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JEWISH ADULT GRANDCHILDREN AND THEIR GRANDPARENTS*

Introduction

Adult grandchildren (age 19 and over) both serve as a viable link to their grandparents and receive support and nurturing from the older generation. Our study attempts to examine how adult Jewish grandchildren in Toronto view their grandparents' contribution to their lives. As grandchildren move through the life cycle, they relate differently to their grandparents and appear to need their grandparents in different ways at different times. In turn, the grandparents are able to offer both formal and informal support to their adult grandchildren.

Review of the Literature

Elsewhere, the authors reviewed the literature relating to grandparents (Schlesinger and Schlesinger, 1998). Robertson and Wood (1996) studied 86 young adult grandchildren (18-26 year-olds). One of their findings was that grandparents have a great deal of influence on adult grandchildren. The characteristics perceived in their grandparents by grandchildren included being loving, gentle, helpful, understanding, smart, friendly, talkative and having sense of humour. Hoffman (1979-80) found that adult grandchildren do not see their grandparents as aloof but as close companions. Harshorne and Manaster (1982)

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studied a sample of 78 young adult grandchildren and found that the grandchildren overwhelmingly rated their relationship with their grandparents as extremely important in their lives (p. 240). The greater amount of contact with their grandparents, the more satisfied, in general, were the adult grandchildren. Battistelli and Farneti (1991) postulated from their study of adult grandchildren, that attachment to grandparents not only persists, but gets stronger as grandchildren mature (p. 154). Hodgson (1992) points out that the grandparent bond continues with surprising strength into adulthood (p. 222). A study by Kennedy (1992), of 391 young adults concluded that grandparents influenced the lives of young adult grandchildren through their values, behaviour patterns and advice. A research study done by Sander and Trygstad (1993) which sampled 80 college students, found that grandparents exerted a strong influence on their adult grandchildren in the areas of values, goals, and life choices. Brussoni and Boom (1998) noted that the relationship with grandparents has the potential to make a lasting impression on the lives of adult grandchildren.

Participants

In the academic year, 2001-02, one hundred and fifteen undergraduate York University students, representing 26 ethnic groups were surveyed about grandparent-adult grandchild relationships. Their age range was 18-30 years old, with 68 per cent in the 19-21 year-old group. The median age was 20. Of those who completed the questionnaire, 35 students were Jewish; all of them were women, and their average age was 21.

Among those who responded, most live at home with their family and were not married. Their grandparents live in Toronto, and they see them almost every week. They communicate with their grandparents mostly by telephone or in home visits.

Methodology

An anonymous questionnaire was distributed in the classroom during the 2001 academic year. The 23 questions in the ques-

tionnaire included demographic information related to the adult grandchildren and their grandparents. The content related to the activities which the adult grandchildren participated in with their grandparents, and the support and influence the grandparents had on their adult grandchildren. Questions also concerned the best loved characteristics of grandparents and the roles they played in the lives of their adult grandchildren.

Findings

Some of the favourite characteristics of the Jewish grandparents as seen by their adult grandchildren are noted in tables one and two.

TABLE 1

**BEST LOVED JEWISH GRANDFATHER
CHARACTERISTICS (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)**

athletic interest	loving
boldness	nurturing
caring	outgoing
courage	over-protectiveness
family involvement	readiness to please
friendliness	sense of humour
funny	sensitivity
generosity	intelligence
gives hugs	strictness
good taste in music	strength
happiness	stubborn
headstrong	success
honour	supportive
innovation	surrogate parent
kindness	tells stories
knowledge	trustworthiness
lives life to fullest	understanding

The qualities related to grandmothers can be found in Table Two.

TABLE 2

**BEST LOVED JEWISH GRANDMOTHER
CHARACTERISTICS (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)**

ability to communicate	honesty	speaks her mind
accepting	independence	spunky
allows you freedom	informative	strong-will
caring	inspiring	stubbornness
cheerfulness	intelligence	supportiveness
courage	kindness	thoughtful
creativity	lovability	traditional
funny	nurturing	trustworthiness
generosity	outgoing	understanding
giving	patience	solid
good cook	resourcefulness	warmth
happiness	sense of family	wisdom
helpfulness	sincerity	youthfulness

While there are some similar characteristics attributed to both grandparents, gender differences emerge. Grandmothers reflect ‘expressive’ qualities. They are caring, cheerful, generous, giving, inspiring, loveable, sincere, understanding and youthful. Grandfathers are seen as both strong and warm human beings. They offer love, nurturing and support to their grandchildren. They are also helpful, sensitive, and smart, and at times act as surrogate parents.

Roles Grandparents Play in the Lives of Grandchildren

Table three lists some of the roles played by grandparents in the lives of their adult grandchildren.

TABLE 3

**ROLES JEWISH GRANDPARENTS PLAY IN THE LIVES OF
ADULT GRANDCHILDREN (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)**

acting as another set of parents	involvement in life of grandchildren
being there in hard times	offering unconditional love to grandchildren
communicating with grandchildren	maintaining a Jewish lifestyle as model
confirming decisions	offering non-authoritarian support
connecting grandchildren to their past (roots)	sharing experiences
educating grandchildren about family history	being a source of knowledge
providing emotional support	teaching life lessons (about the Holocaust in particular)
providing financial support	

In the main, the roles are supportive ones. What also emerges is the importance of communicating to grandchildren their family history and roots. One generation passes family history on to another, and the grandparents also model ways to maintain a Jewish lifestyle.

Passing on to the Next Generation

We asked the grandchildren to tell us what they learned from their grandparents that they might want to teach their own children. Table Four lists some of the responses.

TABLE 4

**WHAT YOU LEARNED FROM GRANDPARENTS THAT YOU MAY TEACH
YOUR OWN CHILDREN (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)**

accept all family members	integrity
be considerate to others	keeping faith in Judaism
conflict management	knowing your cultural roots
family trust	keeping good family relations
family values	life is not as serious as you think
honour	respect
how to treat your parents	spending time with your family
importance of close-knit family	

Many of the answers focus on family life. They view the grandparents as modeling family relationships, religion, trust, and family values. In a way grandchildren hope that they will be able to import these qualities to the next generation, their own future children.

Meaningful Episode Between the Two Generations

Table Five gives some indication of what adult grandchildren found meaningful in their relationships with their grandparents. These are specific examples:

TABLE 5

A MEANINGFUL EPISODE IN THE ADULT GRANDCHILDREN AND GRANDPARENT RELATIONSHIP

When I had a problem with my mother, I would call my grandparent to help me out.
My grandfather told me, he will always love me.
My grandmother told me, how proud she was of me.
My grandmother wants to be close to me, because her time is limited.
I watch a football game with my grandfather.
My grandmother told me, that I am like her in many ways.
Every Friday night I have dinner with my grandparents.
I go out for Sunday brunch with my grandparents.
When my grandfather was in the hospital, he only wanted to see me.
I asked my grandfather about his war-time experiences.
My grandparents were the first persons I told about my engagement.
My grandparents helped me deal with my first relationship breakup.
Reading my grandmother’s biography, I was able to see her as a real person.

These small snapshots throw some light on what grandchildren found important to them in their relationship to their grandparents. What seem to emerge from many of the episodes are “closeness,” “intimate communication,” and receiving “positive feedback” about the lives of the grandchildren and some joint favourite activities.

Health and Personal Problems of Jewish Grandparents

Table Six lists some of the health and personal issues grandparents experienced.

TABLE 6

HEALTH AND PERSONAL PROBLEMS OF JEWISH GRANDPARENTS (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)

Alzheimer disease	Gall Bladder Problems
Arthritis	Hearing Difficulties
Back and Knee Problems	Has Pacemaker
Cancer	Heart Problems
Cataracts	Nervousness
Diabetes	Osteoporosis
Digestive Problems	Rheumatism
Few Friends Left	Stroke
Family Arguments	Uses a Walker
Finances	

These factors may influence the relationship between grandchild and grandparent. As the seniors suffer from health and mental problems, the grandchildren involve themselves differently in their lives. We did not probe this issue in our study.

Negative Aspects of Grandparenting

A minority of respondents replied to this question. They mentioned that grandparents criticize their music. They make demands on the grandchildren's time and ask for constant attention. Some grandparents do not like the friends of their grandchildren, especially if they are not Jewish.

Limitations of the Study

The subjects were not selected on a random basis. The questionnaires were distributed in one class to every student. We could not probe any responses, since we did not conduct any interviews but relied only on the completed questionnaires. The respondents tended to put a positive slant on issues regarding their grandparents.

Discussion

Over the past twenty years, researchers have examined grandparents in North America. Among the varied investigations, only a handful of studies included adult Jewish grandchildren. Today grandparents appear to take on new roles in extended families, and the adult grandchild-grandparent relationship is an important part of the modern family life cycle in the 21st century. This bond appears to be strong and enables the older generation to help the adult grandchildren in many areas of life. These include providing financial, emotional, and social support. The grandparents appear as values models to their grandchildren.

The present study of 35 Jewish students attempted to elicit varied information from adult grandchildren about their relationship to their grandparents. Most of the responses were positive. We also found that the influence of the grandparents and the support that they gave to their adult grandchildren were substantial. It appears that the mutual contact between the two generations was beneficial.

Throughout the family life cycle, there is a continuous relationship between the two generations. In our examination of changing Jewish family patterns it is important to include the Jewish adult grandchild-grandparent relationship in further family research.

In comparing the Jewish sample with the other ethnic groups, we found similar responses. Adult grandchildren who participated in this study reflect the multiculturalism of our Toronto area. It appears that the role of grandparents is an important factor in the lives of their adult grandchildren, regardless of ethnicity. It would be interesting to interview the grandparents to get another dimension of the relationship from a different perspective.

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