Grandparental Investment as a Function of Relational Uncertainty and Emotional Closeness with Parents

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Several theoretical perspectives have generated research on grandparental investment, notably socialization and evolutionary psychological perspectives. Using data collected from more than 200 older adults (mean age 67 years), we test three hypotheses derived from socialization and evolutionary perspectives about grandparents' relationships with and investment in grandchildren. Results indicate that (1) emotional closeness with both children and children-in-law is positively related to reports of emotional closeness with grandchildren; (2) maternal grandmothers invest more in grandchildren than do other grandparents; and (3) grandparents invest more in daughters' children than in sons' children. Discussion addresses limitations of self-report methodology in this context and situates the current findings within the body of research indicating the existence of psychological mechanisms designed to guide differential nepotism.

KEY WORDS: Emotional closeness; Grandparental investment; Relational uncertainty

Several theoretical perspectives have generated predictions about differences between grandparents in the investments they make in their grandchildren. Prominently included among these are socialization theories and evolutionary theories (Spitze and Ward 1998). As noted by Szinovacz (1998), these theories often do not generate contradictory hypotheses about grandparental investment. Most research...
on grandparental investment in grandchildren has been inspired by socialization perspectives that invoke sex differences in socialization and lineage differences based on the sex of the parental generation (see, for example, Somary and Stricker 1998). Socialization theorists argue that women, but not men, are socialized to act as “kin-keepers.” Women are expected to maintain familial relationships, and these relationships are predicted to be stronger among women as a result of this differential socialization. Socialization theories predict that, across generations, maternal grandmothers will invest the most in their grandchildren and that paternal grandfathers will invest the least.

Evolutionary theories explicitly invoke the operation of evolved, domain-specific psychological mechanisms that process information differently when situated in male and female psychology, and that generate sex-specific behavior (see, e.g., Tooby and Cosmides 1992). Evolutionary theorists argue that, throughout human evolutionary history, humans could have increased the likelihood that their second-degree relatives (e.g., grandchildren) survived to reproductive age by investing in them directly or by investing in first-degree relatives (e.g., children) who, in turn, could distribute resources to second-degree relatives (see, e.g., DeKay 1995; Gaulin et al. 1997; Hawkes et al. 1998; Hill and Hurtado 1996; McBurney et al. 2002). Grandparental investment can be substantial and includes aiding in the psychological, social, and physical development of grandchildren and the reduction of the investment costs incurred by the grandchild's parents. As a result of the importance of grandparents as investors in grandchildren, differential investment in grandchildren could have substantial impact on grandchildren and on the grandchild's parents.

Many researchers have used grandparental contact with grandchildren and their parents as variables of interest (King and Elder 1995; Rossi and Rossi 1990; Uhlenberg and Hammill 1998; Whitbeck et al. 1993). Frequency of contact with family members, although the most commonly used of these variables, may not sufficiently reflect the motivation to pursue such contact (Bengtson and Mangen 1988). Relying solely on frequency of contact is a limitation because we do not know who initiated the contact and how the grandparent feels about the contact. In short, a single-item measure of frequency of contact may not accurately reflect grandparental sentiment towards grandchildren. King and Elder (1995) found that more frequent contact is reported between paternal grandparents and grandchildren than between maternal grandparents and grandchildren in a rural sample. Pashos (2000) found similar results in samples of rural Greeks. Frequency of contact, in these cases, may reflect the desires of the parental generation and not the desires of grandparents, however. In rural samples, for example, land acquisition through inheritance of farmland may benefit males more than females. The results reported by King and Elder (1995), for example, may reflect attempts by males to acquire parental resources. To address this concern about the use of a single, and sometimes ambiguous, frequency-of-contact investment item, we use three investment items reported on up to five grandchildren in the current study. These variables are collapsed into a composite measure to test all hypotheses and, in addition, are analyzed