

THE GRANDPARENT EFFECT

STORIES FROM A QUIET REVOLUTION

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COULD YOUR GRANDKIDS GET BY WITHOUT YOU?

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Categories: Conversations, Studies

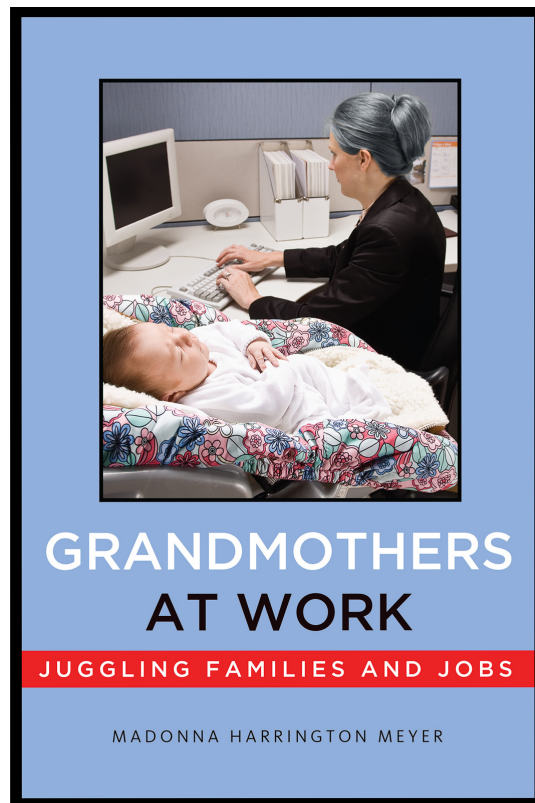
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How has grandmotherhood changed over the past few decades? How are grandmothers juggling work and family? What's it like to care for your grandchildren, your grown children, and your elderly parents all at once?

Madonna Harrington Meyer, a sociologist at Syracuse University, explores these questions and many more in her groundbreaking new book, [Grandmothers at Work](#), which I [posted](#) about not long ago.

It's a study of 48 grandmothers around the country who hold down jobs but also babysit their grandkids regularly; most of the grandmas also help support the children financially.

The role of grandmothers in the United States seems to have "intensified" in recent years, says Harrington Meyer: In general, grandmothers are spending more hours and dollars on their grandchildren than they did a generation ago.



Grandmothers At Work, written by sociologist Madonna Harrington Meyer and published by New York University Press, is a study of working women who are also making significant contributions of time and money to their grandchildren.

I interviewed Harrington Meyer about the causes of this intensification, how grandmothers are experiencing it, and what employers and lawmakers could do to make life a little easier for everyone.

This book was inspired by some grandmothers you know, right?

Yes, that's absolutely correct.

I was at a conference that had nothing to do with grandparenting, but during the breaks I kept hearing colleagues of mine who were a little older than me talking about how much pressure they were under to provide care for their grandchildren.

And this really did surprise me.

These were mostly women, and many of them had not stayed home with their own children during the day—they had worked, and they had their children in daycare—and so they were flummoxed to be expected to be staying home to provide grandchild care.

They had been asked—could they use their spring break to come take care of the grandkids? Could they use their summer break? Could they come in for the weekend?

And while they loved their grandkids, they did feel a certain amount of tension about trying to juggle work and grandchild care when they were in their 50s and 60s.

All the women you interviewed for the study are providing care for their grandchildren and working in paid jobs, too. But other than that, they're so different from one another, and their families are so different.

I think that is the single biggest message of this book: that families are diverse.

And so, for example, on the topic of , some people ask me, "Is it just the low-income families that do that?"

No, that happens across the board. Low-income families worry they're providing too much help, and the very wealthiest families worry they're providing too much help.

So one of the things I found was that these themes tended to go across race, they tended to go across educational levels, and they tended to go across income levels, and there's tremendous diversity.

You coin a new phrase in your book: "the intensification of grandmothering." You think grandmothering might be more demanding now than it used to be.

Yes, it is new, but it is based very, very much on the concept of the intensification of motherhood . I think motherhood has very much changed.

But what I found was some very, very intense grandmothering, and that was a bit of a surprise to me.

How convinced are you that the intensification of grandmothering is a widespread trend, as opposed to something that's happening in a minority of families?

I try to be very cautious to not overstate my results and one of the main reasons for that is that this is a "convenience sample." It is not nationally representative; it is not randomly selected. So therefore it would be really incorrect of me to draw very definitive conclusions.

Rather, with qualitative work like this, what you're looking to do is identify—what are the major themes at play right now? Then quantitative people who've drawn random samples can go back and look to see how common they are.

the intensification was very common. All but four said they're doing more than they thought they would be doing and more than their own mothers did—so that was very pervasive in my sample of 48.

You write that in many families, grandmothers are doing so much simply because parents desperately need the help.

I think there are several sociodemographic changes that have prompted some of this. There's a huge increase in single parenting, which I talk about in the book.

When you have a single parent raising children, there is often much more assistance needed from grandparents than if there were two parents raising children. And that can be financial assistance, but it's also time and shuttling—driving them to this and to that.

there have not been very many changes in our social policies. A lot of people still don't have any paid vacation time at all; a lot of people still don't have any paid health insurance; a lot of people still don't have any paid sick days; a lot of people don't have any flex time; a lot of people are still very vulnerable in their jobs.

And so even though we've had major sociodemographic changes, we've not seen social policies respond to help families cope with those changes. And I think it's that juxtaposition right there that creates so much need and causes so many grandmothers' phones to be ringing.

Were some of the grandmothers you studied giving so much money to their grown children and grandchildren that they were endangering their own financial security?

Some people have ample resources and they can give a great deal of support and still be economically secure, but some are giving a great deal of support and they are not themselves economically secure at all. And by far my biggest concern is with those who are diverting money from their own old-age nest egg and actually adding new debts.

What has been the reaction to your book? Are readers surprised to learn about the intensification of grandmothering?

What I've been doing since the book came out is presenting this, and there are two kinds of audiences. One audience is grandmothers, who know exactly how intense it's become, and the other is everybody else, who don't really seem to be aware.

I will say I've presented the book dozens of times now, and people have very strong reactions to it—very strong personal reactions.

One woman was very agitated about the book, and it took me a second to figure out why. And she said, "I don't want to be like those grandmothers, I don't want to provide all that care ... I want to be a special day grandma. I want to be the grandma who just pops in for the special day and sweeps you off to lunch or a movie and then drops you back off, but I don't want to be like those grandmothers in your book."

How have parents of young children reacted to the book?

That's been an interesting thing too. Some parents tell me, "You described my parents in there exactly; my parents are just like this one or that one."

But a fair number of parents have said to me, "When are you going to write a book about the grandparents who don't help at all? My parents don't help at all; when are you going to write that book?"

Is it just that we expect these days that grandparents will help?

Well, I think some expect it and some don't. I will say in my undergrad classes—these are roughly 20-year-olds—I always ask the question, “After you leave college, whether you marry or not, are you thinking you'll have children, and if so, are you thinking you'll work, and who will provide daycare?”

It's always at least two-thirds of my class who says that the grandma is going to take care of the kids. And then I say, “Does Grandma have any idea that this is your plan?” About half of them say, “Oh yeah, it's her idea,” and the other half say, “No, she has no idea.”

A couple of them have said, “My mom has already told me she is not taking care of my kids—'Don't even think of it.'”

I know a lot of college-aged students expect that a grandmother in particular or grandparents will provide care, but it's not always Grandma or Grandpa's plan to provide the care.

Let me tell you one other very interesting reaction I've had. I was presenting the book and one student was kind of squirmy; I could see her squirming but I couldn't think why. And then during the question and answer, she said “You're calling this work,” and I said, “Yeah, I am calling it work.”

And she said, “But my grandma always seemed so happy when she made my lunch.”

She didn't like that I was calling work. That's an interesting point, isn't it? I'm very comfortable calling this work ... but I do find now when I'm talking to a younger audience I need to pause for a minute and let them think through, “What is work?” “Is it work if Grandma is smiling?”

Another phrase you invented in the book is “club sandwich of care work.” You're talking about grandmothers who are taking care of their grown children, their grandchildren, and their elderly parents all at once.

It was really amazing to me how long we've used this expression of the “sandwich generation” and in fact many of the women I interviewed themselves used that expression. It's out there in popular language, but that implies just a person who's caring for one generation older and one generation younger. But I repeatedly found people caring for at least three generations, not two.

I found it interesting that one-third of your grandmothers said they feared they were “enabling” their grown children by giving them so much help—even though you never brought up enabling. Did that surprise you?

It did. That to me was very surprising and honestly that was the source of a lot of the tears . I would say almost everybody cried at some point, and some people cried a fair amount.

Now, some of the tears are happy tears, and I do talk about that a lot in the book. They literally cannot talk about their grandkids without welling up with happy tears—they just love them that much—but there were a fair number of people who cried about exhaustion and depletion of resources and their worries.

But the enabling is the thing that really roused the most tears. It's a complicated thing.

You have the grandmother who says, "My son got divorced, he had custody on the weekends, and I would call over there and I could hear the party. So I would drive over there and pick up my grandson for the weekend because I didn't want him to be at the party. But now I'm enabling my son to continue partying."

Those stories really were the hardest parts of the interviews. They know they're making it worse in a way, but they're not willing to let their grandchild suffer.

I never ever asked, "Do you feel like you're providing too much care, do you feel like you're enabling?" But one-third of them actually used the word "enabling," one-third of them brought it up.

So the grandmothers who would say, "They drop off my grandson but with no diapers, no formula. Now I have to use my money and go get diapers and formula so I can take care of him."

Or: "They drop him off and they say they'll come back right after the movie, but they don't; they don't come back until tomorrow. So then if I continue to take my grandson, am I enabling my adult child to party, to go out, to be irresponsible, to be a bad parent? Yes, I am. But I'm not going to let my grandchild suffer."

It was source of great tension, and by far the most difficult part of the conversations.

You know, the grandmother who said my granddaughter called and said, "Grandma, it's dark," so she went and paid the power bill.

Now, she knows that there was money to pay that power bill and that it got used on drugs or alcohol or something ... But she paid the power bill because she's not going to let her granddaughter sit there in a dark cold house. Those were sources of great tension for families.

They were also sources of tension between spouses. So you saw several examples where Grandmother's providing a great deal of care and Grandpa would like her to knock it off.

This was such a thought-provoking book. I'm wondering what follow-up studies you hope it inspires among your colleagues.

Well, I see many directions to go with this.

So, for example, we have a lot of feminist scholars who focus on juggling work and family, but they tend to focus on it for mothers, or mothers and fathers, not grandparents. So I think one thing we can do is start to extend over the life course a much more accurate picture of just how much of this some families do—certainly not all, but some.

I also think any policy work that focuses on—so how much would this situation change if we just had three months of paid maternity leave? Or, how much would this situation change if we were like the E.U., where every person who works is guaranteed four weeks of paid vacation or two weeks of paid sick leave or health insurance? Or if you just had all-day universal pre-K at age four for the whole country?

So anybody who's looking at policy work, they tend to think of, "What are the changes in policies and how would those affect nuclear families or young families?" I'd like us to be thinking, "How would that affect families over the entire life course?" Not "How does this affect Mom and Dad?" but "How does this affect Grandma and Grandpa?"

There are studies that show very clearly that in countries with better social programs, grandparents do less work. In countries that have more meager social programs like the United States, grandparents do much more helping with the family.

So that's another line of work that I think is very rich for other people to look at.

Personally, I'm already at work on my next book, and it is about grandparenting children with disabilities.

That came up a few times in this book, and it came up enough times that I thought, "I really want to just stop and focus on this."

What is grandparenting like when the grandchild has special needs?
