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# Grandparents' resources and grandchildren's schooling: Does grandparental involvement moderate the grandparent effect?☆



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## ABSTRACT

Recent studies have argued that grandparents have a direct effect on grandchildren's achievements, net of parental resources. However, little is known about the underlying mechanisms. One explanation is that grandchildren can benefit from the cultural resources that grandparents transmit to their grandchildren. If this is the case, one would expect strong effects in families where grandparents are highly involved in the lives of their grandchildren and weak or no effects in other families. Using new nationally representative survey data on three generations in the Netherlands, we examine if and how grandchildren's educational attainment is affected by three grandparental resources: education, occupational status, and cultural resources. We explore how these effects vary by the strength of the tie between grandparent and grandchild. We find no evidence for a main direct grandparental effect, nor do we find interactions with the strength of the tie between grandparent and grandchild. These null-findings are discussed in light of the mixed body of evidence that has been accumulated in the literature and contemporary theorizing on grandparenting.

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## 1. Introduction

In family sociology, there is a rapidly increasing amount of interest in the role of grandparents in families (Birditt et al., 2012; Chen et al., 2011; Hagestad, 2006; Luo et al., 2012; Silverstein and Marengo, 2001). Caring for grandchildren—'grandparenting'—is an important form of support that parents can provide to their adult children and has been studied as one dimension of the concept of intergenerational solidarity (Bengtson, 2001). Increases in longevity have presumably increased the number of grandparents who are present when parents have young children, although this is mitigated somewhat by parallel increases in the age at first birth. Probably more important is the rise in married women's labor force participation which has increased the demand for care from grandparents, especially in contexts where daycare is scarce or expensive (Thomese and Liefbroer, 2013). Recent evidence shows that child care by grandparents has become more common over time (Geurts et al., 2015).

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A parallel development has occurred in the sociology of stratification and mobility. Studies of intergenerational reproduction that traditionally examined the influences of father's and mother's status characteristics on children's educational and occupational attainment increasingly consider three generations (Mare, 2011). Grandparents can play an indirect role: they affect their children's success, who in turn affect their children. Grandparents can also play a direct role, by affecting the status of their grandchildren even when the middle generation's status attributes are held constant. This would mean, for example, that when comparing children with similarly educated parents, the child who has a college educated grandparent will attain a higher level of education than the child with a grandparent who only has a high school degree. It is especially this direct influence which has received attention (Mare, 2011).

We make two contributions to this literature. First, the evidence for a grandparent effect so far is mixed. A number of studies showed that there is a direct effect of grandparents on grandchildren (e.g., Chan and Boliver, 2013; Modin et al., 2013; Zeng and Xie, 2014; Pfeffer, 2014; Hertel and Groh-Samberg, 2014), but several others found no evidence for such an effect (Warren and Hauser, 1997; Wolbers and Ultee, 2013; Erola and Moisisio, 2007). These inconsistencies may have to do with differences in models, measures, data, and national or historical contexts. One important concern lies in the degree to which the characteristics of the 'middle generation' (the parents) have been taken into account. If the resources of the middle generation are not measured well enough, the measured status of the grandparent could 'pick up' this unmeasured parental influence. Supportive of this idea is the finding that when controls for the middle generation become more stringent across models, the remaining effect of the grandparent's status becomes weaker (Warren and Hauser, 1997; Wolbers and Ultee, 2013). In the present paper we extend the literature on grandparent effects with newly collected survey data in which we asked as extensively as possible about all the resources of grandparents (occupation, education, cultural resources). Because we use parallel measures of all these resources for the father and the mother of the grandchild, we are able to get a reliable estimate of direct grandparent effects.

Our second contribution is that we examine social heterogeneity in the grandparent effect. Prevailing explanations of the grandparent effect argue that grandparents transmit resources to grandchildren through interaction with the grandchild, much in line with Coleman's well-known social capital hypothesis about parental influences on children's schooling (Coleman, 1988; Teachman et al., 1997). Although some of the influence may not be social—e.g., financial transfers or 'legacy effects' in elite colleges (Mare, 2011)—a substantial part of the influence should depend on the amount of involvement of the grandparent in the grandchild's life. As a result, one would expect greater influences of grandparents when they are more involved in grandparenting. The social capital hypothesis has often been tested in two-generational research where parental involvement in school work and school activities is considered as a moderator of the effect of parental education and socioeconomic status on children's schooling outcomes (Crosnoe, 2004; Furstenberg and Hughes, 1995; Kim and Schneider, 2005; McNeal, 1999; Park, 2008; Teachman et al., 1997). This hypothesis has not been tested in three-generational research, despite its intuitive appeal (Erola and Moisisio, 2007; Zeng and Xie, 2014). In the data that we collected, we have extensive and specific information about the involvement of all four grandparents in the lives of their grandchildren via retrospective measures of contact, care, socialization, emotional closeness, and residential proximity. By studying the interaction effect of grandparents' resources and grandparents' involvement, we are not only able to test one of the more important explanations of the grandparent effect, we also connect ideas on grandparenting from family sociology and the sociology of stratification and inequality, two fields of study that have written on grandparents in a rather separate mode so far.

Previous analyses of grandparent effects have been done in a range of countries, including the U.S., Great Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, Finland, and China (see Table 1). Our data come from the Netherlands. The Netherlands does not represent a special case in this group. To support this claim, we first compare child care by grandparents across countries. Hank and Buber (2009) show that the amount of support that grandparents give to grandchildren is higher in the Netherlands than in France, Sweden, and Germany, but differences are modest in size. Second, we compare educational inequality across countries. A distinct feature of the Netherlands is its early tracking system, which tends to increase the strength of parental background effects on children's schooling (Van de Werfhorst and Mijis, 2010). At the same time, the Netherlands has also been a country with a clear and strong decline in the effects of parental status on children's educational transitions and educational attainment (De Graaf and Ganzeboom, 1993). Other countries have witnessed a decline as well and the degree of educational inequality in the Netherlands—defined as the strength of parental status effects on children's schooling—is now similar to that in many other European countries (Breen et al., 2009).

## 2. Background and hypotheses

### 2.1. Previous studies

In the past decade, interest in the direct grandparental effect on grandchildren has increased considerably, partly because of the increasing availability of data for three generations. Our summary of the findings in Table 1 shows that evidence for the hypothesis is mixed. The studies used a variety of outcome variables (education, occupational class, school grades, school drop-out) and explanatory variables for both parents and grandparents (class, income, education). Some studies only focus on the full 'paternal line' (grandson—father—grandfather), whereas others analyze four grandparents. While the US has been the subject of most studies so far, the list of countries has grown rapidly.

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