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# Experiences with grandparents and attitudes toward custodial grandparenting

Julie Hicks Patrick

*West Virginia University, julie.patrick@MAIL.WVU.EDU*

Allyson Stella Graf

*West Virginia University, agraf@mix.wvu.edu*

Danielle K. Nadorff

*Mississippi State University, Danielle.Nadorff@msstate.edu*

Bert Hayslip Jr.

*University of North Texas, Denton, Bert.Hayslip@my.unt.edu*

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*Research Article*

**Experiences with Grandparents and  
Attitudes toward Custodial Grandparenting**

Julie Hicks Patrick  
West Virginia University

Allyson Stella Graf  
West Virginia University and Elmira College

Danielle K. Nadorff  
West Virginia University and  
Mississippi State University

Bert Hayslip Jr.  
University of North Texas

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Departmental Affiliations: Julie Hicks Patrick, Department of Psychology, West Virginia University; Allyson Stella Graf, Department of Psychology, West Virginia University & Elmira College; Danielle K. Nadorff, Department of Psychology, West Virginia University & Mississippi State University; Bert Hayslip, Jr., Department of Psychology, University of North Texas.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Julie Hicks Patrick 53 Campus Drive West Virginia University Morgantown, WV 26506; Contact: [julie.patrick@MAIL.WVU.EDU](mailto:julie.patrick@MAIL.WVU.EDU)

**Abstract**

The goals of the current study were to examine attitudes about custodial grandparents and to examine whether personal experiences with grandparents influenced those attitudes. Data were provided by 730 younger adults (mean age about 20 years) who completed surveys regarding their experiences with their own grandparents, attitudes toward custodial grandparenting, and openness to becoming a custodial grandparent in the future. Mean differences in attitudes as a function of experience did emerge. In addition, a mixed structural model showed that young adults who felt their grandparents helped to raise them perceived custodial grandparenting as less distressing, and it was these perceptions of distress that related to being more open to accepting the role of custodial grandparent themselves. Results are discussed in terms of changing norms and their relevance to policies affecting families.

*Keywords:* grandparenting, attitudes, coresidence, behavioral intentions

Worldwide, more children know their grandparents and great-grandparents than at any other time in history (Dunifron, 2012; WHO, 2012). This contact extends beyond frequent visits, with about 60% of American grandparents being actively involved in childcare (Luo, LaPierre, Hughes, & Waite, 2012). Moreover, of the 7.0 million American grandparents who are co-resident with a grandchild, 2.7 million have responsibility for the child's basic needs (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2012). These "grandfamilies," those families in which a grandparent has primary responsibility for a child's needs, face a variety of challenges, including the negative attitudes of others (Hayslip, Glover, Harris,

Miltenberger, Baird, & Kaminski, 2009; Strough, Patrick, & Swenson, 2003).

In this light, attitudes about custodial grandparenting have implications for public policies and programs (Fruhauf, Pevney, & Bundy-Fazioli, 2015; Minkler, 1999), wherein the link between attitudes and policy is important because we can expect an increase in the number of caregiving and custodial grandparents in the future. In fact, many among the current cohort of younger adults will find themselves needing childcare assistance from their own parents, many may become custodial grandparents themselves, and all will be affected by social policies that support or hinder these family-care situations (Parke, 2013). Whereas significant work has examined negative attitudes toward aging, in general, fewer studies have examined attitudes about custodial grandparenting. Even fewer have examined attitudes toward custodial grandparenting held by younger adults (Miltenberger, Hayslip, Harris, & Kaminski, 2003-2004; Hayslip et al., 2009). Thus, the goals of the current study were to examine the associations among experiences with grandparents and attitudes toward custodial grandparenting, utilizing analyses examining comparisons across different levels of experience. In addition, we sought to explain relations between experiences with grandparents and attitudes toward grandparent caregivers.

### **Influences on Attitudes toward Grandparents**

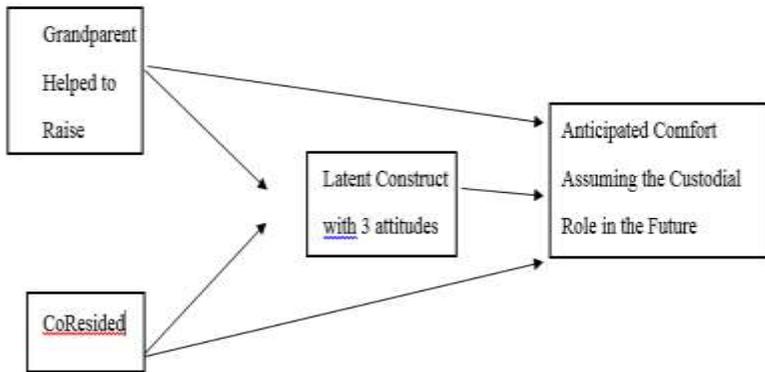
In general, attitudes include an affective component, stereotypes and beliefs, and behavior (Hess, Birren, & Schaie, 2006). Although one's personal experiences with grandparents may influence attitudes about aging, the effect is not always consistent or clear. For example, some studies of younger adults' attitudes suggest that one's own grandparent may be viewed more

positively than others and as different from typical “old people” (Brussoni & Boon, 1998; Soliz & Harwood, 2006). Other studies show that younger adults may be more critical of their own grandparents than they are of older strangers (Anderson, Harwood, & Hummert, 2005). Meta-analytic work (Kite, Stockdale, Whitley, & Johnson, 2005) suggests that although younger adults may hold negative views about older adults in general, these attitudes are mitigated by a close relationship with at least one grandparent. Thus, it is the quality of one’s interactions with grandparents, and not merely contact with older adults, that seems to influence attitudes.

More recent work supports the conclusions of Kite and colleagues (Kite et al., 2005). For example, among college students, nearly half of whom had lived with an older adult, those who had more frequent communication with older adults tended to have more positive and fewer negative attitudes about older adults (Lee, 2009). No differences in attitudes were observed based on coresidence, however. In contrast, Allan and Johnson (2009) found that college students who had ever lived with an older adult experienced more anxiety about aging, particularly in comparison to those who merely worked alongside older adults. Bousfield and Hutchison (2010) extended this work and found that the effects of the quality of contact on intention to interact with older adults in the future were mediated by aging anxiety. Similarly, Celdrán, Triadó, and Villar (2011) highlight the potentially negative effects accruing to grandchildren when a grandparent has extensive caregiving needs, as in the case of dementia.

Thus, direct experiences with grandparents, including coresidence and positive communication, seem to influence attitudes. These attitudes, in turn, influence one's behavioral intentions. To date, however, no study has directly examined the contributions of

different kinds of experiences with grandparents to understanding attitudes about custodial grandparenting. This issue is important, as social and economic trends coalesce in such a way as to increase the number of families in which grandparents are a major child-rearing influence, co-resident with a grandchild, or both (Luo et al., 2012). Thus, in the framework presented in Figure 1, we examined the associations among personal experiences with grandparents, attitudes toward custodial grandparents in general, and one's behavioral intentions regarding taking on a custodial grandparenting role in the future.



*Figure 1: Conceptual Model*

### **Method**

Participants (N = 730) enrolled in an introductory human development course at a large mid-Atlantic university completed online surveys as part of their course requirements. Other activities were available to fulfill course requirements. The Institutional Review Board approved the use of such activities in the course and permitted statistical analyses with de-identified data. The majority of the participants were female (68.7%, n = 497); the mean age was 19.98 years (SD = 1.97).

Regarding coresidence, participants indicated whether they had ever lived at their grandparent's house, whether a grandparent had ever lived in the student's parental home, and whether they felt that their grandparent had helped to raise them. As shown in Table 1, half of the participants reported having never been coresident with a grandparent and that the grandparent was not a significant child-rearing influence. Among the other half, however, 29.5% reported having lived with a grandparent at some point, and an additional 20.5% reported that although not coresident, their grandparent had helped to raise them.

Table 1  
*Percent Reporting Coresidence and Child-Rearing Involvement (N=730)*

	Perceptions of Grandparent Involvement	
	Grandparent helped to raise GC N = 282	Grandparent did not help to raise GC N = 448
Never Coresident (n = 515)	20.5	50.0
Coresident (n = 215)	18.1	11.4
GP- HH (n = 88)	6.3	5.8
Parent HH (n = 66)	4.7	4.4
GP and P (n = 61)	7.1	1.2

### Scenario and Attitudes

Participants read a single scenario that represented a typical custodial grandmother's experiences (Hayslip et al., 2009). Participants then completed a 90-item battery of questions concerning

their attitudes toward the grandmother, the child, and the parents (Hayslip et al.). Only those items related to the present analyses were discussed.

**Scenario:** *Mrs. Smith is a married grandparent and has several adult children. She has recently become a full-time caregiver to one of her grandchildren. Mrs. Smith has been caring for her elementary-school-aged granddaughter for one year and her good health has allowed her to provide for her grandchild. Her granddaughter has exhibited some behavior and learning problems in school and has been involved in fights with friends. Also, her grandchild has begun to experience some symptoms of depression such as not eating and trouble sleeping at night. Mrs. Smith became the primary caregiver of her granddaughter when the child's parents became unemployed. Due to these circumstances, Mrs. Smith will remain the primary caregiver of her grandchild for an indefinite period of time.*

Behavioral Intentions regarding Custodial Grandparenting were assessed using a two-item, five-point Likert-type response scale. Participants indicated how strongly they agreed with the following statements: "If you were this grandparent, you would feel comfortable with this arrangement" and "If you were this grandparents, you would refuse to raise this grandchild", (reversed scored). The scale had a mean of 7.68 (sd = 1.64;  $\alpha = .66$ ).

Distressed Caregiver attitudes were assessed with a five-item scale, with items such as "This grandparent

is likely to become depressed” (Hayslip et al., 2009). The scale had a mean of 14.19 ( $sd = 3.92$ ;  $\alpha = .81$ ). Higher scores indicated perceptions of more distress or burden.

Heroic Grandmother attitudes were assessed using five items, including “This grandparent is a good family symbol for the grandchild” (Hayslip et al., 2009). The scale could range from 1 to 25, with higher scores reflecting more heroic attitudes. The sample mean was 20.94 ( $sd = 3.04$ ;  $\alpha = .82$ ).

Attitudes regarding whether the grandmother was viewed as a Flawed Parent were assessed with three items, including “This grandparent should feel guilty over her earlier failures as a parent” (Hayslip et al., 2009). The sample mean was 6.76 ( $sd = 2.24$ ,  $\alpha = .60$ ).

## Results

Preliminary analyses indicated no problems with missing data; scales were normally distributed and free of outliers. Regarding general views about custodial grandparenting, the sample means suggest that the participants viewed the grandmother in the vignette as moderately distressed, somewhat heroic, and little-to-blame for the custodial arrangement. The average for behavioral intention regarding custodial grandparenting was in the moderate range.

We conducted exploratory analyses to determine whether we could combine the different types of coresidence, or whether we needed to analyze each group separately. Results of these one-way analysis of variance tests, available from the first author, revealed few differences among those who had ever lived in a grandparent's home, had ever co-resided with a grandparent in the parental home, or had experienced both forms of coresidence with a grandparent. Thus, we combined the three subgroups to form a single group of

grandchildren who had coresidence history with a grandparent.

### **Differences in Attitudes toward Grandparents**

We examined whether attitudes were associated with prior experiences with a grandparent using a series of 2 (Perceptions of Child-Rearing Involvement; grandparent helped to raise versus did not help to raise) by 2 (coresidence; participant ever lived with grandparent versus did not ever live with grandparent) analysis of variance tests. Significant effects were observed for perceptions of *Mrs. Smith* as burdened or distressed ( $F(3, 726) = 6.72, p = .001; R^2 = .03$ ), with participants who felt that their grandparent had helped to raise them viewing *Mrs. Smith* as less distressed than those who did not report that their grandparent had helped to raise them ( $F(1, 726) = 10.43, p = .001$ ). Neither a main effect for coresidence, nor the interaction emerged as significant.

Contrary to our hypotheses, no significant differences were evident in terms of perceptions that *Mrs. Smith* was especially virtuous or heroic ( $F(3, 726) = 1.77, p = .15$ ). However, differences emerged for perceptions that the grandmother was a Flawed Parent ( $F(3, 726) = 3.09, p < .05; R^2 = .01$ ). Participants who reported that their own grandparent had helped to raise them viewed the grandmother in the vignette as less responsible for her current situation than did those who did not feel their grandparent had helped to raise them,  $F(1, 726) = 5.37, p = .02$ .

Regarding one's behavioral intentions related to custodial grandparenting, a significant group difference was observed  $F(3, 726) = 5.02, p < .01; R^2 = .02$ . Those who felt their grandparent had helped to raise them were more positive toward assuming such a role in the future.

Neither the main effect for coresidence nor the interaction emerged as significant.

### **Linking Experiences and Attitudes to Behavioral Intentions**

To more fully understand the associations among personal experiences, attitudes, and behavioral intentions, we conducted a mixed model structural equation analysis, implemented in AMOS (V. 21; Arbuckle, 2012). Supported by the bivariate correlations shown in Table 2, the model depicted in Figure 1 was tested. Fit of the model to the data was assessed using a chi square. Because chi-square is sensitive to large samples, indicating small deviations as statistically significant, we also included the Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). GFI and CFI values greater than .95 and RMSEA < .05 indicate good fit of the model to the data (Byrne, 2001).

Table 2  
*Correlations among Study Variables (N = 730)*

	1	2	3	4	5
1 Behavioral Intention: Custodial Grandparenting	1.0				
2 Child-Rearing Influence	.123**	1.0			
3 Co-Resident	.104**	.302**	1.0		
4 Distressed Grandparent	-.445**	-.153**	-.103**	1.0	
5 Heroic Grandparent	.341**	.078*	.050	-.265**	1.0
6 Flawed Parent	-.473**	-.103**	-.071	.512**	-.418**

Notes: \* p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001

Table 3 presents the maximum likelihood estimates (MLE) for each path tested. The top portion shows the measurement model, where the three attitude scales load onto a single latent Attitude construct. The bottom portion of the table shows the structural model. The initial fit of the overall model was adequate as per the GFI, but equivocal via the CFI and RMSEA ( $\chi^2$  (DF = 7, N = 730) = 87.24,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .409$ ; GFI = .963; CFI = .886; RMSEA = .125). The model accounted for more than 40% of the variance in Behavioral Intention: Custodial Grandparenting. As hypothesized, Attitudes were significantly associated with Behavioral Intention: Custodial Grandparenting ( $\beta = -.636$ ), with those expressing less negative attitudes being more comfortable becoming custodial grandparents themselves. As expected, those who perceived that their grandparents helped to raise them reported less negative attitudes ( $\beta = -.145$ ), but those perceptions did not exert a direct effect on Behavioral Intention: Custodial Grandparenting ( $\beta = 0.009$ ). Coresidence with a grandparent exerted neither direct effects on Behavioral Intention: Custodial Grandparenting ( $\beta = .030$ ) nor indirect effects via Attitudes ( $\beta = -0.069$ ).

Exploratory post hoc analyses were conducted in order to identify a more parsimonious and better-fitting model. Thus, non-significant paths were dropped one at a time, and the model was re-analyzed for fit. Because the path from Coresidence to Attitudes is potentially meaningful theoretically, we chose to retain that nonsignificant path for further investigation.

Table 3

*Standardized and unstandardized estimates for tested model*

Measurement Model			$\beta$	b	SE(b)	CR
Distressed Grandmother	←	Attitudes	.656	1.0		
Heroic Grandmother	←	Attitudes	-.502	-.595	.055	-10.85***
Flawed Parent	←	Attitudes	.769	.950	.069	13.70***
Structural Model						
Attitudes	←	CoResidence	-.069	-.387	.244	-1.585
Attitudes	←	Child Rearing Influence	-.145	-.766	.231	-3.316***
Behavioral Intention: Custodial Grandparenting	←	CoResidence	.030	.107	.115	.931
Behavioral Intention: Custodial Grandparenting	←	Child-Rearing Influence	.009	.030	.110	.275
Behavioral Intention: Custodial Grandparenting	←	Attitudes	-.636	-.405	.032	12.815***

Note: \*\*\*  $p < .001$ 

As shown in Table 4, neither dropping the path from Coresidence to Behavioral Intention: Custodial Grandparenting nor dropping the path from Perceptions of Child-rearing to Behavioral Intention: Custodial Grandparenting resulted in incremental improvement in

the fit indices.

Table 4  
*Post hoc Model Modifications*

	$X^2$	GFI	CFI	RMSEA	$X^2$ Change
Initial Model: All Paths	87.237	.963	.886	.125	---
Deleted Path CoreCoresidence to Behavioral Intention: Custodial Grandparenting	88.022	.962	.886	.117	0.785
Child-rearing Influence to Behavioral Intention: Custodial Grandparenting	88.293	.962	.887	.110	0.271

### Discussion

Attitudes and stereotypes influence our behavior in a variety of ways (Hess et al., 2006). It is thought that personal experiences directly shape attitudes (Kite et al., 2005), but the empirical base linking personal experiences with grandparents to attitudes is equivocal. One reason for the mixed findings might relate to the use of imprecisely measured proxy variables. That is, many studies use coresidence as a proxy for frequency of contact, relationship quality, or both. We sought to disentangle the influences of coresidence and relationship by examining these as separate influences.

Similar to Lee (2009), a large percentage of our sample had been coresident with a grandparent, either in the grandparent's home, their parental home, or both. Based on exploratory analyses that showed no differences among these various constellations, we collapsed across these different living arrangements for

the present analyses. However, we remain intrigued at the potential for different patterns of coresidence to exert different influences on attitudes and behaviors, as suggested by work with grandchildren of persons with dementia (Celdrán et al., 2011). In the current study, coresidence with a grandparent was not significantly associated with attitudes nor with behavioral intentions related to custodial grandparenting. However, we encourage future research to investigate the potential link between coresidence and attitudes and behaviors in more detail, including the length and timing of the coresidence. Further, research examining whether prior coresidence with their own grandparent predicts better outcomes among custodial grandparents would be especially interesting and has important policy and service implications (Fruhauf et al., 2012). Researchers interested in this area are well-advised to include more in-depth questions about prior living arrangements and to plan for qualitative analyses that reflect the complexity of multigenerational households (Strom & Strom, 2011). As a way to disentangle living arrangements from relationship quality, we asked people to indicate whether they felt a grandparent had helped to raise them. To our knowledge, this is a unique way to pose the question of relationship quality within the context of family roles. Asked in this manner, a large percentage of our sample reported that their grandparent helped to raise them. Less negative attitudes were associated with increased comfort in taking on the role of custodial grandparent in the future. Although we detected mean differences in attitudes as a function of perceptions of grandparent influence in childrearing, these perceptions were not directly related to behavioral intentions regarding the role of custodial grandparent.

Aspects of our research design limit the conclusions we can draw. Because of the extensive

battery of follow-up items about the Mrs. Smith vignette, we examined only a single custodial grandparent scenario. Including additional vignettes would have added a significant burden to our participants. Additionally, Hayslip et al. (2009) provide compelling evidence that younger adults appreciate differences across custodial grandparenting contexts, such as divorce, parental failure, and abuse. Thus, researchers need to conduct in-depth examinations of a variety of contexts. As an initial study, then, we chose to focus on a high-prevalence context: custodial grandparenting due to economic sufficiency.

We also focused on three attitudes, but there are likely many different attitudes that people hold toward custodial grandparenting, and these attitudes may interact. As social psychologists continue to explore the linkages among experiences, attitudes, and behavioral intentions, additional work may be necessary in studies about attitudes toward custodial grandparents.

Finally, although our results contribute to the knowledge regarding stereotypes and attitudes toward custodial grandparents, the regional nature of our sample also may limit generalizability. Specifically, our sample is drawn from a region in which family ties are strong and household delineations are fluid. However, in this region, it is still considered to be non-normative to coreside with one's grandparents. Other regions in the United States or other nations might hold different attitudes about custodial grandparents that influence one's comfort in becoming a custodial grandparent. Despite the potential limited generalizability of these findings, they clearly indicate that one's attitudes toward grandparents are influenced by perceptions of having been raised by them, and that such attitudes predict comfort in taking on a child-rearing role as a grandparent. This might suggest an avenue to modify the

acceptability of the grandparent caregiver role in educating younger and middle-aged persons about the nature of custodial grandparenting, and in doing so, emphasize the strengths such persons possess as well and the many satisfactions derived from raising a grandchild. Thus, by addressing attitudes held by younger adults, we might be able to alleviate some of the negative stereotypes held about custodial grandfamilies.

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