Factors Influencing the Relationships between Grandparents and Grandchildren: A Literature Review

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The number of non-custodial grandparents as childcare providers has decreased over the past three decades while the number of custodial grandparents has increased dramatically (Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2001). However, grandparents are still considered a resource in the family because they provide alternative resources and role models for grandchildren (Bengtson, Burton, & Rosenthal, 1993). Social workers increasingly have examined the needs of custodial grandparents who face many stressors, but the profession lacks current knowledge about functions of non-custodial grandparents who are important supports for families, which is especially crucial as the number of multigenerational households grow. As maternal employment rates rise, mothers increasingly seek alternative caregivers for their children. In 2005, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that after fathers (24.7%), grandparents were most often alternative caregivers (28.3 %), followed by multiple arrangements (22.4%), and daycare centers (20.6%). Especially when children are young, mothers tend to choose grandparents as childcare providers.

While non-custodial grandparents may also struggle with the childcare burden as do custodial grandparents, the relationships among the former with the grandchild usually vary depending upon culture and family characteristics. This paper identifies factors that strengthen grandparent-grandchild relationships and attempts to understand those influences that weaken these relationships. This information will help social workers more successfully intervene with these families and promote healthy interactions among family members, specifically between grandparents and grandchildren.

Factors Affecting the Grandparent-Grandchild Relationship

Demographic changes

The decrease in the total fertility rate, the growth of the senior population, and the increase in the number of working women in the society may lead to more grandparents caring for children (Minuchin, Lee, & Simon, 2006). Vandell, McCartney, Owen, Booth, and Clarke-Stewart (2003) found from their three-year study that full-time mothers were more likely to use extended full-time grandparent care (more than thirty hours per week) than part-time grandparent care. Grandparents are perceived as the "national guard" of the family because they are always ready to step in if necessary (Silverstein & Ruiz, 2006). Thus, Silverstein and Ruiz described

grandparents as serving as "functional substitutes for parents who are no longer able or willing to fulfill their parental duties" (p. 602).

Gender

        Gender influences the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren. Women are often perceived as kin-keepers who maintain relationships within the family (Lemme, 2002). Hence, grandmothers tend to feel more positive about their grandparenting role than grandfathers (Reitzes & Mutran, 2004). Maccoby (2003) indicated that parents tend to spend more time with children of the same sex, and establish a more intimate relationship with the same-sex children than they do with children of the opposite sex. In the study of Crouter, McHale, and Bartko (1993), mothers were equally involved with daughters and sons while fathers were more involved with their sons. Although it is not clear if the differences in involvement with daughters and sons can be applied to the grandparent-grandchild interaction, the power structure within the family may support Maccoby's findings.

        While grandmothers tend to have more emotional interactions with their grandchildren, grandfathers tend to rely more on formal support systems (Hayslip Jr., Henderson, & Shore, 2003). According to Kolomer and McCallion (2005), custodial grandfathers have less depression symptoms than grandmothers because grandfathers have more support systems, such as a spouse, owning a home, and working outside of the home. In addition, grandfathers are typically better connected to formal social support systems than grandmothers.

Age

        Younger grandparents who are usually healthier and have younger grandchildren who need more supervision tend to be more involved in their relationships with grandchildren than their older counterparts (Lemme, 2002). As grandchildren grow older and require less supervision, grandparents usually need to spend less time with them.

Grandparent-parent relationship

        Relationships between grandparents and parents of the child are another factor that influences the grandparent-grandchild relationship. Welsh and Stewart (1995) mentioned that positive relationships of adult parents with their parents positively influenced children's well-being. However, if grandparents and parents experience emotional distance, the grandparent-grandchild interaction may also be limited. The experience of being a grandparent is related to the experience of being a parent (Reitzes & Mutran, 2004). In general, older parents tend to have less ambivalence toward children who are successful than younger parents, although older parents might feel more ambivalence toward unmarried adult children, those who have less education, and those for whom they provide financial support (Peters, Hooker, & Zvonkovic, 2006). In this regard, grandparents feel more stress in the relationship with adult children and their spouses who gave custody to the grandparents (Musil & Standing, 2005). Custodial grandparents often become stressed because adult children who forego their childcare responsibilities oblige grandparents to raise the children regardless of whether or not these older persons have agreed to take on this caretaking role. Compared to custodial grandparents, non-caregivers are more likely to express concerns related to their husbands than to their adult children, even though the percentage of grandparents being married is the same.

Parent-child relationship

The parent-child interaction also may be a factor that affects the grandparent-grandchild relationship. However, there has not been much research on how the parent-child interaction influences the relationship between the grandparent and the grandchild. Goodman (2007) found that the grandparent-grandchild relationship may be positive if the parent and the child are linked together. Goodman referred to this pattern as the child-linked family. In this family type, the grandmother had relatively low depression and high life satisfaction; the grandchild also had a low level of behavior problems even though the grandmother-parent relationship was not linked. On the other hand, in the isolated-child family where the grandmother was linked to both the grandchild and the parent of the child, and there was no linkage between the parent and the child, the child had the second highest level of behavior problems after those in the not bonded family. In a less cohesive family, the grandchild may suffer from poor relationships with his or her parents even if the grandmother tries to compensate for the adult parent's role. Grandmothers in these families often have higher levels of depression and lower life satisfaction than those in more child-linked families.

Culture

The grandparent-grandchild interaction is immensely dependent upon the culture and its view of grandparents. Therefore, differences exist among Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, and Asian American grandparents (Julian, McKenry, & McKelvey, 1994). Julian, McKenry and McKelvey (1994) indicated that Caucasian families more often emphasize individual differences and emotionally detached relationships than non-Caucasian families. In the Caucasian culture, people are basically equal regardless of age. Thus, Caucasian people seek to be independent from others, and this tendency continues during the senescence period (Lemme, 2002). Hence, Caucasian older adults tend to become more depressed when they become providers of childcare than non-Caucasian grandparents (Taylor, Washington, Artinian, & Lichtenberg, 2007).

In contrast to Caucasian families that emphasize individual relations with others, Asian, African, and Hispanic people tend to pursue collateral relations with people (Gladding, 2002). Minuchin, Lee, and Simon (2006) also state that extended family networks are important for African-Americans. The extensive kin network of African-American families provides both economic and emotional support to their members. Hence, African-American older adults are more likely than Caucasian families to take grandchildren, nieces, or nephews into their homes (Mitchell & Register, 1984). According to Gladding, African-American families are open in family roles and are thus less likely to stereotype roles based on age or gender. Hence, compared to Caucasian families African-Americans tend to be less reluctant to become primary caregivers for grandchildren when they are needed. Similar to African American culture, Hispanic culture and Asian culture emphasize extended family functions and respect toward elders even though variations exist within these ethnic groups.

Conclusion

Non custodial grandparents may consider providing child care for their grandchild as a joy and/or burden depending upon their culture and family characteristics. Wheelock and Jones (2002) stated that grandparenting affects the well-being of grandparents because the grandparenting experience leads to a feeling of being loved. Many grandparents enjoy the rewards that come from closely interacting with their grandchildren. These grandparents feel

emotionally satisfied when they take on a caregiving role. On the other hand, childcare is sometimes just as stressful for non-custodial grandparents as it is for custodial grandparents. It is important that social workers understand the different needs of custodial versus non-custodial grandparents. This understanding may improve social work practice that meets the needs of these different families. Goodfellow and Laverty (2003) found that caring for grandchildren is a physically and emotionally exhausting job for grandparents. Grandparents sometimes complain about the physical challenges involved with caring for grandchildren versus just being with them all the time. In addition to the physical difficulties, these grandparents voiced some emotional challenges such as disempowerment and family obligations that sometimes troubled them. McGowen, Ladd, and Strom (2006) stated that co-resident grandparents had a lower level of life satisfaction than non-resident grandparents even though the co-resident grandparents had higher satisfaction scores than custodial grandparents. Lack of free time is another factor that can create stress for non-custodial and custodial grandparents. We need more research about non-custodial grandparents who, until recently, have been neglected by social work researchers.

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