

COVID-19 as a Family Stressor: A Life Course Exploration of Family Stress Among Rural Grandparents and Their Adult Children in Upstate New York

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Abstract: COVID-19 has brought about many changes for rural families, affecting their family roles, childcare responsibilities, financial status, and experiences of family stress. In this study, I examine (1) how rural grandparents and their adult children perceive family stress related to their family roles and responsibilities during COVID-19 and (2) how rural grandparents and their adult children have coped with the stress of family roles and responsibilities during COVID-19. Data comes from 44 in-depth interviews. The findings of this study suggest that COVID-19, a family stressor, has been the source of stress among rural grandparents and their adult children. The findings suggest that families adapted through a range of improvised strategies such as relocating, abstaining from employment, taking on additional childcare, and adjusting personal identities to maintain stability during uncertainty. These adaptations were not merely practical but often guided by moral and faith-based reasoning, allowing participants to maintain agency despite constraints.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, grandparents played a significant role in childcare, sometimes to the point of being the primary childcare providers (Harrington Meyer 2014). COVID-19 has further complicated the roles and responsibilities of rural grandparents and their adult children. COVID-19 brought changes to rural families, particularly in the areas of their employment, family roles and relationships, childcare responsibilities, and sense of hope.

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The global COVID-19 pandemic is a significant family stressor that has had a profound impact on the family system (Brown et al. 2020). Grandparents often play a prominent role in the care and upbringing of children while their adult children, and they, juggle jobs and childcare (Harrington Meyer 2014). According to Bailey, Haynes, and Letiecq (2013:671), “grandparents are being called upon to rear their grandchildren when parents are unable or unwilling to fulfill their parenting role.” Bailey, Letiecq, and Porterfield’s (2009:148) study found that grandparents took on a surrogate parental role because of a familial crisis. In rural families, grandparents are especially needed to help with grandchildren because families in rural areas, on average, have lower incomes than those in urban areas (Yancura et al. 2019:267). Resources such as access to affordable childcare and jobs within close distances are more limited, leading to greater needs for transportation and childcare support. In addition, the geographic proximity of extended family members, which is common in rural areas, often facilitates this intergenerational caregiving role. This

reality intensified since the COVID-19 pandemic due to the abrupt closure of in-person schools and childcare facilities (Cassinat et al. 2021:1598). Many grandparents have stepped in to take care of their grandchildren during the COVID-19 pandemic. The work required for childcare can often be stressful (Harrington Meyer 2014). According to Bailey and colleagues (2009:148), “grandparents rearing grandchildren experience an array of normative and non-normative stressors as they navigate changes in the family system.” The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the demand for grandparent childcare and the associated family stressors. COVID-19, according to Prime, Wade, and Browne (2020), is a family stressor that has had a detrimental effect on both children and their caregivers.

Family stressors have been defined by family scholars as circumstances in the family of major effect that change the family system (McCubbin et al. 1980:857). Examples of family stressors may include macro-level events, such as pandemics, wars, and large-scale events that can change the fortunes of families, as well as micro-level events, such as chronically ill family members or family members

losing their jobs. Family stressors such as these can have negative effects on families. The far-reaching consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have been regarded as a family stressor (Prime et al. 2020; Eales et al. 2021). As Eales and colleagues (2021:1563) describe it, “many changes were suddenly thrust upon families overnight, including mandated quarantines, social distancing, school closures, and abrupt transitions to distance learning for children and remote work.” These changes that occurred could have a chain reaction in other areas of the family system. For example, the loss of jobs could lead to fights about money, which could then lead to the dissolution of marriages, ultimately resulting in divorces. Unemployment disrupts not only financial stability but also the everyday functioning of family systems. Gough and Killewald (2011) demonstrate that job loss within households often leads to a reallocation of domestic labor, with family members renegotiating roles and responsibilities in response to lost wages and altered routines. These shifts can challenge existing gender norms, sometimes increasing tension as families adapt to new role expectations and patterns of decision-making. By focusing on how unemployment changes housework and caregiving arrangements, Gough and Killewald (2011) demonstrate that the effects of job loss extend beyond individual workers to the entire family system, requiring adaptive strategies that address both practical needs and symbolic understandings of gender, responsibility, and stability.

Family stress, according to McCubbin and colleagues (1980:857), is “not seen as inherent in the events themselves, but rather as a function of the responses of the distressed family to the stressors and refers to the residue of tensions generated by the stressors which remains unmanaged.”

The COVID-19 pandemic is a family stressor because it has played a significant role in the changes, both positive and negative, that occurred within families. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families has not been experienced equally across different social groups. For example, according to Prime and colleagues (2020), economic resources and family togetherness are pre-existing factors that influence family resilience and how families respond to family stress. Bussemakers and Kraaykamp (2020:3) stated that resilience is interconnected to resources, which vary by family. In Bussemakers and Kraaykamp’s (2020:3) study, they focused on the relationship between youth adversity and parental resources. Parent financial resources allow children to be resilient because they serve as a buffer against the negative consequences of adversity. Adversity, according to Bussemakers and Kraaykamp (2020:3), is not distributed equally across social strata.

Parenthood and the work of taking care of children involve emotional labor. Families in rural areas who experience family stressors often lack a community to help with the stressors. Hochschild (2012) describes emotional labor as the work people do to manage their own feelings and the feelings of others to meet social expectations. While this idea first came from research on service jobs, it also helps explain what families do during times of crisis. For rural families, the COVID-19 pandemic increased the need to remain calm and keep children and other family members reassured even when jobs were lost, schools were closed, and health concerns were high. Parents and grandparents often hide their stress or feelings of worry so that others in the family, especially children, would feel stable and safe. This kind of emotion management often fell on women and was made harder by the lack

of childcare and support services in rural areas. Looking at emotion work in rural families during the COVID-19 pandemic shows that keeping emotions steady was a crucial aspect of how families adapted to these challenges (Hochschild 2012).

Cooper (2014:20) described a concept referred to as “security projects,” which is the work that is done by the family to “create, maintain, and further their particular notion of security.” These “security projects” vary in their meaning and are enacted in ways that sometimes even harm the family and manifest themselves as navigating strategies, such as drug consumption. An example of a positive security project is grandparents rearranging their retirement plans to provide full-time care for the grandkids when schools closed. These actions are both consciously and unconsciously enacted and are a response of the family to family stress and upheaval. Cooper (2014) stated that social location (race, class, gender, rural geographic location) plays an important role in “security projects,” and the extent to which they have a positive impact on the family or a negative one. The ability to make decisions that create improvements to the family hinges largely on resources. Cooper (2014:21) makes the important point that just as there are inequalities between different families, there are also inequalities within the family. According to Cooper (2014:21), “a single security project may embrace different and even conflicting approaches and navigating strategies.” Moreover, “husbands and wives can be at odds about where they are going, how they will get there, and who is in charge.”

The COVID-19 pandemic also played a role in how individuals make sense of their personal identities. Destin and Debrosse (2017:100-101) stated that “narrative identity” allows people to have purpose and

to tell stories about their past and how their past brought them to their present. COVID-19 is a structural family stressor that nonetheless caused many individuals to feel like their lack of fortune associated with job losses, relationship difficulties, and other adverse events was under their control and reflected their individual shortcomings. As such, they personalized the effects of the pandemic on their lives when the COVID-19 stressor had a negative impact on many, perhaps most, families and individuals. While low-income, rural families were among the most severely affected by COVID-19, families with greater resources and security were also impacted.

In this paper, I examine the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on families, drawing comparisons based on social class, place, and gender.

I ask: How do rural grandparents and their adult children perceive and cope with family stress related to their family roles and responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Life Course Perspective

The life course perspective is described by Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson, and Crosnoe (2003:10) as “a theoretical orientation that guides research on human lives within context.” According to Elder and colleagues (2003:10), “the life course provides a framework for studying phenomena at the nexus of social pathways, developmental trajectories, and social change.” The life course perspective has five main principles: the principle of lifespan development, the principle of agency, the principle of time and place, the principle of timing, and the principle of linked lives. This study focuses on the principles of time and place, agency, and linked lives.

The Principle of Time and Place

Elder and colleagues (2003:12) stated that “the life course of individuals is embedded and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their lifetime.” According to them (2003:12), “individuals and birth cohorts are influenced by historical context and place.” Different groups experience the same event differently based on their relationship to the event and the social locations they occupy. The COVID-19 pandemic is an event in history comparable to a war or an economic depression. Such events are highly impactful and important to study using a life course perspective. Elder’s (2018 [1974]) study exemplified this life course principle by analyzing a cohort of 167 individuals with longitudinal data. Elder (2018) examined individuals who were children during the economic turmoil of the 1930s and followed them longitudinally into adulthood to look at how early-life hardships shaped their life trajectories in the context of the Great Depression. I am incorporating the life course principle of time and place in two ways. (1) I am examining family stress among grandparents and their adult children in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic as a family stressor, and (2) I am focusing on the social location of the families: rural location, social class, religion, and gender.

There has been limited scholarly attention to family stress experienced by rural families. Rural families face unique challenges, such as the need to travel distances to work, and challenges accessing food, healthcare, and childcare. According to Yancura and colleagues (2019:267), “rural populations have inadequate access to health and social services.” Resources, according to Yancura and colleagues (2019:167-277), “are often inaccessible and unaffordable,” and rural areas often lack

formal sources of childcare. The authors (Yancura et al. 2019:267-268) stated that “support from grandparents may buffer families from stressors at multiple ecological levels that are particularly relevant in rural contexts, such as lack of access to transportation, healthy food, childcare, and institutionalized support.”

Although grandparents and their adult children (and, in fact, all family members) experience family stress as a result of the COVID-19 stressor, this stress is experienced unequally across social classes. McLanahan (2004) described the “diverging destinies” of children as being shaped by the characteristics of the households within which they are raised—whether they are raised in single-mother, resource-poor households or in two-parent, resource-rich households. Divergent family trajectories, often rooted in maternal education and social class, have significant consequences for a family’s ability to afford childcare and the degree to which grandparents are relied upon for support. According to McLanahan (2004), these trajectories shaped economic resources and childcare options, leading to a greater reliance on family support systems, such as those provided by grandparents. The significantly different family trajectories by social class have important consequences for a family’s ability to pay for childcare and the need for grandparents’ assistance. For this study, I compare middle-class and working-class families residing in rural upstate New York.

The Principle of Agency

Elder and colleagues (2003:12) stated that “individuals construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circum-

stance.” According to Elder and colleagues (2003:12), “children, adolescents, and adults are not passively acted upon by social influence and structural constraints. They make choices and compromises based on alternatives that they perceive before them.” Social location, relationships with others, and life events influence people’s perceptions of the choices and compromises available to them (Obernesser and Seale 2024).

The Principle of Linked Lives

According to Elder and colleagues (2003:13), “lives are lived interdependently, and socio-historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships.” The authors (Elder et al. 2003:13) observe, “because people live interdependently, transitions in one person’s life often entail transitions for other people as well.” Consequently, I explore the relationships between husbands and wives, cohabiting partners, grandparents and grandchildren, and parents and children to incorporate the life course principle of linked lives (Giele and Elder 1998). I assess the family stress experienced by grandparents (grandmothers and grandfathers) and their adult children (mothers and fathers) related to (1) the perceived effect of the COVID-19 pandemic as a family stressor, and (2) the perceived effect of family roles and responsibilities on family stress.

Family Stressors and Family Stress

“Family stress” has been of interest to researchers since 1926, according to McCubbin and colleagues (1980:857). “The foundation for family stress research may be traced to Burgess (1926), Angell (1936), Cavan and Ranck (1938), Koos (1949), and Hill’s (1949) classic research on war-induced separation and reunion” (McCubbin et al. 1980:855).

“Stressor events” are, according to McCubbin and colleagues (1980), family hardships and events that disrupt the family, such as a wife being hospitalized, loss of income, or loss of a home. The impact of a crisis on a family varies depending on the family’s level of resilience. Family resilience is a concept that has been studied by family scholars in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic in the last couple of years. Family scholars who have examined family stress and resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic (Prime et al. 2020; Eales et al. 2021) have noted that pre-existing factors, such as economic resources and family togetherness, influence family resilience. Cooper (2014:211) stated that how families experience family stress and family security can be challenging for sociologists to understand. “The rich don’t always feel rich and secure, and the poor don’t always feel poor and insecure” (Cooper 2014:211). The same event can have a profoundly negative impact on one family and a negligible one on another, or even a positive one. While it is often the case that families who are privileged, for example, may say they are happy about the pandemic because they get time off from work, whereas a less privileged family may say that their entire world has ended, it is also possible that these experiences are not perceived as we expect. For example, Tevington (2018) found that upper-middle-class youth are more worried about their futures related to the recession than their low-income counterparts, who were more hopeful. Tevington (2018:212) stated that working-class people blamed their circumstances on their own personal failures rather than the recession, while upper-middle-class youth attributed their struggles to broader structural and economic forces.

According to McCubbin and colleagues (1980:856), “the definition the family makes of the seriousness

of the change(s) influences the family's vulnerability to the crisis." As McCubbin and colleagues (1980:856) observe, Burr (1970) and Hansen (1965) describe "the variation in the family system's ability to recover from the disruptions that result from a stressful event." Hill (1949) describes "family stressors" as events that happen and bring changes in the family. "Family stress," on the other hand, is described as a response to stressors. Hill (1949) and Burr (1973) describe family stress as "residue of tensions generated by a family stressor which remains unmanaged" (McCubbin et al. 1980:857). Family stress, for example, could refer to responses such as family conflict in the face of family stressors like wars and economic downturns, as seen during the 2008 recession. In this study, the COVID-19 pandemic was identified as a family stressor, leading to increased family stress in the form of conflict, for example.

Methods

In this study, I conducted 44 in-depth interviews with 12 families. I conducted ethnographic observations of 4 of those families. This study includes 16 couples (7 grandparent couples and 9 parent couples). All of the participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. To obtain this sample, I began by speaking with individuals involved in a Catholic organization affiliated with a Catholic church in rural upstate New York. They provided me with a lot of helpful information on how to effectively distribute flyers and inform people about my study. They referred to me a few families they knew, and from there, I did a combination of snowball sampling and responding to interest in the flyers. I occasionally attended mass and stood outside with my flyers, handing them to people who approached me with interest. Occasionally, someone would ask

to do the interview right after mass or after they had lunch. My personal biography may play a role in this trust because I come from a Catholic family and was familiar with interacting at mass, which gave me an inside understanding of Catholicism. This also made it easier to interact with the church community because I was allowed to stand outside the church to collect my interviews. The fact that the subject of my study pertains to children and family relationships was well received by the church community.

In my sample, none of the grandparents lived with the grandchildren. Some grandchildren were brought to their grandparents' house, while others came to their adult children's house to care for them. At least one grandparent took care of their grandchildren physically, and occasionally, grandparents stated that their primary involvement in their grandchild's care was financial, providing transportation, or hosting playdates with other grandparents, in-laws, and friends. All grandparents and their adult children live in rural upstate New York and have at least 1 family member affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church. This is why this study does not reflect the fact that working-class couples are less likely to be married than middle-class families (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Smock, Manning, and Porter 2005) as neatly. The Roman Catholic faith emphasizes the importance of marriage before childbearing. These families all had at least one child between the ages of 5 and 10. All the participants in my sample identify as white and reside in rural upstate New York. Their parents also reside in a small rural town in upstate New York that I am calling Shelville, New York. Some of the participants work in the closest city to Shelville. This is especially true for middle-class participants who could afford to drive long distances to commute to work. While this

was an inconvenience, they had working cars and high enough pay at their jobs to afford the gas.

These interviews were conducted from August 2022 to November 2023. Interviews were semi-structured and captured both generational perspectives and the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on family roles, caregiving, and adaptation. Separate interview guides were used for adult children and grandparents, ensuring that each generation's experiences were explored in depth while also facilitating comparisons across family members and couples. Adult children were asked about the pandemic's impacts on parenting, employment, and their reliance on grandparents, while grandparent interviews focused on caregiving roles and well-being. Both generations were asked about their relationships, stress, and childcare responsibilities. A full list of interview questions is included in the Appendix.

The couples that were interviewed were interviewed separately. Occasionally, they were in the same house, but not in the same room. This was necessary because during the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these family members worked from home or retired. Most participants were interviewed in their homes; however, occasionally, participants were unable to be interviewed in person and were interviewed via Zoom instead. The IRB (University at Buffalo) approved this project: STUDY00006521.

Data Analysis

Using Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software, I coded the data for emerging themes. My coding method was inductive. A benefit of inductive coding is that it allows the researcher to get a comprehensive understanding of the context of the data and to capture the themes that are important to the par-

ticipants (Azungah 2018). The data I analyzed consisted of my memos and interview transcripts with 44 participants. After reading the data, I did open coding and generated analytic codes. "Stress about relationship dissolution," for example, is a code that emerged as a theme through inductive analysis. This theme emerged from participants, particularly fathers, responding to a question about the stress that they experience, that they have a fear of divorce, being left by a spouse, or fear of a reduction in marital satisfaction. The code "hope" emerged when participants used the word "hope" when describing how experiences around the COVID-19 pandemic both made them "lose hope" and "have hope." I did not have any interview questions about "hope," but "hope" was a theme that emerged from the participants.

Findings

Many participants in this study thought of the COVID-19 pandemic as a family stressor. These participants described employment, childcare, and family relationships as the primary sources of stress in their families, which they experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was expressed through semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants.

Employment and Family

Employment losses were widespread during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this is also true for the participants in this study. Many study participants lost their employment, they were forced to quit their job for childcare reasons, they had to work from home, they had to rely on financial help from their parents when they did not feel comfortable asking for help, or in three extreme cases, they had to be

quarantined away from their family to make ends meet. Fears about employment and material security haunt the minds of family members—men were most haunted by these fears.

In response to a question regarding COVID-19's impact on childcare, one father, whom I call Jason, described his experience of having to be far away from his family to make money. He describes how he lives in Shelville and has to commute an hour to the closest city to his town of residence. In the following excerpt, he described a difficult work-family trade-off.

I am away from my wife and kids most of the time. Not because I choose to be. It would be crazy to commute back and forth from the city to Shelville every day. I would be spending too much money on gas, and it would be a two-hour drive every day! It sucks, though, because my kids feel like strangers to me, and my wife is not happy with me. This has put a strain on our marriage. My wife wants me to get a closer job, but I wouldn't be able to support the family. I went to school to be a software engineer, and the only job I could get with my degree was in the city. [father, 31]

Jason states that his employment has put a strain on his marriage and connection with his kids, and he describes a work-family trade-off decision that is very difficult. Jason wanted a job that utilized the college degree he had earned, wanted to make good money to best support his wife and children, but at a cost to his family relationships. According to Jason, there were no such opportunities around Shelville. Jason was engaging in identity maintenance—he was preserving a positive self-concept when he described himself as a provider who sacrifices time with the family for financial security “for the family.” He also told this to his wife—when it came up

in conversations during my observations, he said to other family members and friends that his decision was the best thing for the whole family, even though his wife did not agree. She was friendly and accepted it verbally, but inside, she did not. In a related interview exchange about pandemic adjustments to childcare, Taylor described a similar experience:

My wife is very understanding that I have to live in a different area than her during the week while she stays home with our son. I come back home to be with my family every weekend. That is how it is now, but when quarantine happened, I had to be isolated and did not see my family for weeks on end. It was very hard. I always worried deep down that she would get sick of waiting for me and meet someone else who could be there with her. [father, 36]

Taylor's words indicated that he feels a sense of insecurity about the stability of his marriage. While he said that his wife is very understanding, he also admitted to having a fear that perhaps she would get tired of waiting for him and want to form a relationship with someone she can see every day, wake up next to, and have a more “stable” marriage with. He, like Jason, described a material need to work as a software engineer in a job not available in Shelville. A third father, Calan, shared a similar sentiment.

My wife has told me that she is unhappy with me having this job. I have asked her about possibly moving away from Shelville and looking into living closer to my job, but she refuses to move because she wants to be near her parents. Right now, her parents' house is walking distance away from our house. She wants this setup so that the kids can see their grandparents every day. I worked hard for this job and don't want to leave it. I wish she would just understand and move. [father, 31]

Calan's reason for his frustration is that his wife does not want to move closer to his job, which he feels he has invested a great deal of effort in. In his case, COVID-19 had a less significant impact on his sentiment. However, when asked how the pandemic altered childcare arrangements, he explained:

Quarantine was very rough. My two buddies [Jason and Taylor] and I had to quarantine together, so we got an apartment to live in, and now we all stay there during the week and all carpool to go home on weekends. We have known each other since high school, and all went to school together to get our college degrees. We all work at the same place and our wives are all friends. We didn't decide to just stay out here during the week until quarantine happened, and now we just do it because it makes more sense. It's kind of nice to get away and hang with the guys, you know, have drinks and eat chicken wings... [father, 31]

Calan identified what he perceives to be positive effects of the COVID-19 stressor. He pointed out that the pandemic was the cause of the need to live away from the family during the week, but sees it as a break and something that does not, for him, risk fragmenting his family to the same extent as his friends, who both voiced concerns about the state of their marriages and relations with their children. He described this as a convenient solution for work transportation, and that it was nice to have drinks with his friends and be away from his family for a while.

Childcare

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on childcare was huge for parents. Grandparents were heavily relied on for the care of the grandchildren due to changes prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

During quarantine, grandparents were, for many parents, the only option for childcare with schools closed.

Another way the COVID-19 pandemic affected childcare is that it shook up gender roles and responsibilities in unique ways. In two cases, participants described leaving the workforce entirely, such as Vicky and Kathleen's husband, George, because childcare demands exceeded their capacity to manage both paid labor and parenting. For example, I interviewed a mother who, in response to a question about pandemic-related parenting changes, shared that her husband lost his job and ended up surprising her as a very good stay-at-home dad. It was a side to her husband that she never thought she would unearth. With pride, she said:

The point when, especially when I had my last child out, my husband lost his job. So, he was in the house. And literally, he helped me to take care of my last child because he wasn't working. So most of the time, he devoted to helping me take care of the kids. For now, he doesn't have a job. So he's mostly in the house. He makes homemade waffles now. He does it all... hahahaha! [mother, 27]

Kathleen was very happy that he made homemade waffles and helped her take care of the kids. With the prevalence of gender role expectations, she expressed surprise that he would devote himself to feminine-coded pursuits such as childcare and making homemade waffles. This family was a family with whom I did ethnographic fieldwork. In their family, neither the mother nor the father had employment. They were funded by Kathleen's father, and her mother was highly involved in the childcare. Together, the three of them (Kathleen, her mother, and her husband) engaged in direct childcare. The money

was given to them by Kathleen's father. On a weekend research visit, Kathleen's father helped George with yard work while the grandparents entertained the children inside. Afterward, George admitted to feeling embarrassed about needing so much assistance but also relieved: "At least the kids get to see their grandparents every day." This illustrated how changing employment roles shifted caregiving and maintenance responsibilities to older generations while also reinforcing family closeness.

In contrast, Kathleen's husband, George, expressed some feelings of guilt for not working. He lost his job because of the COVID-19 pandemic. When I asked him about his stressors related to fatherhood, he talked about how he experienced guilt about unemployment.

I feel bad that I don't really pull my weight around here. I like being home with Kathleen and the kids, but I feel bad taking money from her dad. I think she likes that I am home all the time, but can't help but feel insecure. [father, 33]

Even though Kathleen is proud of her husband taking direct care of the kids and helping out, it is unsatisfactory to George's self-concept that he is not able to "pull his weight" as a man. He said that living in the small town in rural upstate New York where they reside, "there really isn't much work." He also added he would commute if the money was worth it, given the time it would take. He stated that his goal would be to either find a very high-paying job in the city or maybe even somewhere in Shelville, or to get an online job. Because he only has a community college degree, George said that he does not see how it will get him a job that pays enough to make the commute worthwhile, given that his wife cannot work since she has just had a newborn.

Hope

The COVID-19 stressor put a lot of pressure on the participants in this study. Many of them said they have lost hope, felt demoralized, and occasionally even questioned the existence of God. This is particularly poignant given the religious background of most of the families in my study, in which at least one family member actively participates in a Catholic faith community. Other participants held out hope and engaged in what Hitlin and Elder (2007) refer to as "life course agency." Life course agency, according to Hitlin and Elder (2007), occurs when individuals set goals for themselves and think through how they will make improvements in their lives. This is the "if I just do this, maybe this could happen" thinking. Through the data participants provided in their interviews about their positive thinking and planfulness, I incorporated the life course principle of "agency" into the study.

Meryl, a grandmother who does the majority of childcare for her son's children, described how she has occasionally lost hope because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Her son lost his job, got a DUI, lost his driver's license, and his girlfriend left him; and she adopted most of the childcare responsibilities.

Sometimes you just, you know, lose hope. It feels like there is no point in trying because another thing is going to happen and make it impossible to get back up. It's like you get bigger ideas about what will happen, and then something just... stops it. [grandmother, 58]

When Meryl said that something just "stops it," she was referring to her son's DUI. He began driving under the influence after he lost his job. Meryl

described how her son felt completely defeated when he was laid off due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am basically raising my grandchildren. Their mother told me that I would be a better person to take care of the kids than she is. I was very involved before with the kids, and she did not feel like she could provide the level of care that I can now that I am retired and have more financial security to offer them. My son is currently staying here, but is looking for a place. He is doing better, but it has been hard since he lost his job and his relationship with his girlfriend ended. [grandmother, 58]

Meryl's son, Mark, described his loss of hope and desire to improve his life in the following excerpt about his account of his DUI, breakup, and newfound resolve to improve his life. This was in response to a question about the effects of the pandemic on how he felt as a parent:

I screwed up very bad. I got in a lot of trouble from the DUI and was in a very bad place. I tried to make it work with my job and everything, but I really screwed up. I lost my job, and everything kind of went downhill from there. I am trying to get a place to live with my kids so that I can be a better dad. Right now, that isn't really something I can do. [father, 43]

Even though Mark describes his regret for having "screwed up very badly," and expressed a loss of hope, he also described having a desire to get his own place. At best, his orientation toward his current situation and the future is ambivalent—a mixture of hopelessness and hope. Mark lost his job because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and then he got a DUI after he drank a lot. He talked about how he was in a bad place fiscally, and it caused him

such stress that he spent more time at the bar the year after the pandemic, and in 2021, he got a DUI.

Similar to Mark, Roland described having a similar loss of hope from being laid off during the COVID-19 pandemic, when asked how the pandemic had affected how he felt as a parent:

I couldn't believe it... When I got that phone call from my boss that I was losing my job. I somehow knew what would happen when I answered the phone. I didn't tell my wife about it for 4 weeks because I was embarrassed. I was really lucky because my parents and her parents helped us, but it was still embarrassing to have to tell my wife that I got laid off. [father, 30]

Roland expressed his embarrassment about being laid off, despite knowing that many others had faced the same fate during the pandemic. He felt that if he were a more valuable worker, he might not have been chosen for layoff. Roland was engaging in impression management—he did not want his wife to know at first that he had lost his job. Even though he knew many were laid off during the pandemic, he still had that embarrassment, and he wanted to avoid his wife knowing until her finding out could no longer be stopped.

I thought that maybe they wouldn't lay me off because my boss liked me, and I thought they would never fire me. It must be that they laid a lot of people off. I still take it personally. My parents could afford to help us, but it's embarrassing. [father, 30]

Even though Roland was financially secure, coming from a middle-class family with middle-class parents who could afford to support him and his wife, he still experienced embarrassment for not being

considered “valuable enough” to keep. He described having a lack of hope in the following excerpt:

I just don't know if I am going to be able to get my wife to believe in me again after being laid off. It's embarrassing! I think she must think I am a loser who isn't capable of being responsible. I just think it's impossible to be seen as responsible again. [father, 30]

Roland described experiencing embarrassment, but also a lack of hope because he said that he thinks “it's impossible to be seen as responsible again.” He feels that the respect he feels he has lost is possibly out of reach and thus hopeless.

Rural Location

Living in a rural location was described by participants in the study as a source of stress to their families. Three men in the study who work as software engineers reported difficulties associated with their rural location and transportation to work, as well as having to live away from their wives and children during the week. This is an example of how a rural location can make life more stressful for families. Another example of rural location and family stress is exemplified by Meryl. In response to an interview question about how the pandemic had an impact on childcare for her, Meryl described the following:

It's hard to find other kids to play with my grandson in Shelville. My grandson changed schools after COVID-19 because my son's DUI caused him to have to move in with me before he finds a new apartment. My grandson doesn't have any friends around here, and it isn't like a suburb where kids just walk from house to house to find other children to play with. [grandmother, 58]

Meryl expressed disappointment in her inability to find other children for her grandson to play with. Rural upstate New York has a lot of areas where there are not a lot of children to play with as it is, but Meryl's son getting the DUI caused a change in location within the same county that further exacerbated this problem because, during periods of the COVID-19 pandemic and online school, the experience of being a “new kid” meant having no one to play with.

He's so bored, and I wish I could do something about it. He does talk to his old friends on Skype, but it's not the same as having physical contact. It's not the same as playing outside like my son did when he was a kid. [grandmother, 58]

Meryl explained how times have changed and how much more difficult it is for kids to play with each other due to the COVID-19 stressor.

A rural location is also a source of family stress due to the loneliness experienced by parents. This loneliness was especially prevalent for mothers. In response to a question about some challenges she faced in providing childcare, Rachel described her loneliness living in rural upstate New York.

It's been lonely. I feel, uh, like crap. There isn't things to do around here. I just wish that I could do more than be home with my mom and this baby. I cry a lot because I want to be able to hang out with other people. [mother, 28]

I asked Rachel about how she experiences stress as a parent living in rural upstate New York. She described her experiences of stress related to her loneliness and isolation.

I am super stressed all the time! I want to be able to hang out with other people and be myself, but I can't

because I am always stuck at home with this baby. It feels unfair that I see people on social media doing other things, and I am here... with my mom and this baby. It's not my mom's fault, but sometimes I wish she would just not be with me for a day so I could be able to do my thing without her breathing down my neck. I'm stressed because I feel like nothing is going to improve, and I could be like this for the rest of my life. Bored... so bored. [mother, 28]

Rachel described stress related to her sense of loneliness, boredom, and isolation. Interestingly, she described a scenario in which she feels lonely in the presence of another person. She could, for example, feel less lonely if she had a day without her mother around her. She said informally (which I wrote down in my memo) that she feels like she cannot communicate with her friends on social media without her mother reading her messages and commenting on everything she does. In some cases, the help of grandparents comes at a cost to a person's privacy and sense of empowerment.

The feelings of loneliness Rachel described about having children in rural upstate New York were not unique to her. Another mother, Clara, also spoke about her loneliness when asked how job loss and rural location affected her role as a mother.

Ever since I lost my job, my husband has been the only one working. I am not feeling very good at home alone. I think I feel lonely. [mother, 34]

Clara lost her job because of the COVID-19 pandemic. She did not like being alone at home. The theme of loneliness was prevalent in the sample. The loneliness of motherhood and grandmotherhood was described by women in the sample. Men described isolation from their families, such as in

cases where they stayed away from their families for work. The deep sense of isolation, characterized by feeling "alone," was described only by the women in the sample, including both mothers and grandmothers. This experience was characterized by feeling "grounded" with young kids and having to stay home to watch them, especially when they were young. According to Clara:

There's something lonely about being at home with the baby, and they always need you there to keep them entertained... and the coughing and the crying... it can be lonely to have to make sure everything is good and having to look levelheaded in their eyes... [mother, 34]

What Clara described was emotion work (Hochschild 2012). Clara spoke to me about the stress of needing to seem levelheaded in the eyes of her child and how difficult it can be to act happy when things are not going well.

I spend most of my time crying when they are sleeping because it's the only time I feel like I can have a break, and I just think about how I had friends and now I don't. I don't have friends because I have to be there at all times and the coughing and the crying... [mother, 34]

Clara's father-in-law, Philip (64), talked about how he helps out financially, but not with childcare. He said, "I help my son, James [37], with money, but I don't do the 'coughing thing.'" What he meant by the "coughing thing" was COVID-19. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he kept physical distance from the family to avoid exposure to COVID-19 because he was worried about his physical health problems, which were mostly high blood pressure, which made him vulnerable. Both of their kids (3 and 5

years old) got COVID-19 in 2021 and, according to James, it was “unimaginably bad.”

Oh gosh, the coughing... poor Clara had to take care of them by herself while they were so sick... we all got sick in the whole family. I went to work anyways because I had to, but the kids were so sick... especially our youngest son. He was so sick, and it was upsetting to watch. Looking at his little face while he coughed made me want to cry. He has a good mama. She took good care of him. [father, 37]

Clara described her husband, James, as her rock.

He's so nice and good to me. He's my rock. He works hard for us. I just don't like the being alone part. His dad is good, too. I am lucky to have a good family. I just can't help that sometimes the coughing... it's just a lot to deal with when I am falling apart. I can't exactly make friends in Shelville to spend time with me for hanging out together with kids. [mother, 34]

Isolation was a common theme among mothers in the sample. Of the 12 mothers interviewed, 9 described feeling socially isolated or lonely because of being home with young children in a rural setting. These feelings were often linked to limited social outlets, lack of peers nearby, and reliance on extended family rather than broader friendship networks. For example, Rachel and Clara both expressed boredom and loneliness, even when they had family support, because they lacked same-age peers or opportunities for independent social activity. This pattern was less prevalent among grandmothers, with only three of the 13 grandmothers describing isolation, typically when childcare responsibilities limited their social lives. This suggests that mothers experienced isolation more acutely than grand-

mothers, reflecting both life stage and the intensity of daily childcare work in rural places.

Gender Roles

Stress during the pandemic manifested in gendered ways, shaped by both longstanding expectations and the unique pressures of caregiving, isolation, and economic instability. The following section explores how mothers, fathers, and grandparents experienced and talked about the stress they experienced through the lens of their gender roles. Two families specifically described intergenerational friction rooted in these unequal expectations: in one case, a grandmother resented the lack of support from her husband and adult children, while in another, a maternal grandmother judged her son-in-law's domestic role as inadequate.

Men in the study emphasized the importance of earning money, often at the expense of being physically present with their children. Women, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of being physically around their children at the expense of earning money outside the home. Keep in mind that the sample consists of at least one family member per family who is an active member of a Catholic faith community. Most of the participants in the sample identify as Roman Catholics, and it is at least possible that they may have more “traditional” gender role expectations than is typical in American society.

Rachel, a middle-class mother I interviewed and conducted a case study with, described how stressful she felt about her responsibilities as a parent and the ambivalence she occasionally felt about the parental role.

As a parent, you occasionally feel the stress for responsibility, and sometimes I wish I wasn't a parent. Not really, but occasionally, I think that. I wish I could just be

me. Not a parent, no husband, nothing, just me, go to work, come back, lock the door, and sleep. My dad said God has a different plan for me. When I got pregnant with my first baby, my father made me keep it and told me to marry the dad. I was 19 then. The baby got me closer to God, but the stress for the responsibility of it all can be too much. [mother, 28]

Rachel described her occasional feelings of not wanting to take the responsibility of being a mother and wife. She mentioned at other times during my ethnographic observation that she sees her peers who are the same age as her having fun with their friends and attending college, and she feels trapped in a life she did not necessarily choose for herself. Her family is comprised of very observant Catholics, and does not believe in abortion or childbearing outside of marriage. She has made peace with her life and her motherhood role externally, but internally, she struggles with this responsibility and is haunted by thoughts of other possibilities. When asked how the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on childcare for her, Rachel reflected:

When I think about my life, I think about how COVID-19 changed things for me. I thought I could spend time with my friends and be a parent, but living where I do, there aren't many ways for me to hang out with other mothers my age for playdates... I am kind of stuck here, which really felt like crap during the quarantine. I got so tired of wearing masks at the store and not being able to hang out with friends. It was very... lonely. I had my husband and my parents, but I had to see things like, on Facebook, pictures of my friends having fun while I was stuck with my mom at the house with a baby. [mother, 28]

Rachel, who was pressured by her father, Geoff, to have the baby when an unplanned pregnancy oc-

curred, said she did so because of her family's religious beliefs. However, the decision was also overseen by her father, who wanted her to keep the baby. His reasoning was the family's religious beliefs. Rachel was not a minor when she got pregnant. She was 19 years old. Rachel did not want to keep the baby, but was convinced to do so by her father, who told her that it would make her closer to God. Yet, Rachel described how she often wishes she did not have to be a mother. In Rachel's situation, even though she expressed a closeness to God after having the baby, she still feels like she is missing out and, on occasion, wishes she did not have to be a mother or a wife.

Rachel's father was initially upset when Rachel got pregnant because she was having sex before marriage, but he described how he forgave her and felt blessed by the birth of the grandchild, who is now elementary school-aged. He described how blessed he felt for the opportunity to have a grandchild when he is young enough to spend time with him. His reflections emerged in response to a question about how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted how he felt as a grandparent.

When her mother told me she was pregnant, I was very angry. But once the idea settled into my head, and she agreed to marry the father, I learned how to forgive her. I read scripture and was talked into it by her mother who was supportive of her and her decision to accept responsibility. When he was born, all of those negative feelings went away. He was perfect! And, I got to spend time with him when I was young enough to play and not be too old to play baseball with him. Rachel is a very good mother. I couldn't be more proud of her. [grandfather, 49]

Geoff described how proud he was of Rachel and how his negative sentiment about her out-of-wedlock

pregnancy disappeared after the baby boy was born. This baby was, in his mind, perfect and a gift from God. Geoff described the role Rachel's mother played in convincing him to forgive Rachel for getting pregnant before marriage. In this rural, Roman Catholic community, everyone knows everyone else. Geoff described thinking about the "stress" of people believing he is a bad father because his daughter had a baby before she was married. He described experiencing "stress" about future "embarrassment." Childcare is a community endeavor in Shelville. Many of the parents know each other and attend church community events where the children participate. Geoff, although happy to be a grandfather, felt he fell short as a man in the face of his community, which reads scripture that emphasizes the role of fathers as examples, leaders, and patriarchs responsible for the entire family.

Valery, a middle-class grandmother, expressed frustration with how much she was expected to take care of her grandchildren. She pointed out that her adult children are not grateful for what she does and that her husband does not have to do the childcare she does. This emerged after she was asked to describe a typical day with her grandchildren.

I clean, I cook, I take care of the grandkids, I take care of the kids, and my husband doesn't do anything. My daughter works from home, and she can't be bothered to take care of her kids while working from home. If I took one day off, I think the world would implode, and I feel like no one appreciates my work. [grandmother, 45]

Valery said she was stressed because she had to do all the household work and felt unappreciated for the work she did. This sentiment of feeling underappreciated was similarly expressed by other grandmothers and mothers in this sample.

Calan's wife, Julie, whose husband lived away from his family for work (who described it as a chance to catch up with his "buddies" and eat chicken wings), shared her feelings about her gender role responsibilities.

I never thought that my life would be like this! I always knew I would do more work around the house, and I always knew I would do the cooking and cleaning and... you know, change the diapers and make sure everyone is taken care of... I always thought that my husband would live with me! I always worry that he is out... meeting other women. Even though I trust him... It still stresses me out! [mother, 29]

Julie described her stress about relationship dissolution associated with her husband living near his workplace during the workweek, a situation he described as necessary during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though she said she trusted him, she also expressed fear that he might meet another woman and potentially either leave the relationship or fall in love with someone else. I asked her to elaborate about this.

My father cheated on my mother... I always worry about that... like, what if he cheated on me or fell in love with someone else? I wouldn't even be able to know what he is doing. It kind of makes me feel stressed when he doesn't text me right away. I just get stressed out and feel out of control. I am comforted by my mother being around me, though. On one hand, she makes me feel more stressed by telling me about how dad cheated on her, but she also makes me feel less alone. I know it isn't rational, though... I know deep down that he won't cheat. [mother, 29]

Julie had concerns about being cheated on by her husband while he is away or the possibility of him "falling in love with someone else." Her relationship with her mother, the grandmother of her children, who helps her, is described as a great comfort but, at times,

a source of stress, as it hints at what her husband could be doing when he was away from home. Julie's mother did not describe the circumstances of her husband's cheating when I interviewed her, instead describing her relationship with her husband as "smooth sailing." Julie's husband, Calan, voiced similar concerns in terms of worrying about possible cheating. When interviewed, he said he wanted Julie to move closer to his job rather than stay in Shelville because he was worried she might leave him for someone else while he was away. Both spouses voiced concerns about fidelity or being replaced by someone else. They both expressed concerns about staying together in their marriage and placed their concerns about possible risks to their relationships on the other person, not on themselves. Neither of them said that they entertained other options or thought about cheating, but worried that the other would cheat or "fall in love with someone else." In Calan's narrative, if this happened, it would be due to a personal sacrifice that he made by prioritizing keeping dinner on the table over being home with his family every day. Both Calan and Julie said they used the time apart to engage in homosocial friendships—Julie described her mother as her "very best friend," and Calan said he enjoyed having chicken wings with his "buddies." The stress of not being able to witness what their partner does during this time apart, according to both Calan and Julie, creates an environment where they may let their minds run away with them, stressing about what their partner might be doing when they cannot watch them for days.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic functioned as a significant stressor for rural families, generating a range of stress responses among grandparents and their adult children. Some of them include stress about relationship dissolution, employment, family instability, their chil-

dren's outcomes, the potential for things not improving, and the loss of hope. The stressors have in common that they are associated with unknowable future outcomes. The COVID-19 stressor has had a harmful effect on the hope of the families in this study. There were some examples of positive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on family relationships, but its effects were mostly perceived negatively and associated with stress experienced at the family and individual levels. Working-class participants in my study blamed their misfortunes on themselves, even though those misfortunes resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. Their "identity narratives" (Destin and Debrosse 2017) were characterized by self-blame, which is consistent with Tevington's (2018) finding that many working-class people blame themselves for their adverse experiences that are structural in nature, such as a recession or, in this case, a pandemic. Rural grandparents and their adult children may be less exposed to social others who could tell them that the bad things that happen to them are part of a large, societally experienced stressor. The sample is highly religious (Roman Catholic), and within that religion, there is a focus on God deciding what happens and on the importance of living life humbly, which could play a role in the self-blame expressed by the participants in the study.

There is a gender component to how stress manifested for my sample. The men in my sample were very likely to blame themselves for things like family separation and employment problems that were clearly caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. They internalized blame for the decisions they felt they had to make about work and family. This theme of self-blame was less prevalent among middle-class men. When the men in my sample described stress, they described personal work-related stress, but they did not, in a single instance, describe the stress that may have been experienced by their partners, parents,

or children. Many of the men described their wives and partners as either happy to do the childcare or as “saints” who do so much for the family, but they did not describe it as “stressful” for them, even when the women said they were stressed by all of those responsibilities. There is a disconnect between the narrative some of the men have versus the realities expressed by the women in the sample.

The women in the study did not blame themselves for the loss of jobs, but did blame themselves for other misfortunes, such as getting pregnant and having a baby, and not being able to keep a husband from going to work far away to live. They were more likely to describe isolation and loneliness as their family stressors, describing “loneliness” as a personal experience that causes personal stress and as a stressor experienced at the family level. This was expressed as feeling “stressed” about having a lack of community. Other mothers described feeling stressed by the personal isolation they experienced while doing childcare and feeling contained and alone when their husbands were either at work for the day or for the entire week. Childcare stress, for example, was not described by the fathers and grandfathers in the study. In sharp contrast, all of the women in this study described some degree of stress related to childcare and children. This was equally expressed by mothers and grandmothers. Fathers often described their work as

personally stressful, either because the jobs themselves were stressful (software engineers were common in my sample) or because time away from their partners and children made them feel their family was “getting weak.” Mothers, fathers, grandmothers, and grandfathers all voiced concerns about the outcomes of the children—their access to quality education, their reading scriptures and becoming active members of the Roman Catholic church they are all associated with, and their development down the “right path,” which was described by many of the parents and grandparents, both men and women, as a path in which their children “know right from wrong” and are “good” and not “bad.” Much of this, for them, meant valuing their families and reading and following the church’s teachings. Both men and women who were away from each other described some degree of stress associated with potential relationship dissolution. This left them unable to see what the other was doing during the time apart, but also rendered them unable to perform their idealized family roles.

Rural families have unique challenges that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 stressor. This study contributes to our understanding of how large-scale events such as a global pandemic can have a negative effect on families and their everyday lives, their relationships, the way that they care for children, their hope, and how they see themselves as individuals.

Appendix

Interview Protocols

SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE (ADULT CHILDREN)

How often do your parents see their grandchildren?

Where did you grow up?

Where do you live now?

What is your educational background?

What do you do for a living?
Where do your parents live?
What is the education level of your parents?
What do (did) your parents do for a living?
Compare the standard of living of your parents when you were growing up to your current standard of living—is it about the same?
More comfortable? Less comfortable?

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR ADULT CHILDREN

Who do you consider to be your family?
How would you describe the level of involvement of your parents with your children?
B. How does this compare with your own?
How would you describe your parenting style?
B. How would you compare your parenting style with your parents’?
What do you think makes someone a “good” childcare giver?
What do you think makes someone a “bad” childcare giver?
How would you describe your relationships with your parents? Tell me about a time you disagreed with them.
How would you describe your relationships with your children?
Walk me through a typical day with your children.
Tell me about how the place you live affects your childcare.
 B. In what ways is it beneficial?
 C. In what ways is it not beneficial?
Tell me what it is like taking care of the kid(s).
 B. What do you enjoy?
 C. What is hard?
What are some challenges you face in providing care to your kids?
 B. How does caring for children make you feel?
Has COVID-19 had an impact on childcare for you?
 B. Has COVID-19 impacted how you feel as a parent?
(You were telling me before) that your parents help you with childcare. What do your parents do for your children?
Does anyone else besides you and your parent(s) help with childcare?
 B. Who?
 C. In what ways do they help with your children?
Have you ever disagreed with your parents about something to do with your children’s care? What happened?
Are there any parts to raising and caring for children that you think should be done by (mothers, fathers, grandparents, others)?

SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE (GRANDPARENTS)

How often do you see your grandchildren?
Where do you live?
What is your educational background?
What do you (did you) do for a living?
Where did your children grow up?
Where do your children live now?
What is your children’s education level?
What do your children do for a living?
Compare your adult child’s current standard of living to what they were used to growing up—is it about the same? More comfortable? Less comfortable?

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR GRANDPARENTS

Who do you consider to be your family?
How would you describe your level of involvement with your grandchildren?
B. How does this compare with your children when they were little?

How would you describe your grandparenting style?

B. How would you compare your grandparenting style with your children's parenting style?

What do you think makes someone a "good" childcare giver?

What do you think makes someone a "bad" childcare giver?

How would you describe your relationships with your children?

How would you describe your relationships with your grandchildren?

Walk me through a typical day with your grandchildren.

(You were telling me before) that you help with your grandchildren. How do you help your grandchildren?

Tell me about how the place you live affects your childcare.

B. In what ways is it beneficial?

C. In what ways is it not beneficial?

Tell me what it is like taking care of the kid(s).

B. What do you enjoy?

C. What is hard?

Does your role as a childcare provider affect your well-being?

B. Physical

C. Mental

Has COVID-19 had an impact on childcare for you?

B. Has COVID-19 impacted how you feel as a grandparent?

Does anyone else besides you care for your grandchildren?

B. Who?

C. In what ways do they help with your grandchildren?

Have you ever disagreed with your children about something to do with your grandchildren's care? What happened?

Are there any parts to raising and caring for children that you think should be done by (mothers, fathers, grandparents, others)?

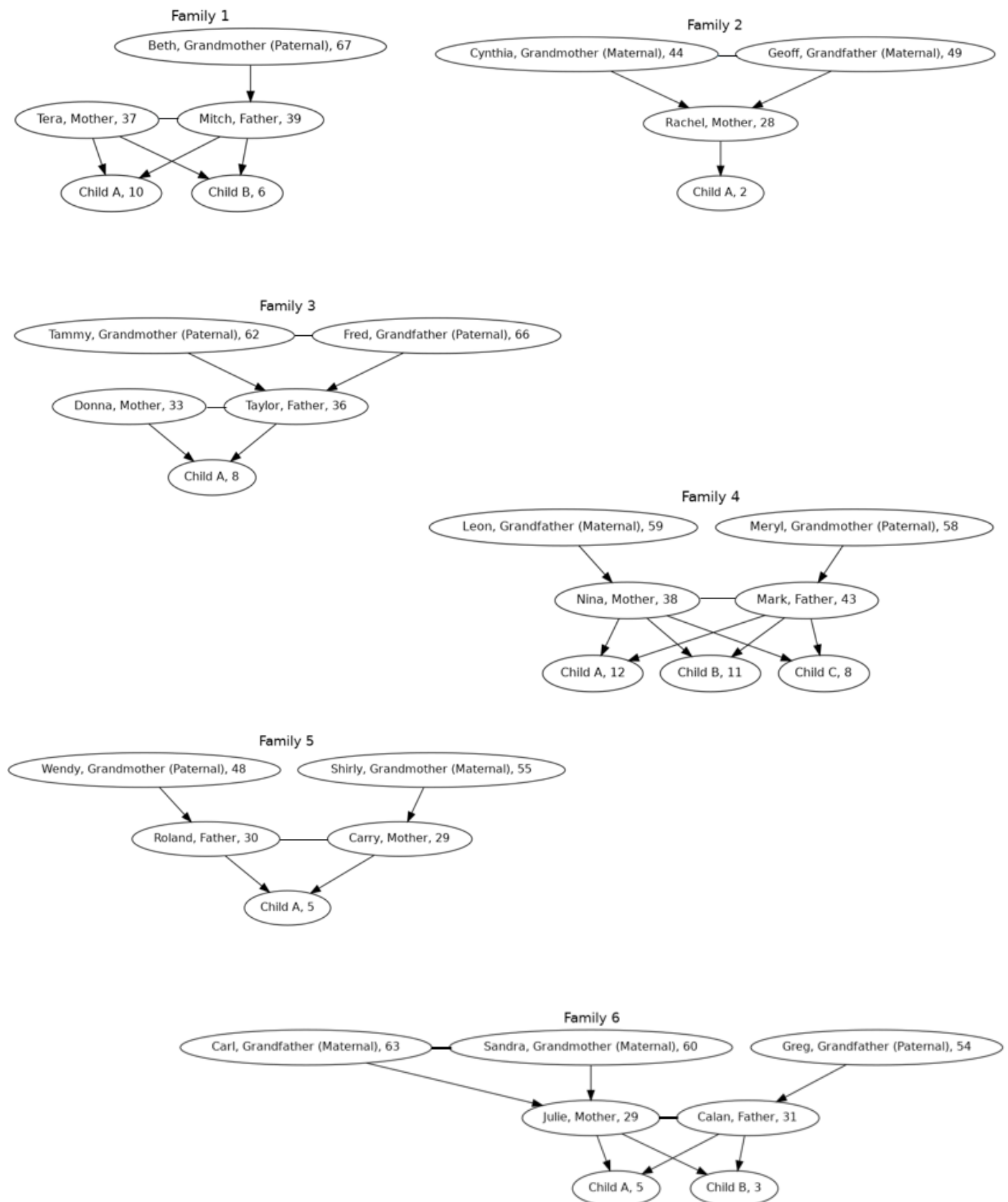
Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

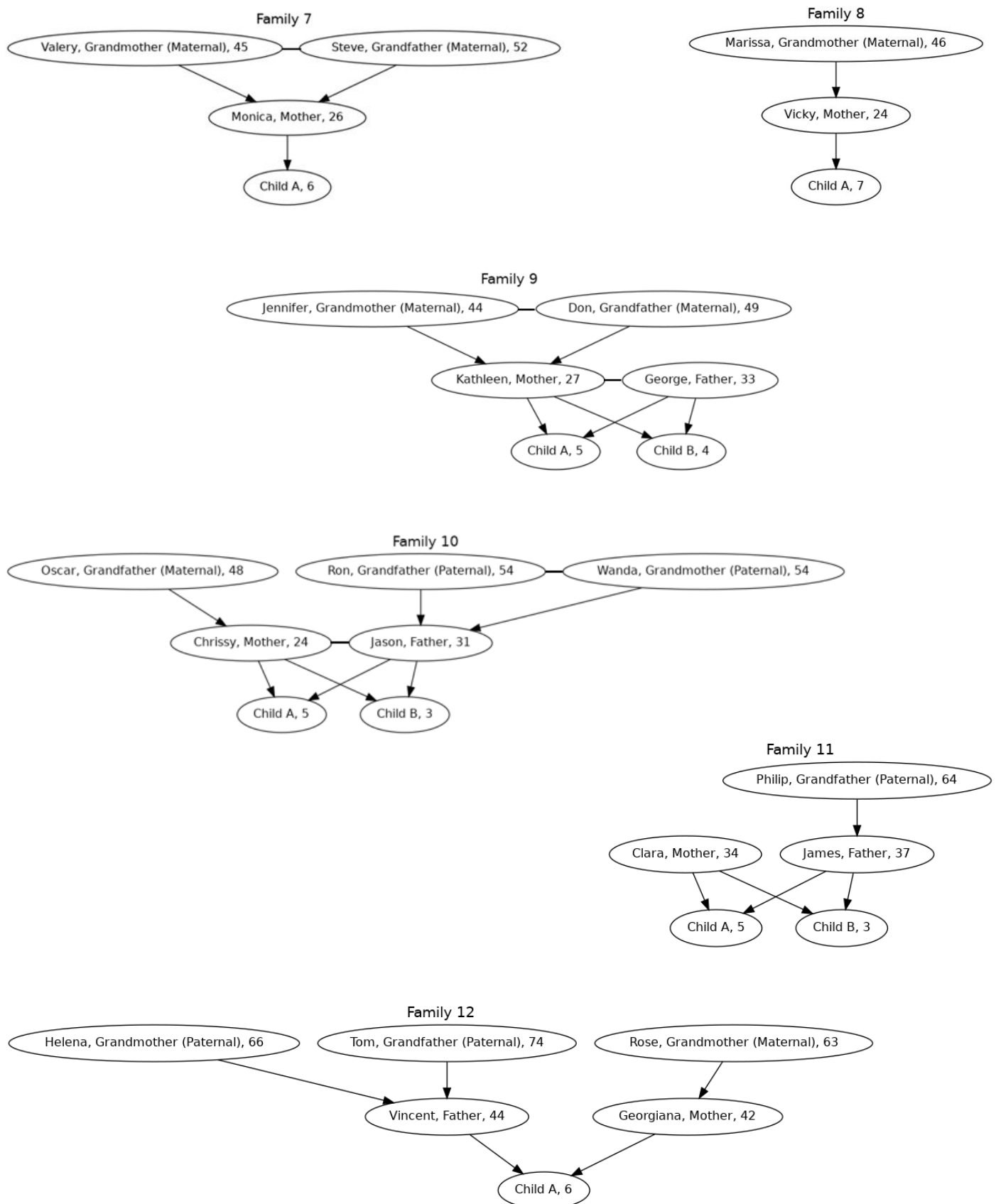
Respondent Characteristics	Number Interviewed
Total Number Interviewed	44
Parents	20
Grandparents	24
Marital Status	
Married	24
Unmarried	20
Race	
White	44
Social Class	
Working Class	26
Middle Class	18
Religion	
Catholic	28
Non-Religious	16

Note: One father depicted in the family trees declined to be interviewed; all other listed parents participated in interviews.

Source: Self-elaboration.

Figure 1. Family Trees





Source: Self-elaboration.

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