

The composition of grandparents and parents' childcare: gender and generational patterns in activity, multitasking and co-presence

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Nuclear families live within relational networks, and parents have long called on extended family, particularly grandparents, to act as auxiliary child carers (Coontz, 1992). Despite the ubiquity and importance of grandparent care, however, little is known about what it actually consists of. How does grandmother and grandfather care differ from mother- and father-care? Is the composition of male care and female care similar at both life stages, or are gender differences narrower in later life? Using nationally representative time use data this paper compares the composition of grandmothers and grandfathers' childcare with mothers and fathers' childcare on three dimensions: the activities performed, how much of it is multitasked with other activities, and the proportion of care performed together with a spouse.

Background

There are well-known gender disparities in amount of parental care (see Bianchi and Milkie, 2010) and research has established that, similarly, grandmothers spend longer caring for children than grandfathers (Horsfall and Dempsey, 2013; Whelan, 2012). It is also known that the *composition* of parental care - that is, its content and the way it is spent in relative terms - differs by gender. Compared to mothers, fathers spend more of their childcare time talking, reading, teaching, listening and playing with children (non-routine tasks), than doing routine physical care tasks such as bathing, dressing, feeding, changing, and putting children to bed (Craig, 2006; Baxter and Smart, 2011). Also, mothers multitask childcare to a much greater extent than fathers do, and research suggests that as a result their time with children is more time pressured and stressful (Offer and Schneider, 2010). Mothers are more likely than fathers to care for children on their own, rather than with their partner also present (Craig, 2006).

On the one hand, it could be expected that these gender differences in care composition would pertain for grandparents also, and may be even more pronounced. Specialisation over the course of a marriage may mean couples have established different sets of skills, ultimately precluding grandfathers from involved participation in routine and physical child care tasks (Mann, 2007). Grandfathers may, like fathers, relatively rarely combine childcare with other unpaid work activities or undertake solo care independently of their spouse. It is, however, conversely possible that being at a later stage of the life course would weaken gender barriers, and facilitate more similarity in care activities for grandparents than for parents. For example, differences in workforce participation are cited as underpinning gendered parental care composition (see Bianchi and Milkie 2010), but are not as salient to grandparents (Ghysels, 2011). Particularly post retirement, grandfathers may be willing to change from stereotyped masculine care behaviour (Tarrant, 2012) and take the opportunity to spend more involved time with children, including in sole charge. At the same time, gender differences in care activities could be narrower for grandparents than parents due to cross-generation contrasts not in men's but in *women's* care. It could be that grandmothers, as auxiliary carers, spend their care time in more similar ways to fathers than to the mothers who are usually the primary carer.

Exploring these possibilities would give new insight into the content of the contributions grandparents make to raising children, show how gendered care practices pertain at different stages of the life course, and give evidence as to how child caring roles vary between fathers, grandfathers, mothers and grandmothers.

Data and method

We use the most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Time Use Survey (TUS 2006). A nationally representative survey, the TUS gathers information on the time allocation of all members of sampled

households over the age of 15. In a time-diary, respondents record the activities they undertake on each of two days, to a detail level of five minutes. Respondents record their main ('primary') activities, any simultaneous ('secondary') activities, who they are with and where they are each day. We identify grandparents who have at least one grandchild under 15, and parents who have children aged 0-15. The ABS TUS collects data from all adult members of co-resident households, so we have data on both members of couples, which is not possible in many other countries, including the USA. Our analytic sample is 1685 grandparents (3051 diaries; 1375 male, 1676 female) and 1901 parents (3507 diaries; 1556 male, 1951 female).

We compute total time in (primary and secondary) childcare, subdivided along the three dimensions discussed above i) childcare activities (minding, playing, teaching (routine) accompanying, physical care (non-routine)), ii) whether it is multitasked (and whether it is teamed with productive activities or with leisure), and iii) whether it is done solo or with a partner present. We then calculate the *proportion* of each respondent's total childcare time that is spent in the subcomponents of each dimension.

We begin with a descriptive overview of time in childcare by mothers and fathers, grandfathers and grandmothers and the proportional composition of that time along each of the three dimensions - activity, multitasking, and co-presence. We then run linear regression analyses on the more onerous aspect of each dimension of care i) the proportion of respondents' childcare time that is spent in routine childcare activities, ii) the proportion of respondents' childcare time that is multitasked with other productive activities, and iii) the proportion of respondents' childcare time that is performed without a partner present. For the multivariate analyses we select only those who record some childcare on the diary days. The *independent variables* of interest are gender (male=0/female=1) and generation (parent=0/grandparent=1), and to see if the associations with gender differ for parents and grandparents, interactions between them (gender*generation). We control for factors that the literature has found to be associated with grandparents' propensity to care: education (no college degree (omitted)/college degree), partnership status (partnered (omitted)/unpartnered), employment status (full time (omitted)/part time/not employed), and index of relative socioeconomic disadvantage of the geographical area (SEIFA, (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006) (lowest 60 per cent (omitted)/highest 40 per cent = 1).

Results

Descriptive results (not shown) confirm previous findings that within each generation, men average less than half the daily childcare of women. However, our focus is on relative childcare composition, not absolute amount.

With regard to *activity*, grandmothers and fathers have a similar composition of childcare. They each spend about 40 per cent of their main activity childcare in the routine activities of physical and accompanying care and about 60 per cent in the non-routine activities of playing, talking, teaching and minding. They differ somewhat in the relative proportion of play versus minding, with fathers doing a slightly higher proportion of the former and grandmothers a slightly higher proportion of the latter, but broadly speaking their childcare activity is similarly comprised. In contrast mothers average much more, and grandfathers average much less, of their childcare time in routine activities (physical and accompanying). There is a clear differentiation in the relative composition of mothers' care from that of the other three groups.

In *multitasking*, there are within-generation similarities in that both mothers and fathers spend only around 23 per cent of their childcare time not multitasking, compared to nearly 30 per cent for grandfathers and 35 per cent for grandmothers. The proportionally greater direct attention to children may reflect grandparents making the most of their comparatively low overall time with children. However, the composition of childcare time that *is* multitasked shows more gender than generational similarities. Both fathers and grandfathers multitask much more (about 50 per cent) of their childcare time with non-work (leisure) activities than do grandmothers (35 per cent) or mothers (40 per cent).

The implication is that male childcare time is more relaxed than female in both generations; childcare involves more simultaneous work activity for women than for men.

Regarding *co-presence*, gender differences outweigh generational differences. Both fathers and grandfathers spend only about 20 per cent of their childcare time without their partner there also, compared to about 40 per cent for mothers and grandmothers. This suggests that responsibility for managing care resides with women, and that men are in this regard ancillary to women in both generations.

To directly test gender, generation and the interaction between them, we turn to multivariate analysis. We model the proportion of routine care activities, childcare multitasked with productive activities, or childcare performed without a partner present. Results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Linear regression models of i) proportion of childcare that is routine activities, ii) multitasked with productive activities or iii) without their spouse present

	Proportion of childcare that is... ...routine		Proportion of childcare that is...			
	B	Sig	...multitasked with productive activities		...without spouse present	
	B	Sig	B	Sig	B	Sig
Constant	0.47	***	0.19	***	0.16	***
	(0.01)		(0.01)		(0.01)	
Female	0.15	***	0.11	***	0.20	***
	(0.02)		(0.01)		(0.02)	
Grandparent	-0.11	***	-0.09	***	0.02	
	(0.03)		(0.02)		(0.03)	
Female*grandparent	-0.08	**	-0.00		-0.09	**
	(0.04)		(0.25)		(0.03)	
Unpartnered	-0.02		-0.03	**	0.48	***
	(0.02)		(0.01)		(0.02)	
Has college degree	0.01		0.01		0.01	
	(0.01)		(0.01)		(0.01)	
Employed full time						
Employed part time	-0.01		0.01		0.06	***
	(0.02)		(0.01)		(0.02)	
Not employed	-0.01		0.01		0.07	***
	(0.02)		(0.01)		(0.02)	
Top 40% SEIFA	-0.02		0.01		0.02	
	(0.01)		(0.01)		(0.01)	
R squared	0.06		0.06		0.28	

*p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001

The constant terms in the models represent the time of fathers who are partnered, have no college degree, are employed full time, and are in the lowest 60 per cent of socio-economic indices for area (SEIFA). Men in this category are predicted to spend 47 per cent of their childcare time in routine activities. Women average 15 percentage points more (to a total of 62 per cent), and grandparents average 11 percentage points less (to a male total of 36 per cent), of their childcare time in routine activities. The interaction term in this model is significant, so grandmothers' predicted higher proportion of routine care as women is partly negated (by eight percentage points, to a total of 43 per cent). The results therefore suggest that the proportion of childcare that is comprised of the regular, routine hands-on care tasks, generally thought to be more laborious and less flexible than talk-based

care activities such as reading, talking and playing, are more gender-equal for grandparents (a seven percentage point gap) than for parents (a 15 percentage point gap).

Reference category men average 19 per cent of their childcare time multitasking with other productive activities. Women average 11 percentage points more (to a total of 30 per cent), and grandparents nine percentage points less (to a male total of 10 per cent and female total of 21 per cent). In this model, the interaction term is not significant, so the gender gap of 11 percentage points is the same for both generations. These results confirm the descriptive analysis suggesting both that female care involves more simultaneous work than male, and that mother care involves more simultaneous work than grandmother care.

Reference category men average 16 per cent of their childcare time without their spouse present. Women average 20 percentage points more (to a total of 36 per cent). There is no statistically significant association with generation as a main effect, but in this model the interaction term is significant, suggesting that while grandfathers and fathers' proportion of childcare time in sole charge is statistically identical, grandmothers' proportion of childcare time in sole charge is 9 percentage points lower than mothers'. Therefore, as with routine care, the proportion of childcare that is done without a spouse also present is more gender-equal for grandparents (a 11 percentage point gap) than for parents (a 20 percentage point gap).

Conclusion

Child care roles vary between fathers, grandfathers, mothers and grandmothers, with results indicating that mothers differ in their care composition from all three other groups, probably due to their status as primary caregivers. In the main, grandmothers' care is more similarly composed to fathers' care than to mothers' care. Moreover, results indicate narrower gender gaps (in routine and solo care) in later life result from grandmothers spending less of their care time on these measures than mothers, not from grandfathers doing proportionately more than fathers. This implies that while the experience of providing childcare is different at the two life-course stages for both men and women, it is most divergent for women. Nonetheless, not least because male care composition varies less by life course stage than female, substantial gender differences also pertain in the grandparental generation.

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