

**THEORETICALLY-BASED FAMILY INTERVIEW
PROJECT TRANSCENDING
FAMILY AND CONSUMER SCIENCES DISCIPLINES**

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This article describes a family relations project that can be utilized in family related classes at either the high school or college level. The authors describe an assignment utilizing interviews with grandparents or other family members to help student understand family theory. The authors discuss how the assignment was developed, the theory guiding the project, a method of assessment, and the expected outcomes. They also explain how the project can be expanded to include disciplines closely related to the family, such as dietetics, fashion, nutrition, and housing. Further, they will elaborate on how an adaptation of the assignment could become a senior research project in a university consumer and family sciences department.

Even though grandparents have played a part in many children's lives throughout history, medical technology has made it possible for more older adults to live longer than ever before. As a consequence, there has been an increase in the number of three and four generation families (Mills, 2001; Roberto, Allen, & Bleiszner, 2001). Longer life expectancy has increased the potential for grandparents to interact not only with their early school-aged grandchildren, but also with their high school and college aged offspring's. Mills, Wakeman and Fea (2001) question "whether the likelihood of more years of shared lives among grandchildren and grandparents will result in long-term joint satisfaction or will result in more years of disengaged relationship between the two generations" (p. 428). This may be especially true for maternal grandfathers since prior research has found they feel closer to their pre-pubescent granddaughters than to older granddaughters (Mills, 1999).

Pressures beyond the family environment also may complicate adolescent grandparent-grandchild interactions. According to Erikson (1968), group identity and peer pressure are powerful forces operating in the lives of early adolescence (12-18 years), while developing autonomy from parents and establishing a separate identity are major tasks during later adolescence (18-24 years). During this time, family interactions often take second stage to participation in peer activities. When together, conversations with grandparents often remain unidirectional and superficial with older relatives asking questions related to dating, grades, employment, school activities, or sports.

Purpose of the Article

During their years of teaching and in conversations with students outside of the classroom, the authors have become aware that students, in general, have a positive relationship with at least one grandparent and have some understanding of history. It became apparent, however, that many students are unaware of how history specifically has impacted their families. They may know, for example, their grandparents grew up during the Depression, that grandpa's

picture in a military uniform standing beside an airplane has always been on the piano, that an African-American grandmother worked in a hospital when discrimination was common, or that grandma and grandpa lost two children to polio. Nonetheless, many had not heard specific details personalizing the historical times that humanize their grandparents during earlier periods in their life cycles. Often these stories are lost when grandparents die. Also lost are educational opportunities for students to integrate their lives with the past and to become more personally aware of how families change and are impacted by the economic, political, and social aspects of the larger society.

The purpose of this article is to describe a family relations project that can be utilized in family related classes at either the high school or college level. It involves conducting a guided interview with grandparents, a grandparent, or a great aunt or uncle. The authors will discuss how the assignment was developed, the theory guiding the project, a method of assessment, and the expected outcomes. They also will explain how the project can be expanded to include disciplines closely related to the family, such as dietetics, fashion, nutrition, and housing. Further, they will elaborate on how an adaptation of the assignment could become a senior research project in a university consumer and family sciences department. Methods for finding alternative interviewees will be discussed for those students whose relatives are unavailable.

Our project assists students in gathering information about their family within an educational structure and by use of a guided interview. It is of value because many models of educational processes indicate that a combination of cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning are important (Burr, 1994). Traditionally, cognitive knowledge or learning has held primary place in the academic community. We believe this assignment captures each of the three types of knowledge or learning. For example, cognitive learning is utilized when students are asked to integrate theory into their interviews. In collecting information about their grandparents' earlier lives students gain a greater connectedness to their grandparents and assistance in developing a sense of continuity and emotional attachment (Strong, DeVault, Sayad, & Cohen, 2001). This contributes to the students' affective knowledge, while scheduling interviews and meeting with their grandparents makes use of behavioral knowledge.

We have found this assignment may stimulate increased student interest in family history and genealogy. Websites, such as www.genealogy.com, www.genhome.age.com, and www.CyndisList.com may be helpful and are free. The last provides links to over 100,000 sites. In addition, other sites can be found by using "genealogy" or "ancestry" as key words.

Theoretical Background

The project is guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Newman & Newman, 1999). It attempts to explain how individuals are impacted by interlocking systems of interaction that take place within and beyond their families, as well as the time period in which they live. Bronfenbrenner uses the terms microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem to explain the interlocking nested systems. Explanations of these terms are included here to assist in using the model.

Microsystem - a pattern of activities, rules, roles, and interpersonal relations that a developing person experiences in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics; the individual and all persons or groups that make up the individual's day-to-day environment. Examples include how children are disciplined or the existence of gender specific roles for boys and girls.

Mesosystem - interrelations among two or more settings in which the individual actively participates (the mesosystem); for example, the relationship between an individual's home and school or between the individual's home and church. Specific examples include how involved parents are in encouraging education for their children or how involved the parents are in taking their children to church.

Exosystem - one or more settings that do not directly involve the developing person as an active participant but affect the person; for example, father's work and how it impacts his treatment of his family members or the parents' involvement with friends and how it affects their views on parenting.

Macrosystem - the broad belief system or cultural beliefs that affect the lower systems. Examples include the *federal government*, e.g., World War II, the development of the welfare system, health care assistance, and legislation; *societal norms*, e.g., acceptance/nonacceptance of divorce, discrimination, changing gender roles, impact of Civil Rights movement; *religion*, e.g., beliefs and values; *mass media*, e.g., radio, television movies; and the *economy*, e.g., The Depression, factory closings or lay offs. Macrosystems changes which occur over time.

Bronfenbrenner's model therefore, is helpful in studying family from both the micro and macro levels, as well as the time period in which an individual lived. The following is a description of the assignment and how the model can be utilized to assist students in applying their grandparents' lives to the social, economic, and political happenings of the larger society.

Family History Assignment

Each of us carry our family history. Most often, however, it is a quiet history that is often lost when our grandparents die. We may interact with our grandparents or other relatives of their generation, but we know little about them as children or young adults as people living during a particular point in time. A greater understanding of your family history would give you a better understanding of who you are, as well understanding how your family fits into the collected histories of our society. The purpose of this assignment is to assist you in gathering portions of your family history and in comparing your history with that of two other classmates.

PART I. Interview your grandparents - at least one grandparent if possible, but may interview all grandparents if desired. (If you do not have a grandparent who is available to interview, you may interview a substitute grandparent. Please think of an alternative and discuss this with your instructor.) Each student is to submit a five paged typewritten paper that should be separated by the following headings.

A. Grandparents' Families Of Origin

Discuss your grandparents' families of origin (family in which they spent their childhood).

1. What were their parents and siblings' first names (are these names still commonly used)?
2. In what geographic location did your grandparent live while growing up? (Country, state; urban/rural)
3. What was the time period during which your grandparents were growing up?
4. Who was the parental disciplinarian and what kinds of discipline were used?
5. What occupations did your grandparent's father and/or mother have?

Have them relate a short story about things they remember their parents saying about work or the type of work they did.

6. What events were happening in the larger society at the time? Ask your grandparent to relate a short story about an event or happening in the larger society.
7. During this stage of their life and during this time period, what were your grandparent's greatest pleasures and biggest concerns?
8. What were several ways in which current family life is different from family life when your grandparent was a child?

B. Grandparents' Dating-Wedding

1. At what age did your grandparents begin dating? About how many other people did they date until they "settled" on each other? How did they meet? How did their first date come about? What types of things did they do on their dates?
2. What is a story about your grandparents' dating experiences with each other?
3. What type of transportation did your grandparents use on dates?
4. How long did they date before their engagement? How and where did it occur?
5. What was their wedding like? Where? Who presided? Who was in the wedding party? Did they go on a honeymoon? If so, where?
6. What does your grandparent remember about the first weeks and months of married life?

C. Grandparents' Work-Family

1. What were your grandparents' occupations?
2. What did they earn each week (or use hour, day, or month depending on how they were paid).
3. What was the cost of their rent?
4. What was the cost of their first home?
5. How many children did they have? Children's names (are they still commonly used)?
6. If they had children and worked outside the home, how was childcare managed?
7. If they had sons and daughters, in what way did they raise them similarly and differently? (i. e. chores, discipline, age to begin dating)
8. What tasks were their children expected to do around the home?
9. What historical events happened while their children were growing up?
10. What were the greatest pleasures and biggest worries while they were at this stage of their lives?
11. In what ways is life different now compared to when your children were growing up?
12. How was life different while your children were growing up compared to when you were growing up?

PART II. Comparison of families. In this section, you will be comparing your grandparent's history with those of one or two other classmates. In a minimum of two typed pages and using the three sections in Part I, compare and contrast

grandparent families' history. What similarities existed in their dating and weddings? What differences existed in occupations, number of children, family pleasures and worries? Look at such things as historical times and political, social, and economic happenings in terms of their impact on the families. Each group member is to submit a paper. It is expected papers will be similar, but different, since each of you should base comparisons starting with your own grandparent.

Method Of Evaluation

Instructors can adapt the evaluation to their fit their expectations. Some may place sole emphasis on the paper's contents, while others choose to include grammar, spelling, and writing style in their evaluations. See Table 1 for a matrix we used to score the assignment.

Methods For Integrating Bronfenbrenner's Model

Various methods exist for Bronfenbrenner's model to be incorporated into the assignment.

1. Present the model either before or after the grandparent interviews. In either situation, students can incorporate information from their interviews into the various components of the model and write a paper with the material gathered from their interviews. This assignment can stand alone or be used in conjunction with the 2nd strategy described.
2. Following completion of their individual papers, students are assigned to work in groups of three to compare and contrast their interviews. Class time can be used for these discussions. Instructors can determine whether to require use of the model in the two-three paged paper assignment as students compare and contrast their grandparents' lives.
3. A final way to use the model is for the students to conduct their interviews without prior knowledge of the model and write their individual and group papers. Instructors, by way of a class discussion, present Bronfenbrenner's model with students volunteering information from their interviews.

Adaptations For Interdisciplinary Study

There are a variety of ways to adapt this assignment. Additional questions can be developed for students to gain information from their grandparents about other aspects of family life. Some examples follow.

Fashion - grandparent's family or origin

What type of clothing did your grandparents wear as children? What kinds of play clothes, school clothes, special/church clothes did they have? Were they "store bought," hand-made, hand-me-downs, etc.? Discuss the social/cultural conditions that influenced the style of dress, such as changing gender roles, popular culture, influential personality, political event, religious beliefs.

Fashion - grandparent's dating and wedding

Briefly describe the wedding. What attire did the bride and groom wear? What did the attendants wear? Include photos if possible. (They will be returned.)
Where was the wedding held? Who presided? What did the presider wear?

Fashion - grandparent's work-family

What type of clothing did your grandparents wear to work? If a specific type of attire was needed, explain. Discuss the social/cultural conditions that influenced the style of dress, such as changing gender roles, popular culture, influential personality, political event, religious beliefs.

Nutrition and dietetics - grandparent's family of origin

What were your grandparent's favorite foods as a child? What type of food storage and food preparation equipment did your grandparent's family have (e.g. ice box, refrigerator, wood-coal stove)? Did your grandparent's family use lard in cooking? Was there any understanding of health and its connection to food? How often did your grandparent's family eat in restaurants? Did your grandparent eat in fast food restaurants? What were the names of some of the fast food restaurants?

Nutrition and dietetics - dating and wedding

In what ways did food play a part in dating? If your grandparents had a wedding reception, how was food utilized?

Nutrition and dietetics - work and family

How were work meals handled? For example, were meals carried from home or food purchased at or near the work site? Was there any understanding of health and its connection to food? Who was primarily responsible for food preparation? How often did your grandparent's family eat in restaurants? What differences exist between eating out now and when your grandparent was a child?

Housing and interior design -

Have your grandparent compare and contrast the houses they lived in while growing up, while raising their family, and their current residence in such areas as cost, (don't need to get specific) size, and number of bedrooms.

Alternative Assignment for Students

Some students' grandparents may be deceased, while others may have grandparents who are ill and unable to be interviewed. Still others may feel uncomfortable asking their grandparents to be interviewed because of existing family issues. We have found geographic proximity not to be a problem. Our students sent a copy of the interview guide to their grandparents and arranged a time to converse by telephone. Proximity, however, may be a concern for some students. One of the following options may be a solution to student concerns. If a great aunt or uncle is still living, ask them to be interviewed. If no older relatives are living or available, an elderly friend, such as a neighbor or church/synagogue friend, may provide information about their families. It also is important to recognize that the ethical guidelines for family scientists (individuals who teach about family including university students, social service professionals, educators, therapists, and administrators are considered family scientists) developed by the National Council on Family Relations (Adams, Dollahite, Gilbert & Keim, 2001) indicate that while teaching a for-credit course, family scientists do not make assignments that require students to divulge potentially painful personal or family experiences or information without providing an alternative assignment for those who do not wish to participate. Because of family problems or diminished health, interviewing a grandparent may be too sensitive for some students and options discussed above might not be available. An alternative assignment could involve students interviewing one or more members of an ethnic minority family different from their own.

Adaptation As A Senior Research Project In A Department of Family & Consumer Sciences

The utilization of the project as a university family and consumer sciences senior project has the potential to provide both educational and personal benefits to students. The website of the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences states “Consumer and family science professionals focus on an integrative approach to the reciprocal relationships among individuals, families and communities, as well as the environments in which they function” (AAFCS, 2001, p. 1). The interview guide and integration of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model (Newman & Newman, 1999) provide a venue for future family and consumer scientists to gain a greater understanding of the reciprocity of family and environmental contexts. More specifically, they assist students in determining how their individual families fit into the collected history of society and how society and history has impacted their families.

In addition, by including fashion, dietetics/nutrition, housing and interior design, the assignment provides a method for future family and consumer sciences professionals to assimilate information across consumer and family sciences practice areas and content specializations. Thus, the project assists students in gaining a greater awareness of the connectedness among the family and consumer sciences disciplines.

Since influencing the creation of family policy is a core component of the family and consumer sciences professional goals (AAFCS, 2001), the inclusion of a policy component in a senior project is essential. Various methods for its inclusion could be incorporated into the senior project. For example, students might be required to select a specific content area, such as child care provider requirements, nutrition package labeling, or clothing construction employment regulations, and follow policy development at the federal and state levels. Another suggestion would require students to select a specific policy and interview a state legislator who has introduced a bill related to the policy. The student would be required to discuss the bill’s positive and negative merits. A final suggestion requires students to study a specific policy and determine how it has impacted the various systems in the Bronfenbrenner model.

Summary

Responses from students in a family relations class and a fashion history class who completed the assignment were very positive in their anonymous feedback. The following statements are representative of the responses.

I like the project because I got to interview my grandparents and listen to them tell me about their pasts. Personally, I’ve never really taken the time to get to know (about) them before they became grandparents and I found it fascinating.

I enjoyed the assignment because it gave me a chance to learn more about my grandparents. I liked some of the funny stories that my grandma shared with me, and it was interesting to compare some things, such as dating with the way it is now!

I liked getting the time to talk with my grandmother. I feel I know her a little better since she told me the information about her past. I learned about her childhood and what she has had to deal with in her lifetime.

I liked the assignment. It gave me the opportunity to learn more about my family. I put a copy of this in my lock box so my children will have it down the line. This

*was important information about their heritage that I would never have know.
Great assignment!!!*

Student feedback also was favorable regarding the group work of comparing and contrasting others students' families with their own. We also experimented with pairing students in a family relations class with students in a fashion industry class. While in theory, the pairing sounded good, practice garnered different responses. Student feedback was primarily negative because of the difficulty of arranging times to get together and not knowing students in the other class.

We have described a theory-driven family relations project that can be used at the high school and college levels. We described the interview guide students can use to interview their grandparents (or an alternative), and explained how the assignment can be expanded to include other disciplines in the family and consumer sciences field, such as nutrition and fashion. An effort also was made to explain how the assignment could be adapted as a senior project for undergraduate majors in Family and Consumer Sciences. In addition, methods of evaluating and outcomes were addressed. The educational goal is for students to integrate their lives with the past and to become more aware of how the family impacts and is impacted by the economic, political, social aspects of the larger society. We recognize other methods with similar goals may exist, but have found this assignment to work particularly well for us.

*Table 1
Family History Assignment Evaluation*

<u>Catagories</u>	<u>Possible points</u>
Overall. Writing/grammar	10
Part I. Grandparent's families of origin	20
Part II. Grandparents' dating and wedding	20
Part III. Grandparents' work-family	20
Part IV. Comparison of families (see below)	30

	No/Not mentioned	Mentioned Briefly	Compared Adequately
Comparison of grandparent's history with that of one other member of our class.			

Comparison of two families:

Similarities of

Dating (length of time, type of dates, etc.)	0	3	5
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Wedding (where, who attended, reception, etc)	0	3	5
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Differences in

Occupations			
Number of children	0	2	4

Names of children	0	2	4
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Family pleasures	0	2	4
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Family worries	0	2	4
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	0	2	4
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Compare such things as

Were similar historical events recalled?	0	5-10	15
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Were similar political events recalled?	0	5-10	15
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Compare how the <u>social happenings</u> of the time impacted your grandparent's family and the family of your classmate's grandparents.	0	5-10	15
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Compare how the <u>economic conditions</u> of the time impacted your grandparent's family and the family of your classmate's grandparents.	0	5-10	15
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