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The Intergenerational Family Relationships of Grandparents and GLBQ Grandchildren

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Abstract

This paper describes the intergenerational family relationships of grandparents and GLBQ grandchildren. Reviewing empirical research on GLBQ family of origin relationships that include materials on grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships, this paper examines, 1) disclosure patterns with grandparents, 2) social expectations that exist about “coming out” to grandparents, 3) social expectations of GLBQ grandchildren when “coming out” to grandparents, 4) the mediating role of parents and other extended family in grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships, and 5) theorizing differences amongst grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships. This review indicates that grandparents have been overlooked in existing empirical research in research on GLBQ family relationships. Grandparents may be a unique source of support for younger GLBQ individuals and their parents. Future research may usefully incorporate grandparents, as well as other extended family members, to better understand the experience of “coming out” in families.

This cultural divide [between those who normalize GLBQ identities and those who do not] is not between gays and straights or even among the various stripes of gay people. Neither is it between lesbian and gay men, blacks and whites, rich and poor, or urban and rural. Rather,...it is between generations.

(Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 12-13)

Introduction

As this quote indicates, age and generation are often thought of as a critical division between those who understand gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer (GLBQ¹) identities as normative and those who do not. While these dividing lines are often researched regarding their relevance for policies such as same-sex marriage legislation, the receptions of GLBQ identities also have important implications for family relationships. Research on how the disclosure of a GLBQ identity (or “coming out”) impacts family relationships often focuses on parent-GLBQ adult child relationships, leaving a relative gap for understanding how other family members, such as grandparents, might respond to, and ultimately understand, their GLBQ family members. In this paper I review empirical and theoretical literature on “coming out” in families, assessing what is known about how grandparents respond to their GLBQ grandchild. I ask: *How does a grandchild’s disclosure of their GLBQ sexuality impact the intergenerational relationships of grandparents and their GLBQ grandchild?*

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¹This acronym commonly includes transgender identities, however in this paper I will be primarily focusing on how families understand sexual identity rather than gender identity or expression. Understandings of GLBQ sexualities are often intertwined with gender narratives, however gender identity and expression will not be the main focus of this paper. I also include queer identities in this paper, an identity term added more recently to this acronym, to reflect an inclusive understanding of the emerging range of sexual identities that contemporary young adults are adopting (Savin-Williams, 2005).

To explore what is known about grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships, I first briefly contextualize GLBQ family relationships, highlighting the emerging importance of grandparents in later life families. I then review empirical and theoretical literature that incorporates grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships. I describe this literature in five main sections: disclosure patterns, expectations of grandparents, expectations of GLBQ grandchildren, parents as mediators, and theorizing differences. I conclude by summarizing the main findings of this project, describing its limitations, and delineating implications for future research.

Background

Historical Understandings of GLBQ Sexualities and Family Relationships

Historically, GLBQ individuals have been excluded from the families in which they were raised, either by being kicked out or by choosing to leave (Seidman, 2002; Seidman, Meeks & Traschen, 1999; Weston, 1991). Until recently, living an open life as a “homosexual” was not a possibility for most US citizens, creating a situation of “closeting” where individuals understand themselves as homosexual, yet make “potentially life-shaping decisions in order to manage a public heterosexual identity” (Seidman, 2002, p. 21). This period of closeting had profound implications on family life as GLBQ family members would go to great lengths to keep their sexual identities and behaviors from their family members, resulting in a popular conception that GLBQ individuals were somehow outside of the scope of the family (Cohler, 2004; Seidman, 2002).

The Stonewall Rebellion of 1969 has been identified, in particular, as a turning point for understandings of gay and lesbian identities (Armstrong & Crag, 2006; Cohler, 2004; Seidman, 2002, 2003). “Never before had homosexuals openly declared their sexual identity as something good while criticizing American society for its intolerance” (Seidman, 2003, p. 64). This shift from understanding same-sex desires and behaviors as negative and stigmatized, to imagining gay and lesbian individuals as deserving of the same rights and privileges as their heterosexual counterparts, has considerable implications for Americans’ shifting attitudes about GLBQ sexualities.

Contemporary Understandings of GLBQ Sexualities and Family Relationships

Americans’ attitudes toward homosexuality² have shifted greatly since then, yet some Americans still believe that homosexuality is “always wrong” and that the civil liberties of homosexuals should be limited (Loftus, 2001; Yang 1997). These attitudes have increasing relevance for individual relationships, as families of origin are becoming increasingly important to the lives of GLBQ individuals (Savin-Williams, 2005; Seidman, 2002; Seidman et al., 1999). Where previous historical moments have demanded secrecy and closeting, the contemporary moment is marked by a “disclosure imperative” (LaSala, 2009; McLean, 2007; Seidman, 2002; Seidman et al., 1999), whereby GLBQ individuals are expected to be open about their sexual orientations with friends, family members, and colleagues. In particular, it is a younger generation that has been instrumental in shifting how GLBQ individuals relate to their families of origin (Seidman 2002).

This increasingly “out” population has important implications for relationships with family members. The combination of a disclosure imperative and family members’ (potential) negative understandings about homosexuality can make “coming out” to family members a

²I use the term homosexuality here to reflect the language of the research that has been conducted about same sex desires, behaviors and identities. While often acknowledged to be problematic language, the General Social Survey retains this language so that it can conduct comparisons across different years of the survey.

“crisis” experience (Ben-Ari, 1995; Fields, 2001; Morrow, 2000; Saltzburg, 2004; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; Strommen, 1989; Wirth, 1978). Even “coming out” experiences that are not characterized by crisis are described as problematic in other ways as, “kin ties often became cordial and somewhat formal, lacking the openness, trust, and emotional closeness that we look for in families” (Seidman, 2002, p. 96). Rather, gays and lesbians are “rarely completely estranged from their families of origin, [and] many contend with family relationships that are difficult and stressful” (Rostosky et al., 2004, p. 43). Thus, even “good case scenarios” sometimes negatively impact immediate and extended family relationships. This demand for acceptance in one’s family of origin, without “openness, trust, and emotional closeness,” presents an emerging issue for GLBQ individuals and their families.

The Emerging Relevance of Grandparent-Grandchild Relationships

Not only are increasing numbers of GLBQ individuals “coming out” and demanding inclusion in their families of origin, but as individuals live longer, families are more likely to include multiple generations of family members (Bengston, 2001; Coontz, 2000a, 2000b; Farkas & Hogan, 1995; Uhlenberg & Kirby, 1998). Demographic research indicates that as of the year 2000 an average 30 year old adult is 75% likely at least one living grandparent, a dramatic shift from even 60 years earlier where the average 30 year old had only a 32% chance of having at least one living grandparent (Uhlenberg & Kirby, 1998). These multi-generation families have enabled new relationships between grandparents and their grandchildren and scholarship has reflected these shifts in its attention to the relationships of grandparents and their grandchildren (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1992; Fruhauf, Orel & Jenkins, 2009; Harwood, 2001; Hodgson, 1992; Kemp, 2005; Mueller, Wilhelm & Elder, 2002; Nussbaum & Bettini, 1994; Orel & Fruhauf, 2005; Sheehan & Petrovic, 2008; Szinovacz, 1998).

Yet, no study has directly examined grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships. This lack of knowledge about grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships is oft reflected in scholarly articles, as researchers commonly indicate the need to incorporate grandparents in research on GLBQ families. “Members of the family of origin who have not been studied and whose reactions are of interest are grandparents. Do homosexuals disclose to grandparents? Are grandparents told when the discovery of a homosexual family member is made?” (Strommen, 1989, p. 21). Here, Strommen articulates a commonly iterated suggestion for future research to extend the scope of what is known about GLBQ family relationships. Given the increasing inclusion of grandparents in contemporary family life, grandparents may be likely to play an important role in these interactions.

Even though studies do not focus on grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships, grandparents are present in literature on GLBQ families. Furthermore, these references often articulate strong opinions about the roles of grandparents. For instance, in discussing the limited role of extended family in research about GLBQ family of origin relationships, Savin-Williams and Esterberg (2000) state that, “some individuals report that they will never be fully out until their grandparents are dead” (p. 203). In contrast, a blogger from the Family Equality Council website comments that, “I don’t want my grandparents to die without ever fully knowing their grandson” (Family Equality Council, 2009). While these are quite different sentiments, they nevertheless indicate the strength of feelings that are associated with grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships. In this paper, I review empirical and theoretical literature on GLBQ family relationships to better understand grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships. I present here five main categories: disclosure patterns, expectations of grandparents, expectations of GLBQ grandchildren, parents as mediators, and theorizing differences.

Disclosure Patterns

While no studies have directly focused rates of grandchildren's disclosure of sexual orientation to their grandparents, there is nonetheless some research that includes grandparents, or more often, "other relatives" in their analyses of disclosure patterns within families. Here, I review this small body of work as a means of understanding what is known about grandparents' awareness of their GLB grandchildren's sexual orientation.

Boxer, Cook and Herdt's (1991) investigation of the relationships of parents and GL children is perhaps the most informative of these studies. Boxer et al. use psychological and anthropological approaches with 147 gay males and 55 lesbian females aged 14-21. Uniquely important to the topic of disclosure patterns in families, Boxer et al. ask whom, in study participants' families, knew about their sexuality (awareness), as well as to whom they had personally disclosed their sexual orientation (disclosure), and include a number of family members in this measure, including grandmothers and grandfathers.

Boxer et al. (1991) report rates of family awareness graphically; and do not specify the exact rates of awareness in the text. Thus, I provide here a best estimate of the percentage of the total sample that is out to each family member. For (gay) males in this sample: 54% of mothers are aware, 28% of fathers, 15% of older male siblings, 14% of younger male siblings, 21% of older female siblings, 15% of younger female siblings, 15% of grandmothers, 8% of grandfathers, 20% of other relative of the same age, and 18% of other adult relatives. For (lesbian) women in this sample: 63% of mothers are aware, 37% of fathers, 22% of older male siblings, 4% of younger male siblings, 18% of older female siblings, 8% of younger female siblings, 8% of grandmothers, 3% of grandfathers, 18% of other relatives of the same age, and 23% of other adult relatives.

This study indicates that, for gay men, about 15% of grandmothers and 8% of grandfathers know about their sexuality; and for lesbian women, about 8% of grandmothers and 3% of grandfathers know about their sexuality. Again, these numbers are estimates, perhaps further highlighting the relative "unimportance" of extended family in this analysis. However, it is notable that these GL individuals report that between 3% and 15% of their grandparents know about their sexuality. This study also draws attention to the gender differences that exist in grandparent-GL grandchild relationships as gay grandsons are more "out" than lesbian granddaughters, and grandmothers are more aware than grandfathers. In addition, given that this is a particularly young sample, with an average age of 18, it may be expected that some grandparents may learn later about their GL grandchild. In this sense, this estimate is likely lower than actual lifetime prevalence rates of disclosure to grandparents.

While other studies have not examined disclosure to grandparents directly, there have been some important advances in knowledge about disclosure patterns with "other relatives." For instance, D'Augelli and Hershberger (1993) find that of the 194 gay, lesbian and bisexual youth in their sample, few came out first to family members, however of those who did, "Mothers were the first told only 7% of the time; fathers, 1% of the time; both parents, 1%; brothers, 1%; sisters, 2%; and other relatives, 4%" (p. 433). In this study, "other relatives" are the second largest family category to whom individuals first disclosed their sexual orientation, with a higher disclosure rate than fathers or siblings. This illuminates the important roles that extended family or "other relatives" may play in "coming out" to families. Similarly in Mays, Chatters, Cochran and Mackness (1998) study of 673 gay male and 506 lesbian female African American family relationships, Mays et al. find that 28% of their sample report that "all categories of family members were aware of their sexual orientation" (p. 77), with 48.8% out to "other close relatives" and 30.9% out to "distant relatives." This finding indicates that "other

relatives” (both close and distant) are less likely to know about the sexual orientation of their gay and lesbian family member.

Not only are GLB individuals likely to be out to their extended family members, but according to Beals and Peplau’s (2006) report on the social networks of GL individuals. Their findings indicate that 53% of “other family” members knew about the lesbian or gay identity (as compared to 58% of mothers, 39% of fathers, and 63% of siblings), and of these family members, 59% were accepting. This rate of acceptance is similar to the rate of acceptance of siblings (60%) and considerably higher than the acceptance rates of mothers (36%) or fathers (30.5%). This indicates that other family members are likely to know about GL family members, and be among the most accepting. Like D’Augelli and Hershberger (1993) and Mays et al. (1998), Beals and Peplau (2006) do not describe the “other family” members that make up this category, leaving a gap in our knowledge about which “other family” members, in particular, might be likely to know and to respond with acceptance. While it is unclear if grandparents may be included in this group, this study does indicate that extended family members may be likely to know about their GL family member, and that they may be likely to respond with acceptance.

In addition, D’Augelli, Grossman and Starks (2005) explore disclosure to family members through structured interviews with 293 gay, lesbian and bisexual youth aged 15-19, who were raised by (and currently living with) at least one “parent.” In this study, the investigators define parent(s) as the person(s) by whom one was raised and with whom one currently resides. For 16 of these study participants, that person was a grandparent.³ While a small percentage of the overall sample, this numerical minority is nevertheless important for those interested in GLB family relationships, as it (unintentionally) highlights the relevance that grandparents have in the lives of their GLB grandchildren, as they may be primary caregivers or support a biological parent in the rearing of a GLB grandchild. Unfortunately, this study gives few additional details about these family relationships, such as how these GLB grandchildren came to live with their grandparents or how this particular type of grandparent-grandchild relationship might impact GLB disclosure patterns.

These studies indicate that: 1) extended family members may be important family members for GLB individuals, 2) other family members may be among the most accepting of family members, 3) GLB grandchildren are parented by grandparents and that, 4) in one study, for gay men, 15% of grandmothers and 8% of grandfathers know about their sexuality, and for lesbian women, 8% of grandmothers and 3% of grandfathers know about their sexuality (Boxer et al., 1991). While these studies provide important information about grandparents of GLB grandchildren, they are nonetheless limited in several ways. First, only one of these studies specifically examined grandparents. While Boxer et al.’s (1991) contribution to understanding disclosure patterns amongst grandparents is important, there is still much unknown about disclosure patterns with grandparents. Secondly, much of this research uses a variation on the concept of “other relative,” a term that generally stands in for cousin, aunt, grandparent, or any other non-parent or non-sibling family member. As Boxer et al. (1991) demonstrate, “other” relatives are not similarly likely to be told. Nor are they easily comparable to family members such as parents or siblings, as generally a person has between one and four parents, perhaps most commonly two. However, this same person may have multiple cousins, aunts, uncles, or grandparents. Thus, a person could have disclosed to only one cousin of a similar age, or to multiple grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles and these would be recorded similarly in these studies.

³Four were raised by a grandmother-grandfather pair, 1 by a bio father and a grandmother, 1 by a bio mom and a grandfather, and 10 by grandmothers.

Third, even though these studies have looked at the rates of disclosure amongst extended family, “other family members,” “other close relatives” or “distant relatives,” none of them forefront these family members in these analyses. As such, even these studies that have incorporated data about extended family members, findings about extended family are largely secondary in their analyses making conclusions about the relevance of extended family or grandparents limited. These studies are also limited as they primarily examine lesbian or gay individuals, leaving much unknown about similarities or differences in the disclosure patterns of bisexual or queer individuals and their extended family members. Lastly, many of these studies have younger samples, which is potentially limiting for understanding lifetime prevalence rates of disclosure to grandparents. However, younger samples may also be a strength as this group may be more likely to have (multiple) living grandparents and more likely to see disclosure to family as critically important to their own GLBQ identity development.

Expectations of grandparents

In this section, I explore expectations that exist about grandparents of GLBQ grandchildren in empirical and theoretical scholarship on GLBQ families. Expectations of grandparents (and grandchildren) illuminate the social construction of particular family roles, as they “provide a general framework as individuals negotiate and evaluate their interactions and relationships with one another” (Kemp, 2004, p. 499). These expectations then are socially informed perceptions or ideas about these family members that shape individuals’ experiences with, and perceptions of, their family members. To illustrate these expectations I draw largely from participants’ narratives excerpted from qualitative studies on coming out to families. Again, none of this empirical research purposefully focused on grandparent- GLBQ grandchild relationships, so it is noteworthy that there are as many accounts of grandparents as there are in this literature. Where applicable, I draw on the broader grandparenting literature insofar as it contributes more particularly to knowledge about expectations of the grandparents of GLBQ grandchildren. I present this subsection in several themes: *negative reactions*, *fragility*, *continued love*, *emotional and instrumental support* and *influencing others*.

Negative Reactions

One commonly-articulated expectation of grandparents is that of having negative reactions to learning about their GLBQ grandchild. A first example of this expectation of disapproving reactions from grandparents comes from Weston’s *Families We Choose*. Weston (1991) provides an anthropological analysis of the kin relationships through ethnographic observations and qualitative interviews with 80 gay men and lesbians. In her chapter on relationships with “blood relatives,” Weston describes the process in which one of her participants engaged to determine if he should disclose his sexuality to his grandfather.

One man had a grandfather who, as a Christian evangelist, seemed an unlikely candidate for acceptance. He told the grandfather anyway, not because he anticipated understanding, but because he decided that without honesty the relationship would not mean much: “The alternative is you just sit around waiting for people to die so you can be yourself”

(Weston, 1991, p. 55).

As this narrative indicates, this participant anticipated a negative outcome from his grandfather based, in part, on his religious background, yet still decided to disclose so that he could “be himself.”

Weston offers another account: “Lourdes Alcantara, an immigrant from Latin America, decided to come out to her senile grandmother, reasoning that even if her abuelita told other

family members, no one would believe her” (Weston, 1991, p. 55). While there are many details missing from this account, we may reasonably believe that Lourdes disclosed to her grandmother, despite anticipating a negative reaction (which Lourdes imagined would have further negative repercussions as her grandmother tells other family members). Interestingly, Lourdes imagined herself shielded from some of the potential negative fallout from disclosing by imagining that others in her family may not take her grandmother seriously based on her senility. While we do not have any additional information about her grandmother’s mental health status, this particular type of dismissing or discounting of a family member’s influence is likely particular to grandparents, compounding complications associated with expectations of grandparents’ reactions to GLBQ grandchildren. Further examples emerge elsewhere in this paper.

What is common to these narratives are the expectation that grandparents will respond negatively, with relatively little information about *how* GLBQ individuals come to this expectation. Weston theorizes that GLBQ individuals often anticipate negative reactions from grandparents not based on the specific history of the relationship, but on generalized stereotypes about older adults:

Younger gays who had come out to their parents sometimes hesitated to disclose their sexual identity to grandparents, despite the feelings of affection and closeness that often characterize those relationships. Although often framed in terms of age, this reluctance to come out to grandparents had less to do with number of years lived and more to do with making generations into symbols of particular historical periods, since some individuals’ grandparents were members of the same age cohort as others’ parents.

(Weston, 1991, p. 54)

As Weston indicates here, much of grandchildren’s (or parents’) reluctance about disclosing to grandparents does not necessarily have to do with either age or relationship but, rather, may be about their symbolic position in the family, as a member of a particular historic period or generation. Although GLBQ grandchildren seem to generally expect negative reactions from their grandparents, this does not necessarily dictate their actions, as GLBQ grandchildren (or perhaps, more often, their parents) may disclose in spite of the negative reactions they expect to encounter.

Fragility

In addition to expecting negative reactions to disclosure, families also expect grandparents to demonstrate emotional and physical fragility upon learning about a GLBQ grandchild’s sexual orientation. For instance, in their book *Something to Tell You: The Road Families Travel When a Child is Gay*, Herdt and Koff (2000) present original data from qualitative interviews with parents of lesbian women and gay men. Although this book is about “families,” as the title implies, the analysis (and sample) focuses exclusively on the experiences of parents. Despite the focus on parents, there are several examples in these data about grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships and the authors do make theoretical claims about the roles of grandparents in GLBQ family relationships. For instance, they say that families may generally believe that, “telling the grandparents may be ‘too much for them to handle’” (Herdt & Koff, 2000, p. 6), implying that grandchildren and other family members expect that grandparents are perhaps emotionally unable to handle the news that their grandchild is gay.

Another example of the perceived fragility of grandparents emerges in an advice book written to the Catholic family members of gay and lesbian children. Lopata and Lopata (2003) use original social research with 210 Catholic parents with gay and lesbian children to support their advice to Catholic parents. Most relevant to this project is a chapter sub-heading entitled, “We

can't tell Grandpa (Grandma), it would kill him (her)" (p. 42). This sub-heading reflects the popular notion that grandparents are physically fragile and that shocking news (like discovering that a grandchild is lesbian or gay) may cause physical harm. While the authors acknowledge that this stereotype is not based in fact, this example nonetheless represents a popular conception of the physical and emotional fragility of grandparents. Lopata and Lopata go on to say that, "Spouses say this to each other. Gay children and their non-gay siblings say it about their grandparents. Parents say it at PFLAG meetings. Where does this stereotype of the uninformed, sheltered, physically weak and emotionally defenseless grandparent come from?" (p. 42). While the authors ultimately conclude that this notion of grandparents as shielded from the social world and physically and emotionally fragile is not founded in reality, they acknowledge that this remains a popular trope in family discussions about grandparents.

The stereotype of grandparents as emotionally and physically fragile emerges not only in the literature about GLBQ family relationships, but is also well documented in aging research (Hurd, 1999; Uhlenberg & Kirby, 1998). As the social meaning of old age has shifted in Western cultures during the early twentieth century, older adults (and older adult bodies) are more likely to be understood as "senile, tired, sickly, and frail" (Hurd, 1999, p. 419). Grandparenting research, more generally, has left popular notions of aging bodies unexplored, and we know very little about how these notions impact contemporary grandparenting. In this way, the expectation of fragility identified here may offer an opportunity to extend existing grandparenting literature, as the thought of "coming out" to grandparents seems to invoke unique expectations of physical or emotional fragility and frailty amongst GLBQ grandchildren and parents.

Paradoxically, these notions of the physical fragility of grandparents may also make them seem like "safer" family members to "come out" to, given that fear of physical violence from family members remains a powerful motivation for some individuals to keep their sexuality hidden from their family members (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pickington, 1998). In this way, perhaps expectations of grandparents as frail or fragile may facilitate grandparents' awareness of their GLBQ grandchild, as grandchildren may be less likely to fear abusive physical repercussions of disclosure.

Continued Love

Despite these understandings of grandparents as rejecting or fragile, there are relatively few examples of this in the empirical literature. Rather, the relatively few empirical examples indicate that grandparents continued to love their grandchildren as they had previously.⁴ While this is not necessarily an "expectation" in the minds of the GLBQ individual or other family members, like the previous examples, it is often interpreted as an expectation by GLBQ individuals retrospectively. Examples of unconditional love, then, are most often experienced post-disclosure as GLBQ individuals are generally surprised at the acceptance they receive from grandparents.

To illustrate, consider an example in Merengi and Grimes' (2001) article that discusses coming out to families in a multicultural context. As one participant says:

My grandmother was raised in San Francisco in the twenties and grew up and lived there all her life. She's one of the attitude that people are who they are and you love them or leave them and so she's been silently supportive. Her and I have never really

⁴Examples in this literature generally do NOT include individuals who had poor relationships with their grandparents, or relationships that were not previously characterized by love and acceptance. Thus it is worth noting that feelings of ongoing love and acceptance, requires initial experiences of love and acceptance. The literature offers us far fewer examples of individuals with poor relationships with grandparents before or after disclosure, a distinction that is likely important to a more complete understanding of expectations of grandparents of GLBQ grandchildren.

talked about my being gay but it's come up in little issues and she's voiced her support [of being gay]. To her it doesn't matter. I'm still her number one grandson, which she has called me since I was four. So she's been supportive. (20 year old European American).

(Merengi & Grimes, 2001, p. 36)

While this participant perhaps expected a more positive reaction than others, this participant's story nonetheless illustrates this grandmother's ongoing support and love of her (gay) grandson. This ongoing, uninterrupted love is illustrated in the participant's comments that he is "still her number one grandson," a title he has worn since the age of four.

Another example of grandparents' ongoing unconditional love comes from Meyer's (1990) paper on gay relationships. In this paper, Meyer conducted 24 qualitative interviews with gay men about their romantic relationships. One of these participants spoke briefly about his experience with his grandparents:

Researcher: Was your family very supportive of your relationship?

J: Very supportive. My grandparents were very fond of him, in fact, they were captivated by him. My parents too. Though it is very interesting when they are talking with me after the fact. My father was very apprehensive: was it good for me?

(Meyer, 1990, p. 70)

As this excerpt illustrates, this participant experienced acceptance from his grandparents, as they exhibited genuine curiosity about his partner, perhaps even *more* love and support than from his parents; as the father, in particular, expresses apprehension about his previous same-sex relationship.

This expectation may be related to broader expectations of unconditional love from grandparents:

As any doting grandparent will tell you, toward their grandchildren they can feel unconditional love. The birth of a grandchild therefore constitutes a major milestone, if not a capstone, to a life of labor and sacrifice

(Herdt & Koff, 2001, p. 39).

Here, Herdt and Koff characterize grandparents as universally selfless and altruistic, exhibiting unconditional love for their grandchildren, and presumably GLBQ grandchildren. Later, when discussing parents' fears about disclosing to the grandparents Herdt and Koff write:

Sometimes a parents' reluctance to disclose can be based more in fear than in reality. For example, we noted that grandparents were able in some cases to be more accepting than their own children! Grandparents can be agents of integration—if they are allowed to know the truth. After all, they have little to gain by rejecting their grandchildren, and they stand to lose the very thing—grandchildren—that provides such meaning to their lives

(2001, p. 75-6).

Again, Herdt and Koff's characterization of grandparents mirrors the empirical examples present in this scholarship. Even though grandparents are expected to respond negatively, empirical examples often indicate love and occasionally their responses are more positive than those of parents. What little we know, empirically and theoretically, suggests that grandparents may be likely to maintain loving relationships with GLBQ grandchildren. Again, we know less about grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships that were not already characterized by unconditional love.

The few examples of grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships in the scholarly literature seem to bear out this ideal, as grandparents demonstrate loving support for their GLBQ grandchildren. It is perhaps unsurprising that grandparents continue to demonstrate love for their GLBQ grandchild given how prominent themes of love and positive regard are in the more general grandparenting literature (Hodgson, 1992; Kornhaber & Woodward, 1985; Nussbaum & Bettini, 1994; Sheehan & Petrovic, 2008). It may also be that norms of non-interference by grandparents may be responsible for these accepting behaviors, as other research indicates that contemporary grandparents may be expected to “be unassuming and supportive in exchanges with their adult grandchildren” (Kemp, 2004, p. 507). Supportive behaviors by grandparents, then, may not be motivated by approval of GLBQ sexualities; but, rather, of grandparents’ desire to respect their grandchild’s autonomy.

Emotional and Instrumental Support

Another theme in this literature is that beyond *merely* demonstrating love and acceptance of their GLBQ grandchild, grandparents may also be expected to fill supportive functions. As examples illustrate, this support can benefit the GLBQ grandchild, other family members, and often both. A first example is demonstrated in Oswald’s (2002) analysis of GLB individuals at family weddings. In this study, Oswald conducts focus groups with 45 GLB adults to share their recent experiences at family weddings as she investigates “how GLBT people would like to be treated during family events” (p. 328). Oswald presents an example of a participant who describes her grandmother as one of the people who supported her “outness” in the family. This participant said that it was helpful to have the support of her father at his wedding. “And it also helped having other family members who are pretty much the same, that took the lead in that. Yeah. Things like my grandmother being there, ‘Oh, good to see you!’” (p. 338). In this example, a grandmother is described as a source of emotional support during a family event, in this case, merely by voicing her joy at seeing her granddaughter there.

Merengi and Grimes’ (2001) article about coming out to families in a multicultural context offers a second example of how a grandparent has offered support to their GLBQ grandchild. A 20 year old African American male participant states:

Every time I talk to her it’s all, ‘Are you using condoms?’ And I’m all, ‘I’m not even having sex.’ ‘Well, just make sure, even if you’re giving oral sex.’ and I’m all, ‘Grandma!’ Like every time I’m over, ‘So are you having sex yet?’ and I’m all, ‘I’m not talking to you about this. You’re my grandma.’ She’s a trip. She’s funny. She’s cool with it now.

(Merengi & Grimes, 2001, p. 38)

This participant reports a relatively positive relationship with his grandmother where his sexuality is discussed, even if sexual activity is a primary aspect of these conversations. Notably, this grandmother offers her grandson sexual health information, such as imparting the importance of using protection. While this sort of support may be unwanted by this grandchild and, perhaps problematically, focuses on the sexual health aspects of gay life, this grandmother nonetheless imparts sexual health information to her grandson in the expectation of preventing risky sexual behavior.

A final example of the support that grandparents may be expected to provide to GLBQ grandchildren comes from Weston’s research on lesbian and gay kinship. Weston offers this account of one of her participants: “Yoli Torres, who was Puerto Rican, told a story of seeking refuge with her grandmother when she was 15, after her mother told her to “leave until you get your senses together” (Weston, 1991, p. 59). For Yoli Torres, her mother’s reaction to the disclosure of her sexuality resulted in her homelessness. Yoli Torres then sought residence and support with her grandmother. This account demonstrates another way that a grandparent may

“pick up the slack” of the important functions of family, when a parent has refused to do so based on their child’s sexuality. In particular, this example illustrates the instrumental support that grandparents may provide GLBQ grandchildren, as her grandmother provides her with basic needs such as shelter and food, rather than the emotional or educational support demonstrated in the previous examples.

It is perhaps unsurprising that grandparents fill in the gaps of family functions that parents leave unfulfilled given that this is a common theme in grandparenting literature more generally (Aldous, 1995; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1992; Kemp, 2004; King, Russell & Elder, 1998; Pebley & Rudkin, 1999; Troll, 1983). Grandparents frequently support grandchildren when parents are unable or unwilling to do so (Kemp, 2004; Kornhaber & Woodward, 1985; Langer, 1990; Roberto, Allen & Blieszner, 2001). In her seminal work, Troll (1983) characterizes grandparents as the “family watchdog[s]” who “monitor[s] the state of the family functioning and step[s] in only when they are needed,” (p. 64) often appearing uninvolved. “Coming out” in families may be another family situation in which grandparents act as “watchdogs,” stepping in to meet needs of GLBQ grandchildren that are not otherwise being met.

In addition to norms of grandparents fulfilling instrumental supportive roles, grandparents also demonstrate their support for grandchildren through providing education that they imagine may be specifically required by a GLBQ grandchild, another supportive role that grandparents often take with their grandchildren (Kemp, 2004; Kornhaber & Woodward, 1985). Additionally, grandparents may offer emotional support when a grandchild “comes out” by demonstrating excitement to see a grandchild and her partner at a family function, or by asking about a grandchild’s love life, echoing findings about grandparent-grandchild relationships more generally (Kemp, 2004; Kornhaber & Woodward, 1985; Sheehan & Petrovic, 2008; Silverstein & Marengo, 2001). Thus, the expectations of support from grandparents of GLBQ grandchildren conform to extant patterns in this literature, but also expand these categories as grandparents of GLBQ grandchildren may encounter unique contexts for enacting their support of GLBQ grandchildren.

Influencing Others

Not only do grandparents provide instrumental and emotional support to their GLBQ grandchildren, but they may act as advocates on their behalf with other family members, influencing them in their opinions about the GLBQ family member. As several authors posit, grandparents may have some influence over the thoughts and opinions of family members, given their status within the family:

The family of origin does not consist only of parents and siblings. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews are also important members of the family system, which should be factored into the process of disclosure. Grandparents, as senior members of the family system, have influence that extends to many members of the family. It is possible that grandparents could play a significant role in this process

(Mallon, 1999, p. 79).

Neglected are studies that explore sexual-minority youths’ relationships with siblings, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins. Extended family members may be underused resources of acceptance and support. Although some individuals report that they will never be fully out until their grandparents are dead, they may be relinquishing potential sources of guidance from grandparents who could assume an intermediary role in salvaging the integrity and coherency of the family

(Savin-Williams, 2001, p. 257).

As these scholars indicate, grandparents may likely be important family members for GLBQ individuals. Indeed, the influence that grandparents have over family relationships is well documented in research on grandparenting relationships more generally (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1992; King, Russell, & Elder, 1998; Troll, 1983).

Grandparents may exercise their influence over other family members regarding their GLBQ grandchild. However, it is unclear to what extent grandparents may exert helpful or less helpful interventions on behalf of their GLBQ grandchildren. For instance, although we have few examples of it in this literature, it may be that grandparents use their position in the family to promote more negative understandings of GLBQ sexualities.

The literature on GLBQ family relationships has delineated several expectations that may be associated with grandparents with GLBQ grandchildren. While grandparents are often expected to respond negatively and/or be perceived to be too emotionally or physically fragile to learn about the sexuality of a grandchild, empirical examples actually indicate that grandparents may be expected to respond with love, support and help others reach positive understandings of GLBQ sexualities within the family system. The single biggest gap in this literature is perhaps knowledge about how grandparents who have less positive relationships may respond to a grandchild disclosing their GLBQ sexuality.

Like research on grandparenting relationships more generally (Hodgson, 1992; Kemp, 2004, 2005), research on grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships is largely positive as the few accounts of that have been documented of grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships are characterized by love and support. It may be that grandchildren are more likely to discuss more positive or close grandparent relationships. Similarly, in reporting about their relationship, GLBQ grandchildren may focus on the positive aspects of these relationships. It is a challenge to researchers to capture the range of experiences GLBQ individuals may have in “coming out” to grandparents. The expectations delineated in this section are largely articulated from GLBQ grandchildren themselves, and only occasionally from parents. It is unclear if grandparents themselves would identify similar expectations of their responses to learning about their GLBQ grandchild. Additionally, it is unclear how these expectations may (or may not) relate to behavior.

Expectations of GLBQ Grandchildren

In addition to the expectations that exist about grandparents, academic scholarship also articulates expectations of the GLBQ grandchild. It is interesting to note that there are many fewer of these articulated in this research. I offer a few ideas about why this may be. First, most of these studies are conducted through an examination of the experiences of the GLBQ grandchild. A GLBQ grandchild may be more willing, and able, to articulate their expectations of other family members, than they are to describe what may be expected from them. As this literature contains no interview, survey, or observational data from grandparents themselves, we are relatively impoverished about what their expectations may be of their GLBQ grandchildren. Second, even when family members other than the GLBQ grandchild are interviewed, almost always parents, the focus on the research has never been on grandparent-grandchild relationships. Thus, while this family member might be able to better inform our understandings of the specific expectations of GLBQ grandchildren, these data are not currently available. Third, it may be that expectations of grandchildren are, in general, difficult to describe (Kemp, 2004), making expectations associated with GLBQ grandchildren, similarly difficult to identify.

Despite this general paucity in knowledge about expectations that exist of GLBQ grandchildren, there are a few expectations that are worth further exploration: *disclosure imperative*, *protecting grandparents*, and *emotional and instrumental support*.

Disclosure imperative

Several scholars describe a “disclosure imperative,” or the need to tell family members about one’s sexuality (LaSala, 2009; McLean, 2007; Seidman, 2002). Indeed disclosure to one’s family of origin is often seen as a critical last step in achieving healthy, integrated GLBQ identities. “The process of coming out – of revealing a gay, lesbian or bisexual identity to others – is considered one of the key events in the development of an integrated and healthy homosexual and bisexual identity” (McLean, 2007, p. 151). For GLBQ grandchildren, this desire to disclose their identity to their grandparents often arises out of a desire to “be honest,” “be myself,” or to “not hide.”⁵

The presence of this disclosure imperative for GLBQ grandchildren is perhaps best illustrated in a posting on the Family Equality Council website, as described earlier. On this website, a blogger comments, “I don’t want my grandparents to die without ever fully knowing their grandson,”⁶ indicating that for this blogger, disclosure to his grandparents is critical for honoring their important role in his life. Later in the post, the blogger describes his grandparents’ reactions after the young man’s father disclosed his sexuality to his grandparents. “My grandparents didn’t skip a beat or a bite, and went on with their sandwiches. And that was that. No tears. No disowning. No outbursts.” This example is a clear illustration of how GLBQ grandchildren feel compelled to disclose to their grandparents, but may not disclose themselves. While this is certainly not the case for all of the examples found in this literature, this desire to be open and honest with grandparents, and other family members is certainly common in the literature about coming out to families of origin.

This disclosure imperative may be especially salient in families where some family members are aware and others are not. In situations such as these, the challenges associated with managing awareness, may provide additional incentive for disclosing to grandparents. “That certain family members know and other are unaware (to varying degrees) creates a complex, unstable situation in the family” (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993, p. 443). As D’Augelli and Hershberger eloquently articulate, keeping secrets from some family members can create tension within the family which may be alleviated by disclosing to the unknowing family members.

While this disclosure is likely to bring about a different sort of stress (the stress of knowing), D’Augelli suggests that there is a unique type of stress associated with managing information within the family to keep secrets from some. While, “we lack basic information needed to understand the characteristics of the stressors in families such as who knows, who does not know, what kinds of problems the knowledge generates, and how different family members respond” (D’Augelli, 2005, p. 124), we may also reasonably hypothesize that the stress of managing information from family members such as grandparents, may be an additional factor that compels family members to disclose to grandparents.

The earnestly felt desire to disclose one’s sexuality to grandparents is a common theme in literature that discusses expectations of GLBQ grandchildren. While a disclosure imperative may be somewhat unique to GLBQ grandchildren, other research finds that grandchildren generally experience the expectation to share information about themselves with grandparents, particularly aspects of themselves that they experience pride about (Kemp, 2004). Given contemporary discourses around taking on GLBQ identities as a source of “pride,” it perhaps makes sense that GLBQ grandchildren may want to share this aspect of themselves with their grandparents.

⁵These are phrases GLBQ grandchildren used to describe their reasons for disclosing to grandparents.

⁶<http://www.familyequality.org/blog/?p=787> (March 7, 2009)

Protect grandparents

Paradoxically, even though grandchildren may commonly experience a disclosure imperative with their grandparents, they may also be expected to protect their grandparents from finding out about their sexuality. For instance, Weston (1991) finds in her research that some, “felt protective of relatives, worrying that someone in poor health might have a heart attack or ‘nervous breakdown’ at the news” (Weston, 1991, p. 51). Here Weston indicates that guarding a family member from this information, may be, in part, about their interest in “shield[ing]... the relative from pain” (p. 51). Another example of this emerges in Herdt and Koff’s research on coming out to families. Here, a mother describes her thoughts about disclosing her son’s sexuality to her parents.

Initially I thought my parents would think it is a terrible thing to have a gay son, like at one time it was a mental illness; you had to keep it secret, it was shameful. Shocking. *I didn’t want them to suffer!*

(Herdt & Koff, 2001, p. 76, emphasis added)

In this example, the family consciously seeks to protect the grandparents from “suffering” associated with finding out that their grandson is gay. This particular example of protection is articulated by a parent, however as the next section will discuss, parents often serve as mediators disclosing a grandchild’s sexuality to grandparents. These examples illustrate the protective functions that GLBQ grandchildren, and family members more generally, perceive themselves playing for grandparents.

In addition to protecting grandparents by keeping a grandchild’s sexuality secret, grandchildren may also act protectively with grandparents who *do* know about their sexuality by withholding other related information. While there were no examples of this in the empirical or theoretical literature, it is reasonable to hypothesize that aspects of GLBQ lives, such as sexual behaviors, drug or alcohol use, or political activism, may be regarded as unpalatable by grandparents. Grandchildren or other family members may seek, then, to conceal this information, as a means of protecting them from concern or worry.

This expectation of grandchildren perhaps parallels the expectation about grandparents from the previous section, where grandparents are seen as fragile, and therefore in need of protection. Kemp (2004) finds a similar expectation of grandchildren in her article that explores contemporary expectations of grandparents and adult grandchildren. Amongst her findings, Kemp, (2004) says that, “out of respect for their grandparents and a desire to not disappoint, a number of grandchildren also felt they should censor themselves in interactions with their grandparents” (p. 521). Here, Kemp indicates that the censorship that grandchildren may practice with their grandparents may arise from a desire to demonstrate respect and maintain favor with grandparents. In this sense, grandchildren’s (and parents’) interests in “protecting” grandparents, may be as much about protecting their own favorable status with grandparents as it is about actually protecting grandparents from harm. Yet, regardless of the motivation, (GLBQ) grandchildren experience an expectation of censorship to protect their (relationships with) grandparents.

Emotional and instrumental support

A final expectation of GLBQ grandchildren may be that they demonstrate emotional and instrumental support for their grandparents. While there are no examples of this in the empirical data, Mays et al. (1998) hypothesize that, “acceptance of the same-sex partner could result in an expansion of instrumental and emotional support resources for the family (if the family chooses to accept)” (p. 83). Here Mays et al. argue that family members may expect support from their GLBQ family member, especially if they are able to accept the (potential) same-sex partner of their family member. While there is little additional support of the emotional and

instrumental support that grandchildren are expected to offer their grandparents in this literature, related literature on informal caregiving and grandparenting bolster this claim.

Research on the care and support of older family members indicate that GLBQ family members are likely to provide care for their families of origin (Cahill, Ellen, & Tobias, 2002; Cohen & Murray, 2007; Fredriksen-Goldsen & Muraco, 2006; Fredrickson, 1999; Fruhauf & Orel, 2008). This line of research is early in its development and little is known specifically about GLBQ grandchildren providing care for grandparents. Some research does indicate that grandchildren are generally expected to provide care in some situations for their grandparents (Kemp, 2004; Fruhauf, Jarrott, & Allen, 2006; Fruhauf & Orel, 2008; Hodgson, 1998). While adult grandchildren may most often provide secondary caregiving, adult grandchildren are also expected to “give back” to grandparents by spending time together, or by occasionally doing household chores (Kemp, 2004; Hodgson, 1998). Taken together, these findings suggests that GLBQ grandchildren are likely important to the ongoing care and support of their grandparents, although little is known still about how “coming out” may impact this expectation.

Very little is known about the expectations families have of GLBQ grandchildren. I hypothesize that this may be in part because of the lack of attention to grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships in the literature in general, the lack of attention to grandparents’ experiences of there relationships, or merely, a reflection of the general challenges that exist in identifying expectations of adult grandchildren. Nevertheless, GLBQ grandchildren may feel compelled to disclose their sexuality to grandparents (or to be willing to have it disclosed for them.) GLBQ grandchildren may also, ironically, be expected to conceal their sexuality or particular aspects of their sexuality from their grandparents to protect them. Lastly, GLBQ grandchildren may be expected to provide emotional or instrumental support for their grandparents.

Grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships as mediated by parents

In general, parents play an important mediating role in grandparent grandchild relationships, even after grandchildren reach adulthood (Cherlin & Furstenber, 1992; Fingerman, 2004; Hodgson, 1992; 1998; Monserud, 2008; Robertson, 1975; Sprey & Matthews, 1982), supporting the idea that grandparent-grandchild relationships should be examined within a family system. In this fourth section, I describe parents’ roles in grandparent- GLBQ grandchild relationships. To review the potentially unique mediating roles that parents may play in grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships I have come up with three initial, descriptive categories to reflect this literature: *parents as disclosers*, *parents as advocates*, and *parents pushing grand-generations together*. After discussing existing knowledge about how parents may mediate grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships I then briefly summarize what is known about the reception of GLBQ sexualities in parent-GLBQ adult child relationships, describing how these themes may be relevant to understanding grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships.

Parents as disclosers

One of the themes present in empirical and theoretical literature on grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships is that of parents acting as disclosers for their GLBQ children. Parents’ roles as the discloser of their child’s sexuality is evident in an example from Herdt and Koff’s (2000) book, *Something to Tell You: The Road Families Travel When a Child is Gay*. They say:

As Amy, the forty-six-year-old mother, admitted, “None of our friends had gay sons. It took me a long time to tell my mother, because Jay is her only grandson.” Amy felt singled out and isolated as a result of learning that her son is gay. For some parents, this is the first time in their lives that they have had to face prejudice or injustice.

(Herdt & Koff, 2000, pp. 26-7)

Here Amy illustrates the (reluctant) role parents may take as they disclose their child's sexual identity to grandparents (and other family members). Notably, in this example Amy does not appear to question her mediating role with her parents as she accepts what she experiences as a burden: telling them about her son's sexuality.

Another example of parents acting as disclosers in relationships between grandparents and their GLBQ grandchildren is evident in Savin-Williams (2001) book, *Mom, Dad, I'm Gay!* In this book, Savin-Williams draws on data from throughout his research career regarding "coming out" in families, including 164 qualitative with GLBQ youth. However the primary aim of this book is not to present research, but rather to give advice to GLBQ youth and their families. Most relevant to the current topic is an example of a young (presumably lesbian) woman's narrative about her relationship with her mother. She says:

We don't talk about it much today, but if I say I'm spending lots of time with a particular person of the female persuasion then she begins to question me in a negative way. I'm trying to educate her, and there's been progress. She's in a better place but not fully accepting yet. She keeps thinking that she failed some way, perhaps by not having a father around me. The big break came last summer when Mom told my grandparents about the commitment ceremony, and they're coming to the ceremony. She was hedging until Grandpa said, "So what?" He's fine with it, and so you know Grandma is too. That was it.

(Savin-Williams, 2001, pp. 97-8)

In this excerpt, the mother discloses to the grandparents about their granddaughter's sexuality, in this case compelled by an eminent commitment ceremony. Evident in this narrative is a parent's fear that her parents (the GLBQ youth's grandparents) will react negatively creating additional strain in the family system. In this case, the mother's disclosure to her parents (and their subsequent positive reaction) was a "big break" in the young woman's relationship with her mother. This perhaps lends further support to the idea that grandparents have the potential to serve important supportive roles for other family relationships, such as parent-GLBQ child relationships. Interestingly in both of these examples, it is mothers, not fathers, acting as mediators by disclosing this information to grandparents, indicating that gender may be an important aspect of these three generation family relationships.

The importance of parents as mediators or "managers" of the information about the sexual orientation of their child may vary a great deal. "Parents' management of youths' disclosure within the family (to siblings, other relatives, and so on) and to community members can vary tremendously" (D'Augelli, 2005, p. 123). However, as D'Augelli also points out, very little is known about parents interactions with other family members. "We lack basic information... such as who knows, who does not know, what kinds of problems the knowledge generates, and how different family members respond" (2005, p. 124).

Parents as advocates

There is also evidence that parents may not only act as the discloser about their child's sexuality to their parents, but that parents also take an active role in advocating for their child with grandparents. In one example which emerged in an earlier section, a 20 year old African American male participant describes how his mother mediated a conflict with his grandmother.

She [my grandmother] found out by reading my journal. She was all, 'Oh, there's something you need to tell me.' I was like, 'What are you talking about?' and then my mom told me that she read my journal and I was livid, I was so mad that she was getting into my life.

(Merighi & Grimes, 2001, p. 38)

While this quotation lacks many of the details we might wish for, it is reasonable to guess that the mother in this story disclosed this information to her son as a means of enabling this grandmother-grandson pair to talk directly with each other about his sexuality. As the earlier excerpt indicates, this conflict was resolved as the grandmother educates the grandson about sexual health risks on an ongoing basis. This story concludes with this gay grandson describing his grandmother as, “a trip. She’s funny. She’s cool with it now” (p. 38). This indicates that with the mother’s intervention, this grandmother-grandson duo were able to successfully resolve their conflict and maintain a positive relationship post-disclosure.

In another particularly poignant example, Herdt and Koff (2001) describe Bill and Cynthia, parents of David, a young man who came out to them as gay a few years ago. For Bill and Cynthia, telling Bill’s parents was a source of stress given their religious and conservative background. Cynthia reports that,

My fear is that instead of rejecting David, they would be hassling us to take him to a psychiatrist or to pray for him—get him into religious groups that purport to convert people to heterosexuality. Bill thinks [his parents] (in text) would be very hurt by it and he doesn’t want them to experience that. He’s not ready yet to deal with their questions and anxiety.

(Herdt & Koff, 2001, p. 77)

Here, embedded in this narrative is, again, the expectation that David’s parents will disclose his sexual identity to David’s grandparents. Yet despite this assumed role as a discloser, Bill and Cynthia attempt to shield their son from anticipated negative actions from his paternal family. This shielding can be seen as a form of advocacy in and of itself, as parents actively engage in protecting their son from the deleterious effects of coming out as gay.

However, despite his parents’ attempts to conceal David’s sexuality from the paternal side of his family, they discover David’s sexual identity, much to Bill and Cynthia’s dismay.

Dealing with my husband’s part of the family has been hard. They were brutal. My husband’s brother wrote a letter to my gay son saying our son was a ‘disgrace’ to the family. My mother-in-law turned against [my son] then. My husbands’ sister told our son that by telling his grandmother about his sexual orientation, he has hastened her death.

(Herdt & Koff, 2001, p. 77)

After the paternal side of the family discover David’s sexual orientation, Cynthia and Bill take on the burden of “dealing with” Bill’s family. While this account does not elaborate on what “dealing with” these family members entail, it might be reasonable to assume that this includes defending David’s sexuality to other family members. In this account, Bill and Cynthia advocate for David, first, by trying to shield him from the negative actions of family members, and second, by “dealing with” these negative actions, presumably through education and defense of David’s sexuality to his paternal grandparents and other family members.

Notably, this account indicates that David’s paternal grandmother did not necessarily have a bad reaction to this news until interacting with her other son about this issue. This example indicates that in addition to parents, other family members may also be mediators who impact grandparents’ understandings of their GLBQ grandchild. This example indicates that in addition to understanding parents’ roles as mediators in grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships, a family system analysis may be even more analytically useful as it may incorporate other relevant family responses.

Parents pushing grand-generations together

Parents may often be helpful to GLBQ children as they act as disclosers to grandparents or advocate on behalf of their child to their parents. However, parents do not always have supportive reactions to the discovery that a child is GLBQ. When a parent's reaction is less than supportive, it is unlikely that they would act as advocates for their GLBQ child to their parents. In the few examples that discuss negative or rejecting parental reactions, grandparents often take on a supporting role.⁷

For instance, Weston relays the story one of her participants. "In another case a grandmother contradicted expectations by demonstrating more acceptance than a man's parents. With much laughter, the man described a scene in which his grandmother attempting to calm his mother by exclaiming, "Felicia, get over it!" (Weston, 1991, p. 55). Here, a grandmother acts in a calm supportive manner, as she encourages her daughter to "get over" her own difficulties with accepting her gay child. As this example indicates, parents may mediate the relationships of GLBQ grandchildren and their grandparents by enabling grandparents to articulate an accepting stance toward their GLBQ grandchild.

A previously cited example also supports this theme. Recall Yoli Torres, a participant in Weston's (1991) study, whose mother told her to leave the house when she disclosed her sexuality. As a result, Yoli sought refuge with her grandmother. While her mother undoubtedly was not intending to facilitate the closeness of her daughter and her mother, this grandmother-granddaughter pair was nonetheless pushed together by circumstances created by a parent. Again, these examples bring to mind Troll's (1983) description of grandparents as watchdogs, as grandparents may act to support their GLBQ grandchild when the parent acts in a way that the grandparent deems inappropriate, or does not take action that a grandparent deems necessary. Building on Troll's work, others have investigated the ways that grandparents "fill in the gaps" for parents (Franks, Hughes, Phelps & Williams, 1993; Kennedy, 1990; Tomlin, 1998), indicating that this is a common expectation of grandparent-grandchild relationships more generally.

Theorizing differences

While thus far in this paper I have explored trends in the empirical and theoretical literature on grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships, in this section I will attend more specifically to differences that exist in this literature. Given the poverty of literature on grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships in general, analyses of possible variations in the reception of GLBQ sexualities are nearly nonexistent. In this section, I describe some of the general empirical and theoretical knowledge about differences between families when someone "comes out," supplementing this with knowledge from grandparenting literature more generally to make theoretical suppositions about how attending to socio-demographic characteristics may enrich our understandings of grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships. I focus specifically on race and ethnicity, and gender, as these characteristics have received the most attention thus far.

Race and ethnicity

In the literature that explores the intersections of race, sexuality and the family, a major theme is that "coming out" to families and communities of color is additionally complicated (Bennett & Battle, 2001; Grov et al., 2006; Jackson & Brown, 1996; Mays et al., 1998; Morales,

⁷There were no explicit examples of parents of GLBQ individuals who had negative reactions whose grandparents also had negative reactions. It may be that when parents have negative reactions, grandparents are less likely to know about the sexuality of their grandchild given that, 1) as parents often act as disclosers for GLBQ children, and 2) the GLBQ individual may assume that a grandparents' reaction would be similar (or worse) and therefore decide not to disclose to grandparents or other family members. Future research may usefully investigate the role that parents' reactions may have on halting or enabling disclosure to other family members.

1990; Weston, 1991; Zamora-Hernandez & Patterson, 1996). Some argue that this is because of the more central role that family takes in communities of color. “‘Coming out’ to the [ethnic minority] family tends to involve both the nuclear and extended family systems. Such a family collective is the major support system for the ethnic person and is the source of great strength and pride” (Morales, 1990, p. 233). Because family relationships occupy such a central role in these GLBQ individuals’ lives, it may be additionally complicated to “come out,” for fear of disappointing or losing such an important person or group of people. Indeed, other research finds that fear of disappointing close family members may lead GLBQ individuals to avoid or delay disclosure (Waldner & Magruder, 1999).

In addition, racial and ethnic minority families may be particularly likely to centrally incorporate “extended family members” in more active family roles. “In ethnic communities, family is defined more broadly than nuclear family members. Extended family members, including grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, provide child care, advice role models, support and other specialized roles” (Savin-Williams, 1996, p. 158). In addition to these challenges, it may also be that GLBQ individuals of color may also have more family members that are central and important to them, including grandparents. This idea fits well with grandparenting research with communities and individuals of color that often conclude that grandparents often play a central role in their grandchildren’s lives (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1992; King & Elder, 1998; Lawton, Silverstein, & Bengtson, 1994).

Additionally, “coming out” in communities of color may be complicated because of multiple identity developmental processes. In an early theoretical piece on the topic, Morales theorizes that racial and ethnic identity construction revolves implicitly around a heterosexual standard. For Morales, “minority lesbians and gays coming out to the family not only jeopardizes the intra-family relationships, but also threatens their strong association with their ethnic community” (1990, p. 233). Morales indicates that for racial and ethnic minority individuals, coming out may threaten racial and ethnic identity and ties to community, a strain that is related to, but not the same as, family relationships. Similarly, Mays et al., (1998) say that,

Ethnic minority groups may view homosexuality as antithetical to issues of family, ethnic identity, and the preservation of minority communities...As a consequence, lesbian and gay children are often reluctant to disclose their sexual orientation within the traditional Black family.

(Mays et al., 1998, p. 75)

As these authors illustrate, African American families and families of color more generally, are often described as integrally connected to one’s ethnic community and one’s ethnic identity. In this way, GLBQ individuals of color may feel as if they are choosing between two aspects of themselves when deciding to be “out” as GLBQ in their racial or ethnic community.

However, not all scholars conclude that coming out in families of color is complicated or more difficult by virtue of a non-white racial or ethnic background. For instance, in one of the few examples that refers explicitly to grandparents, a Native American man, “named his elders [grandparents] as the persons most likely to be sympathetic because the latter [in comparison to parents] sometimes had knowledge of ‘traditional’ *berdache* institutions that incorporated elements of gender-blending and same-sex sexuality” (Weston, 1991, p. 51). In this example, this grandson is perhaps less concerned about his grandparents’ reactions because of his perception of their greater connections to culturally specific knowledge that respects variations in genders and sexualities. Later in her analysis, Weston speaks more generally about the role of race (and class) in influencing her participants’ conceptions of “coming out” in the family. For instance one participant tells her that, “a lot of Latinos, they says their parents don’t mind who they sleep with, but they’re just worried to death that the neighbors will find out” (p. 57). Like this participant, another participant in Weston’s sample says that,

Some of the blacks have had rough times with their grandmothers or their religious aunts or whatever... But when push comes to shove, they're all in the same boat... I have never heard the levels of brutality among my black gay friends that I've heard among whites when they came out.

(Weston, 1991, p. 58-9)

As this last example indicates, Black grandmothers and families may not initially have positive responses to the disclosure, but “when push comes to shove” these family members support their GLBQ grandchild. Taken together, these examples indicate that some GLBQ grandchildren and family members see their non-white racial or ethnic background as facilitating understanding, or that their closeness with family members may help family to understand and incorporate their GLBQ identity.

What is clear from this research is that the backgrounds of some families of color may, “both facilitate and hinder disclosure” (Weston, 1991, p. 60, *emphasis added*). What is also clear is that much more research is needed to better understand how family background and context impacts the reception of GLBQ family members. Given the paucity of examples of racial and ethnic differences in grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships, this broad literature about differences in families more generally is currently one of the best indications of how race and ethnicity may be important for understanding differences in grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships.

Gender

As with race and ethnicity there is very little literature that specifically addresses grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships. Research indicates that the gender of the GLBQ individual impacts the family's reception of this news for instance as parents often respond more negatively to female family members “coming out” (Ben-Ari, 1995; Muller, 1987). This is perhaps because female family members are expected to have children and families of their own, a role family members are likely to see as incongruent with a LBQ identity (Ben-Ari, 1995). An additional gender distinction is that, GBQ men are more likely to fear violence from (male) family members following disclosure (Ben-Ari, 1995; D'Augelli et al., 1998; D'Augelli & Hersberger, 1993; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Literature on grandparenting also contributes to this discussion, as research finds consistently that the gender of the grandchild does impact grandparent-grandchild relationship, as female grandchildren describe emotionally closer relationships with grandparents than male grandchildren (Eisenberg, 1988; Haegstad, 1985; Kennedy, 1991; Mills, 1999).

Research also finds that female family members are more likely to be aware of GLBQ kin and more likely to be directly disclosed to than male family members (Ben-Ari, 1995; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). It is hypothesized that, gender comes into play in these family relationships, “in the form of cultural notions which assigned feelings to women and reason to men, and which credited women with responsibility for the maintenance of ‘family life’” (Weston, 1991, p. 51). In this way, some of the gender specific stereotypes of family members may facilitate women knowing more about their GLBQ family member. Similarly, stereotypes associated with masculinity, such as aggression, violence and not communicating about sexuality-emotion, may make “coming out” to male family members particularly challenging (Ben-Ari, 1995; D'Augelli et al., 1998; D'Augelli & Hersberger, 1993; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003).

Gender has a lengthy history of exploration in grandparenting literature, as it impacts all of the levels of interactions, from adult child, parent and grandparent (Bengston, 2001; Eisenberg, 1988; Keith & Wacker, 1990; Spitze & Ward, 1998). This research generally finds that grandmothers report having closer relationships with grandchildren (Roberto & Stroes, 1992;

Silverstein & Marenco, 2001). Similarly, maternal grandparents tend to have closer relationships with grandchildren than paternal grandparents, indicating that the gender of parent also impacts the relationship between grandparent and grandchild (Chan & Elder, 2000; Eisenberg, 1988; Hodgson, 1992; Matthews & Sprey, 1985). In addition, as many of the empirical examples used in this paper indicate, parents' gender also impacts grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationship, as mothers may more often act as "disclosers" or "advocates" on behalf of their GLBQ child, and that grandchildren are likely closer to their maternal grandparents.

Conclusions

Thus far, grandparents have been overlooked family members in research on GLBQ family relationships. Initial research on disclosure to grandparents and extended family members indicates that extended family members may be important for experiences of "coming out" in the family. Future research on disclosure patterns amongst grandparents may usefully investigate possible differences in disclosure patterns (e.g., by race or by gender), how discovery happens for grandparents (e.g., disclosure from grandchild or disclosure from parent), as well as exploring *when* grandparents are likely to learn about their GLBQ grandchildren in comparison to other family members. Future research should also investigate how GLBQ individuals, or other family members who know about the GLBQ individual's sexuality, make judgments about which "other relatives" should be made aware of their kin's sexuality.

Despite the limitations of what is known about disclosure to grandparents, the empirical and theoretical literature on GLBQ family relationships does contain some accounts of grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships. These stories indicate that even though grandparents are expected to have negative reactions and imagined to be emotionally and physically fragile, grandparents may often have loving and supportive reactions to learning about a GLBQ grandchild. Future research may usefully explore how grandparents understand their GLBQ grandchild and how grandparents may be a unique source of support for GLBQ individuals. Future research may also usefully explore how notions of fragility or frailty impact grandparenting roles, in general, as well as how they may specifically impact grandparents whose grandchildren are GLBQ. Little is known about how grandparents may have internalized this notion of their fragility, or how they may offer resistance to this image in their practices and relationships with (GLBQ) grandchildren.

From this literature, it would appear that grandparents may often be able to reach accepting or other more positive understandings of their GLBQ grandchild. Future research may wish to disentangle the extent to which grandparents' behaviors may be genuinely accepting of their GLBQ identities or evidence of grandparents enacting norms of non-interference. To the extent that grandparents are reaching more accepting stances, further research into *how* grandparents reach these accepting stances (despite general negative views on same-sex desires and relationships, particularly among older populations) may yield helpful information for how to help other family members come to more positive understandings of their GLBQ kin. This research should account for the status of the relationship before disclosure.

Future research may usefully assess the degree to which the sexual orientation of the grandchild presents a unique instance of grandparent intervention, or calls on grandparents to take on unique functions in a family. Future research may usefully address the extent to which these different types of support are motivated by different goals, and the impact that these different types of support have on the GLBQ grandchild, the grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships, and the family system as a whole. Further research is needed to determine the possible positive and negative consequences of grandparents' influence in the family. Future

research may also fruitfully investigate *how* grandparents may seek to influence other family members, as well as discovering which family members may be particularly likely (or unlikely) to be influenced by the interventions of grandparents.

Future research may usefully ask GLBQ grandchildren about negative interactions they have had with grandparents who have learned of their GLBQ identity, or about why they decided to disclose to particular grandparents. Future research could usefully investigate grandparents' perceptions of their, and their cohort's, potential or likely reactions to the discovery of GLBQ kin or grandchildren.

In addition to the expectations of grandparents themselves, GLBQ grandchildren may have expectations about "coming out" to grandparents. As I have described here, a disclosure imperative may compel a grandchild to disclose her sexual identity to her grandmother, while her interests in protecting her grandmother may lead her to disclose selectively. Future research may usefully explore the boundaries of this disclosure imperative. Future research may also explore if GLBQ grandchildren are acting to protect their grandparents from "sensitive" information, what this "sensitive" information may be and how this may be influenced by other aspects of the grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationship. It is unclear what role parents or other family members may play in this protection, and to what extent the protection of grandparents from a GLBQ grandchild's sexual orientation, or other sensitive material, may become a family expectation.

Future research should explore the extent to which emotional and instrumental support is an expectation of GLBQ grandchildren. Assuming that GLBQ grandchildren are expected to provide care and support to grandparents, future research may then usefully explore the extent to which a grandchild's GLBQ status may impact a grandchild's interests in or willingness to provide care and support for grandparents. Future research may also usefully explore how a GLBQ grandchild's disclosure status impacts a grandparent's desire to receive support from this grandchild, or how a grandparent's awareness impacts their expectations of support from a GLBQ grandchild. Future research may usefully explore how GLBQ grandchildren may experience contradictory emotions around disclosure to and protection of grandparents. Future research may usefully investigate other possible expectations that grandparents, parents, other family members, or GLBQ grandchildren themselves, may have of GLBQ grandchildren. It is unclear how these expectations may be complementary to extant expectations of grandchildren, or if disclosure may result in a shift in existing expectations.

This review highlights the importance of exploring multiple family members' reactions to GLBQ sexualities, in addition to parents and siblings. Parents and other family members may play important roles in facilitating grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships. Similarly, grandparents may also facilitate relationships between GLBQ individuals and parents. Parents are likely important for their role in disclosing their child's sexual orientation to grandparents and further research is needed to determine the extent to which this occurs in families. Future research may usefully investigate the unique ways parents may mediate grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships. As still less is known about the roles that other family members may play, future research may usefully investigate the ways that multiple family members may facilitate or hinder grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships.

The limited research on socio-demographic differences between families also brings forth several promising directions for future research. The inclusion of family members beyond parents and GLBQ children may be particularly likely in studies that explicitly incorporate families of color (Mays et al., 1998; Morales, 1990; Weston, 1991), perhaps because families of color are more likely to centrally include multiple generations (Burton & Dilworth-Anderson, 1991; Pruchno, 1999; Sarkisian, Gerena, & Gerstel, 2007). Research on GLBQ

family relationships may (unintentionally) reproduce nuclear conceptions of family relationships in its almost exclusive focus on parent-GLBQ child relationships. Not enough is known about the extended family relationships of white families with a GLBQ family member to say with certainty that they do *not* generally incorporate their extended families. Further research may usefully explore the intersections of racial background, conceptions of family and understandings of GLBQ family members. It may be that if individuals and communities of color had been incorporated more centrally in earlier research on GLBQ families, there would have already been more focus on the roles of extended family members, such as grandparents.

Future research may usefully investigate the roles of grandparents' gender in awareness and response. Additionally, little is known about how the gender of grandchild, or of parent may be important to understanding grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships. In addition to race, ethnicity and gender, other characteristics such as class or faith background, are also likely important for understanding grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships. Future research should explore the range of social identities that shape individuals' understandings of GLBQ sexualities.

As this review indicates, much is unknown about contemporary grandparent-GLBQ grandchild relationships. I hope these findings will encourage researchers to incorporate grandparents, as well as other extended family members, in their investigations of GLBQ family relationships. Additionally, although I have been using the GLBQ acronym in a unified fashion throughout this paper, some of these identities are more researched than others. Specifically, much more is known about family responses to lesbian and gay individuals than to bisexual or queer individuals. Future research may usefully explore differences amongst these sexual identity categories. Future research may also explore the unique experiences of "coming out" as transgender to grandparents and other extended family members.

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Biography

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