

Grandparents as Caregivers:
Report of Cognitive Research

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Background

Included in welfare reform legislation passed by Congress in 1996 was an authorization to collect information about a growing social phenomenon, grandparents who are primary caregivers for their grandchildren. Testimony before congress indicated that although there are currently a small number of such households, the number is growing, in part as a result of substance abuse and AIDS. The legislation called for the inclusion of questions to collect statistically significant data on such households in the decennial census. The questions developed for this purpose were to distinguish between households “in which a grandparent temporarily provides a home for a grandchild for a period of weeks or months during periods of parental distress” and households in which “a grandparent provides a home for a grandchild and serves as the primary caregiver for the grandchild.” Thus, the questions were to identify both long and short term arrangements for such children. Whether the grandparent had legal or informal custody of the child was not an issue. Since the legislation specifies “providing a home” for the grandchild, situations in which grandparents participated in childcare while the children were still primarily under their parent’s care were to be excluded from the estimates. We assumed that only minor grandchildren should be considered. Questions for testing were developed in conjunction with Population Division. This report describes the findings of ten cognitive interviews which were undertaken to examine the new questions. We have described the reactions of respondents to these questions, and indicated ways in which clarification of the intent of the data collection would assist us in achieving more precise wordings and better data.

Aims of the research:

Since these were new questions, the major aim of the research was to discover if the question wordings and concepts were understandable to respondents. Our aim was to establish whether care giving grandparents would respond positively to these questions. It was also necessary to discover whether the questions would falsely include grandparents in multiple generation households who do not have primary responsibility for grandchildren. Our focus was on the questions themselves rather than their presentation. We tested these proposed long form questions in the context of a short form, and thus we are unable to examine contextual effects on question interpretation. The design of the form used for these interviews was adapted from the Race and Ethnicity Targeted Test (RAETT.) It differs from the proposed 212 design, so we cannot make recommendations about the format of the questions.

Methods:

Since we were only interested in testing four questions, we decided, as noted previously, to include the questions in a short form questionnaire. This provided a survey context for the

questions, so that respondents would understand that the questions were part of a self-administered household questionnaire. We adapted RAETT forms to suit our purposes. This shortened the questionnaire development time considerably. It also allowed us to use a household roster, since we wanted to see whether our respondent's included their grandchildren as household residents. It also allowed us to establish the presence of co-grandparents and parents in the household early in the interview.

A copy of the questionnaire is included in Appendix A.

A series of ten cognitive interviews was undertaken by staff of the Center for Survey Methods Research. During the cognitive interviews, respondents were encouraged to think aloud, and concurrent and retrospective probing was used to investigate the meanings of particular words and phrases. After the respondents completed the forms, a short debriefing questionnaire was administered. Respondents were asked about question difficulty and sensitivity. In addition, we asked several questions designed to add to our understanding of the situation: we asked about expectations for the future care of the child and about any possible past spells of care. After this, a series of seven vignettes were administered. These vignettes were designed to broaden our understanding of how certain living situations involving grandparents and grandchildren were understood by our respondents. They were a necessary adjunct to our cognitive interviewing in order to broaden the range of situations beyond those that we were likely to encounter in a small number of cognitive respondents. Respondents were asked to determine how the grandparent in the vignette situation should answer the caregiver questions on the questionnaire.

The interview protocol, including the text of the vignettes, is included in Appendix B.

Recruitment of respondents

The respondents were recruited through personal contacts and through a support organization for grandparents who are caring for grandchildren. These means of recruitment tended to identify respondents who had long-term arrangements for the care of their grandchildren. Five of our respondents lived in multi generation households, containing either three or four generations. The remaining five respondents lived in households with only grandparents and grandchildren present. In several instances, the spouse of the respondent was present at the time of the interview, and also added to the discussion of the questionnaires. The respondents were interviewed at CSMR's cognitive laboratory, in their homes, or at local libraries. Respondents were paid \$25 for their participation in the research.

Findings:

The age screener

The age screener question which was tested differed from the one which is currently proposed for inclusion in the decennial long form, which asks the age screener in terms of age rather than date

of birth. This screener was not available to us at the time that we drafted our questions. The question we tested was:

7. Was this person born before December 8, 1971?

- Yes, born before December 8, 1971
- No, born on December 8, 1971 or later

The proposed placement for the grandparent questions in the long form is after an age screener. We maintained this position for the caregiver questions in our questionnaire. However, our screener asked about persons over the age of 25, rather than the age of 15 which will be used in the screener in the long form. This alteration was made to prevent respondent's from having to answer grandparent questions about persons who were obviously still very young.

Respondents had little difficulty in understanding the wording of the age screener, as their paraphrases of the question indicated. For example, one respondent's paraphrase of the question was, "Asking if I was born before 1971, and I was, way before."

Respondents reacted strongly to the placement of grandparent questions after an age twenty five screener. They thought that the questions were extremely irrelevant for persons who so young. They responded with incredulity, laughter, and by writing notes about it in the margins of the questionnaire, such as "not of age to be a grandparent". Some respondents did not mark anything in the answer boxes when they regarded the question as very irrelevant. This leads to the conclusion that item non-response will be caused when people are presented with questions they consider to be irrelevant. We expect this phenomenon to occur even more frequently when the age screener uses age 15 instead of 25.

An additional consequence should be considered. The presence of irrelevant questions which respondents tend to ignore may "train" respondents that skipping questions is a legitimate or expected response. This could affect the way that respondents deal with subsequent questions, and lead to higher item non-response in general.

Only one respondent had difficulty in answering the age screener for members of her family. She was uncertain of the year of birth of her grandson and son-in-law, although she knew their ages. She was uncertain of how to calculate a year of birth on the basis of this information. In current drafts of decennial long form, the age screener question and answer categories are phrased in terms of age rather than date of birth. We recommend the continued use of that strategy.

Another reaction to the age screener was to see it as redundant with the age question in the demographic section, which occurred only four questions previous to the age screener. Several respondent's puzzled over why we would be asking what appeared to be an additional age question. One respondent thought that it was designed as a check on his answer to the previous age question. About half the respondents had difficulty with the skips, and never figured out the

function of the age screener. In the actual long form this perceived redundancy will be mitigated by the presence of intervening questions about ancestry, education and the language spoken at home. We anticipate that perceived redundancy will be less of a problem in that context.

Recommendation:

1. If possible, place the grandparents as caregivers questions after a more appropriate age screener. If this is not possible, it might be better to move the question sequence about grandparents to a later point into the questionnaire.
2. Continue to phrase the screener question and answer categories in terms of ages rather than in terms of dates.

Presence of grandchildren

The next question is intended to establish whether or not the person asked about is a grandparent with grandchildren living in the household. The question wording was:

8. Does this person have any of his/her own grandchildren under age 18 living in this house or apartment?

The wording of the question appears to work relatively well for our respondents. Several noted the use of the phrase “own grandchildren”, which seemed to be asking if the grandchildren were related through marriage (i.e. step-grandchildren). For one respondent, this was ideologically unacceptable: “Grandchildren are grandchildren.” However, the only respondent who had a step-grandparent in her household answered “no” for him at question 8: “It’s not his grandchild, per se... I just think of [the child] as mine.” This was the only instance in which a grandchild was assigned to only one co-resident grandparent. (Four respondents answered “yes” at this question for a co-grandparent.) One other situation occurred among our respondents in which the wording “own grandchildren” might be relevant. A child was currently living with a mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. After some hesitation, the grandmother responded “yes” to question 8 for the child’s great-grandmother.

An anticipated difficulty with this question was the possibility that grandparents who had legally adopted grandchildren might answer this question in the negative. Two of our respondents had already legally adopted their grandchild, and another was planning to adopt a grandchild within a month. Two others indicated that they considered the grandchild as child, or that the grandchild addressed them as parents. However, in all of these instances, the grandparent answered “yes” to Question 8. Although such grandchildren may be referred to as “children” in some circumstances, these respondents thought that question 8 was asking about what they called the “real” or biological situation. (It is possible that the wording “own grandchildren” may help to cue this response.) One grandparent indicated that familial adoptions such as the one he was

contemplating may not be completely permanent, since the child and his/her actual parent may become more interested in one another over time. For these reasons, it appears that adoptions of grandchildren do not cognitively recategorize the child sufficiently to elicit “no” answers to question 8.

Other research has demonstrated that the word “live” has strong associations with permanence. Two of our vignettes (like questions 8 and 9) were phrased in terms of where the grandchildren “live.” One respondent used this wording to conclude that the living situation described must be permanent, regardless of other circumstances mentioned in the vignette. This suggests that the wording of the questions in terms of grandchildren “living” in the grandparent’s house or apartment may prove problematic for responses where grandchildren are in shifting and temporary arrangements. If the intent of the question is to include these shifting and temporary arrangements, it might be advisable to use a softer wording, like “staying” in Question 8. (However, it should be noted that one respondent suggested that grandchildren who move in and out of the grandparents’ home would never be put on the roster, because of the potential sensitivity of the situation.)

Recommendation:

1. Maintain the wording “own grandchildren.”
2. If shifting and temporary stays for grandchildren are supposed to be included as “yes” answers to question 8, reword the question as:

Does this person have any of his/her own grandchildren under age 18 **staying** in this house or apartment?

Responsibility

9. Is this grandparent currently responsible for most of the basic needs of any grandchild(ren) under the age 18 who live(s) in this house or apartment.

The main aim of our research related to this question was to discover the range of understandings of the concepts of “responsibility” and “basic needs” for our respondents.

“Basic needs” were defined in a very similar way by all respondents. They all mentioned food and clothing, and if they elaborated on the list, shelter and medical care were frequently added in. Providing education was sometimes mentioned.

However, respondents were aware that raising a child involves more than this, and emotional and other kinds of care were often added to this basic definition. This response is typical of the

pattern of beginning with material necessities and then expanding to non-tangibles:

“Basic needs for me means a safe home, food, clothing... ah, providing a place where this child is treated with dignity, with respect... where the child is encouraged to be the best they can be.”

However, it appears that the core of the concept of basic needs always includes the provision of material necessities.

The concept of responsibility was generally defined in terms of financial responsibility for the child. The most common reference was to paying for whatever the child needs; for example, when asked why they chose “yes” as an answer to question 9, respondents said:

“We pay for her.”

“He pays for all their food, clothing...”

“[We’re] able to work and care for them”, etc.

Terms like “financial” and “support” were also used to explain responses to this question. Another approach to the concept also included a financial aspect. Two respondents mentioned the idea of taking a child as a tax dependent in explaining their responsibility for the child.

However, the concept of financial responsibility is not taken literally when the government is the source of funds for the child. We had originally been concerned that grandparents whose children were part of the foster care system or who were receiving welfare benefits for them might answer “no” to question 9. Only one of our respondents had a grandchild who was also a foster child, and he marked himself “responsible” at question 9. Responses to our vignettes also indicate that receiving money from government sources does not alter respondent’s views of who is ultimately responsible for the child. For example:

“She’s receiving the money for the child.”

“She’s on a fixed income, so she’s just getting some help.”

There is some evidence from our vignettes that providing other kinds of care without providing complete financial support may be enough to elicit an answer of “yes” to question 9. It appears that this is the case primarily if the grandchild actually spends the bulk of his/her time at the grandparent’s residence. More than half of the respondents said that grandparents were “responsible” in three such vignettes, despite indications that the parents provided some level of financial support for the child. In one instance, the parent was described as “contributing rent” and providing medical insurance for the children, while the grandparent was described as feeding, bathing, taking them to doctors and visiting teachers. Seven of ten respondents believed that the grandparent in this case was “currently responsible for the basic needs of the child.” (Some indicated that they were still making a financial calculation, and believed that the grandparent must be contributing more resources than the parent to the care of the child, although this was not

stated in the vignette.) Responses to these vignettes suggest that grandparents who share financial responsibility with parents for the care of grandchildren are likely to say that the grandparents are responsible, if the grandchildren spend most of their time with them. It is not clear if this matches the intent of the question.

By contrast, if the grandparent is seen as living with the grandchild's family and providing only care-giving with no financial support, views of responsibility are reversed. One of our vignettes described a grandmother who took care of her child during the day while the child's parents were at work. Eight of ten respondents decided that the grandmother in the vignette was not responsible for the child, and often referred to her contribution to child care as "babysitting." This seems to indicate that respondents will not be likely say they are "responsible" for grandchildren in multiple generation households where they are not primarily financially responsible. (There is some evidence that care-giving without financial support is not seen as "baby-sitting" on the part of co-grandparents. One retired grandfather did all of the daily care for his two grandchildren while his wife worked full time. He marked himself "responsible" although he noted that he did not provide any of the money, and termed his wife "even more responsible.")

We believe that the current wording is adequate to elicit responses primarily in terms of financial responsibility for children. If the intent of the question is to exclude responses where the grandparent is care-giving without financial responsibility, it may be advisable to insert the word "financially" into the question.

Recommendation:

Clarify the intent of the question. If the intent of the question is to elicit responses exclusively in terms of financial responsibility, the question should be worded:

Is this grandparent currently **financially** responsible for most of the basic needs of any grandchild(ren) under the age 18 who live(s) in this house or apartment?

Long-Term or Short-Term Arrangement

10. Is this a long-term or a short-term arrangement for the grandchild(ren)?

- Long-term
- Short-term
- Don't know

This question proved to be the most problematic question in the series. The following points characterize responses to question 10.

There is inconsistency and variation in the definitions that respondents offer for long and short-term.

- What is considered long-term and short-term by different respondents overlaps to a great extent. In discussions during the completion of the questionnaire, respondents thought of periods of less than a year, a year, two years or three years as being “short-term.” When specific time periods are elicited in response to our vignettes, respondents associated long-term with period ranging from 6 months to 5 years. “Short-term” elicited “under a two year time frame,” “1 year or less,” and “a couple of years or a couple of months.”
- The definitions of short-term which respondents offer spontaneously indicate that they would not include periods of “weeks,” which were indicated in the legislation authorizing these questions. Only one respondent mentioned “weeks or months” when asked for a definition of “short-term.” (In fact, one respondent indicated that a period of weeks would not be long enough to qualify the situation for a “yes” response to the question about grand-parental responsibility.)
- The assessment of long-term and short-term is affected by the expectations which grandparents have about the arrangement. Definitions of “long-term” were sometimes presented in terms of when the child will become an adult. “Getting him raised and educated, until he’s a senior in college” is a definition typical of this approach. Several respondents said they thought of “long-term” as “forever.” Similarly, the assessment of whether a situation is short-term may be affected by the expectations that the grandparents may have about the grandchild eventually returning to the custody of his/her parents. In these instances, “short-term” means “temporary”, which was defined as “until the parents can get their act together,” or “until the parents can get their situation straightened out”. One respondent told us that any situation which was intended to be temporary, even if it “drags out”, should be considered short-term.

Most respondents interpret the question to be asking about how long the grandchild is likely to stay in the future, and do not consider the amount of time that has elapsed since the child began living with them during the current spell. Respondents do not include any past spells during which the child may have stayed with them in their homes in thinking about a response to this question. Only one respondent indicated that she was considering the entire time since the grandchildren were born in thinking about her answer.

Almost all of our respondents who answered question 10 saw the arrangements for their grandchildren as being long term. However, several respondents answered “don’t know.” In part this was a result of uncertainty about the future. For example, one respondent initially hesitated to mark “long-term” because “...I don’t know. I mean. Who knows? I mean, we’re just planning--we just go day by day, week by week.”

Another reason for the use of the “don’t know” category was that two grandchildren with different situations were being considered. In one instance, a grandfather was caring for one child who was likely to return to her mother within a short time, but the grandfather was waiting to adopt his other granddaughter. Another respondent (who arrived at this question in error because

of missed skips) was uncertain of what the question meant since the two grandchildren in her household were of two very different ages. One was a young adult, who would probably leave home in the near future; while the other was only seven, and would remain in the household for years to come.

We believe that this question should be rewritten to provide respondents with more guidance about what is considered long and short term. These categories should be included in the question and/or answer categories. We would need guidance about the intent of the question before choosing time periods to associate with long- and short-term. (In this regard, we should point out that including an answer category in terms of “weeks” might help to include stays of that length in respondents’ answers. However, it is also possible that introducing the concept may encourage additional misreporting by respondents who care for their grandchildren during vacations or for other brief, non-custodial periods.)

The problem of grandchildren in different situations is less easily solved. Asking the question about each of the grandchildren does not seem to be a practical alternative given the current number and placement of the questions. It would require a series of extra questions to determine which grandchild the response was for, and what the different situations might be.¹ If minimizing the number of “don’t know” answers for grandchildren in different situations is considered important, another alternative is possible. The long-term and short-term arrangement question might be asked about only one of the grandchildren. For instance, an instruction could be added to the question to consider only the situation of the oldest grandchild if there is more than one. However, this would probably result in an even greater loss of data than permitting the “don’t know” answers, and as a consequence we do not recommend it.

If the intent of the question is to elicit information about how long the stay of the child is in total, some other wording will be necessary. Current wording only cues respondents to consider how long in the future they expect the grandchild to stay. This decision will also require clarification of the intent of the question. An alternative strategy would be to limit the requested response to the time that the child has already been present in the household.

Recommendation:

1. After clarification of the concepts of long- and short-term, the answer categories to the question should be reworded to provide a specific number of weeks or months. For example, the answer categories might read “less than x months” and “x months or more.”

2. If it is necessary to consider the grandchild’s entire length of stay, the question should be

¹Alternatively, the questions might be recast so that they are asked about each child, for persons who are younger than 15 at the age screener. However, this alternative would make it difficult to determine which adult was the responsible grandparent if that grandparent were not Person 1 (and the anchor of the relationship question.)

reworded so that respondents will calculate the entire period, and not just from the present into the future.

Counting all the time since the grandchild(ren) began living here, how long will the arrangement last in total?

- less than 4 weeks
- 1 month - 12 months
- 1 year or more
- don't know

However, if data requirements will be satisfied by a calculation of the expected future length of stay, the complex instruction in the question above would not be necessary. In that case, the question should include the answer categories. For example:

Will this arrangement for the grandchild(ren) continue for less than four months or for four months or more?

- less than four months
- four months or more
- don't know

Skip patterns

Although we did not test the question in the format they will eventually have, our research strongly suggests that many respondents may have difficulties in following the skip patterns. (There are three skips in the series of questions, at questions 7, 8, and 9.) Five of our ten respondents had difficulties in following the skips. The main result of respondent's inability to skip properly was that respondents found themselves answering questions for persons for whom they were extremely irrelevant. The possible consequences of this are discussed above. In addition, some respondents attempted to reinterpret the question they had arrived at through not following skips, in order to make sense of it. For example, a respondent who marked that she was not responsible for the grandchildren living with her continued on to question 10, which she interpreted by thinking about how long it might take their mother to find her own apartment and answering on that basis. In fact, this question made sense if the person for whom it was answered was a child. As a result a common pattern of non-response was to answer the age screener, omit questions 8 and 9, (correctly) and then provide an answer for question 10. This should be kept in mind when procedures for editing the question sequence are written.