

Grandparents: The Storytellers Who Bind Us; Grandparents may be uniquely designed to pass on the great stories of human culture

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FULL TEXT

'Grandmom, I love Mommy most, of course, but you do tell the best stories—especially Odysseus and the Cyclops.' This authentic, if somewhat mixed, review from my grandson may capture a profound fact about human nature. A new study by Michael Gurven and colleagues suggests that grandparents really may be designed to pass on the great stories to their grandchildren.

One of the great puzzles of human evolution is why we have such a distinctive "life history." We have much longer childhoods than any other primate, and we also live much longer, well past the age when we can fully pull our weight. While people in earlier generations had a shorter life expectancy overall, partly because many died in childhood, some humans have always lived into their 60s and 70s. Researchers find it especially puzzling that female humans have always lived well past menopause. Our closest primate relatives die in their 50s.

Perhaps, some anthropologists speculate, grandparents evolved to provide another source of food and care for all those helpless children. I've written in these pages about what the anthropologist Kristen Hawkes of the University of Utah has called "the grandmother hypothesis." Prof. Hawkes found that in forager cultures, also known as hunter-gatherer societies, the food that grandmothers produce makes all the difference to their grandchildren's survival.

In contrast, Dr. Gurven and his colleagues focus more on how human beings pass on information from one generation to another. Before there was writing, human storytelling was one of the most important kinds of cultural transmission. Could grandparents have adapted to help that process along?

Dr. Gurven's team, writing earlier this year in the journal *Evolution and Human Behavior*, studied the Tsimane in Amazonia, a community in the Amazon River basin who live as our ancestors once did. The Tsimane, more than 10,000 strong, gather and garden, hunt and fish, without much involvement in the market economy. And they have a rich tradition of stories and songs. They have myths about Dojity and Micha, creators of the Earth, with the timeless themes of murder, adultery and revenge. They also sing melancholy songs about rejected love (the blues may be a universal part of human nature).

During studies of the Tsimane spread over a number of years, Dr. Gurven and his colleagues conducted interviews to find out who told the most stories and sang the most songs, who was considered the best in each category and who the audience was for these performances. The grandparents, people from age 60 to 80, most frequently came out on top. While only 5% of Tsimane aged 15 to 29 told stories, 44% of those aged 60 to 80 did. And the elders' most devoted audiences were their much younger kin. When the researchers asked where the Tsimane had heard stories, 84% of them came from older relatives other than parents, particularly grandparents.

This preference for grandparents may be tied to the anthropological concept of "alternate generations." Parents may be more likely to pass on the practical skills of using a machete or avoiding a jaguar, while their own parents pass on the big picture of how a community understands the world and itself. Other studies have found that relations between grandparents and grandchildren tend to be more egalitarian than the "I told you not to do that" relationship between so many parents and children.

Grandparents may play a less significant cultural role in a complex, mobile modern society. Modern pop stars and TV showrunners are more likely to be millennial than menopausal. But when they get the chance, grandmas and grandpas still do what they've done across the ages--turning the attention of children to the very important business of telling stories and singing songs.

Credit: By Alison Gopnik

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