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Chapter 1

GRANDPARENT-GRANDCHILD RELATIONSHIPS  
IN THE NETHERLANDS: A DYNAMIC AND  
MULTIGENERATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

## *Introduction*

Increased longevity and decreased family size are reasons to believe that grandparents figure more prominently in family life than ever before (Uhlenberg, 2009). Grandparents are often still alive when grandchildren arrive, and share a longer period of time with fewer grandchildren (Bengtson, 2001). Not only the greater and longer availability of grandparents are reasons to study grandparenthood, but also the possible importance of grandparents as providers of help to their grandchildren and vice versa, as well as the beneficial effects the relationship can have on grandparents, parents, and grandchildren (Fruhauf, Jarrott, & Allen, 2006; Hayslip, Henderson, & Shore, 2003; Kemp, 2005).

Most research examined grandparent–grandchild relationships from a static perspective and from the grandparents’ point of view. Furthermore, most research almost exclusively pertains to the United States (e.g. Mills, 2001; Silverstein, Giarrusso, & Bengtson, 2003). There are only a limited number of studies available in Europe (e.g. Attias-Donfut, Ogg, & Wolff, 2005; Danielsbacka, Tanskanen, Jokela, & Rotkirch, 2011; Gray, 2005; Hank & Buber, 2009; Hoff, 2007; Nesteruk & Marks, 2009; Pashos, 2000; Pollet, Nelissen, & Nettle, 2009; Tan, Buchanan, Flouri, Attar-Schwartz & Griggs, 2010; VanRanst, Verschueren, & Marcoen, 1995) and Dutch publications are almost absent. There is only one Dutch study that explicitly aimed to advance our understanding of the grandparent – grandchild relationship (Oppelaar & Dykstra, 2004). This study suggests that the opportunity structure is more important for contact between the parties than personal motives. Other Dutch publications present descriptive information only (Diesfeldt, 1999; Fokkema, 2004;

Prins, 1994; Post, Van Imhoff, Dykstra, & Van Poppel, 1997), study grandparenthood from an evolutionary perspective (Kaptijn, Thomese, Van Tilburg, & Liefbroer, 2010; Kaptijn, Thomese, Van Tilburg, Liefbroer, & Deeg, 2010; Pollet, Nettle, & Nelissen, 2006), or do not explicitly focus on the grandparent–grandchild relationship but rather on the psychology of grandparenthood (Vermulst, De Brocke, & Van Zutphen, 1991), informal childcare provision (Portegijs, Cloin, Ooms, & Eggink, 2006; Remery, Doorne-Huiskes, Dykstra, & Schippers, 2000) or study grandparents in the context of kin-networks (Van Poppel, Monden, & Mandemakers, 2008).

Using nationally representative survey data from the Netherlands, this dissertation extends earlier research by taking a dynamic and multigenerational perspective. I examine change over individual time in the grandparent–grandchild relationship, explore the role of earlier experiences in the grandparent–grandchild relationship for later outcomes, and analyze the influence of major developments in contemporary society on the intergenerational relationship. At the same time I take into account characteristics of the multiple generations involved. The focus is on contact frequency, network membership, support exchange, and child-care provision. I consider grandparents and grandchildren as age cohorts with distinct life experiences shaped by earlier experiences as they move through individual and historical time. Because the life course perspective emphasizes a dynamic and multigenerational approach in understanding diversity in grandparent–grandchild relationships, I rely on this perspective as analytical framework.

### ***The Life Course Perspective***

By the term “life course” sociologists denote individuals’ experiences of transitions into and out of social roles over individual time (Hogan, 2000). These roles refer to the social expectations that come along with the positions that individuals occupy within institutions such as school, work, and family (Liefbroer & Billari, 2010, Macmillan & Copher, 2005).

When multiple roles are occupied at a given point in time, the role configuration may give a special meaning to each component role (Macmillan & Copher, 2005). For example, parenthood adds special meaning to a partner relationship in the form of shared interests and responsibilities for a child,

and the meaning of parenthood is affected by the status of the parent's relationship (e.g. divorce and remarriage). The transition into and out of social roles generally takes places in a short time span and marks a period between prior and present role(s). Transitions for example include marriage, divorce, and retirement. People can exert influence on transitions into and out of social roles. Some transitions, however, are beyond a person's agency. Becoming a grandparent is often regarded as an example of such a transition: it is not brought about by the individual but by their children becoming parents (Hagestad, 1985).

Transitions into and out of social roles are embedded in an individual and a historical context (e.g. Bengtson, Elder & Putney, 2005; Elder, 1994; Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2004). The individual context includes the influence of the life path of other people and earlier experiences in the life course (Putney & Bengtson, 2003). The historical context refers to the constraints and options in distinct historical worlds. It takes the form of age-cohort differences in life course patterns: successive age-cohorts are exposed to different historical worlds due to the process of social change affecting how people's life courses are shaped (Elder, Jr. et al., 2004). This dissertation departs from the following central themes of life course research: changes over individual time, the role of earlier experiences for later relationship outcomes, and changes in the historical context. The life path of each generation is taken into account by including their characteristics.

As to the first research theme, about changes over individual time in personal relationships, the life course perspective emphasizes that the set of relationships alters when people age and transitions occur. Needs, opportunities, and preferences for various types of social relationships are likely to shift over the life course. This can be illustrated by looking at relationship dynamics in old age. People in old age often lose friends in their personal network while they gain in the number of close relatives (Shaw, Krause, Liang, & Bennett, 2007). Preferences concerning personal relationships are likely to shift from instrumental relationships toward emotionally close relationships (Carstensen, 1992). Serious health problems decrease opportunities for contact, which may lead to the loss of personal relationships (Aartsen, Van Tilburg, Smits, & Knipscheer, 2004), although health problems may also mobilize contacts in response to an increased need for support (Van Tilburg & Broese

van Groenou, 2002). In particular friends are often lost due to decreased opportunities while close relatives are mobilized as they respond to the increased need for physical support (Aartsen et al., 2004). This illustrates that changing needs, opportunities, and preferences over individual time alter the set of personal relationships that a person maintains. Changes over individual time play an important role for people's social relationships as age per-se and age-related experiences affect the set of personal relationships.

The second theme from which grandparent–grandchild relationships will be examined concerns past experiences. Past experiences within intergenerational relationships play an important role for current relationships as they constitute a context for development later in life. They shape the options and conditions for life course pathways that individuals follow. Children who shared more time with their parents, for instance, are more likely to provide support to their parents later in life (Silverstein, Conroy, Wang, Giarrusso, & Bengtson, 2002), and a history of affection between older adults and children increases support provision from children to parents later in life (Parrott & Bengtson, 1999). Likewise, grandchildren who coresided with their grandparents during childhood are more satisfied with the relationship later in life (Taylor, Robila, & Lee, 2005). Because past experiences in the grandparent–grandchild relationship are of importance for understanding later intergenerational relationships (i.e. grandparent–grandchild and grandparent–adult child relationships), this dissertation examines the consequences of past experiences in the grandparent–grandchild relationship for later intergenerational relationships.

The third life course theme pertains to the historical context. The historical context can be important for the set of relationships that people maintain as it can be linked to a person's development over the life course (Elder, 1975; Mills, 1959). This is manifest in the past two centuries in which in particular the life course of adolescents and older adults has changed (Liefbroer & Dykstra, 2000). For the youngest generation, 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 absence of strict normative expectations (Arnett, 2000; Vollebergh, 2008). For the oldest generation, a new life phase has emerged not only because people generally live longer and remain healthier for a longer period

of time, but also because a decrease in family size, the introduction of the Old Age Pensions Act (AOW) in 1957, and the introduction of pensions funds during the 1970's and the 1980's increased the period of time in which older adults are unfettered by child-care responsibilities and work obligations (Henkens, 1998; Laslett, 1991). These changes created a period in life that is characterized by great freedom (Knipscheer, 2006). It should yet be noted that current developments of pension reforms aim to reduce opportunities for early retirement and raised mandatory retirement age. These reforms are believed to be unavoidable in order to deal with the economic pressures coming along with an aging population (De Graaf, Maier, & Frericks, 2007). New concepts were coined to capture and describe this distinct life phase for older adults. These concepts include "young olds" (Neugarten, 1974), "second adolescence" (Schuller, 1987), "third age" (Laslett, 1991), and "early old age" (Higgs, Hyde, Wiggins, & Blane, 2003). For the study of grandparent–grandchild relationships, it is thus important to take into account that the grandparent–grandchild relationship from today should be understood from this distinct life phase that recently came into being. Grandparents from today are presumably more available as child-care providers than ever before (Bengtson, 2001).

In addition to these three life course themes, I will take into account that the life paths of other family members are important for understanding grandparent–grandchild relationships (Putney & Bengtson, 2003). Life course experiences of one of these generations can bring about changes in the life course of the other generations (Hurwicz, Durham, Boyddavis, Gatz, & Bengtson, 1992). For instance, divorce of parents negatively affects children's educational achievements (Amato & Keith, 1991), in particular when, prior to divorce, mothers have a low level of cultural and economic resources and fathers have a high level of cultural and economic resources (Fischer, T., 2008). This means that lives of multiple generations are important. In particular the generation in between, i.e. grandparents' children, are assumed to play a key role in the grandparent–grandchild relationship (Monserud, 2008; Oppelaar & Dykstra, 2004). That is, they often serve as a "lineage bridge" between grandparents and grandchildren by either facilitating or hindering contact (Hill, Foote, Aldous, Carlson, & MacDonald, 1970). Likewise, parents shape 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 presumably declines in its importance (Roberto, Allen, & Blieszner, 2001). Adult grandchildren can maintain contact with their grandparents independently from their parents and may re-establish the relationship on the basis of their own and their grandparents' terms (Kemp, 2005). Because parents may play an important role in grandparent–grandchild relationships, I take into account characteristics of this generation in each study of this dissertation.

### ***This Dissertation***

In this dissertation I examine grandparent–grandchild relationships from a life course perspective. Having a dynamic design, the dissertation goes beyond earlier studies using a static design. In my study of grandparent–grandchild relationships, the focus lies on changes over individual time, the role of past experiences for later relationship outcomes, and changes in the historical context. In addition to this dynamic perspective, the multigenerational perspective is applied by taking into account the characteristics of each generation involved. In the following, I will describe four research questions that are posed within the three overarching research themes: changes over individual time, the role of past experiences, and changes over historical time.

#### Changes over individual time

The grandparent–grandchild relationship changes over the life course as a result of transitions that take place. Some transitions occur within a short time frame and are therefore often clearly recognizable by an event (e.g., leaving the parental home, marriage, divorce, retirement, widowhood) while others occur more gradually and are not clearly marked by an event (e.g. deteriorating physical and cognitive health). Life course transitions affect the grandparent–grandchild relationship because opportunities, preferences and needs for contact change over individual time. This can be illustrated from the perspective of the grandparents and grandchildren. From the perspective of the grandparents, opportunities for contact may increase when grandparents have more time available after retirement (Silverstein & Marengo, 2001),



preferences for contact may shift towards family-ties including the grandchildren (Carstensen, 1992), and need for contact may increase after the death of an important network member. From the perspective of the grandchildren, opportunities for contact may decrease due to residential moves, labor force entrance, and the setting up of an own household (Monserud, 2011; Mueller, Wilhelm, & Elder, 2002), preferences for contact may decrease as they shift their focus from family ties to age-peers, and need for contact decreases when they grow independent as they move into adulthood. These examples illustrate that the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren is likely to change over individual time. Transitions of adult grandchildren are presumably more important than transitions of grandparents because the initiative for maintaining the relationship presumably resides at the adult grandchild (Kemp, 2005).

Previous research on changes over individual time suggests that the grandparent–grandchild contact weakens when both parties grow older. Earlier evidence shows that the frequency of grandparent–grandchild contact and the intensity of shared activities declines (Field & Minkler, 1988; Oppelaar & Dykstra, 2004; Silverstein & Long, 1998; Silverstein & Marengo, 2001). Previous research however almost exclusively focused on non-adult grandchildren (Silverstein & Long, 1998). Little is therefore known about how and why contact changes when grandchildren become adults. Evidence on the role of changing grandchild’s preferences is scarce because they are difficult to measure and usually not included in surveys. The role of the more easily measured life course experiences and age-related characteristics is also scarcely studied (Mills, 1999). The first research question that will be addressed in Chapter 2 is:

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

I examine the extent to which grandchildren between 18 and 35 years old have contact with their grandparents by looking at contact frequency. I distinguish between face-to-face contact frequency and remote frequency, i.e. contact by letter, phone, and e-mail. I first look at how contact frequency evolves over individual time by taking the age of the grandchild as a proxy for change over individual time. Next, I try to explain why contact changes as grandchildren get

older by including the following indicators for major life course statuses of the grandchild: employment, partner, and parenthood status, as well as whether the grandchild has left the parent home. Because of the focus on *adult* grandchildren, I assume that these grandchildren have no prominent needs for the intergenerational contact, and therefore propose that these life course statuses are related to the grandchild's opportunities and preferences concerning the contact with grandparents. These changes are assumed to be the leading forces behind changes in frequency of contact.

To assess the first research question, I use data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS; Dykstra et al., 2005). This study includes information about life course statuses of grandchildren in early adulthood as well as face-to-face and remote contact frequency with their living grandparents. In addition, the data include information about the generation in between that allows for the controlling for the possible influence of the parents (e.g. divorce). The interviews for the first wave of the NKPS were held between October 2002 and January 2004. This study is included as Chapter 2.

### Past experiences

Grandparent–grandchild relationships early in the life course shape the individual context in which intergenerational relationships develop later in the life course. Past experiences in grandparent–grandchild relationships can therefore be important for later relationship outcomes. That is, grandparents may invest in the grandparent–grandchild relationship to increase their social capital within intergenerational relationships. This capital might be tapped when support is needed. The role of past experiences in grandparent–grandchild relationships are examined in Chapters 3 and 4. More specifically, in Chapter 3 I examine the consequences of relationship intensity between grandparents and grandchildren early in the life course for later grandparent–grandchild relationships and in Chapter 4 I look at its consequences for later grandparent–parent relationships.

Past experiences in the grandparent–grandchild relationship are assumed to affect the intergenerational relationship in later life. As previously speculated by Fuller-Thompson and Minkler (2001), grandparent's investments in the relationship early in the life course may contribute to strengthening the bond.

A history of frequent contact, shared activities, or child-care provision by the grandparents during childhood may have created a strong bond between grandparents and grandchildren which they want to continue and are willing to make an effort for (Brown, 2003). A 'history of care giving', for instance, was observed to increase the quality of grandparent–grandchild relationships in later life (Brown, 2003). In addition, Taylor, Robila, and Lee (2005) observed more positive perceptions and greater satisfaction in intergenerational relationships if adult grandchildren resided with their grandparents during childhood. As such, contact between grandparents and adult grandchildren may be related to relationship intensity in the past when grandchildren were in their childhood.

The role of earlier investments for present grandparent–adult grandchild relationships is a relatively unexplored issue. Few empirical studies, almost exclusively using retrospective data, examined the extent to which earlier investments are related to the strength of the grandparent–grandchild bond when grandchildren have become adults (e.g. Brown, 2003; Taylor, Robila, & Lee, 2005). In Chapter 3, I address the following research question using longitudinal data:

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?

To assess research question two, I first examine the extent to which grandparents perceive adult grandchildren as frequent and important contacts by looking at network membership. Next, I examine whether this network membership is related to relationship intensity in childhood by looking at contact frequency, voluntary contact frequency, overnight visits, and child-care provision. Network membership was assessed in 1992 by the Living Arrangements and Social Networks of Older Adults research program (LSN; Knipscheer, De Jong Gierveld, Van Tilburg, & Dykstra, 1995; 397 grandparents; 1,594 grandchildren) and at the 2005–2006 follow-up in the context of the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam (LASA; Huisman et al., 2011; 155 grandparents; 429 grandchildren). Relationship intensity was assessed in 1992. To understand why grandparents identify adult grandchildren in their network, I draw on the

convoy model (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980). The convoy model is a widespread model in social gerontology from which dynamics in personal relationships of older adults can be understood. It offers a unique life course perspective in that it conceptualizes the individual's social network as an evolving set of relations that vary in perceived closeness and importance (Levitt, 2005).

Grandparents' past investments in grandchildren are presumably not only related to the current strength of grandparent–grandchild relationships but also to the current strength of grandparent–parent relationships (Friedman, Hechter, & Kreager, 2008). Earlier research indicated that older adults who transferred money, sentiment, or time in the past to their children were more likely to receive support later in life from these children (Parrott & Bengtson, 1999; Silverstein et al., 2002). According to Friedman et al. (2008), past support in the form of child care for grandchildren is of greatest importance for understanding current support receipts from adult children. Parents benefit from grandparental activities because the parents' time that can be spent in absence of the children, e.g. at work, is highly valued in an era in which such time is a scarce commodity. Because grandparent's child-care provision is of high value compared to other investments, this is an investment par excellence for compelling future support. This high value is assumed to create a debt that should be repaid later in life. Grandparents' past investments may have stored credit in their "bank of support" which can be tapped later in life. In this way, grandparental activities may contribute to the strength of the grandparent–parent relationship that sustains into later life.

Drawing on social exchange theory and the concept of reciprocity, the third study in this dissertation examines whether grandparental child-care provision in the past is related to current support from adult children using longitudinal data in which child-care provision was measured in 1992 and support from children was measured seven to seventeen years later. The following research question will be addressed in Chapter 4:

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

To address the research question, I distinguish between instrumental and emotional support. Data come from LSN and LASA and allow the tracking

of grandparent's relationships with all their grandchildren and adult children for a maximum of 17 years. In 1992, the LSN research program interviewed 3805 older adults from the birth cohorts 1908–1937 taken from the population registers of eleven Dutch municipalities. At the 1992 interview, grandparents were asked about the frequency of child-care provision for each of their grandchildren younger than 16 years of age. In addition, emotional support and instrumental support other than child-care provision given by grandparents to parents were assessed. The 1992 observation was followed up by six observations for LASA. From these follow-ups, support exchanges between grandparents and parents could be assessed.

### Changes over the Past Decades

The increase in female labor participation is presumably an important change in the past few decades for grandparent–grandchild relationships. This development increased the need for child care from beyond the nuclear family (Lewis, Knijn, Martin, & Ostner, 2008). Since grandparents are nowadays often available for child-care activities, they may be called upon for assistance more than ever before (Uhlenberg, 2009). It is however difficult to predict beforehand whether the grandparent–grandchild relationship has become more or less intense over the past few decades. It depends on the generation under consideration and other major contextual changes that impinge on grandparent–grandchild contacts. For instance, increased numbers of working grandmothers would suggest that the grandparent–grandchild relationship has become less intense for later generations, because the grandmother has less time to interact with her grandchildren. Increase in female labor participation among the middle generation however predicts the opposite. Working mothers are more likely than non-working mothers to need help from their parents in child care (Portegijs et al., 2006). Likewise, the trends of decreased fertility may have increased grandparent–grandchild contact because it may have led to less competition among parents for grandparental child-care provision. Increased geographical mobility (Van Diepen & Mulder, 2009), however, may have decreased opportunities for grandparents to contact their grandchildren.

Change over the past decades as to the intensity of the grandparent–grandchild relationship is hardly documented in research. The bulk of research doc-

umenting historical change in grandparenthood has presented descriptive information on the social-demographic context of grandparenthood, pertaining to its prevalence, the number and size of generations and the age of becoming a grandparent (Dykstra & Knipscheer, 1995; Prins, 1994; Post et al., 1997 for the Netherlands; Uhlenberg, 1996 for the United States). Two American studies (Silverstein et al., 2003; Silverstein & Long, 1998) present descriptive information suggesting that the frequency of contact between grandparents and grandchildren has declined over historical time. No studies exist identifying the sources of change by looking at changes in social-demographic characteristics of different cohorts. The current study focuses on the implications of increased female employment, while taking into account other changes over the past few decades such as decreased fertility and geographic mobility. In Chapter 5, I assess the following research question:

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

For assessment of this question, I focus on change in grandparental child-care provision and examine the extent to which the prevalence of extensive child-care provision has changed between 1992 and 2006. Furthermore, I examine whether a link exists between changes in child-care prevalence and employment increase among mothers, as well as the following other social-cultural changes: increase of divorce among the parents with young children, altering travel time between grandparent and parent, decrease of the number of children, and increased employment and divorce among grandparents.

Data were used from LSN and LASA and allow examination of two age-equivalent cohorts of grandparents in two distinct periods in time. That is, in 2002–2003, a new birth cohort was added to the data set using the same sampling frame as LSN had in 1992. The 2005–2006 follow-up of this new birth-cohort included an identical set of questions about grandparenthood as the 1992 sample. These data allow for the study of changes over about 14 years in the extent to which grandparents provide child care.

### ***Outline of the Study***

The present dissertation consists of four distinctive empirical studies that stand on their own. The studies aim to describe and explain changes in the grandparent–grandchild relationship over individual time, the importance of past relationship intensity for later relationships outcomes, and to describe and explain changes over past few decades in grandparental child-care provision. For the first study addressed in the next chapter, I expect that changes over the adult grandchild’s life course can be understood from the idea that major life course transitions alter preferences and opportunities for maintaining contact resulting in changing contact frequency with grandparents. For our second study in Chapter 3, I aim to advance our understanding of why grandparents identify adult grandchildren in their network by drawing on the convoy model. The third study in Chapter 4 aims to advance our understanding of grandparents’ support receipts from adult children by looking at the role of grandparental investments earlier in the life course. I draw on social exchange theory and the concept of life course reciprocity. The final study in Chapter 5 examines changes between 1992 and 2005 in the likelihood of child-care provision by grandparents, and aims to understand these changes by recent major historical changes reflected in the way people shape their lives. In this chapter, I expect that changes in child-care provision can be understood from changing needs and opportunities for grandparental child-care provision. In the final chapter of the dissertation, the findings of the preceding chapters are summarized and an overarching discussion of the findings will be provided. The discussion will be framed within the topic of solidarity between the generations and the care potential within grandparent–grandchild relationships. Finally, I will provide suggestions for future research.

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