the extent to which mothers are employed full-time or part-time (Herlofson, Hagestad, Slagsvold, & Sørensen, 2011). When public child-care services are extensive and maternal employment rates are high, such as in the Netherlands, grandparents are occasionally called upon for child-care assistance but are not needed for daily child-care provision. The findings in Chapter 5 suggest that grandparental childcare provision in the Netherlands should be understood as support that is complementary to public services.

The results from Chapter 5 not only indicate that grandparent–grandchild relationships hold much potential for support when grandchildren are young, but also that grandparental child-care provision is nowadays more prevalent than in the early 1990’s. The recent emergence of a new life phase, in which older adults are in good health and freed from taking care of their own children and work responsibilities (Laslett, 1991), allowed for increased productivity in terms of social participation (Broese van Groenou & Deeg, 2010) and child-care provision (Chapter 5). Through their child-care activities, grandparents contribute to their family, the society (by increasing employment opportunities for women), and the welfare state (by producing support functions that is absent or would otherwise be produced by the welfare state). This productivity should be accounted for when evaluating the consequences of gray-ing of the population even though it is not instantly visible in monetary terms. In addition, it should be recognized that grandparents’ child-care activities increases support receipts from adult children later in life (Chapter 4) and may contribute to the grandparent’s well-being when grandchildren have become adults (Chapter 3). The activities of today’s grandparents are important for the reconciliation of work and family of younger generations (Chapter 5) and for generating support from children later in life (Chapter 4).

Next to the prevalence and intensity of downward care within Dutch grandparent–grandchild relationship, this dissertation sheds light on the extent to which care is transferred upward within the relationship. This dissertation suggests that in grandchild’s adulthood upward care is at best of limited potential. Although earlier research indicated that grandparents and grandchildren evaluate their relationship as potentially important (Kemp, 2005), the results from Chapter 3 suggest that adult grandchildren in the Netherlands do not start to help their grandparents when care-needs arises for instance due to widowhood and ill-health. Furthermore, the frequency of face-to-face contact as well contact by other means was low and did not change when adult grandchildren experience major life course transitions, such as marriage and the birth of a child (Chapter 2). The finding that contact frequency is of limited magnitude and invariant to almost all major life course transitions of grandchildren and grandparents (Chapters 2 and 3) implies that, across grandchild’s early adulthood, the relationship does not emerge as a resource for support for grandparents when the need arises. This is not to say that grandparent–adult

grandchild relationships are not important per se, but rather that the importance of the relationship goes beyond care functions and may predominantly reside in the meaning both parties attach to their relationship. It can provide a sense of continuity, it can be a source of pride, and it can serve as an extension of the self for instance by vicarious accomplishments through the grandchildren.

Suggestions for Future Research

This dissertation yielded results that call for further examination. First, results from Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 suggest that grandparent – adult grandchild relationships are characterized by a by a matrifocal tilt that was observed only when looking at relationships upwards (adult granddaughter – mother – grandmother) rather than downwards (grandmother – daughters – adult granddaughters). Taking the grandchild’s perspective, I observed in Chapter 2 that granddaughters had more frequent contact with grandparents from mother’s side than from father’s side and also more with grandmothers than with grandfathers. From the grandparent’s perspective, I observed in Chapter 3 that the gender of the grandparents and of their children did not matter for contact with adult grandchildren; only adult granddaughters were more often in the grandparents’ network than grandsons. There are two theoretical models that are commonly used to explain gender differences in maintenance of family relationships: kin-selection and kin-keeping theory (Dubas, 2001). According to the kin-keeping theory, daughters are socialized to have the primary responsibility for holding the family together making them more involved in family relationships. This theory takes no assumptions about the direction of the gender tilt. Kin-selection theory however aims to understand these gender differences from a downward view: one’s gene succession is most certain within the female family line. The observed single direction in gender tilt (from the younger generations to the older generations) suggests that the grandparent – adult grandchild relationship might be better understood by kin-keeping than by kin-selection theory. Future research could focus on lineage patterns in grandparent – adult grandchild relationships and examine the role of connectedness in grandparent – child relationships versus adult grandchild – parent relationship for the intergenerational contact.

Second, the unmeasured characteristics of families in Chapter 2 and Chap-

ter 3 (accounted for by the multi-level regression analysis) suggest that the family of origin could be an influential factor in contact between grandparents and adult grandchildren. In Chapters 2 and 3, we observed that most of the variance in contact between grandparent – adult grandchild relationship can be explained by differences between families of origin. This view is further supported by research demonstrating that conflict between grandparents and parents have negative consequences for the quality of grandparent–adult grandchild relationships (Monserud, 2008). Future research therefore might want to take a broader view and examine the extent to which family characteristics, such as structural factors and conflict, contribute or hinder contact between grandparents and adult grandchildren. This might yield more insight into why nearly one out of thirteen adult grandchildren has no contact at all with their grandparents (Chapter 2) while others remain having contact in a familial context.

In this line of reasoning, it would in addition be interesting to examine the extent to which conflict plays a role in grandparent–grandchild contact. Like in parent–child relationships (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010), conflicts are likely to occur in grandparent–grandchild relationships thereby shaping the relationship in the present and future. For instance, when grandparents provide child care, they may put into effect their own ideas about childrearing that deviate from their children’s ideas. A deviating childrearing style has positive and negative sides for grandchildren which are likely to influence the relationship between the parties. To understand diversity in grandparent–grandchild contact, it would be worthwhile to examine solidarity and conflict within grandparent–grandchild relationships and within grandparent–parent relationships in tandem. When doing so, it is important to recognize that solidarity and conflict are not necessarily to be regarded as two sides of the same coin: strong solidarity does not necessarily imply absence of conflict and vice versa (Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006). It would in addition be interesting to study whether earlier conflict affects the relationship later in life as this dissertation indicates that earlier experiences are important for later relationships (Chapters 3 and 4).

Third, I concluded that my results hinted at differences in how grandparents and adult grandchildren perceive the relationship. That is, the divergent interest in the intergenerational relationship might become more pronounced

when grandchildren move from childhood into adulthood. This divergence would be an interesting topic for further investigation. First documented by Bengtson and Kuypers (1971), the developmental stake was coined four decades ago as a concept to post-hoc explain the observation that parent and children differ in the perception of their relationship. Over time, this concept changed from “developmental stake” to “generational stake” (Giarrusso, Feng, & Bengtson, 2004) which both in general referring to the empirical finding that the parental generation reports feeling closer to or having more heavily invested in its children than the children report about their relationship to their parents (Marshall & Mueller, 2003). This was also observed for grandparent–grandchild relationships in earlier research (Crosnoe & Elder, 2002; Harwood, 2001). Recent research supports the generational stake hypothesis for understanding differences in parents and children’s report on contact frequency (Mandemakers & Dykstra, 2008), but results did not support the hypothesis for discrepancies in reports on support exchanges. Apparently, support exchanges are not a matter of parents being more positive than children but rather that parents and children often overrate what they give and under-rate what they receive. As this dissertation did not examine the grandparent–grandchild relationship when grandchildren were adolescents, future research could look at the relationship to identify when and why the generational stake becomes a prominent factor for grandparent–grandchild contacts.

Fourth, I concluded that adult grandchildren at best play a limited role in supporting grandparents who are in need for support. That is, in Chapter 3 I observed that the relationship with most adult grandchildren is not intensified when the need for support arises due to ill health. These observations indicate that the majority of adult grandchildren are not included in the grandparent’s latent kin matrix, i.e. “the web of continually shifting linkages that provide the potential for activating and intensifying close kin relationships” (Riley, 1983, p. 441) in which “family members may remain dormant for long periods of time and only emerge as a resource when the need arises” (Silverstein, Bengtson, & Lawton, 1997, p. 431). An exception should however be made for on average one out of five adult grandchildren with whom grandparents had frequent and important contact. These adult grandchildren might be mobilized as care providers. This dissertation however did not look at grandparent’s support receipts from these adult grandchildren in the context of a care ar-

rangement. Since previous qualitative research suggests that some grandchildren might be important for care-support (Dellmann-Jenkins, Blankemeyer, & Pinkard, 2000; Fruhauf, Jarrott, & Allen, 2006; Langer, 1990; Piercy, 1998), future research could examine support from adult grandchildren to grandparents in response to a grandparents care need for those adult grandchildren with whom grandparents maintained important and frequent contact.

Fifth, in Chapter 4 I observed that grandparental child-care provision in the past increases instrumental and emotional support receipts from adult children later in life. The assessed type of instrumental support concerned predominantly occasional help rather than support within the context of a long-term care relationship. I focused on occasional help because the more voluntary character of this type of support is presumably better understood by repayment than looking at caring for parents since care follows parent's needs whereas occasional help is generally given sporadically when a child has the opportunity (Brandt, Haberkern, & Szydlik, 2009). Future research could address the extent to which grandparental child-care provision plays a role in support within the context of long-term care relationships. This would increase our knowledge about how far earlier child-care provision in terms an investment reaches.

Finally, I observed in Chapter 5 that contemporary grandparents more often provide often child care than a few decades ago. Although I explain these changes by increased need for child care and better opportunities for child-care provision, it would be interesting to examine whether and how the parent's choices regarding formal and informal child-care provision has changed over time. In addition, this study may include changes in the grandparent's willingness to provide for it.

Overall Summary

This study examined grandparent–grandchild relationships from a life course perspective. The findings show that, although many grandparents provide child-care provision (Chapter 5), the relationship evolves into one with little content when grandchildren have matured as indicated by the low frequency of contact between the two parties (Chapter 2). This limited contact can be counteracted when grandparents have an intensive relationship during the

childhood years (Chapter 3). Frequent visits of grandparents to their grandchildren contribute in particular to the continuation of the relationship into adulthood. Furthermore, an intense relationship during childhood is not only beneficial for the grandparent–grandchild relationship later in life (Chapter 3) but also for the grandparent’s own wellbeing (Chapter 4). Grandparents received more instrumental and emotional support from adult children when they had assisted these children by means of child-care provision in the past. Finally, the dissertation advanced our knowledge by the finding that over the past few decade grandparents have gained a more prominent role in the nuclear family, i.e. the socialization and nurturance of a child, mainly due to increase labor participation of young mothers.

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