

**Does Race Matter for Grandparent-Grandchild Relationships? Grandparent Closeness in  
the Biracial Context**

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***Abstract***

Using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey (ECLS), this study investigates grandparent-grandchild relationships in biracial families. Specifically, this paper addresses three questions. First, does level of grandparent-grandchild closeness as reported by the parent differ between biracial children and monoracial children? Second, do differences persist in level of grandparent-grandchild closeness within biracial families when controlling for family socioeconomic factors? Third, is gender of the minority-status parent associated with measureable differences in the level of grandparent-grandchild closeness? Results suggest that biracial adolescents experience less close relationships with their grandparents than their monoracial White counterparts but more close relationships than their monoracial minority counterparts. These findings suggest that as a whole biracials occupy some distinct middle ground when compared to their monoracial counterparts.

## *Introduction*

The relationship between grandparents and grandchildren is an important one. Researchers have found that the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren acts as a unique bond that provides children with strong emotional support (Barranti, 1985). Specifically, this bond, “confers a natural form of social immunity on children that they cannot get from any other person” (Kornhaber&Woodward, 1981). Additionally, researchers show that without close bonds to grandparents, children do not receive the nurturance, support or emotional security they need (Barranti, 1985). The absence of a grandparent bond could also be harmful to the development of self-identity for a child. Grandparents assist in identity formation for children and without them researchers claim that children can lack a cultural and historical sense of self (Mead, 1978).

The relationship between grandparents and race, particularly for the growing biracial population is not well understood. For this study, I am going to attempt to understand close bonds between grandparents and grandchildren in the biracial family. In this study I use the kindergarten wave of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey data to examine the grandparent/grandchild relationship in more depth for biracial families. Specifically I would like to answer three research questions. First, does level of grandparent-grandchild closeness as reported by the parent differ between biracial children and monoracial children? Second, do differences persist in level of grandparent-grandchild closeness within biracial families when controlling for family socioeconomic factors? Third, is gender of the minority-status parent associated with measureable differences in the level of grandparent-grandchild closeness?

### *Why Biracials?*

Aside from the growing number of individuals with recognized biracial heritage in the United States, there are a number of reasons why this population is important to study and may be unique in terms of intergenerational relationships. For example, in our highly racially stratified society, biracials occupy a distinct category that is not congruent with other single race populations. This differential categorization makes it harder for biracials to assimilate with either of their single-race heritages (Campbell & Eggerling-Boeck, 2006; Park, 1928). Despite the occurrence of biracial unions throughout U.S history, these types of unions have been generally uncommon and stigmatized. We know biracial families are on the rise: in the 1970s, 1 in 100 children were born to parents of different races, and in recent years this figure has increased to 1 in 19 children. Yet social stigma still exists for biracial couples, and a primary source of unease comes from relatives who are uncomfortable with the unions producing children (O'Donoghue, 2004; St Jean, 1998). These findings suggest the potential for rejection of biracial families by extended family and community members; this rejection could lead to social isolation and distress (Campbell & Eggerling-Boeck 2006).

This research will focus on outcomes for biracials during the period of early adolescence, for a variety of theoretical reasons. First, experience in adolescence has enduring effects throughout the life course. For example, early socialization in adolescence can affect such outcomes as age at marriage, adult psychological wellbeing, and long-term life satisfaction (Clausen, 1991). Additionally, because adolescence is a time when racial identity becomes particularly salient, grandparent's unique social support could be particularly important in the process identity formation.

### ***What do we mean by “Biracial?”***

The term “biracial” is very broad and can encompass a wide variety of individuals. In fact, it is often used interchangeably with the terms “biracial” and “multiethnic.” This means that “biracial” can refer to individuals with any combination of multiple racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, most people in the nation have had some type of racial, ethnic or cultural mixing at some point in their family history, yet relatively few recognize themselves as biracial, biracial or multiethnic. For the remainder of this research project, this analysis will restrict the terminology to the use of the term “biracial.” Further, the specific biracials that are analyzed in this study are those having one parent with a minority racial background and one parent with a White background. This is done for two reasons: First, by restricting the discussion to individuals with only these racial heritage backgrounds the analysis can be narrowed down and can specifically address a population that has a multiple race heritage. Secondly, researchers have found that the majority of African Americans, Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans who interracially married had White partners (Bratter and Eschbach, 2006).

To further complicate the story of racial categorization, existing research on the biracial population suggests that identification is fluid and context-specific over the life course. For example, Harris and Sim (2002) find that adolescents with mixed race heritage do not always identify as having one. In fact these adolescents are more likely to identify as biracial among their peers than among their families. Physical appearance and individual choice are also strong influences in how a biracial individual will identify (Ahnallen et al., 2006). For example, feelings of social acceptance and social exclusion (often associated with physical appearance) on the individual level predicts self-identification with a monoracial or biracial group. Furthermore,

biracial identification varies by specific racial groups involved. For example, Asian-White biracials are more likely to be identified as biracial than those with other racial groupings. Gender-specific variation can also occur: Hispanic-White biracial girls are more likely to be identified as Hispanic, while and Hispanic-White biracial boys are more likely to be identified as White. Identification can vary by region as well. African American-White adolescents in the Northeast they are more likely to be identified as White, whereas in the South they are more likely to be identified as African American (Brunsma, 2005).

All of these findings suggest a complex story of identification for biracial individuals that varies by individual, context, gender, residential location and specific racial combination. As a way of taking into account these complexities I will focus on racial heritage as means for identifying biracial individuals in my sample. Specifically, the racial constructions that I will use for my categorizations will be based on parent-reported racial heritage. This is necessary for the age of the population and it will provide a less complicated and context specific construction of racial identity.

The biracial categorizations that will be generated from parent-reported racial heritage are: Asian-White, African American-White, Native American-White and Hispanic-White. For this research project, “Hispanic” will be treated as a racial category rather than solely an ethnic category. I am making this distinction as existing research suggests that the Hispanic live a distinct racialized experience in the United States that warrants acknowledgement (Johnson, 1997). As the identity literature suggest, the biracial experience is race-specific, and as such I expect each of these biracial categories to provide unique insights into the experience of biracial families in the United States.

## ***Background***

As life expectancy increases, grandparents have a more prolonged and thus increasingly important role in family systems (Barranti, 1985). Researchers have found that grandparent-grandchild relationships are beneficial to children's wellbeing across the life course. For example, the grandparent-grandchild bond provides a unique source of love and support that fosters social immunity for the child, which cannot be gained from any other source (Kornhaber & Woodward, 1981). Additionally, if a child does not receive this support, he or she may lack a cultural and historical sense of self that will prevent proper development of an identity (Baranowski, 1982; Barranti, 1985).

## ***Race and Grandparents***

Previous research also suggests that the grandparent/grandchild relationship might vary on the basis of both race and gender of parents. Specifically, as women typically act as "kin keepers" in a family, women are usually the ones who keep close ties with their parents (Barranti, 1985). This means that grandchildren typically have a closer relationship with their maternal grandmother (Eisenberg, 1988). This could be particularly interesting for biracial families as this would mean that grandchildren would often only have a close relationship with a grandparent of one race of the racial heritage. Therefore depending on the racial combination of their parents, a biracial child might only have a close relationship with either their minority heritage or their Non-Hispanic White heritage.

Researchers have also found that relationships between grandparents and grandchildren affect children differently depending on racial groups involved. Specifically, in African

American families, children benefit more from a co-residential grandparent than do children in non-Hispanic White families (Mollborn et al., 2010). Additionally, a grandparent's sense of satisfaction and mood towards grandchildren varies by race. Hispanic grandparents are generally more positive and have a greater sense of satisfaction when providing care for their grandchildren than either African American or non-Hispanic White grandparents (Goodman & Silverstein, 2006).

*Why might grandparent-grandchild relationships be different for biracial families?*

While prior research suggests that grandparent-grandchild relationships are important and that relationships can vary by racial group involved, little is known about these relationships within the biracial family. We know biracial families are on the rise, however, despite this increase in the population, social stigma still exists for biracial couples. In particular, research documents grandparents expressing concern with the unions producing children (St Jean, 1998; O'Donoghue, 2004).

Previous research on biracial families suggests that there is a potential disconnect that could exist between the biracial family and their extended kin networks. Specifically, qualitative literature suggests that many grandparents are uneasy about what a biracial grandchild might look like and are concerned about what identity the child might take. Furthermore, research documents the turmoil associated with interracial unions, going as far as individuals being disowned by parents and extended family members (Byrd and Garwick, 2006). Research also suggests that due to this experience of disapproval, biracial families make specific decisions about their residential location and their social networks. Biracial families are more likely to live in a non-white urban area, withdraw from public activities, and have less contact with their

spouses and their own extended family members (Winddance Twine, 1997; Aldridge 1978). This could be particularly problematic for the grandparent/grandchild bond due to the fact that researchers have found that parental feelings toward grandparents are transmitted to children and that these transmitted feelings persist through their life course (Gilford & Black, 1972).

All of these findings suggest that children in biracial households might not enjoy the same relationship with their grandparents as their monoracial counterparts. Not having these relationships can result in a variety of negative outcomes for the children in these households.

### ***Research Questions***

Currently, no quantitative study has directly examined the closeness of relationships between grandparents and grandchild in biracial families. Therefore, in this study three specific questions are addressed. First, does level of grandparent-grandchild closeness as reported by the parent differ between biracial children and monoracial children? This question will examine biracials as a whole and will determine if this growing segment of the population is distinct from their single race counterparts. Second, do differences persist in level of grandparent-grandchild closeness within biracial families when controlling for family socioeconomic factors? This question will determine if particular racial groups experience disadvantage relative to other groups, will this disadvantage exist after controlling for socioeconomic factors. Third, is gender of the minority-status parent associated with measureable differences in the level of grandparent-grandchild closeness? This question will add another layer of complexity to the analysis race and determine if parent's gender determines closeness to biracial grandchildren.



A number of specific hypotheses are tested in the current research. First, as discussed above, previous research on stigma associated with interracial unions and children from these unions suggest that grandparents might not have the same connection to biracial grandchildren as their single race counterparts. Therefore, the prediction is that results will show systematic disadvantage for biracials compared to monoracials when examining relationship closeness between grandparents and grandchildren. Second, previous research on the biracial population emphasizes the importance of race specific differences in a variety of family outcomes. For example, among African American-White biracial families, White mother-African American father households have a lower family income than households with a White father-African American mother. Furthermore, with the exception of Asian father-White mother households, all biracial combinations have an average family income that is less than homogenous non-Hispanic White families (Chew et al., 1989). These family income differences are a reflection of the racial and gender hierarchy in our society and suggest that differences between racial groups could exist also with extended kin relationships. Therefore, it is hypothesized that grandparent closeness will vary by racial combination of the biracial family, with specific variation on basis of race and gender combination of the parents.

## ***Method***

### *Data/Sample*

The dataset that will be utilized for this study is the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS). ECLS is a nationally representative sample of children which utilized multi-stage

stratified probability design using U.S. birth certificates. Data from this sample was collected at home from the adolescents and through parent surveys. This study will utilize data from the Kindergarten sample (N=21,260, total sample size). A particular advantage of this dataset is that it over-samples Asian and American Indian populations, both of which have the high of children with a multiple race heritage. This data has also provided a unique advantage for examining intergenerational transmission in biracial families. As I will be using the Kindergarten wave of this dataset and my particular interest in is familial heritage, racial classification will be solely based on parental self-reports of racial heritage.

For my analysis I restrict the sample to individuals with at least one biological parent respondent. Specifically, the nature of my racial classifications, require that I use race of biological parent. Therefore, I must omit non-biological parent respondents from my sample. Additionally, my interests for this research project are primarily an attempt at understanding the growing biracial family form and not as much about understanding outcome for multiple race individuals in adopted or non-traditional family forms. So while omitting individuals not living with at least one biological parent might overlook a subset of the biracial population, it is a restriction that is necessary for this research project.

### *Race*

Adolescent race is the primary analytic measure within this study. Specifically, I separate race into three categories and these categorizations can be seen in more detail visually in Figures 1-3. Each of these categories will be based on parental self-repot due to the Kindergarten age of the children. The first construction of race takes on a more condensed form. The categories for this variable are also constructed based on parents self-reports and are: Monoracial White,

Monoracial Minority and Biracial. This categorization will give a broader overview of biracial families and interactions with extended kin. This racial categorization does not suffer from sample size constraints. However, it cannot be used to tease out any race specific differences as they relate to extended kin interaction.

With that in mind, the second racial categorization takes on a more detailed account. This expanded categorization of race addresses the concerns of modern biracial research which claims that disaggregating racial grouping is imperative as it should not be expected that individuals with different multiple race heritages experience their race all in the same way (Jaret and Reitzes, 1999; Rockquemore and Laszloffy, 2005). Therefore, this racial categorization will be separated into nine categories.<sup>1</sup> These categories are based on parent's self-reported race. The detailed racial categories will be: Monoracial White, Monoracial Black, Monoracial Native American, Monoracial Asian, Monoracial Hispanic, Monoracial Other, Biracial Other, Hispanic-White, Black-White, Native American-White and Asian-White. The primary concern with this racial categorization is that although it allows for more insight into differing effects on the basis of particular racial heritage background, it severely limits sample sizes.

The final categorization of race uses parents self-reported race as a proxy for grandparent's race. Once grandparent's race is inferred I categorize in two separate ways. The

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<sup>1</sup> Multiracial categorization is separated in this way (White-minority category), as a primary goal of this analysis is to compare multiracials to their White and minority counterparts. Furthermore, it is useful when comparing outcomes to previous findings as previous literature has treated categorization in the same way.

first categorization is the more condensed version and includes four categories: Monoracial with White Maternal Grandparents, Monoracial with Minority Maternal Grandparents, Biracial with White Maternal Grandparents and Biracial with Minority Maternal Grandparents. Each of these categories is represented in terms of maternal grandparent because prior literature suggests that maternal grandparents have a larger role in grandchildren's lives than do paternal grandparents. This could be due to the traditional role of mothers as "kin keepers." Therefore by having an understanding of grandparent-grandchild interaction broken down in terms of race of the most important grandparent ties, we can better understand how race plays a role in these families. That being said, the four category racial breakdown does not provide any nuance as to how these interactions might differ by specific racial group involved. Therefore, I will also create a more detailed grandparent 7 category racial classification: Monoracial with White Maternal Grandparents, Monoracial with Minority Maternal Grandparents, Biracial with White Maternal Grandparents, Biracial with Black Maternal Grandparents, Biracial with Asian Maternal Grandparents, Biracial with American Indian Maternal Grandparents, Biracial with Hispanic Maternal Grandparents, and Biracial with Other Maternal Grandparents.

## Sample Size

Monoracial White	4,882
Monoracial Minority	1,566
<b>Biracial</b>	740
<b>Minority Mother</b>	321
<b>White Mother</b>	419

### *Grandparent closeness*

For this analysis, the dependent variable is grandparent closeness. This concept will be based on a parent report to the question of “How many grandparents would you say CHILD has a close relationship with?” The question will be ordinal with four categories, with a lower score being associated with the least close to grandparents and the higher score being associated with the most close to grandparents.

The fact that this is a parent reported closeness could be a limitation of this study. However, research suggests that the closer a parent feels to extended kin the more contact they have with that family member. Since the adolescences are still at such a young age, the

relationship that their parent has with the grandparents should reflect amount of contact and the nature of the relationship that the child has as well.

### *Controls*

A basic set of controls was also included in each model: sex, mother's level of education, mother's marital status, family income, number of grandparents living and mother's age at first birth. Controlling for sex of the adolescent is important as previous literature has suggested some sex specific differences for various outcomes relating to biracial children. Controlling for mother's level of education and family income will provide a way of filtering out differences based on socioeconomic status. Additionally, I also control for number of grandparents living so that the results are not affected by a grandchild not having close relationships due to death. .

### *Analysis*

Methodologically, survey functions for negative binominal regression models were estimated to analyze the relationship between condensed race and grandparent closeness. Negative binominal regression is the appropriate model for this analysis because grandparent closeness is operationalized here as a count dependent variable and it cannot be assumed that the conditional mean and variance are equal. Models were estimated using the survey commands in Stata, which are specifically designed to account for the statistical requirements of complex large-scale survey data such as ECLS.

## ***Results***

### *Descriptive Statistics*

Descriptive statistics shown in Table 2, suggest that being minority or biracial results in reporting fewer close relationships to grandparents than being White. For example, monoracial minorities have the lowest reported number of close relationships to grandparents, reporting on average being close to 2.07 grandparents. Biracial families report on average being close to 1.73 grandparents, which is a number falling between their single race counterparts. Monoracial Whites report being close to 2.45 grandparents which is the highest number from all of the races. These results illustrate preliminary evidence of variation in grandparent-grandchild relationships on the basis of race.

### *Are there overall differences grandparent closeness?*

In the analyses of whether measureable differences exist in terms of grandparent closeness and race, it appears that when controlling for sex and number of grandparents living, biracial families fall between their monoracial minority and monoracial White counterparts. As shown in Table 3, each race category is statistically significant when compared to each other category. Specifically, monoracial minority grandchildren are close to 23% fewer grandparents than monoracial white grandchildren and biracial grandchildren are closer to 13% fewer grandchildren than monoracial white grandchildren. Furthermore, a Wald test reveals that the coefficient for biracial is significantly different from the coefficient from monoracial minority.

*Do differences persist in level of grandparent-grandchild closeness within biracial families when controlling for family socioeconomic factors?*

Yes, it appears that biracial children fall between their monoracial minority and monoracial White counterparts. Being biracial decreases the expected number of grandparents a child is close to by 13%. Coefficients for biracial differs from that for minority at the  $p < .05$  level.

*Is gender of the minority-status parent associated with measureable differences in the level of grandparent-grandchild closeness?*

No, based on the results from the mother-specific race model we can conclude that there is a statistically significant difference between both biracial groups but we cannot conclude that a difference exists between each biracial group and their monoracial counterparts. Specifically, it appears that biracial grandchildren with a White mother are closer to fewer grandparents than biracial children with a minority mother but this result is not statistically significant.

### ***Discussion***

Biracial families do seem to have less close grandparent-grandchild relationships than their monoracial White counterparts as a whole. Specifically, biracials fall between their single race counterparts, reporting higher levels of grandparent closeness than their minority counterparts



but lower levels than their White counterparts. These differences persist after controlling for family socioeconomic factors.

While the minority-status of parent shows statistically significant difference from monoracial counterparts but not between the two biracial groups. Additionally, this study supports previous research that grandparent relationships do vary by race but this study does NOT support the Marginal Man Hypothesis. Overall, biracial families do seem unique in terms of grandparent closeness compared to their monoracial counterparts between the two biracial groups.

*Tables*

**Table 1: Variable Descriptions (Data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey)**

Variable	Description	Mean
<b>Dependent variable</b>		
<b>Closeness to Grandparents</b>	“How many grandparents would you say the child has a close relationship to?” Range= 0-4 or more.	2.27
<b>Control Variables</b>		
Male	Coded, 1 for male 0 female.	51%
Mother’s Education	High school or less	8%
	Some college	26%
	College graduate	66%
Log of Family Income	Parents’ self-report of family income; Logged.	10.82
Mother Married	Coded, 1 for mother married 0 otherwise.	96%
Number of Grandparents Living	Count of number of grandparents living; Range 0-4 or more.	3.41
Mother’s Age at 1 <sup>st</sup> Birth	Mother’s age at birth of first child. Range 12-44	34.26

**Table 2: Means and Percent's by Race (Data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey)**

Variable	White	Minority	Biracial
<b>Dependent variable</b>			
<b>Closeness to Grandparents</b>	<b>2.48</b>	<b>1.73</b>	<b>2.07</b>
<b>Control Variables</b>			
Male	51%	50%	51%
Mother's Education			
HS or less	4%	23%	5%
Some college	25%	27%	26%
College graduate	71%	50%	69%
Log of Family Income	10.95	10.39	10.88
Mother Married	98%	91%	95%
Number of Grandparents Living	3.50	3.14	3.34
Mother's Age at 1 <sup>st</sup> Birth	34.65	33.11	34.11

**Table 3: Condensed Race and Grandparent Closeness**

	Grandparent Closeness	
	B	% Change
<b>Condensed Race</b>		
Monoracial Minority	-.264***(.018)	-23%
Biracial	-.124***(.022)†	-13%
<b>Controls</b>		
Male Child	-.033***(.012)	-3%
Number of Grandparents	+.292***(.006)	34%

Standard errors in parentheses; † significantly differs with minority  
 \*p<.10, \*\*p<.05, \*\*\*p<.01; % is the percent change in the expected count

**Table 4: Condensed Race and Grandparent Closeness**

	Grandparent Closeness	
	B	% Change
<b>Condensed Race</b>		
Monoracial Minority	-.218***(.019)	-19%
Biracial	-.125***(.022)†	-13%
<b>Controls</b>		
Male Child	-.031***(.011)	-1%
Mother Married	-.005 (.033)	-.2%
Mother Education		
High School Diploma	+.166***(.033)	+8%
Some College or Higher	+.225***(.033)	+28%
Family Income	+.037***(.009)	-3%
Number of Grandparents	+.289***(.006)	+31%
Mother's Age at 1 <sup>st</sup> Birth	-.008 (.001)	-4%

Standard errors in parentheses; † significantly differs with minority  
 \*p<.10, \*\*p<.05, \*\*\*p<.01; % is the percent change in the expected count

**Table 5: Mother-Specific Race and Grandparent Closeness**

	Grandparent Closeness	
	B	% Change
<b>Mother-Specific Race</b>		
Monoracial Minority	-.218***(.019)	-19%
Biracial: White Mother	-.136***(.031)†	-14%
Biracial: Minority Mother	-.116***(.029)†	-12%

**Controls Included**

Standard errors in parentheses; † significantly differs with minority

\*p<.10, \*\*p<.05, \*\*\*p<.01% is the percent change in the expected count

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