

YESTERDAY'S GRANDPARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS TODAY

Eva Lelièvre (Ined) and Nicolas Robette (Univ. of Bocconi)

The retrospective data from the *Biographies et entourage* (event histories and contact circle) survey allows the study of grandparenthood across generations and along time. They provide information on both the relationships of the respondents with their grandparents mainly when they were children and on their relationships with their grandchildren at the time of the survey when the respondents are 50 to 70 years old. Considering the generations involved, the childhood of the respondents took place from the 1930s to the 1960s, and half of them are now grandparents themselves.

For the past twenty years, the wider family group has been drawing attention. With increasing life expectancies and the general ageing of the population, the place and the role of grandparents have aroused a renewed interest for both social scientists and public authorities. At the same time, as income levels for older people are relatively high compared with previous generations, parents and grandparents are all the more present in their children's and grandchildren's lives. There has been a great deal of research on the extended family and large surveys have been conducted on relations and exchanges within families in many European countries since 1990 (Bonvalet and Ogg, 2006). Such surveys and studies result from initiatives led by several research institutes to launch large-scale surveys with the specific aim of measuring social support with families and wider social networks.

This proposal thus stands within the current trend of contemporary research on family life. We aim to move beyond household descriptions of family life: grandparents and grandchildren rarely live together. On the other hand, our paper captures the dynamics of kinship relations across generations, combining here biographical time (individuals are in turn grandchildren, parents and grandparents) and historical time (the social context of these exchanges have evolved from the 1930s to the XXIst century).

The data:

The *Biographies et entourage* (event histories and contact circle) survey retraced the family, residential and occupational histories of 2,830 individuals aged between 50 and 70 living in the Paris region. It extended the field of observation to close friends and relatives retracing

their own life histories, all in all 11 to 12,000 linked histories are made available. In this way the data make it possible to study the relationships the respondents had with their grandparents when they were still alive, as well as those they entertain with their grandchildren if they have any: 49% of the respondents are grandparents, 1,376 individuals among the 2,830 interviewed.

We will first describe the available information and then provide a detailed analysis of grandparental relationships with a special attention given to gender differences, the impact of the diversification of family formation and dissolution (of the grandparents, the parents and the grandchildren) on these relationships.

Some insights:

In the context of cohorts born between 1930 and 1950, our exploration of respondents’ parental universes (see Lelièvre et al., 2008) led us to include parent figures who were recognized as such by the respondents, on the basis of both affinity and choice. The questionnaire includes biological parents along with adoptive parents and parents’ partners (when they had lived with the respondents). Then are described any other person(s) identified by respondents as “having played the role of a parent”. Far from causing any surprise or ambiguity among respondents, these parent figures were mentioned by a striking proportion of individuals: more than one fifth referred to at least one person who played a parental role for them before age 15. A total of 803 persons were cited as being influential before age 15.

Distribution of parent figures according to their relationship with respondents

Relationship		%
Family circle	Grandparent	51%
	Uncle or aunt	20%
	Brother or sister	8%
	Other relative	5%
Outside family circle	Household employee, childminder	7%
	Other non-related person	9%
Total		(803) 100%

Source: *Biographies et entourage* survey, INED, 2001.
 Population: Individuals mentioned by respondents as having played a parental role in their childhood.

More than three-quarters of respondents (79%) mentioned one parent figure, usually a woman and generally the grandmother. At a time when the “new role” of grandparents and their

closer involvement with grandchildren is taking the limelight (Attias-Donfut et al., 2002), it is important to stress that in 50% of cases these alternative or supplementary parents are a grandmother or grandfather. Grandparents were very active, comprising the majority of the couples mentioned as parent figures, and hence frequently a part of the parental and educational universe of the respondents born between 1930 and 1950.

Beyond these first results, the ambition of our paper is to address the following questions:

How does the attention they received from their grandparents when they were children predict the respondents' behaviour toward their grandchildren? How involved are they with their grandchildren? Can grandmothers, some of them still active grandmothers, combine work and grandparenthood ? What happens when family disruption (in any generation) complicates the relationships between generations ?