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Grandparenting in the 21st Century: Issues of Diversity in Grandparent–Grandchild Relationships

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Abstract

Although previous literature has demonstrated the importance of age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status in understanding grandparent–grandchild relationships, additional factors contribute to a more complete and nuanced understanding of multigenerational relationships. Thorough understanding of the role of diversity requires examination of the discrete impacts of grandparents' gender, sexual orientation, and physical and/or cognitive limitations on the relationship. This article focuses on these 3 important, yet overlooked, issues of diversity, with a focus on strength-based and empowerment-oriented strategies and their implications for practice, policy, and future research.

Keywords

Grandparenthood; grandchildren; caregiving; grandfathers; gay and lesbian elders; family diversity

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With dramatically increased life expectancy, many grandparents will experience this family role for 30 or more years. Thus, more children will have the opportunity to develop enduring relationships with their grandparents. Presently, 94% of older Americans with children are

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grandparents, and it is estimated that 50% will become great-grandparents (Smith & Drew, 2002).

The grandparent–grandchild connection is of value, either directly or indirectly for grandparents and grandchildren (Bengtson, 2001; Bengtson & Robertson, 1985; Kivett, 1991; Kornhaber & Woodward, 1981; Roberto & Stroes, 1992). The actual value derived from this relationship, however, will vary considerably depending on a multiplicity of factors that contribute to the quality and experience of the grandparent–grandchild relationship (for a recent review of the grandparent role, see Thiele & Whelan, 2006).

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, we provide a brief overview of the literature on the grandparent–grandchild relationship, focusing on factors that influence this connection. Second, we focus on diversity of grandparent experiences, particularly the impacts of gender, sexual orientation, and physical and/or cognitive limitations on the grandparent–grandchild relationship. The third purpose of the article is to present strategies for practitioners that recognize the heterogeneity of relationships between grandparents and grandchildren, enhance programs and services directed toward grandparents and grandchildren, and empower both grandparents and grandchildren within these intergenerational relationships.

AN EMERGING UNDERSTANDING OF GRANDPARENTING

During the 1960s and 1970s, researchers began investigating the roles of grandparents and the grandparent–grandchild relationship (e.g., Neugarten & Weinstein, 1964; Robertson, 1976, 1977). Unlike other primary family roles, there are not explicit norms for grandparenting (Landry-Meyer & Newman, 2004). Clavan (1978) conceptualized grandparenthood as a “roleless role” (p. 351) because there is a wide diversity of grandparenting behaviors coupled with it, and the absence of sanctioned rights, obligations, and prescribed functions. This ambiguity is illustrated in the wide range of terms used to describe grandparents, such as:

- “national guard” or “watch dog” (Hagestad, 1985; Troll, 1983),
- “arbitrator” (Bengtson, 1985; Hagestad, 1981, 1985),
- “stress buffer” (Bengtson, 1985; Hagestad, 1984, 1985; Hagestad, Smyer & Stierman, 1984; Johnson, 1985),
- “roots” (Conroy & Fahey, 1985; Hagestad, 1985),
- “resource person” (Neugarten & Weinstein, 1964),
- “valued elder” (Kivnick, 1982),
- “mentor” (Kornhaber, 1996),
- “conveyer of family legacy and culture” (Barranti, 1985; Bengtson, 1985; Hagestad, 1985),
- “silent savior of children from faltering families” (Creighton, 1991; Minkler & Roe, 1993), and
- “surrogate parent” (Jendrek, 1993; Neugarten & Weinstein, 1964).

Most authors have highlighted the multidimensionality of the grandparent role. For example, Hagestad (1985) suggested, “In a society where grandparents range in age from 30 to 110, and grandchildren range from newborns to retirees, we should not be surprised to find a variety of grandparenting roles and styles with few behavioral expectations regarding grandparenting” (p. 36). Norms are complicated even more when grandparents are expected

to provide care to grandchildren. Despite the increase in research during the 1980s and 1990s and a continued focus on the possible roles enacted by grandparents, there is still a significant lack of empirical research on grandparenthood and the grandparent–grandchild relationship, especially when one considers the growth of multigenerational family structures.

DIVERSITY IN GRANDPARENT–GRANDCHILD RELATIONSHIPS

A focus on diversity within grandparent and grandchild relationships underscores the need to move away from dominant structures and processes within families to a more nuanced and complete picture of the variability in intergenerational relations. Building on the work of Hays (2001), diversity embraces and celebrates differences while, at the same time, recognizing inequalities. Although the North American population consists of individuals with complex and multidimensional identities, our culture continues to categorize individuals into two groups: majority or minority. Traditionally, the term *minority* is used to reference those groups whose access to power is limited by the majority (e.g., dominant) culture. Groups that have traditionally been considered cultural minorities include elders; people who are poor; those who are less formally educated or of rural heritage; people who have a disability; women; and ethnic, religious, national, and sexual minorities (Fukuyama, 1990). All of these groups can be considered vulnerable populations because they have been excluded, marginalized, overlooked, or misrepresented by mainstream society psychology (Hays, 2001).

Apart from the search for social norms that govern parenting, recent research has emphasized grandparents raising grandchildren (Hayslip & Patrick, 2006). Research on the experience of grandparents as caregivers has evolved from a focus on the stress, strain, and associated costs of this role to a more balanced approach that views the exchange of support between generations comprised of both costs and rewards (for a recent review, see Hayslip & Kaminski, 2005). Services and programs continue to be developed and assessed to provide appropriate support and guidelines for working with custodial grandparents (Hayslip & Patrick, 2003), as research has demonstrated that adequate and appropriate social support can enhance the wellbeing of grandparent caregivers (Landry-Meyer, Gerard, & Guzella, 2005).

Research exploring the grandparent role continues to emphasize variability within the grandparent–grandchild relationship. Variability has been explored by examining family dynamics and diversity within family systems (King & Elder, 1995), grandchildren's contact with grandparents (Dellmann-Jenkins, Papalia, & Lopez, 1987), grandparents' behavior toward their grandchildren (Tinsley & Parke, 1984), parents' relationship with grandparents (Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Huck, 1993), and the mediating effects of parents (Barranti, 1985; Hodgson, 1992; Kivett, 1991; Robertson, 1975; Sprey & Matthews, 1982; Whitbeck et al., 1993). In addition, diversity in the individual characteristics of grandparent and grandchild (Roberto & Stroes, 1992) has also been examined. Collectively, research on the contemporary grandparent–grandchild relationship indicates that this relationship is influenced by: the age and gender of the grandparent and grandchild (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986; Hagestad, 1985; Kivett, 1991; Sheehan & Petrovic, 2008; Sprey & Matthews, 1982); socioeconomic variables such as employment status, educational level, and economic resources (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986; Hunter, 1997; Watson & Koblinsky, 1997); geographical proximity and frequency of contact between grandparent and grandchild (Coward & Cutler, 1991; Kivett, 1991); psychosocial compatibility (Kornhaber, 1996); personality characteristics (Kornhaber, 1996); and disruptive life events (Aldous, 1985; Barranti, 1985; Connidis, 2003; Kornhaber & Woodward, 1981; McPherson, 1983). Issues of ethnic and cultural diversity are also commonly highlighted in the literature on

grandparent–grandchild relationships (Gutheil & Tepper, 2002). The following sections focus on three areas where additional, but often unrecognized, variability is experienced within the grandparent–grandchild dyad.

Grandparenting as Gendered: The Experience of Grandfathers

A contemporary discussion of grandparenting in the 21st century must recognize the salience of gender as a critical factor in the role of grandparent and the grandparent–grandchild relationship. Grandparenting is a gendered experience. For example, Thomas (1995) and Spitze and Ward (1998) outlined how gender variations occur across all three generations in relations between grandmothers and grandfathers and their grandchildren, the influence of lineage between paternal and maternal grandparents, and the relationships between grandsons and granddaughters and their grandparents. This section highlights grandfathers as an emerging focus of research in the grandparenting literature.

Older men have been invisible in the gerontological literature in general (Thompson, 1994) and the literature on grandparenting, in particular. Although established research supports the importance of gender in intergenerational family relationships, few studies have addressed men's experiences as grandfathers. Yet grandparenting brings different expectations for behaviors and responsibilities for men and women (for reviews, see Mann, 2007; Thomas, 1994).

When grandfathers have been examined, there has been a tendency for them to be seen through a feminized conception of grandparenting derived from the focus on the experience of grandmothering (Mann, 2007). In this way, grandfatherhood has often been examined with grandmothers as the point of reference, comparing how grandfathers are similar to and different from grandmothers. This has often resulted in the application of a deficit model where grandfathers are not only seen as different, but as less important, less active in intergenerational relations, and offering less to grandchildren.

Researchers addressing experiences of grandfathers have found competing trends. For example, findings suggest both lower role satisfaction for grandfathers (Reitzes & Mutran, 2004; Thomas, 1995), and little or no difference in the satisfaction between grandmothers and grandfathers (Peterson 1999; Reitzes & Mutran, 2004; Thiele & Whelan, 2006). Grandfathers have also been found to have competing desires; wanting to be active in their grandchildren's lives (Clarke & Roberts, 2004; Waldrop et al., 1999), but seeking to do so within the expectations associated with men's roles across the life course (Roberto, Allen, & Blieszner, 2001; Scraton & Holland, 2006).

The degree to which grandparenthood is important in the lives of older men and women has received considerable study. Thomas (1995) suggested that the role of grandparent and perceived responsibility for grandchildren were equally important for men and women, but that grandfathers experienced less satisfaction in their relationships with grandchildren. On the other hand, Thiele and Whelan (2006) and Peterson (1999) found no significant differences between grandmothers' and grandfathers' satisfaction with the grandparenting role. In their study, both grandmothers and grandfathers responded that the best thing about being a grandparent was witnessing the development of their grandchildren. Descriptions of the most negative aspects of grandparenting revealed an interesting gender difference in subjective expectations between grandmothers and grandfathers. Grandmothers were more likely to be dissatisfied with the amount of contact they had with their grandchildren than grandfathers, even with no actual differences in amounts of contact (Peterson, 1999). Similarly, Reitzes and Mutran (2004) found grandfathers reported significantly less contact with grandchildren compared to grandmothers, but there were no gender differences in overall role satisfaction. These authors concluded that contact with grandchildren may be

seen by grandmothers as a right and expectation, whereas grandfathers held fewer expectations and, thus, contact with grandchildren was seen as more voluntary. Waldrop et al.'s (1999) examination found that grandfathers expressed strong desires to serve as mentors, transfer values, and teach life lessons to their grandchildren. The desire to be engaged with grandchildren and to be involved in grandchildren's lives was also noted by Clarke and Roberts (2004). These findings speak to the diversity of expectations that underscore the importance of examining grandparenthood within the context of family history and expectations.

The relationship between grandfathers and grandchildren needs to be viewed in the context of the grandfather's experiences of roles and expectations of behaviors. Roberto et al.'s (2001) interviews with older men about grandfatherhood revealed that some were able to transcend the traditional of men as *good providers* and develop more caring and close relationships with their grandchildren. Similarly, Scraton and Holland (2006) examined the role through a qualitative study of 12 men's experience of grandfatherhood, leisure activities, and contact with grandchildren. They found that some respondents were reluctant to be viewed as involved with grandchildren, apparently unwilling or unable to break away from gendered patterns of child rearing set earlier in their lives. Even those who expressed affection for grandchildren did not want to be viewed as breaking expectations for care set during fatherhood.

The issues of grandparents as caregivers have been explicitly discussed as women's issues, as it is more common for grandmothers to live with and provide primary care for grandchildren (Mills, Gomez-Smith, & De Leon, 2005; Minkler, 1999). Data from the 2006–2008 American Community Survey of coresident grandparent and grandchild households showed 62.9% of grandparent caregivers were grandmothers (US Bureau of the Census, 2008). Although women certainly make up a majority of grandparent caregivers, 37.1% of grandparents living with, and responsible for, grandchildren are men. Men's experiences as caregivers may be different from women's (Kaye & Applegate, 1994). Men perform care differently. So studies of the role of gender should focus on those differences, rather than on a comparison of who performs care better or worse (Calasanti, 2004; Calasanti & King, 2007).

It is important to recognize the diversity in the experiences and influences of grandparent caregivers. Bullock (2005) found that grandfathers who were responsible for the care of at least one of their grandchildren reported feelings of powerlessness. Specifically, these caregiving grandfathers reported powerlessness in the transition to the new role of caregiver, in parenting activities, and in their long-term ability to provide care for their grandchildren. Custodial grandfathers have also shown lower levels of parenting efficacy (Hayslip, Kaminski, & Earnheart, 2006), lower levels of social support (Hayslip et al., 2006), increased emotional strain for grandfathers (Okagbue-Reaves, 2005), and more symptoms of depression, compared to custodial grandmothers (Hayslip et al., 2006; Kolomer & McCallion, 2005). In addition, Kolomer and McCallion (2005) reported grandfather's experiences becoming a caregiver involved a loss of freedom, the loss of an expected role as a noncaregiving grandparent, and concerns about their own health and the implications for their grandchildren if their health deteriorated further. Kolomer and McCallion's (2005) results mirror established findings about concerns of grandmothers caring for their grandchildren from the previous 20 years (for a review of this literature, see Hayslip & Kaminiski, 2005).

The research on grandfathers' relationships with grandchildren has begun to establish an understanding of the importance of gender in examining grandparent–grandchild relations. The literature on grandparenting in general, as well as with grandfathers, remains focused on

surrogate parenting. The nature of relationships between grandfathers and grandchildren outside of the area of custodial grandparenting remains largely unelaborated. The literature addressing men's experiences as grandfathers ranges from qualitative studies of convenience samples to gender comparisons with grandmothers based on large samples of older adults. Overall, the literature provides a foundation for further research with needed attention to theoretical underpinnings, methodological approach, level of measurement, and operational definition of relationship experience and quality.

Sexual Orientation of Grandparents

Sexual orientation of grandparents is another understudied topic in grand parent–grandchild relations. There is little research on grandparents who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) and to date there has not been any published research on the experiences of transgender individuals who are grandparents (Orel, 2006; Whalen, Bigner, & Barber, 2000). Because researchers have neglected to ask about sexual orientation, accurate estimations of the number of gay grandfathers, lesbian grandmothers, or bisexual grandparents are not available. However, we do know (based on national studies), that over 10 million children currently live with 3 million LGB parents in the United States (Mercier & Harold, 2003) and that 94% of older adults with children will become grandparents. If a comparable proportion of these parents become grandparents, we conservatively estimate that one to two million LGB individuals are (or will soon become) grandparents. Additionally, with the increase in homosexual couples adopting children, finding surrogate mothers to bear children, and becoming pregnant through artificial insemination (Flaks, Ficher, Masterpsqua, & Joseph, 1995; Johnson & O'Connor, 2002; Patterson, 1995), it is likely that the current and future aging LGB population will experience grandparenthood in greater numbers than previous LGB cohorts. Additionally, the number of LGB grandparents may even be larger, as there are likely individuals who do not live openly lesbian, gay, or bisexual lives. As the number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals becoming grandparents increases, it is important to understand the grandparent–grandchild relationship within the context of LGBT families.

Prior to 2005, only one published study explored the grandmother's role as experienced by lesbian women (Whalen et al., 2000). However, this study did not explore the effect of the grandmother's sexual orientation on the grandparent–grandchild relationship. Orel (2006) and Orel and Fruhauf (2006) were the first to specifically explore the effects of sexual orientation on the grandparent–grandchild relationship using the life course perspective. Applying this perspective to lesbian and bisexual grandmothers, the grandparent–grandchild relationship is embedded within the context of the grandmother's individual choices across the lifespan (e.g., decisions to disclose one's homosexuality), the structural contexts in which these decisions are made (e.g., level of homophobia within a culture), and the transitions that grandmothers experienced (e.g., previous heterosexual marriages and divorces). Lesbian and bisexual grandmothers' descriptions of their relationships with their grandchildren were always placed within the context of on-going relationships with their adult children (Orel & Fruhauf, 2006). Lesbian and bisexual grandmothers who had strong, intimate relationships with their adult children were more likely to have close relationships with their grandchildren. The adult child's attitudes toward homosexuality influenced the direction of the mediating effect (i.e., facilitating or discouraging) on the grandparent–grandchild relationship. Therefore, the adult children's acceptance of the grandmothers' sexual orientation determined the grandmothers' opportunities to grandparent.

The long-standing finding that parents are the intermediaries of the grandparent–grandchild relationship is amplified for lesbian and bisexual grandmothers, and this was also true with gay and bisexual grandfathers (Fruhauf, Orel, & Jenkins, 2009). Adult children of LGB grandparents not only influenced the formation and maintenance of the grandparent–

grandchild relationship, but they played a profound and significant role in the coming out process of LGB grandparents. In most cases, parents assisted in answering questions and normalizing the coming out process for grandfathers and grandchildren. Collectively, the research on LGB grandparents revealed that managing disclosure about sexual orientation was a primary issue for all LGB grandparents. LGB grandparents used secrecy and silence strategically. The decision to disclose or remain secretive reflected familial and societal relationships over time.

The decision was also determined by the level of homonegativity within the culture. *Homonegativity* is a term that describes negative attitudes and/or behaviors against people who are nonheterosexuals that are the result of prejudicial and discriminatory social values (Maurer-Starks, Clemons, & Whalen, 2008; Morrison, Parriag, & Morrison, 1999). These discriminatory social values created barriers within LGBT multigenerational families and adversely affected the grandparent–grandchild relationship. Although the ability to disclose one's sexual orientation to grandchildren was psychologically salient for LGB grandparents' identity, the level of homonegativity in the culture forced many LGB grandparents to maintain the illusion of heterosexuality. LGB grandparents who did not disclose or remained secretive did so to prevent becoming estranged from their families of origin (Fruhauf et al., 2009; Orel & Fruhauf, 2006). Therefore, their sense of familialism was stronger than their need to disclose their individual identity.

Grandchildren Caring for Grandparents With Functional Limitations

Similar to grandparents who are LGB, grandparents with physical and cognitive limitations are considered vulnerable and marginalized in a culture that values independence. When older adults are challenged by the declines precipitated by the normal and pathological aging process, adult children, usually daughters or daughters-in-law, typically provide some type of assistance (Brody, 2004). The majority of older adults with functional limitations have surviving children, and approximately 62% have at least one child living within 10 miles (Johnson & Wiener, 2006). These children usually identify as primary caregivers to their parents and indicate that their decision to provide care was primarily due to intergenerational norms (i.e., expected behaviors) of filial obligation and responsibility (Brody, 2004; Orel, 1999; Piercy & Chapman, 2001). As a result, there was a felt obligation resulting from the familial expectation to provide care and to adhere to intergenerational norms of support.

The overwhelming majority of caregiving research has focused on the experiences of the primary caregiver (usually a woman), neglecting examination of other family members, particularly grandchildren (Beach, 1993, 1997; Brakman, 1998; Miller & Montgomery, 1990; Mui, 1995; Piercy & Chapman, 2001; Young & Kahana, 1989). This omission is tragic, because 31% of caregiving adult children have children under the age of 12 and 23% have children between the ages of 12 and 17 (Hirsch, 1996; National Center of Health Statistics, 1987; Stone, Cafferata, & Sangl, 1987). Furthermore, it is estimated that 8% of the 22.4 million informal caregivers in the United States are grandchildren (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2003).

Only recently have researchers examined the effects of caregiving on the entire family system recognizing that families are diverse and include members other than a parent and child (Becker, 2007; Fruhauf, Jarrott, & Allen, 2006; Orel, 1999; Orel & Dupuy, 2002; Piercy & Chapman, 2001; Szinovacz, 2003, 2008). Clearly, grandchildren are exposed to their grandparents' health needs and physical and cognitive limitations; an experience that probably influences the functioning of the multigenerational family and impacts the grandparent–grandchild relationship. For example, there is a natural entanglement of feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and values between the three generations (i.e., grandparent, adult child, and grandchild). Within caregiving families, early family relationships and

intergenerational norms affect family members' interaction styles and expectations. Early family interaction processes influence whether families would assume the responsibility of providing care for the oldest generation.

Grandchildren bring relationship histories with their grandparents to the caregiving environment. These established feelings of attachment (e.g. warmth, affection, respect, and trust) facilitate the maintenance of the grand parent–grandchild relationship despite changes in the physical/cognitive functioning of the grandparent. The grandparent–grandchild relationship history also determines the type of coping strategies grandchildren develop to deal with the stress and burdens of providing care for ailing grandparents (Fruhauf et al., 2006; Fruhauf & Orel, 2008; Orel & Dupuy, 2002).

Orel's (1999) qualitative study investigated the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of grandchildren living in multigenerational caregiving environments. The research consisted of family interviews, individual interviews, and follow-up interviews with six care recipients (grandparents), six primary/secondary caregivers (parents), and six auxiliary caregivers (grandchildren) from three multigenerational families living in the Midwest. The grandchildren, who ranged in age from 7 to 17 years, experienced emotional difficulties when attempting to deal with the cognitive and/or physical declines of their grandparents because of the inherent demands of the caregiving environment. However, for those grandchildren who reported emotionally distant relationships prior to caregiving, the demands of the caregiving environment were particularly difficult, especially when they could not draw upon a history of warm and affectionate feelings with grandparents. For those grandchildren who characterized their relationships with their grandparents prior to caregiving as being emotionally close, these grandchildren were able to draw strength from their previously warm and affectionate relationships. Established feelings of attachment facilitated the maintenance of the grandparent–grandchild relationship, and encouraged the development of coping strategies that reduced the stress and burdens of providing care for ailing grandparents.

Grandchildren's ability to experience the positive consequences of providing care for grandparents is facilitated or hindered by parents (Fruhauf et al., 2006; Orel, Dupuy, & Wright, 2004). The parent generation has been labeled the *sandwich generation* or *women in the middle* to describe their positioning between two generations that are both dependent upon them for care (Brody, 1985, 2004). The parent generation is the mediating link or *lineage bridge* between grandparents and grandchildren (Hill, Foote, Aldous, Carlson, & MacDonald, 1970; Kemp, 2004). For example, in multigenerational caregiving environments, parents orchestrate the triadic caregiving relationship (Beach, 1997). The centrality of grandparents in multigenerational caregiving families is not eliminated by physical and/or cognitive limitations. Parents, in their mediating role, can facilitate positive interactions and encourage strong relationships between the youngest and oldest generations (Fruhauf et al., 2006; Orel, 1999). Conversely, parents can also discourage interactions between the generations if they are experiencing negative interactions with their aged parents due to the stress of providing care. Providing care to an aged parent with physical and/or cognitive limitations is but one example of a situation that may cause friction between the generations impacting the family, and on the other hand, provide a means for grandparent and grandchildren to build their relationship while grandchildren learn new skills (Fruhauf et al., 2006).

RECOGNIZING DIVERSITY AND EMPOWERING GRANDPARENTS: PROGRAMS, PRACTICE, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Practitioners working with grandparents and grandchildren share the common goal of recognizing, celebrating, and strengthening families to empower individuals and families. Interventions must acknowledge the complexity of relationships between grandparents and grandchildren to appropriately meet individual and family needs. Programs and services to support grandparents must move away from dominant cultural assumptions and discourse that assumes grandparents are female, heterosexual, and functionally independent. Programs and services must support and empower a diverse set of grandparents who differ in the three areas discussed here, as well as in age, cohort, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geography, national origin, timing of transitions, and other areas. Empowerment necessitates attention to the unique experiences and diversity within grandparents and grandchildren's lives and family structures.

An ecological perspective provides the foundation for understanding how policies and programs need to be designed and implemented to support and empower a diverse group of grandparents (Cox, 2003). Healthy individual and family development are determined by a myriad of factors, most important the ecological contexts of family, school, and community. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model emphasizes that no individual acts in isolation and directs one's focus to reciprocity as a critical factor in understanding both individual development and family relations. Using an ecological perspective, practitioners can recognize variability in the experience of grandparent and grandchild based on the continued aging and developmental level of each (Cox, 2003; Fruhauf & Orel, 2008).

Here we intend to draw attention to the possibilities for supporting diverse individuals through existing programs rather than suggest that new programs be developed. Clearly, the first step toward empowering grandparents would be for individuals to have access to appropriate support services regardless of gender, sexual orientation, or functional health. Once this has been accomplished, specific supportive services for groups could be necessary. At present, there is a paucity of empirical work on evidence based interventions with diverse grandparent–grandchild relationships (for a review with grandparent-headed households, see Cox, 2007).

Designing appropriate programs and policies requires understanding of the heterogeneity of grandparents, the diversity in relationships between grandparents and grandchildren, and the variability in the social contexts of these intergenerational relationships. Practitioners working with grandparents and grandchildren also need to recognize the cultural messages about family roles and how respective family members learn the rules and expectations within family and society. These meanings and expectations differ across gendered and cultural contexts and interact in a reciprocal manner. A brief discussion of how these issues influence programs and practice follows with a concluding look at future research on grandparenting.

Policy and practice related to grandparenting has been dominated by literature on older women, grandmothers, and grandmothers raising grandchildren, often to the exclusion of older men's lives and roles within the family. Practitioners need to be aware of the influence of gender and gender role expectations on grandparenting to support both grandmothers and grandfathers. They must recognize that grandmothers and grandfathers may enact different roles within the family and reject the comparative and deficit perspectives. Grandfathers need to be made visible and welcome in support programs and services. For example, activities designed to enhance intergenerational relationships should offer activities that appeal to same gender and cross-gender dyads of grandparents and grandchildren. If a range

of activities is not feasible, then attention to the degree to which the choice of activity and program is differentially appropriate for gender and generations should be a priority in the design of programs.

Because practitioners typically assume grandparents are heterosexual, they may overlook grandparents' sexual orientation. Practitioners must listen for subtle messages to learn about an elder's sexual identity and orientation. For example, a lesbian grandmother may repeatedly emphasize the importance of her female friend in "their" relationship with "their" grandchildren. Practitioners who assume heterosexuality will overlook the unique challenges, issues, and concerns of LGBT grandparents. Unfortunately, for most LGBT grandparents, the invisibility of their status as a grandparent mirrors their general sense of invisibility as an LGBT elder. LGBT grandparents (and their partners) must receive the social support and recognition that is naturally granted to heterosexual grandparents within all cultures. Practitioners must also recognize that because LGBT grandparents have developed creative and resourceful ways to function in a heterosexist culture as LGBT persons, LGBT grandparents can provide creative and flexible definitions of grandparenting.

Functional limitations of grandparents may lead grandchildren to assist with their care. Grandparents may experience oppression because they are old and grandchildren may experience oppression because they are young; as a result, both groups experience ageism. Further, grandchildren caregivers may experience stressful life events (i.e., completing caregiving tasks), but through the use of empowerment strategies, they will develop coping skills and techniques. Grandchildren may find they better identify with other family members who share caregiving responsibilities or they may find they do a better job at completing caregiving tasks than other members (Fruhauf et al., 2006).

The interplay of levels of ecology from the micro or individual level to the macro or societal level requires examination of linkages within and without the family (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Practitioners should recognize that grandchildren's lives are impacted by a variety of social institutions outside the family (i.e., schools, religious organizations, social pressures) but intergenerational relationships play a key role in the social and behavioral development of grandchildren. Because parents are the gatekeepers to the grandparent–grandchild relationship, interventions should involve the parents when possible and appropriate. It is important to acknowledge the mediating role of parents in the grandparent–grandchild relationship. Programs and services designed to support relationships between grandparents and grandchildren need to adapt to changes in those relationships over time.

Programs designed for grandparents and grandchildren also need to be able to adapt to assist a variety of intergenerational relationships. Practitioners and programs need to utilize a strength-based perspective when working with the multiple generations within aging families. Empowerment within this perspective requires recognition of empowerment at the personal, interpersonal, and political levels (Chapin & Cox, 2001). Empowerment also necessitates attention to the unique experiences and diversity within grandparents and grandchildren's lives. The focus on gender, sexual orientation, and functional ability highlights the need for empowerment within diverse contexts of grandparent–grandchild relationships. The diversity that exists among families makes a universal approach to supporting and empowering grandparents and grandchildren impractical. For example, attention to the strengths and needs of grandchildren is also necessary. Social-emotional support groups that focus on the specific needs and concerns of grandchildren being raised by grandparents and grandchildren providing care would be beneficial. Furthermore, it is important to note that, like grandchildren, grandparents would benefit from support groups and programs using an empowerment model. When planning programs, practitioners must recognize societal and personal barriers that may exist, such as LGBT grandparents being

closeted to family members and grandparent caregivers not wanting friends to know that their adult child is unfit to parent. Likewise, practitioners must carefully think about program location, time of day, the need to provide child care, and accessibility issues to attempt to decrease attendance deterrents. Another strategy is to utilize technology in offering Web-based programming and even on-line support programs.

Future research on grandparenthood should focus on understanding the linked lives within intergenerational families and how these linkages extend across different environments. Gender has emerged as a salient, but relatively unexplored, issue in the grandparenting literature. So we call for closer examination of the gendered nature of intergenerational relationships and more attention to the lived experiences of older men as grandfathers.

Likewise, further research is necessary to understand the experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender grandparents and their families. Research on later life families has given little consideration to extended family networks or *families of choice*. Future work in this area would include investigation of the experiences surrounding grandchildren's relationships with the cograndparent or partners of LGBT grandparents. Most important, research is needed to explore the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of grandchildren with LGBT grandparents.

Last, future research should focus on stress and coping among grandchildren caregivers, the positive aspects of providing care to grandparents, and the experiences of grandparents who receive care from grandchildren. All of these areas focus on the heterogeneity of experience, understanding the interconnections within the intergenerational family system, and mechanisms of support and empowerment that best match the needs of diverse intergenerational families.

CONCLUSION

Based on the review of literature on the grandparent–grandchild relationship, a primary conclusion can be offered: namely, that one must consider the diversity and context in which the grandparent–grandchild relationship is embedded and lifelong patterns of family experiences, exchange, and attachment to understand contemporary intergenerational relationships. Although our review focused on three subgroups of grandparents, other subgroups warrant attention. These include grandparents who suffer from serious and persistent mental illness, grandparents who are incarcerated, and grandparents who reside in long-term care facilities. With the unprecedented growth in the general older adult population, each of these subgroups, and others not mentioned or yet unidentified, will only increase in number.

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