

CROSS-CULTURAL LESSONS AND INSPIRATIONS FROM GRANDPARENTS AND GREAT-GRANDPARENTS RAISING GRANDCHILDREN

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This narrative is a sharing of lessons learned and inspirations gained by the authors who interviewed grandparents and great-grandparents raising grandchildren from myriad cultures across the United States. During the two-year period that the interviews were conducted, the three co-authors found that, despite cultural differences, there are powerful cross-cultural themes which are expressed eloquently by the strong men and women in this narrative.

Introduction

The letter from Lois* to her tribal members seemed to move us most. We could feel the outrage, disbelief, and pain that she expressed at suddenly being ordered by the court to return the granddaughter she had raised and nurtured for most of the child's five years of life to a mother who was neither ready nor able to be a good parent.

"Mitakuye Oyasin! All my relatives! Something is happening with our children's rights, not to mention our own.

As everyone is aware, my granddaughter, _____, was raised here. She was respectful of everyone and all of you acknowledged her. I, her maternal grandma, raised her here because her mother, my daughter, did not want her. Judge _____ decided that (my granddaughter) should live with her mother...

There is a Resolution (#2-2-70) that is supposed to be in place in the Tribal Court. ECAGWAYA (ee chaug wa ya) – to raise as one's own. Among many things it says that the best interests of the CHILD and recognition of where the CHILD'S sense of family is will be decided on a case-to-case basis. Because I try to adhere to our traditional Lakota ways, my grand-

daughter became knowledgeable of them. She accompanied me to many sweats and ceremonies. She belongs in our tyospaye. I never, ever, thought that I would have to resort to a court of law over my granddaughter's best interests. But because I am looking out for them I will do everything possible to help her. ECAGWAYA – to raise as one's own.

I thank you for your prayers for (my granddaughter) and I welcome your presence in the courtroom..." (Lois, 2000)

Ecagwaya or "Traditional Adoption" is a centuries-old tradition in Lakota and other Native American tribes. According to tribal custom, the child is placed by his or her natural parent(s) with another family but without any Court involvement.

"After a period of two years in the care of another family, the Court, upon petition of the adoptive parents, will recognize that the adoptive parents in a custom or traditional adoption have certain rights over a child even though parental rights of the natural parents have never been terminated. The decision of the Court shall be based on the best interests

*Names have been changed

of the child and on recognition of where the child's sense of family is. Ecagwaya is to raise or take in as if the child is a biological child."
(Lakota Tribal Resolution #2-2-70)

Preceding the attempted genocide of American Indian tribes during the second half of the 19th century, Indian cultures operated much as tribal cultures in Africa had for time immemorial. That is, tribal or village families shared in the responsibility for child rearing. Many, many times, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other kin had as much influence in a child's upbringing as did the child's biological parents (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Cross, Earle, & Simmons, 2000; Pinderhughes, 1998; Voss, Douville, Little Soldier, & Twiss, 1999). Placement of the child with relatives or other tribal families when the child's parents were unable to care for the child properly was a given.

Only in the last two decades of the twentieth century, after the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act and the development of Tribal Social Services, has the tradition re-emerged as the placement route of choice in cases where children need care by adults other than their parents. Now, by federal and tribal law, Tribal Social Services must first try to place a child within his or her own family, then within the reservation, and then, if necessary to go off reservation, within their own tribe. Outside of the "awareness" of Tribal Social Services, the tradition of Ecagwaya is, again, widespread. Grandmothers are considered sacred in Lakota and other American Indian tribes and are generally those relatives that step in first to aid in the rearing of children whose parents are having difficulty in meeting all of

their parental duties (Lois, personal communication, December 27, 2000).

Perhaps it was Lois' story that convinced us of the importance of looking at cross-cultural similarities and differences in families where grandparents are raising grandchildren. Lois lives on a

reservation far from Maryland, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, where the authors reside or have resided, yet her story had a familiar ring to us all. We have all worked in homes, schools, and communities with grandparent-headed families. Our discussions about our practice experiences led us to realize that it must be more than coincidence that increasing numbers of families in rural and urban Michigan, Maryland, and Pennsylvania were changing in this way.

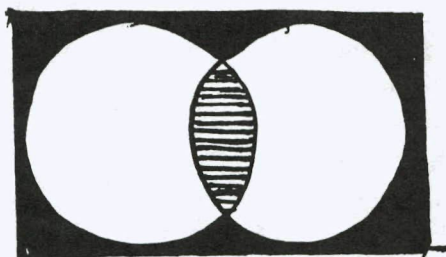
When a serendipitous interview during a trip to Lakota Indian Reservations in South Dakota provided another grandparent story, we decided to flow from our practice experiences to research. Inspired by the strengths of these grandparents and frustrated by social policies that seemed downright unfriendly to these grandparents, we undertook an ethnographic investigation of these grandparents' experiences. We had a two-fold purpose: to gather the stories of these grandparents, and to share these words of wisdom with other practitioners and policy makers who affect these families.

With little outside funding, we had to limit our study to ethnic groups we could most easily access—those we were working with. We had access to African American, Caucasian, Hispanic (both Puerto Rican and Mexican), and Native American grandparents. We worked and interviewed grandparents in rural, urban, and suburban areas.

Historical, Cultural Overview

African American families also have a centuries old tradition of "to raise as one's own," dating back to their ancestry in Africa (Pinderhughes, 1998; Scannapieco & Jackson, 1996). This tradition continued during the horrible period in U.S. History when African men and women were enslaved. When children were separated from their parents, the African women took over in the care and raising of the children. This practice continued during the great migration northward, as fathers and mothers often went north in search of jobs before their children.

Grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, uncles, and cousins cared for the children. This was part of the beginning of kinship care in America (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Hines, Preto,



McGoldrick, Almeida, & Weltman, 1999).

The tradition of kinship care is present in Hispanic culture as well. The term Hispanic is used to describe people who came to the United States from any of the many countries that were once under Spanish influence, each unique in its customs and culture.

Despite the diversity of national origin, there are numerous similarities, the most important of which is the value Hispanic families place on the extended family structure and the desire to maintain connections across several generations. It is not unusual for related Hispanic American families to move in with each other or to build homes on or near their parents' land (Lum, 1992).

There is a long, proud history of "natural helping" in Mexican American culture and a "porous" concept of family. Mexican Americans turn first to family and kin networks in times of crisis, including times when substitute child care is needed (Patterson & Marsiglia, 2000). These traditions have continued in third and fourth generation Mexican American families. The same is true of Puerto Rican families where grandmothers are the matriarchs of the family and the first line of refuge for children who need some care outside that of their parents.

European-American grandparents were often involved in the day-to-day care of their grandchildren during the height of the immigrant wave from Europe, from 1880 to 1954. During that period it was customary for many generations to live within the same household (Reeves, 1998). Two of the authors had European, immigrant grandmothers who provided primary care for them during times when their parents were not able to care for them. Second and subsequent generation European Americans have strayed somewhat from this multi-generation household. Now, some of these families have been forced to revisit this "model" due to substance abuse, mental illness, incarceration, or accidental death in their grandchildren's parents.

During the period 1990-97, the rate of growth of grandparent-headed households has been phenomenal, with an increase of

approximately 76% (U.S. Census Population Division, Working Paper Series Number 26). Contrary to popular belief, this is not just an African American phenomenon. In fact, the rate of growth of European-American, grandparent-headed households during this period has been the most dramatic of any ethnic group. Across *all* ethnic groups in America, grandparents are primarily caring for approximately four million grandchildren. This number is only an estimation, as so many children float back and forth, informally, between their grandparents' care and other relatives or parental care.

Methodology

As aforementioned, we were inspired by the stories we heard in our practices to undertake an ethnographic and cross-cultural investigation of grandparents raising grandchildren. In ethnography, the investigators immerse themselves in the culture of the groups being studied in an "attempt to understand the meaning of behaviors and attitudes" (Goldstein, 1991). We used a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions.

The grandparents' stories were tape-recorded and then transcribed. The transcripts were coded for common themes. This particular study had the added advantage of triangulation of the data analysis, as the three co-researchers all saw, independently, the same sorts of themes emerging in their data analysis. What follows is a sharing of portions of the narratives of the grandparents interviewed organized according to common theme.

Neglect and Abandonment

The most common theme in the stories we heard was one of neglect and abandonment during the grandchildren's lives. This neglect and abandonment took many forms. The grandparents interviewed shared that they were constantly worried about the safety and health of their grandchildren, until they or Child Protective Services intervened and took the children from neglectful parents. Even after the children were safe in their care, the grandparents continued to

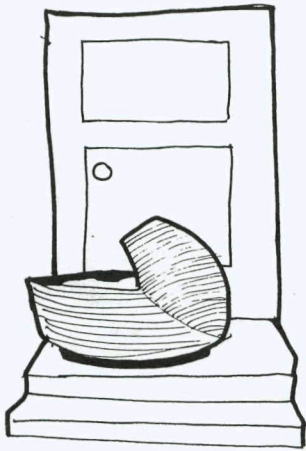
witness them suffering. Nightmares, distrust of adults, attention-seeking behaviors, cries for affection, fears of being abandoned and/or maltreated, and repeated disappointments by parents who could not or would not visit were just a few of the symptoms of the emotional pain of these children that would not go away. The following excerpts from interviews reveal some of the issues of neglect and abandonment as well as the grandparents' feelings of helplessness to ease the emotional pain of their grandchildren.

The grandmother's story that was the most moving and wrenching to me (Nadine) is the story with which I began my interview project. "Susan" is a young, vibrant, and attractive grandmother of Jewish and German descent. I worked with Susan, her husband, and their two-year-old granddaughter in their suburban Maryland home, providing play therapy and (grand) parental guidance to the family. "Kayla" was diagnosed as being Severely Emotionally Disabled (an educational system term) and her disabilities were directly related to neglect and abandonment issues. Kayla had been placed with Susan and her husband by Child Protective Services. In fact, in less than two years of life, Kayla had been removed from her mother's care three times due to neglect. Kayla's mother and father were both heroin addicts. Kayla's father (Susan's son) was incarcerated for drug trafficking during the time I worked with the family. Kayla's mother had been arrested numerous times for prostitution. Kayla's mother had also left her in the care of people who had, in all likelihood, sexually abused her. Susan commented on the most difficult aspects of trying to raise her granddaughter:

"Well, negatively, I'm sure in every situation something is different. In this one, I had to watch a beautiful child cower in corners, scream with fright when the very...when she heard a male voice, which included my husband, which included my son-in-law, which included anybody who came into

my house...To watch that, to watch a child be that broken, was almost too much for me to handle...We had never experienced a child who had suffered so much in that capacity. And I am in the business, always have been, of nurturing and fixing things. I could not fix this. I could not do this...I couldn't take away her pain. And it almost destroyed me...She had also...chosen me to be her protector. She had also become, I hate to use the word clingy, attached to me, almost like she was another appendage. She just...I stepped on her toes, she stepped on my toes. I would turn around and we would be bumping elbows and heads. 'Cause she felt so insecure, she felt that 'I finally found something, a place to be, someone to nurture me, someone I feel safe with.' No one could get near me and that included my husband, my children, my grandchildren. They were devastated...And there was a point where I almost called (Social Services) and said, 'I don't think I'm right for this child'...It wasn't the baby so much as me not being able to watch it. It was the pain of this beautiful baby."

As I (Euretta) sat in her kitchen interviewing 54-year-old Bonita, a grandmother of Mexican American ethnicity, four of the five grandchildren she is raising kept coming in and out of doors, and the spring-less, screen door kept banging behind them. "Could I raise five energetic children who ranged in age from 3 to 13?" I asked myself. "No way! Certainly not now, in my 50's! The noise alone," I thought. Yet Bonita felt she had no choice. Still raising a 16-year-old daughter of her own, Bonita is also caring for the children of an older daughter. She and the children's mother tried living together several times, but the stress was too much for both of them:



"Their mother couldn't cope with things and started going out and drinking at night (leaving the children alone) and sleeping a lot during the day. I noticed the kids weren't going to school...I'd go over and knock and knock on the door and the kids would be up and the house would be a mess and she'd be sleeping and I started getting worried...I told her, 'You're going to sit down after the holidays and tell them that you are moving and that they are going to be with me for a while until you get yourself together.'...And she moved out. And it was so hard for her and it was hard for me, but when she left, she went back to work and we didn't see her for months... Sometimes she'd call and talk to the kids and for weeks she wouldn't call. I mean the kids would cry at night. They'd say, 'tell my mama to come home!'"

Eight-year-old "Andy" also suffered from the pain of neglect. I (Euretta) had worked with him and his grandfather for several years. His grandfather's concern about Andy's behavior and safety and his anxiety about legal issues had been evident on many occasions. The interview for this study, however, gave me a different perspective on how insightful he could be about Andy's psychological well-being. Andy's grandfather sighed as he began recounting how he came to raise Andy. A tanned, European-American man, looking older than his 57 years, his eyes filled with tears several times as he talked about his son and former daughter-in-law's cocaine addiction and incarcerations and how that has affected Andy's life:

"When he was two years old, the Department of Social Services and the police found Andy and his older sister in a drug house...They lived in another state and their maternal grandmother was given

custody there. When my son and his wife got out of jail, they took Andy and came to live with me for a while. They seemed to be trying. Then one day they went out and didn't come back. I started getting calls from different places where my wife had checking accounts...This grocery store said she had bounced a check of a hundred dollars. [Turns out] it was \$1200 worth of checks. My son had stolen the checkbook and Andy's mother had wrote out these checks...Three days later they called...I asked about Andy. He was in the background screaming, and they were on cocaine. They said if we didn't call the police and gave them a chance to get out of state, we could come and get Andy. I said o.k. I met them and they turned Andy over to me and I didn't call the police and they left. I didn't hear from them for about 13 months...

[Andy has some contact with both parents. His mother lives in another state and his father lives about 30 miles away.] I let her call. I told her she can call a couple times a week if she wants to and sometimes she does and sometimes she don't. And she's a nice person. It's the drugs. Drugs ruin a lot of people...People change when they're on that stuff...Both of them have gone six months, a year, clean and everything and you think they're back and then boom! That's the worst part of cocaine, as far as I'm concerned...

I just hope Andy understands that nothing is his fault. Nothing he did caused any of it...Both parents have promised him so many things that [they never carried through on]. Andy has been lied to so many times. So I try not to have him count on too much that they say and that's hard because I don't want Andy to think that his parents aren't any

good. I don't say bad things if I can help it, because that's not good for Andy."

Perhaps my (Lynn's) most dramatic interview was with Mrs. B., a 55-year-old, African American grandmother who had turned her house over to her oldest daughter to raise her seven children. Mrs. B. moved to a neighboring state with her sister and was looking forward to settling into her own new apartment. She had a job she loved as a receptionist at a casino when the "bomb dropped." Her younger daughter called her to say that DHS was taking the children because Mrs. B's oldest daughter had left her children alone in the house for two weeks. Mrs. B. recounted:

"And what she did was she was using the kids' welfare money and food stamps on drugs. So she left the kids in the house for like, two weeks, by themselves...DHS came when I got back [to the house] and I told them I didn't want the kids separated. That same thing happened with my mother. She put all of us in foster homes. So I graduated from school. I started getting all of them back. And I never want my grandkids to go through that. So I quit my job [in a neighboring state] and came back to take care of the kids."

Joy and Fulfillment

The examples related above of neglect and abandonment themes might lead one to believe that the stories we heard were overwhelmingly negative. Quite the contrary. Interspersed among the tears and expressions of anger, guilt, frustration, and fear were infectious smiles and exclamations of pride and excitement about raising grandchildren. Almost all of the grandparents had many positive things to say when asked what the best aspects of raising their grandchildren were. One of the most predominant themes was joy and how fulfilling it was to see the children growing and "blossoming" in

a safe environment. Many grandparents shared how enjoyable it was to go to their grandchildren's schools and watch the children participate in various activities.

Most of the grandparents reported that their lives had changed focus and that this was fulfilling to them. Although often exhausted, they found that the increased activity level demanded of them was frequently energizing. Many felt that they were getting a "second chance." They described a sense of purpose and a reason for being. The excitement in their voices can be heard in the following excerpts from some of the interviews.

My (Nadine's) most thrilling and inspiring moment in an interview with a grandmother came while interviewing Marisa, a Lakota grandmother who is raising a 16-month-old granddaughter and had, just five days before our interview, brought home from neo-natal, intensive care, twin baby boys (sons of the same daughter). She has had custody of all three children from birth. Social Services workers have called her from the hospitals in which the children were born and/or cared for and asked that she take the children, as their mother was unable to care for them.

I interviewed "Mari" on a warm, breezy, cloudless, early summer day as she prepared a sweat lodge for that evening for herself and other women on the reservation, some of whom were also raising grandchildren. We were only 50 yards or so from her modest home and neighborhood on the reservation, yet her soft and rhythmic words and my looking out over the green, grassy, rolling plains made me feel as if I were transported to a spiritual dimension that I did not want to leave. Mari spoke of how her father was a medicine man and how, for a while, she seemed to stray from the Lakota ways. Now, she is a teacher of the Lakota ways and respected as a wise woman on the reservation. She spoke of the most positive aspects of raising her grandchildren:

"When they were born...The birth...Because I was there when she [her granddaughter] was born

on Valentine's Day. Yeah, I got to...they let me bring sage in...in the delivery room. They let me burn sage in the delivery room. And I got to wipe her off. I got to welcome her, Lakota. And I gave her things...And I sang the redirection songs with her and I always think that's why she's the way she is...Those have to be the first words they hear when they're born...And she amazes me [now], because they enrolled her at the tribe here, and my granddaughter got a letter saying, 'Congratulations, you are now a member of the Sicunga Nation.' My son [says], 'Baby, are you a Sicunga now?' She turned around and said, 'How!' She was going to shake hands right away. They really got a big charge out of that...I really cried when they were born...

...My dad was there for each, for my oldest daughter [who was killed by a drunk driver], he was there when she was born. He was there, he couldn't go to the hospital [for the actual birth], he didn't have a ride down there, but he called almost every other minute, to see if she was born...He named [her] when she was four days old. He gave her a name at the hospital...He went to see her at the hospital and he said that, 'All these pink babies are lying around with their mouths wide open.' He said, 'This little brown one, with black hair, and just - brown. She was lying there, looking around.' He said, "All of the sudden - at me - in the window, and she - smiled." And he said, 'She reminded me of an eagle, you know, when they are looking around.' He said, so he called her, 'Little Eagle'...They all have Indian names."

Through Mari's words, I suddenly understood the interconnectedness between

generations in the Lakota culture. By tradition, grandparents are involved in their grandchildren's births and conduct naming ceremonies for them. There is no question that grandparents will play a central role in their grandchildren's lives.

I had met Mari through Lois, whose touching letter to her tribal members opens this article. Lois had some equally moving stories about the positive aspects of raising her grandchild. "Well, probably in the very beginning...it was the challenge of doing it. And then it got to be, uh, perhaps something was rekindled in me, of when I was raising my children. And so it just started being applied to her. And she was just - my own...She has just been a total joy! ...She's just a baby, but I have learned so much from her...She's taught me to be patient...She's taught me tolerance."

Susan, who earlier so painfully recounted watching the ravages of maltreatment and abandonment in her two-year-old granddaughter, has incredibly joyful stories to tell of her granddaughter's steady improvement under her care:

"Just watching her grow, just watching little bits, chips of the bad paint falling off and a new day coming, and a new experience coming with her every single day. She's brilliant, and beautiful and wonderful and deserves...all the happiness that life has. She's just a joy, what can I say? I love everything about her...She amazes me with her ability to reason, her ability to sit and listen before she answers. She figures things out better than I do!

...I lost my mother in November of '97...and she became the comforter. I would try to hide my emotions, which was very difficult...and she would say to me, 'But you have me now...I know Meema is in heaven, but you have me now.'...So she's just a joy. Oh, I love all of my grandchildren, but to watch this broken baby. It's almost

like a bird that had a broken wing, and you fix it, and they can fly. And ah, we could learn, adults could learn a lot from Kayla and the innocence of love. And the unconditional love and forgiveness of a child."

Instead of Bonita, the grandmother raising five, feeling sorry for herself, she finds having the children beneficial to her life:

"I enjoy having them around. They keep me going. There's times that I'm aching and moaning and they make me do something. I have to do something for them and then I forget about my pain."

Loss of Freedom

Though grandparents, across cultures, spoke eloquently of the joys and fulfillment that raising their grandchildren has brought into their lives, almost all of the grandparents spoke of the loss of freedom as a central aspect of their experiences.

Gerry, a 63-year-old, spry, African American grandmother, who is raising two young grandchildren, shares:

"There is a part of me that says I should be free. I was at the point in my life when I should be getting on the bus to Atlantic City with the rest of the senior citizens."

Alma, another African American grandmother, speaks of when one of the two grandsons she now cares for was in foster care. The Department of Human Services called her to see if "Tommy," who was then 4, could come and visit his three brothers and sisters whom Alma was caring for at the time. She agreed to the visit and "Tommy" is still with her, eight years later. Alma said, with a sigh, "You know, that's how DHS works."

"Catherine", a European-American grandmother that I (Nadine) interviewed, is a family lawyer from a mid-Atlantic state. She

has been the primary caregiver for her five-month-old granddaughter almost from birth. In fact, the baby's mother had asked Catherine if she and her husband would take custody of the baby straight from the hospital. This young woman had been the girlfriend of Catherine's college-age son, though she had gone through three more relationships during her pregnancy and was living with a man, not the baby's father, at the time of the child's birth. Catherine rearranged her professional and personal life in readying for the baby's arrival.

On the day that she was to take the baby home from the hospital, the baby's mother changed her mind. Catherine spoke very movingly of the confusion, mourning, and fears that she experienced on the ride home. After all, she shared, the baby's mother had already lost custody of another child, a son, now three or four years old. She knew, as a professional, that the risks to her granddaughter's health and well being were great. Just days later, the mother called to ask if Catherine would take the baby for "a few days." Catherine did so, willingly, but now finds herself "trapped" in being "on call" whenever the baby's mother asks her for assistance with caregiving. There was the time she called her in the wee hours of the morning, asking her if she could come and take the baby, immediately, as her shift at work had changed and she didn't have childcare. No matter that Catherine had to be in court at 9 a.m., she made the three-hour, round-trip journey at 5 a.m. and brought the baby to court with her. The most difficult aspect of the situation is that Catherine does not have legal custody of her granddaughter. She is afraid that if she presses for full and legal custody the mother will disappear. She is also afraid that if she does not take the baby, then the baby will be neglected or left with questionable babysitters.

Catherine is not the only grandparent that we interviewed that worried, incessantly, about parents showing up, unexpectedly, to "reclaim" parental rights. This was talked about in all interviews, except the two in which the parent of the grandchild was

deceased. Many of the grandparents had horror stories to share of times when their grandchild or grandchildren were, indeed, snatched up by parents and were not seen for months or even, in Lois' case, for one year. The tenuous (if any) legal rights that many of these grandparents have are pitiful. They live their lives at the mercy of DHS and the family court system. Many have experienced the pain of a family judge awarding custody back to parents who have repeatedly failed their children. Many shared the pain of being on opposite sides of the court from their adult child regarding the safety of their grandchildren. In any case, emotional and/or legal entanglement with their grandchildren's parents is a central feature of these grandparents' existences.

Coping Through Faith, Prayer, Family, and Friends

From inner city Philadelphia to the farm fields of Pennsylvania and Michigan to Lakota Indian reservations, we were all struck by the number of grandparents who mentioned faith or prayer as a central means of coping. Now, faith and prayer may manifest themselves very differently on the Lakota Indian Reservation or in an inner city Baptist community, but we are struck more by the similarities than by the differences.

Susan shared:

"I rely on my faith a lot, uh, all of this to me is...it is very important to me and I give all of the credit to God. It's still a one-day-at-a-time process, but each day I see another miracle. And so it keeps me strong and it keeps me focused on who I am...I believe that God sent this baby to us because He knew we'd nurture her and take care of her."

Bonita admitted:

"There are times when I felt like I can't do it no more. I am strong and I have faith in God and I think he keeps me going. He gives me energy and when I want to give up,

I don't give up."

"Hilda," a Puerto Rican grandmother raising her teen-aged stepdaughter and a 14-year-old granddaughter, felt she had to keep going and drew on her faith:

"I remember when I had my first heart attack. While I was praying I said 'Dear God, I can't die now, I got to raise these girls!'"

Lois speaks of how she coped during a time when her daughter had snatched her granddaughter away and she didn't know where her granddaughter was for a year.

"When ___ took her away, I had a ceremony with Mr. R, he's a medicine man. And I was so afraid for her, ...it was such a good ceremony. I could feel the spirits everywhere and I could see the lights everywhere, where they were and I was crying, of course, and they would come, and they would pat me on the head, like 'it'll be all right, it'll be all right.' And afterwards, [Mr. R.] doesn't speak English there, he speaks Lakota, especially at ceremonies, and he told some other interpreters, who in turn, told me that he had sent spirits from there down to [city where she suspected granddaughter was] to watch over her until she came back. And I said, 'Ah, she's coming back? When is she coming back?' And he just kind of smiled and said, 'Just be patient.' So I felt really good that someone was watching over her anyway. And when she came back, like I said, everybody was so happy. I [held ceremonies], I just gave thanks to everywhere that she was home!"

At this point in the interview, Lois' 5-year-old granddaughter, who had been peacefully coloring in a corner of the room, came up to me holding up her right index

finger and said, "May I say something?" I said, "Of course." She then said, "My ancestors were happy." I just cried at this sharing of her spirituality.

Cultural Differences

Two of us found some fascinating, unique themes in our interviews with African American and Hispanic grandmothers and great-grandmothers raising grandchildren. Most of the African American and Hispanic grandmothers reported a positive or, at least, a stable relationship with their adult child, the parent of the grandchildren they were raising. This is in contrast to the European-American and Lakota grandparents interviewed. Pruchno (1999), in an article comparing the experiences of black and white grandmothers, notes that "Black grandparents are less likely to embrace the norm of non-interference, especially when the middle generation is comprised of a single parent" (p. 211). White grandparents may, in fact, be resented more by their adult children and seen as interfering rather than helpful during difficult times. "Donna," one African American grandmother interviewed, shared, "In the beginning he [her son, father to the grandchild she was raising] didn't really want to be bothered because that's what his dad did to him. I raised him all by myself and I talked to him and said 'Why would you want your child to go through what you went through?' After that time, Donna shared, things improved and now this father sees his daughter almost every day and she knows she can call him whenever she wants.

Two of the Hispanic grandmothers we listened to had the mothers of their grandchildren living with them. They, as did many of the African American grandmothers, reported a strengthening of the relationship with their child who was the parent of the grandchild they were raising. The mother of a teen-aged mother stated that they spent more time together than ever before and that "we are more close than we would have been if she had no kids." The close relationships of the Hispanic grandmothers may be due in part to the cultural tradition of collec-

tive responsibility and closeness of extended family. When the teen-mother's mother was asked about what she saw as her daughter's future, she answered, "I don't know. 'Cause Hispanic family live that way. They just stay there. You get too many Mexican kids - until the kids grown - and those kids never move! They add up!" Even Bonita, the Hispanic grandmother of five, thinks that eventually when her daughter is ready to parent again, they will live in trailers next to each other so Bonita can continue to help raise her grandchildren. This is further illustration of the natural helping network in Hispanic American culture.

African American grandmothers were more likely than other ethnic groups to report strengthened relationships with relatives and friends. Almost all of these grandmothers noted a sister, daughter, or close family friend who was their main support in caring for the children. Three of the Hispanic grandmothers also noted that sisters and brothers, other relatives, and friends were a big help. Two of the African American grandmothers in the group interviewed were married and reported no marital problems because of the children. They both, in fact, noted that the grandfathers were supportive and helpful. One married, European-American grandmother and one married, Lakota grandmother, however, reported great strife over the strain of raising the grandchildren. One had thought of separation and the other was, indeed, legally separated. The finding of African American and Hispanic grandmothers' reporting strengthened or stable relationships with family and friends may be attributable to the historical tradition of kin care and natural helping networks in both the African American and Hispanic American communities.

Discussion/Implications for Future Practice

With the input of the strong and resilient grandparents that we interviewed, the authors have come up with a number of best practice guidelines. First of all, in working with a grandparent-headed family, assessment should expand both "vertically and



horizontally." That is, assessment of a family's strengths and needs should occur over three or four generations and should include as wide a circle of kin as possible.

The amazing strengths and resilience factors that these grandparents possess should first and foremost be recognized. However, practitioners should also recognize that these grandparents often neglect their emotional and physical needs. Many times in interviews, we heard vague references to "not getting around to my own doctor" or "not having a chance to get my medicine." This was especially true in families where the grandchildren had complex mental and physical health challenges.

Most of the grandchildren of those interviewed had parents who had "abandoned" them. Thus, these children had a number of cognitive, developmental, and emotional/behavioral "symptoms" of their unstable lives including PTSD, depression, ADD, conduct disorders, explosive outbursts, reactive attachment disorder, and, finally, the likelihood of repeating patterns of the parenthood that they experienced. Grandparents we interviewed spoke movingly of the complex set of problems these children came to them with and the confusing, complex society in which they were trying to raise them. Almost all of the grandparents expressed strong need for more guidance on raising these children in today's society.

Mrs. Ayes, a European-American grandmother, shared:

"It's hard to put into words. It's not that they're more intelligent, they just know different things at 12, 13, and 14 years old. They know more than they did when our

kids were that age. It makes me sound real antiquated, but it's just that it's kind of hard for us to deal with. It just makes your eyes pop sometimes."

A number of grandparents we interviewed were also caring for frail, elderly parents. We have dubbed these grandparents members not of the "sandwich generation," but members of the "club-sandwich generation." These grandparents, especially, faced stresses and strains that we could only imagine.

We have concluded a number of things about the needs of grandparent-headed families. First of all, practitioners and policy-makers must advocate for grandparental legal rights. We have much to learn from centuries-old, cultural norms about the central role that grandparents play and should play in their grandchildren's lives. Most grandparents had horror stories to tell about the lack of responsiveness and support of such institutions such as public child-welfare agencies. One of us, in her work in the child welfare system a couple of years ago, was told by a supervisor to *not* discuss the possible financial assistance available to relative caregivers.

At present, many, many support groups for grandparents raising grandchildren exist across the country, yet many of the grandparents we spoke to face almost insurmountable challenges in getting to the support groups. These challenges include such things as lack of transportation or money for transportation, lack of babysitters, and not being able to leave home easily due to their grandchildren's medical needs, their aging parents' medical needs, and/or their own! Much information is also to be had on the Internet; a prime example is the Grandparent Information site of AARP. However, most of the grandparents we interviewed did not have access to a computer. We have concluded that support might better be given on a one-to-one basis, either at home or on the phone, much as some breast cancer survivors reach out to newly diagnosed breast cancer patients.

Spiritual support, if faith is a centerpiece of these grandparents' lives, is an essential aspect of meeting the needs of these families. Grandparent-headed households might be connected to one another through faith centers and faith leaders. Members of churches or temples might be able to offer support and/or respite to these grandparents.

Finally, many grandparents raising grandchildren need assistance with the grief, guilt, and/or shame issues that they may feel about the children's parents. Individual and family counseling, in a contextual framework, is in order.

Perhaps all of these services are best provided via a multi-disciplinary team approach. Child welfare workers, geriatric social workers, nurses, physicians, educators, and lawyers should come together to serve these families. Project Healthy Grandparents, in Atlanta, uses this service model. In that project, nurses, social workers, and third-year law students do medical, psychological, and legal assessments as a team.

This research remains a work in progress and a labor of love. Next, we hope to interview grandchildren currently being raised by their grandparents or adults who have been raised by their grandparents. We have entered into an agreement with documentary filmmakers to chronicle the narratives of both grandparents and grandchildren. The cross-cultural, common themes that have emerged in this first study have been a source of endless fascination and inspiration for us. We have learned so much from these grandparents about coping, resilience, and strength.

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