

*College of Arts and Sciences*  
*CUREJ - College Undergraduate Research*  
*Electronic Journal*

---

*University of Pennsylvania*

*Year 2007*

---

Grandchildren as Unifiers in  
Intergenerational Relations

Mana Nakagawa  
University of Pennsylvania, manakag7@sas.upenn.edu

# **Grandchildren as Unifiers in the Intergenerational Relationships of TLC3/Fragile Families**

**Senior Honors Thesis**

**Mana Nakagawa**  
**Advisors: Dr. Kristen Harknett and Dr. Kathryn Edin**  
**University of Pennsylvania**  
**April 21, 2007**

## **ABSTRACT**

Declining marriage rates and the corresponding rise in single-parent families is associated with the increased likelihood that children spend at least part of their childhood living in poverty. Intergenerational kin networks, however, can serve as an important safety net for children whose parents are unable to provide appropriate instrumental or emotional support for their own children. This paper uses data from the Time, Love, and Cash Among Couples with Children (TLC3) study, a longitudinal qualitative examination of parents who recently had a child together, to explore the processes that underlie these intergenerational relationships. Looking at unmarried mothers' and fathers' reports of their relationships with their parents, we build a typology of intergenerational relationships and solidarity that highlights the important role of grandchildren as a unifying element of intergenerational contact. The grandchild generation serves an important role in bringing all three generations into contact with one another, regardless of whether parents and grandparents have harmonious or tension-filled relationships. These results suggest that increased mutual understanding between grandparent and parent generations, especially of each others' expectations regarding involvement with the grandchild, may lead to more harmonious intergenerational relationships that benefit all generations.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The rapid rise of nonmarital childbearing and the aging of the population in the U.S. are two closely interrelated demographic changes that have received significant research attention in the past few decades. With the considerable increase in the numbers

of unmarried couples with young children, often referred to by policymakers as “fragile families,” studies have shown that most of these unmarried parents are poorly equipped to support themselves and their children and further, are twice as likely to live below the poverty line (Parke, 2004). Closely related to the low self-sufficiency among fragile families, research on intergenerational family structures has shown that grandparents have increasingly stepped in to assist their children and grandchildren in times of crises, and have become the safety net for children whose parents are unable to provide appropriate parental support for their own children (Goodman, 2003). While these two demographic trends are often closely related to one another, little research has been done on intergenerational family structures and relations amongst fragile families specifically, a population whom may be in the most need of intergenerational support from grandparents.

Grandparents have increasingly stepped in to provide care for their grandchildren. In the most extreme cases, grandparents become the dominant caregivers when parents cannot take care of their children particularly due to alcohol or drug addiction, mental or emotional problems, child abuse, divorce, unemployment, child care, or other financial needs (Goodman, 2003). Additionally, simply because grandparents are living longer in recent decades, they are likely to be more involved with grandchildren, as more grandparents are alive and healthy and are thus more able to be involved in providing childcare support. Consequently, intergenerational triads, consisting of grandparent, parent, and grandchild, have increased dramatically in the U.S. in the past few decades (Bonita and Myers, 1999; Goodman, 2003).

Within studies on family relations amongst intergenerational household structures, researchers have largely focused on different generations serving as the “mediator” of these intergenerational relationships and the varying levels of solidarity that exists as a cause of these mediating roles (Goodman, 2003; Thompson & Walker, 1987; Werner et. al, 2004). While past studies have largely shown the middle generation parent, particularly the mother, to hold the most frequent role as mediator, studies have also shown evidence regarding grandparent mediation as well (Werner et. al., 2004).

Previous studies have increasingly conceptualized the definition of mediation as the role responsible for mediating, linking, and controlling relationships between the other generations by encouraging or discouraging the interaction and communication between them (Block, 2000; Holladay et. al, 1997; Kahana & Kahana, 1971; Kennedy, 1992; Robertson, 1975; Werner et. al, 2005). However, while past studies attribute great importance to the mediating roles of various generations, research is still limited in examining the factors that enable individuals to mediate. Despite the significance of this mediating role, few studies have closely examined the deeper factors associated with individuals being able or unable to mediate relationships, due to various personal or practical life circumstances. For example, while studies provide various typologies and ways in which different generations are able to mediate and the positive effects associated with mediation, there is limited research on specific factors and reasons of when and why certain individuals may or may not be able to mediate despite their desires to do so.

This paper uses data from the Time, Love, and Cash Among Couples and Children (TLC3) study, a qualitative study of new parents in 3 U.S. cities, to examine the

middle, parental generation's beliefs and experiences with intergenerational relationships, that is, relationships among grandparents, parents, and grandchildren. These data demonstrate the crucial role of the grandchild as the unifying factor for maintaining intergenerational relationships. While the ability to mediate, link, and control relationships amongst generations is of great importance, members of fragile families may not have the appropriate material or emotional resources to take on this role, and thus, it seems that serving as a "mediator" role is more of a luxury position than has been identified in past research studies. The aim of the present study is to expand the knowledge in the area of intergenerational family structures and relations amongst fragile families from the perspective of the middle generation of parents. This paper documents and explains parents' views about what types of family structures and relationships between the different generations lead to more and better social contact and to the most harmonious intergenerational support.

This study illustrates a new typology of intergenerational relationships between grandparent, parent, and grandchild, consisting of three main patterns. The first category illustrates a harmonious tri-generational relationship in which grandparents are deeply involved in the focal grandchildren's lives while all three generations benefit from their positive relationships with one another. The second category exhibits varying levels of tension between grandparent and parent generations, although grandparents maintain some level of involvement with the grandchild. In the third category, some grandparents are completely uninvolved in the lives of their grandchildren, due to reasons such as residential proximity and grandparents' reluctance to endure any further parental responsibilities.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Intergenerational Relations & Solidarity**

Nearly one-third of all U.S. births occur outside of marriage, and varying patterns of cohabitation exist within these families: some parents live together, others live separately but parents have close relations with each other, and in other cases, one parent, particularly the father, may have virtually no contact with either the mother or the child (Parke, 2004). Cohabiting couples with children have grown dramatically in the past four decades, and currently roughly 40 percent of cohabiting households include children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). These unmarried parents and their children have been called “fragile families”, emphasizing that both unmarried couples and their children are in fact “families”, and that they are at greater risk of poverty and of family dissolution than married families (Parke, 2004).

Over the last decade, research on family relations, particularly studies on adult intergenerational relations, has increasingly taken multidimensional approaches in attempts to factor in a wider range of dimensions of family relations in ways that affect multigenerational structures and relations. Sociological studies of family solidarity (Lawton, Silverstein & Bengston, 1994; Bengston & Silverstein, 1997), cohesion (Olson, 2000), and triangulation (Bowen, 1978; Guerin, Fogarty, Fay, & Kautto, 1996) also have all established solid theoretical frameworks that have given important light to the significance and implications of grandparental care on the well-being of all three generations: grandparents, parents, and grandchildren.

Building on these frameworks, this study illustrates the intergenerational relationship structures and solidarity among the three generations. As fragile families,

these parents also show a wide range of multigenerational relationship structures and types. However, this study provides a typology emphasizing the key role of the grandchild's existence as a highly influential unifying factor in determining levels of solidarity. The rich qualitative interview data of fragile families provides deep insight into how the different generations interact and truly feel about each others' involvements in parenting and family life. While past studies have explored a wide range of associative factors leading to intergenerational solidarity, this study further builds a typology of intergenerational relationships and solidarity that highlight the significant role of the grandchildren's existence as a unifying element of intergenerational contact.

## **DATA & METHODS**

The main data source for this paper comes from qualitative interview data from the Time, Love, Cash Among Couples with Children (TLC3) study, the qualitative nested sub-sample of romantically involved couples from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing (FFCWB) study. The FFCWB study is the first national study of unmarried parents, their relationships to each other, and well-being of their children. The FFCWB sample of about 4,700 couples was drawn from all births occurring between 1998 and 2000 in hospitals located in a stratified sample of 20 U.S. cities with populations over 200,000. The FFCWB survey deliberately oversampled nonmarital births, and this study only uses the unmarried portion of the sample. In this longitudinal study, both mothers and fathers were interviewed shortly after birth, one year later, two to three years later, and five years later (Parke, 2004).

The TLC3 ethnographic study consists of in-depth interviews over the course of three years with a sub-sample of 75 romantically involved couples, 50 unmarried and 25 married, from Chicago, Milwaukee, and New York, selected from the broader FFCWB sample. This paper's study looks only at the 50 unmarried couples. It is particularly important to study unmarried parents because their relationships are fragile and are likely to have less financial resources. As part of the selection process into the TLC3 study, couples' incomes were capped at \$60,000/year, though most of the unmarried couples had incomes much lower than this criteria. The TLC3 sample consists of an ethnically diverse population, including African American, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Mexican American, and White couples (Edin et. al, 2003).

Both mothers and fathers are followed over the course of these studies, and thus the FFCWB and TLC3 data offer researchers a unique opportunity to examine a wide range of attitudes toward marriage and relationship dynamics. The TLC3 study examines the norms and expectations about the rights and obligations of unmarried parents, and interview protocols were designed to evoke detailed narratives from respondents that may shed light on a wide range of processes related to couples' lifestyles. Thus, this qualitative approach permits the exploration of some questions and issues identified in the quantitative FFCWB study in further detail.

This research takes an inductive analytic approach, generating insight from the qualitative interview data, subsequently identifying recurring trends and patterns, and developing themes that describe the core ideas across the cases. This process involved first reading two main categories within the TLC3 data interviews, then further examining other categories of relation to the main themes identified. Recurring trends

and themes emerged illustrating parents' relationships with kin, the quality of their relationship, and thoughts of why they have the type or quality of relationship that they do.

This study uses data from the TLC3 qualitative study to uncover the processes which shape intergenerational relations for these fragile families. In particular, this paper focuses on exploring the heterogeneity in intergenerational relationship patterns within these families, and presents the various patterns in the levels of intergenerational relations that emerged from the qualitative data. The new typology represents significant themes which frequently reoccur in the parental generations' narratives regarding their perspectives on the existing state of their intergenerational relationships.

## **FINDINGS**

Three main patterns of intergenerational relations, particularly emphasizing grandparent involvement in the lives of grandchildren, emerged from this data. In the first type, grandparents are deeply involved in the focal grandchildren's lives while all three generations are able to maintain harmonious intergenerational relations. The second type consists of grandparents who are substantially involved with their grandchild both physically and emotionally, but experience tension with the middle parental generation. Lastly, there are exceptional cases in which grandparents are not at all involved in the lives of the focal grandchildren due to several material and non-material reasons. All three categories show a wide range of varying family relations, revealing heterogeneity and complexity of the intergenerational triads in these fragile families.

As discussing three generations of related kin can be complicated, for the remainder of this paper, the three generations will be referred to in respect to the focal grandchild: grandparent, parent, and grandchild generations.

### **I. “Tri-Win” Relationships**

Grandparents proved to be generally involved in the lives of the focal grandchildren in the fragile families. In approximately one-fourth of the sample, grandparent involvement in grandchildren’s lives is harmonious across all three generations: there are good relations maintained between grandparents and parents, parents and their child (focal grandchild), and grandparents and grandchild. Further, all three generations benefit from this intergenerational support in this “tri-win” relationship: grandparents are involved by their own will, parents receive a break from their childcare responsibilities, and grandchildren receive material and non-material support from grandparents and parents, while simultaneously being able to form a bond with both generations.

Among the varying reasons that parents attribute for their intergenerational harmony, the common factors behind the success of these “tri-win” situations was based on both the grandparent and parent generations wanting to spend time with the focal grandchild, and both generations are understanding the others’ desires and needs. For example, Derwin, a 32-year old father from Chicago, explains the benefits of having his mother care for his baby daughter, Sally, when he and his partner want to have a break or just to have support from the family:

It’s easier to take on all those responsibilities that you have...cause there’s times when we’re both a little tired and my mother will come up

and be like, 'oh I want', she wants to see the baby—...It's nice to see my mother cause she's downstairs and my daughter loves her, that's beautiful to see that they bonded so much, you know?.... She like, my mother's like crazy about her and my daughter sees her she's like, she gets so happy and...

This illustration of a harmonious “tri-win” relationship is successful based on various factors. First, the father openly expresses his desires of needing an occasional break from parenting. Similarly, the grandmother is not reluctant to express her desires to see her granddaughter. In this intergenerational relationship, grandparents, parents, and grandchildren all enjoy spending time together, and are open about expressing their individual needs to one another. Consequently, all three generations are able to fully benefit from each other's interactions with one another.

In similar trends of “tri-win,” mutually beneficial relationships, parents receive voluntary grandparent support and are thus further encouraged to be open about asking for increased, future support from their parents. Tim, a 36-year-old father from New York, describes how his parents frequently provide him and his family with various forms of support that he and his partner, Michelle, need:

...my dad's been there, for the most part financially. If we need anything, it's never a problem to ask my father...And there are times where, you know, like me and Michelle just want to go out for a couple of hours. Grandma has no problem taking the boys...You know, what grandma's do for kids. 'Oh I'm coming over to pick you up, we're going to get you a new jacket.' There's a new jacket we don't have to worry about buying. You know grandma's, 'Oh we got a new grandson, well...' Then she went out and bought him a brand new snowsuit and new outfits. You know, little things like that takes a little bit of the burden off us. You know, so that makes a difference...a little more sanity.

When parents openly express their needs for financial or childcare support, the help from grandparents generally seemed to be available, and consequently a tri-win situation is

created. Grandchildren receive what they need materially and emotionally, parents receive a break that they ask for, and grandparents enjoy providing for their grandchildren while helping out the middle generation through the process. Within these tri-win situations, the grandchild plays the unifying role in facilitating interactions among all three generations, for common grounds between grandparents and parents are based on their mutual desires and benefits of being involved with caring for the focal grandchild.

## **II. Tensional Contact**

While “tri-win” cases in fragile families exhibit constructive, beneficial intergenerational patterns, more than half of the sampled families show evidence of some level of tension between grandparent and parent relations attributed to various factors. Despite tensional conflicts however, negative relations between grandparent and parent generations do not detract from grandparental involvement in their grandchild’s lives, and frequent cases show that grandparent-grandchild relationships are not contingent on the quality of interactions between grandparents and parents. Overall, the main pattern in these tensional intergenerational relationships is one in which some level of interaction is maintained between the grandparents and parents, but interactions are often characterized by many differing levels of tension. Most importantly, regardless of existing tensions, grandparents almost always provided unconditional support towards their grandchild. Within the general category of tensional relationships that exist between grandparent and parent generations, three sub-typologies emerged. First there is evidence of a filtered support system in which parents accepted advice regarding childcare but not about the

parents' relationship as a couple. Second, parents and grandparents exhibit power struggles over who possesses stronger authority over care of the grandchild. Lastly, there are grandparent and parent generations who seem to maintain a minimal level of contact that is based on their mutual involvements with the focal grandchild.

### **II.a. Filtered support: Advice for the grandchild, but not for the couple**

The first category in which tensional relations exist between grandparents and parents is shown in patterns of parents receiving various forms of various support and advice from grandparents about caring for the grandchild, but contrastingly, rejecting any form of advice or support towards the parents as a couple. Fathers, for example, reject relationship advice from their parents, but are much more willing to accept and even ask for advice about their kids. In a discussion with Marcial, an 18-year old father from New York City, he describes that his parents frequently give him advice in terms of childcare, such as what types of food to give his child, and admits that "If I don't know anything, I'll ask [my parents]." However, he claims that he would never call on his parents to give him advice about his relationship with his partner:

I think now that we've been together for awhile they both realize that it doesn't really matter what they say and what they do...It's our decision now, what we're going to do, and how we're going to do it, when we're going to do it, the way we want to do it.

Similarly, the majority of parents reported that if and when grandparents do voice their opinions, either positively or negatively toward the parents as a couple, that grandparents' attitudes would not affect the couples' relationships. However, when advice and support are guided toward the grandchildren, parents would be generally pleased to accept it.

This trend of filtering verbal support from grandparents is a frequently recurring theme throughout parent interviews. In this subcategory, parents are able to maintain a fairly strong level of contact and relationship with the grandparent generation, but predominantly because they need support toward their child. Most frequently, tensions initially arise between generations when grandparents do not approve of the couples' status, particularly the parents' unstable or non-employment status, young age at non-marital births, and personality conflicts. Further, when parents begin internalizing their frustration with grandparents trying to give them couples' advice, increased tensions arise between these generations. In the midst of these conflicts, the grandchild generation serves a crucial unifying role in the intergenerational triad, for parents will often communicate with grandparents for the central purpose of receiving childcare support, despite tensions that arise when grandparents attempt to impose views on how the parents as a couple should behave. Therefore, the benefits of childcare support for the grandchild enable all three generations to maintain some level of association and contact, emphasizing the importance of the grandchild generation as the unifying element of the intergenerational triad.

### **II.b. Power Struggles**

The second subcategory related to tension levels among the first two generations is one where the grandparent and parent generations experience authoritative disputes over parenting the grandchild. The challenges faced in their attempts to balance their respective roles and relationships with the grandchild frequently created various levels of negative relations between these two generations. In some cases, parents expressed

frustrations towards the lack of understanding by grandparents in the amount of support they needed, but never openly expressed these concerns to the grandparents. Valeria, a 32-year-old Hispanic mother from New York, describes clashes with her partner's mother:

I'm 32 years old and I don't like being told what to do.... She's just like, 'You know, you should do this, and you should do that, and you should do this.' I'm thinking ok, you take care of your daughter.... Not just that, like other stuff, you know you should do about your finances and this and your house and I'm like, no no no no. I'm not fifteen, you know? I'm not a kid. So I'm like, I don't like it, I don't like being told what to do.

Although Valeria expresses frustrations with being told how to handle her lifestyle, when asked how she alleviates the issue, she describes that she does not tell her partner's mother that she experiences these frustrations:

I tell her, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, oh yeah, sure, sounds good, yeah, yeah, yeah, ok, whatever." And just you know, do whatever it is I have to do.

Similar to Valeria's case, many parents hold back or internalize their irritations when they feel that grandparents are crossing personal lifestyle boundaries such as parenting. Valeria explains that her partner tells her to ignore his mother because "she's always talking and she's like that, so don't worry about it." For many parents, the internalization of negative feelings toward the grandparent generations, particularly toward their partner's parents, often creates tension that exacerbates with time.

In other cases, parents express the overbearingness of grandparents who step on their toes in preaching child rearing patterns. Natasha, a 21-year-old Black mother from New York, discusses that although she initially experienced a positive relationship with

her partner's mother, their relationship was later worsened by their difficulties in both attempting to gain parental control over the grandchild:

We kind of ran into conflicts about the kids because I thought she was really lenient and [the kids] were just really bad. And plus they lied a lot, which a no, no, to me in my house. And I was like, because they have no supervision, that's why they act like this. That kind of split us apart...they were kind of trying to play a power trip.

A dominant source of conflicts seems to be the difficulty in finding the appropriate balance between receiving necessary childcare from grandparents and still being able to maintain the authority as the parent. However, even when these tensions exist, parents report that grandparents are involved in caring for their grandchildren. Therefore, in the “power struggles” category of intergenerational relations, the grandchild serves as a source of conflict and unity, for although the first two generations experience conflicts over parental authority, both generations are still forced to maintain contact with one another through sharing their respective roles in caring for the grandchild.

### **II.c. “Only for the Baby”**

Lastly, there were several accounts in which grandparents entirely bypass maintaining positive relations with the parent generation, but are nonetheless highly supportive and involved in their grandchild's lives, both emotionally and physically. Various factors account for this type of high tension between the first two generations, ranging from grandparental disapproval of the parents' relationship as a couple, to the discord between grandparent and parent views on child rearing principles.

A clear example of high tensions between grandparents and parents is reported by Ralph, a 28-year old father from Chicago, whose partner's mother did not approve of them having a baby at such a young age:

Ok, well, her mother's helpful. She watches the kids...But she thinks her mother is very judgmental of her so that affects their relationship, because her mother thinks she should be not having babies at twenty-one, she should be in college, you know, and trying to find a better life, trying to be successful, married maybe, a different person, you know, that doesn't have all this extra stuff with him, you know what I mean.

Although the grandmother and mother, Natasha, age 21, have an uneasy relationship in this situation, this does not deter the grandmother from providing support and care for the grandchild. Regardless of the grandmother's disapproval of Natasha's young age in childbearing, Ralph claims that Natasha's mother "is very helpful. She watches the kids," providing the necessary help for the grandchild.

Rhonda, a 21-year old Black mother discusses a similar relationship she has with the parents of her partner, Adam. Rhonda has a very difficult time getting along with Adam's mother, particularly because she claims that Rhonda "brings Adam down", and further describes her relationship with Adam's mother as a "whole lot of mess." However, despite these conflicting relations, Rhonda explains that Adam's mother provides support for her grandchild:

"Well she'll come and, she'll take care of the kids. She don't have a problem with the kids. It's me, I guess. I don't know what I done to her, though."

For many parents and grandparents with high tensional relationships, it is evident that the only reason they would ever come into contact with one another would be to fulfill either

or both the grandparents' desires to see their grandchild or the parents' needs for childcare support.

Within these tensional relationships between the grandparent and parent generations, the grandchild seems to be the key figure in unifying the first two generations. Narratives show that when tensions exist, the grandparent-parent relationship itself is not a strong enough motive for parents and grandparents to maintain contact with one another. Therefore, it is only through the exchange of the grandchild's care that the parent and grandparent generations are forced to interact and thus maintain some level of contact.

As evidenced by these examples, this study's findings suggest that in fragile families, the grandchild may play a "mediating" or "unifying" role, more so than the mother or grandmother generations as previous studies suggest. Further, mothers in fragile families do not exhibit themselves to play a mediating or gate-keeping role, as suggested by previous studies (Thompson & Walker, 1987). This may be a result of the financial situations of mothers, as they often may not have the sufficient resources that allow them to dictate the level of grandparental involvement in the grandchild's lives; in other words, mothers may not have a choice but to have grandparents involved in caring for their grandchild in order to survive for both financial and non-material reasons. When grandparents insist on seeing their grandchild, very few parents deny them this demand, seemingly because parents regard grandparental support as beneficial and often necessary. Further, when grandparents insist on seeing their grandchild, it seems nearly impossible for grandparent and parent generations to not have any contact with each other, and thus, the grandchild generation plays a particularly important role in the

intergenerational triad through creating points of contact for the parent and grandparent generations, even when tensional relations exist.

Overall, even when tensions between grandparents and parents exist on any level, parents report a general perception that their grandparents would give unconditional support for their grandchildren. For example, when Donnella, a 21-year old mother from New York is asked whether she perceived that her parents would give more or less support for the family depending on a hypothetically poor relationship between the grandparent and parent generations, she responded:

“They probably would not have [done as much for the family] but since we have a baby it probably wouldn’t change too much, everything...They could like me but not as much as they do now. But they do stuff for the baby and it’s all that makes the difference..”

Further, when Donnella was asked whether she perceived grandparental care would be available even if she personally did not get along with her partner’s parents, she expressed:

“They’d still help with the baby...But as far as me, they probably wouldn’t have anything to do with me. They’d talk to me but they wouldn’t have too much to do with me. They’d talk to me cause of the baby....So they feel like the baby is the most important thing.”

These examples emphasize the key role that the grandchild plays in holding the tri-generational triad together. Mothers’ perceptions of anticipated unconditional support for the grandchild are a strong indication of the prominence of a grandchild in the lives of grandparents. These frequent accounts show that many parents and grandparents may only interact and thus maintain some level of contact because of the need to exchange

roles in grandchild care, and thus, the grandchild serves as a key unifying factor in the intergenerational relations within these fragile families.

### **III. No Interaction**

The least frequent category of intergenerational relations is one in which grandparents do not interact at all with their grandchildren. While these cases were much rarer, less than a quarter of the sample reported such patterns, two main recurring factors are evident within this category. First, residential proximity of grandparents and parents is closely associated with grandparental involvement with the grandchild. Second, several parents reported that grandparents who lived in large households were “done with parenting,” after bearing on too many responsibilities of childcare with previous children and grandchildren..

#### **III.a. Residential Proximity**

Residential proximity of grandparents is a key issue relating to the level of grandparental involvement in lives of the focal grandchildren. Overall, data showed that closer residential proximity was associated with higher grandparental care and involvement, while for parents who lived farther away from grandparents, physical support such as child care was reported to be less accessible and thus utilized less frequently. Natasha describes how her partner’s mother became less involved in her family after they moved farther away residentially. She says, “Well, me and his mom, we were a lot closer when we stayed together,” but expresses that after moving away, she has much less influence on her relationship with Ralph or the kids, “‘cause they don’t come around that much.”

Further, among parents who are currently receiving frequent childcare support from grandparents, there is a strong sense that residential proximity plays a significant role in the level of support they receive from grandparents. Michelle, a 27-year-old mother from New York, describes the benefits of living close to her mother in receiving help for child care:

“She wouldn’t...it wouldn’t be at our convenience anymore, for her, you know, like go pick Austin up from school or when the baby’s sick to take Austin for a few days. You know that would make it a little more stressful.... We’d still make it, we would you know, we’d probably struggle a little bit harder.”

Additionally, in families where intergenerational conflicts exist between the parent and grandparent generations, parents express that residential distance from grandparents is beneficial because more distance equated to less interaction, and thus less disputes amongst the generations. Yaneiry, a Hispanic mother, age 22 from New York, describes that neither her nor her partner’s parents approve of Yaneiry and Pablo’s relationship. Yaneiry’s father does not like Pablo because he is Puerto Rican, and he associates being Puerto Rican with infidelity. Similarly, Pablo’s parents distrust Yaneiry, claiming her to be promiscuous. While Yaneiry reports that she does not allow their families to interfere with her relationship with Pablo, when asked how their intergenerational disputes affect her relationship with her own daughter, she describes the benefits of living farther away from her parents:

I think it’s, it’s better like that, they live far away. When they live close, they’re over in your house, you know, seeing how you live, if you cook, if you not cook, if you wash clothes, if you don’t wash clothes. You know, everything. I think it’s good to be far away. And me, they... leave them alone...so it’s better that they live far away.

These examples illustrate the close association of residential proximity with levels of childcare support and interaction across the three generations. Closer residential proximity generally leads to higher levels of grandparent involvement in providing childcare support, while living farther away from the grandchild more likely leads to less grandparent involvement. Although this was a general trend, most families exhibited other factors that contributed to the differing levels of grandparent involvement in grandchildren's lives in addition to residential proximity. Regardless of grandparents' personal desires of wanting to be more involved with the grandchild, living farther away seems to detract from the feasibility of their desired levels of involvement.

### **III.b “Done with Parenting”**

Another explanation for grandparents not providing childcare for their grandchildren was that parents perceived that grandparents did not wish to take on a parental role any more than they have had to already. Focal grandchildren are frequently one out of the numerous children and grandchildren within a household, and thus grandparents have parented not only their own children, but many of their grandchildren as well previously. Therefore, some parents acknowledged that they could not expect their grandparents to further take on a childcaring role with their own children. Yaneiry, for example, discusses her understanding of why her mother does not provide childcare for her daughter:

“They don't touch her. You know, like talking about it, things like that. They love her, they like her. You know, they don't want to take care of her, that's ok, I understand, she like...she has so many kids already. She don't want to go for that again.”

Despite this finding, an important aspect to note is that not all respondents raise this issue of large numbered households as problematic in grandparent-grandchild relations. In fact in most of these fragile families, having very large households is seen as beneficial because it allows for different family members to share responsibilities of child care for various members within the family.

## **CONCLUSION**

Interviews from the Time, Love, Cash, Care and Children (TLC3) data reveal that within the intergenerational triads of fragile families, the grandchild generation serves an important role in bringing all three generations into contact with one another, though depending on the family, contact may be accompanied with differing levels of intimacy. Overall, three main patterns exist when looking at the relationship between the three generations of grandparents, parents, and grandchildren. First, there are grandparents who are deeply involved in the focal grandchildren's lives while being able to maintain harmonious tri-generational relations. Second, there is some grandparent involvement with the grandchild, yet varying levels of tension exist amongst the grandparent and parent generations. Lastly, some grandparents are not at all involved in the lives of the grandchildren, though these cases are much less prevalent within the sample.

For fragile families with positive, intimate relationships between parent and grandparent generations, mutual care of the focal grandchild strengthens the existing harmonious relationships across all three generations. With the shared desire to care for the focal grandchild, grandparents and parents are able to particularly bond on the mutual benefits gained by sharing childcare responsibilities with one another. In particular,

when parents openly express their needs for outside childcare support, grandparents are generally happy to provide it and simultaneously benefit by being able to create a special bond with their grandchild.

The most frequently recurring pattern showed that more than half of the sampled fragile families experienced some level of tension between grandparent and parent generations. In general, although tensions exist, grandparents' and parents' shared involvement in the care of the focal grandchild create opportunities for all three generations to maintain some level of contact with one another. Despite the power struggles over who has more authority over the grandchild or regardless of grandparents' disapproval of the parents as a couple, the focus on being involved in providing support for the grandchild serves as the most stable element contributing to maintaining contact between all three generations.

While previous studies have suggested that the middle parental generation serves as a "gatekeeper," this is not necessarily the case for fragile families. Rather, particularly in these tensional relationships, the focal grandchild played the most crucial role in bringing together the other two generations who may not have interacted otherwise without the existence of the grandchild. For instance, without the desire to be involved in the grandchild's life, grandparents who did not approve of the couple as a relationship would be likely to have less incentive to spend time with the parent generation, and likewise, the parent generation may not feel the need to maintain a relationship with their parents (grandparent generation) without their need for childcare support. Thus, while previous studies suggest that mothers play the role of the "gatekeeper" of the grandchild,

fragile family mothers generally do not tend to do so, for most express that childcare support from the grandparents is often a necessity to get by in their daily lives.

Overall, there are certainly limitations to this study and its findings. As the TLC3 study's sample is limited to 75 couples in 3 urban cities, the size of this qualitative study is much lower compared to the FFCWB study's large sample. However, due to the nature of the ethnographic qualitative approach of the TLC3 study, the in-depth interviews provide a unique opportunity to explore unanswered questions from the quantitative FFCWB data in further detail, and is thus a powerful study that can shed unprecedented light on family dynamics within fragile families.

Further, it is important to note that all of these narratives from the TLC3 study interviews are the voices of the middle generation parents, and thus the data must be analyzed as the parental perceptions of the intergenerational relationships. In attempting to analyze why grandparents give this seemingly unconditional support for their grandchildren despite tensional relations with the parent generations, this study can only provide speculations based on parental notions of these relationships. However, as a longitudinal study, future interviews with the grandchild generations will allow investigation of the child wellbeing of this generation as an outcome of the differing levels of intergenerational relationships.

The findings of this study may have important implications for practitioners such as family therapists and service professionals. This study identifies important trends within fragile families suggesting that increased mutual understandings between grandparent and parent generations, especially of each others' expectations of childcare involvement, may lead to more harmonious intergenerational relations that benefit all

generations. This may serve as a significant trend to identify for practitioners as the recent increase in life expectancy of the grandparent generations will likely lead to more overlapping years in the lives of the grandparent and grandchild generations. Further, with the recent rise of fragile families with the concurrent rising trend of grandparental care in grandchildren's lives in the U.S., it will be particularly important for family therapists and service professionals to understand how to ameliorate intergenerational conflicts within fragile families.

This paper's study suggests that grandchildren perform an important function in bridging the gap between generations. Although this paper does not measure the extent to which each generation benefits from the others, this study brings an important light to this open question. As young children are presumably better off with more 'social capital' and 'social ties,' this study's findings may aid family therapists to capitalize and build upon the bridging function that new children can perform in bringing generations closer together, in order to promote the optimal functioning for fragile families and their children.

## References

- Albrecht, R. (1954). The parental responsibilities of grandparents. *Marriage and Family Living* (16) 201-204.
- Block, C.E. (2000). Dyadic and gender differences in perceptions of the grandparent-grandchild relationship. *International Journal of Aging & Human Development* 51(2), 85-104.
- Bonita, M, & Myers, B. (1999) "Grandmothers Providing Care for Grandchildren: Consequences of Various Levels of Caregiving." *Family Relations* (48)3. 303-310.
- Edin, K., P. England, & K. Linnenberg (2003). Love and Distrust Among Unmarried Parents. Working paper.
- Gibson, C., and Duncan, G.J. (2002). Lessons Learned: Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in the Study of the Family. Working paper. Duke University.
- Goodman, C. (2003) "Intergenerational Triads in Grandparent-Headed Families." *Journal of Gerontology: SOCIAL SCIENCES* 58B(5). S281-S289.
- Holladay, S., D. Denton, D. Harding, M. Lee, R. Lackovich, and M. Coleman (1997). Granddaughters' accounts of the influence of parental mediation on relational closeness with maternal grandmothers. *International Journal of Aging & Human Development* 45(1), 23-38.
- Kahana, E., and B. Kahana (1971). Theoretical and research perspectives on grandparenthood. *Aging & Human Development* 2(4), 261-268.
- Kennedy, G.E. (1992). Quality in grandparent/grandchild relationships. *International*

- Journal of Aging & Human Development*, 35(2), 83-98.
- Kivnick, H. Q. (1982). The meaning of grandparenthood. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press.
- Lugaila, T. A. (1998). Marital status and living arrangements: March 1997. *Current population reports, population characteristics*. Series P-20, No. 514. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.
- McAdoo, H.P (1990). A portrait of African-American families in the United States. In S. Rix (Ed.), *The American woman 1990-91: A status report*. New York: Norton.
- Neugarten, B. & K. Weinstein (1964). The Changing American grandparents. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 26, 199-204.
- Parke, M. (2004, January) Who are “Fragile Families” and What Do We Know About Them?. Center for Law and Social Policy: Couples and Marriage Policy Brief Series (4).
- Pinson-Milburn, N.M., Fabian, E.S. Schlossberg, N.K., & Pyle, M. (1996). Grandparents raising grandchildren. *Journal of Counseling and Development* 74 448-554.
- Roberston, J.F. (1977). Grandparenthood; A Study of role conceptions. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 39 165-174.
- Robertson, J. F. (1975). Interaction in three-generation families, parents as mediators: Towards a theoretical perspective. *Intergenerational Journal of Aging & Human Development* 6(2), 103-110.
- Shore, R.J. (1990). *Grandparents raising grandchildren: A model of psychological functioning*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of North Texas.
- Simmon, T. & O’Connel, M. (2003, February) Married-Couple and Unmarried

- Partner Households 2000. Census 2000 Special Reports. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau.
- Thomas, J.L. (1986) Gender differences in satisfaction with grandparenting. *Psychology and Aging, 1*, 215-219.
- Thompson, L., Walker, A.J. (1987) Mothers as Mediators of Intimacy Between Grandmothers and Their Young Adult Granddaughters. *Family Relations, 36* 72-77.
- Werner, P., E. Buchbinder, A. Lowenstein, and T. Livni. (2004). "Mediation \ across generations: A tri-generational perspective." *Journal of Aging Studies (19)* 489-502.