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In Newsweek Magazine

GO, GRANDMA

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If you thought your grandmother's main function in life was to bake you brownies, think again. Scientists have long puzzled over whether there's any reason, evolutionarily speaking, for women to live long past menopause, when they can no longer bear children. Last week scientists found that there is. The study, published in the journal *Nature*, looked at 500 women in Finland and 2,300 women in Canada during the 18th and 19th centuries and found that the length of a woman's post-reproductive lifespan correlated with the number of grandchildren she had. "Post menopausal women are having an effect on reproduction," says Kristen Hawkes, an anthropology professor at the University of Utah. By helping care for the grandkids after they have been weaned, grandmothers in turn free up their sons and daughters more quickly for those romantic evenings propagating the species. This creates more gene copies--also known as little bundles of joy.

This behavior apparently is unique to humans. Chimpanzees, our closest relatives, are post-reproductive by 45--like many humans--but they rarely live to a ripe old age. The study also found the effect was the same whether the maternal or paternal grandmother was around to help the kids. "This is a general characteristic in the evolution of the species," says Hawkes. "It shaped our lineage." Thanks, Grandma.

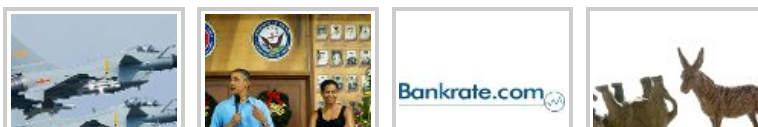
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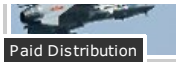
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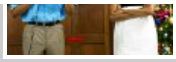
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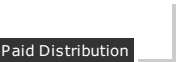


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