2008

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Jordan Soliz
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, jsoliz2@unl.edu

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Jordan Soliz (PhD, University of Kansas, 2004) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68588-0329, email jsoliz2@unl.edu

Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to examine grandparent support to grandchildren following the divorce of parents. Participants (*N* = 42) responded to questions focusing on the enactment of support and relationships with grandparents. Through these retrospective, self-report accounts, six categories of grandparent support were identified. Additionally, four barriers to grandparent support emerged from the responses of the grandchildren. These categories of and barriers to intergenerational social support are discussed as they relate to characteristics and expectations of provided support in post-divorce families.

Keywords: divorce, family communication, grandparents, social support

The grandparent-grandchild (GP-GC) relationship has received increasing attention from communication scholars over the last few years (for review, see Soliz, Lin, Anderson, & Harwood, 2006). In addition to the "aging of the population," family forms are shifting in that intergenerational relationships within the family are more common today than in the past (Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1990; Mares, 1995), and grandparenting relationships can be quite diverse. In fact, grandparents play an influential role in the lives of their grandchildren (Tomlin, 1988), including influencing family, religious, and ethnic identity (King,

Elder, & Conger, 2000; Kornhaber & Woodward, 1981; Wiscott & Kopera-Frye, 2000), shaping values and beliefs (Brussoni & Boon, 1998), and providing support (Cherlin & Furstenburg, 1986; Kornhaber & Woodward, 1981). More recent work (Cogswell & Henry, 1995; Findler, 2000) has focused on the importance of grandparental support during challenging times for families. The purpose of the current research is to expand our understanding of intergenerational support by investigating grandparental support in post-divorce families.

As Lewis, Wallerstein, & Johnson-Reitz (2004) explain, "a critical question . . . is whether children in families where there is toxic conflict that chronically and directly involves the children are better off if their parents divorce" (p. 199). Regardless of the potential positive effects of a divorce, parental separation can have numerous consequences on the well-being of the child (e.g., increased parental conflict, negative relationships, lower academic achievement, behavioral problems, and self-esteem; see Amato, 1988, 1996; Amato & Keith, 1991).

An important factor of adjustment for divorced parents is the social support network (Kitson & Morgan, 1990), and it is fair to assume that this is also the case for children. In fact, social support is fundamental to coping with stressful events (Cunningham & Barbee, 2000) which, in turn, is important for overall well-being (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2004). Hence, understanding the role of social support for children of divorce is an important goal of research in that it may shed light on how to alleviate some potential negative consequences of this family transition.

Whereas the "immediate family" may seem like a logical avenue to seek support, post-divorce conflict may limit the capacity to seek support from these family members, specifically parents and siblings. As parents (re)negotiate their roles from spouse to co-parent (Metts & Cupach, 1995) and manage their own post-divorce adjustments, they may not be able to serve in a supportive capacity. Furthermore, the notion of "feeling caught" between parents (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003) may limit the tendency for children to turn to one parent for support. Likewise, varying adjustment levels and/or different relationships with parents may cause post-divorce conflict between siblings (Gano-Phillips & Fincham, 1995), which may serve as a barrier to support. In fact, therapeutic perspectives suggest that maintaining a normal, non-disruptive "grandparental house" may be important for the children's adjustment (Barth, 2004). Therefore, the grandparent emerges as a potential supportive figure after a divorce. This is consistent with claims that grandparents play an integral role in children's adjustment to family changes (Drew & Smith, 1999). Much of the research related to divorce and grandparents has focused on maintenance of the grandparent-grandchild relationship following the divorce. However, grandparents may be unclear as to their expected role in the post-divorce family (Gladstone, 1987; Schutter & Scherman, 1997).

Previous research on grandparent support has typically followed established taxonomies of types of social support (e.g., financial, instrumental, and emotional; see Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). However, this research has not addressed the enactment of support—what people say or do in supportive interactions (Goldsmith, 2004)—in this context. Grandchildren offer an important perspective on postdivorce GP-GC relationships (Kalish & Visher, 1981). Therefore, the current study focuses on young adult grandchildren's retrospective accounts of conversations with grandparents to understand the enactment of support (e.g., providing and seeking support), characteristics of support providers, and evaluations of

support. Although the current research focuses on the grandchild's perspective, it may be beneficial for grandparents in further clarifying expectations of their roles during this family transition—expectations that are typically unclear to the grandparent (Gladstone, 1987).

RQ: From the perspective of the young adult grandchild, how was intergenerational support enacted following the divorce?

Method

Forty-two participants answered questions about post-divorce grandparent support as part of a larger study on GP-GC relationships. For all participants, the divorce occurred while they were still living with parents. Participants were 19 to 29 years old (M = 20.86, SD = 2.12; 24 females, 16 males, 2 did not report demographic information). Most were White/European-American (n = 37). The rest were Asian American (n = 2), Hispanic/Latino (n = 2), or reported multiple ethnic groups (n = 1). Questions related to the post-divorce conversations addressed types of support, support solicitation, relationship with the grandparent, evaluation of support, expectations of support, and barriers to support.

Analysis followed an emergent theme, inductive approach. First, participant responses were reviewed to gain a sense of potential themes. Next, following a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), responses were reread and emergent themes were noted. Responses to all questions were reviewed for potential themes related to the research question. Hence, in approaching the data, responses were analyzed as a whole rather than a separate analysis for each question. In so doing, the analysis garnered a more collective sense of enacted support. Themes were utilized to develop categories of support and were continuously confirmed or adapted when reviewing subsequent responses. The responses were "revisited" a third time and checked against these established categories. Finally, a "peer debriefing" (Baxter & Babbie, 2004) was completed to address credibility of the themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

Six categories of post-divorce grandparental support emerged. These categories of support are composites of the type of support provided, support provider, and general characteristics of the supportive communication. In some cases, grandchildren discussed more than one category of support, and therefore they should not necessarily be viewed as exclusive categories. Participants also discussed the financial assistance provided to the custodial and non-custodial parent; although not the direct recipients of support, grandchildren did describe this as an important facet to deal with the potential economic hardships of parental divorce.

1. Empathic Grandmother
The most frequently described support reflects enactment of emotional support. Descriptions such as "caring," "just being there," "sympathetic," or "letting us know everything will be okay" were common, suggesting that the purpose of this support was to buffer the

negative effects of divorce through nurturing and cathartic talk. Nearly all descriptions involved the grandmother, and, often times, this was a maternal grandmother with strong emotional ties to the grandchild. Further, these supportive interactions were described as "understanding," "open-minded," and "accepting of the divorce," indicating a non-judgmental discussion of the circumstance. Finally, nearly all respondents indicated this that the grandparent provided the support without solicitation.

2. Stable Generation
An additional frequently occurring category described grandparents who continue to provide a "sense of family." Grandparents are not depicted as offering emotional support specifically; rather, support is enacted by "acting normal," "staying positive," "letting us know relationships won't change," and "showing a marriage that works." Hence, the grandparents serve as a stable family unit as the grandchild's more immediate family deals with the volatility of going through the divorce. Typically, this was enacted by grandparent dyads or by all grandparents individually.

3. Peacekeepers
Similar to the stable generation, the peacekeepers' influence is a somewhat indirect type of support. Specifically, these grandparents actively maintained relationships with their child's former spouse. Maintenance behaviors included "visiting with," "sending birthday and holiday cards to," and "talking positive about" the other parent. This was described as important following the divorce, as it buffered some of the stress associated with conflicts between maternal and paternal sides of the family. Typically, this type of support was enacted by grandparent dyads rather than one particular grandparent.

4. Straightforward Grandfather
Whereas the empathic support was overwhelmingly a grandmother, the straightforward grandparent seems to be the role of a grandfather. Rather than performing nurturing behavior, being sympathetic, or talking about the divorce, this support was characterized as "straight talk" or "making sure we toughen up." Typically, these were unsolicited interactions. Therefore, the purpose of these interactions is to instill a sense of closure to the grandchild or, in some ways, make the grandchild realize that they cannot change the situation. Although this could be construed as a negative or less-than-desirable grandparental influence, grandchildren characterized this as a positive influence on their situation.

5. Family Historian
The family historian is described as the grandparent "talking about what happened" and "explaining the divorce." Hence, the grandparent explains the "why" of the divorce to the grandchildren. In a few circumstances, the grandparent divulges information about the parents that were not known by the grandchildren. However, for the most part, the grandparent was asked to serve in this capacity because the grandchild was young at the time of parent separation, and the grandparent(s) provide insight into the circumstances leading to the separation. Further, this support was always characterized as being specifically

sought out, suggesting that grandparents respect the privacy or do not want to get involved if the grandchild does not desire this information.

6. Parent Supporters
Although questions specifically addressed how grandparents provided support to the grandchildren, participants described support to their parents as a supportive action beneficial to them. By offering emotional support to the parents, the grandparents "helped get us through it." Unlike the peacekeepers, the parent supporters only focus on their children. In fact, grandparents were often described as "taking sides" in the family transition. These grandparents direct personal resources toward assisting the parent in coping with the divorce rather than directly supporting the grandchild. However, this was not negative in that grandchildren described themselves as "being okay with that." This type of support was provided by both the mother and father of the custodial parent.

Participants also discussed barriers to support or why support was not provided. The following discussion focuses on these four barriers emerging from the participants' responses. Once again, these should not be viewed as exclusive categories because some respondents described more than one barrier.

1. Absent Grandparent
The most commonly discussed barrier to support was characterized with descriptions such as "no strong relationship," "don't see them that often," "living far away," or "hardly know them." However, the divorce was not a cause of the quality of the relationship. Hence, the lack of a quality GP-GC relationship prior to the divorce limits the supportive role of the grandparent. Some grandchildren expressed disappointment that grandparents did not actively try to maintain a relationship following the divorce. Most likely, a result of custodial context (i.e., living with the mother), the absent grandparents were typically paternal grandparents.

2. Critical Grandparent
In contrast to the empathic grandparent, the critical grandparent is quite judgmental in discussing the divorce. In addition to expressing disapproval of divorce and the parent's decision, these grandparents also "bad-mouthed" their child's former spouse. Although these grandparents typically provide financial or minimal emotional assistance to the parent, grandchildren still considered the critical nature of these interactions as a barrier to effective support.

3. Incapacitated Grandparent
Although grandchildren felt the grandparent wanted to offer support and assist the family with this transition, physical or cognitive attributes related to aging limited the capacity to offer support; in other words, "they were getting too old to help."

4. Silent Grandparent
Whereas the critical grandparent openly discussed their opinions and attitudes toward the divorce, the silent grandparent actively avoided these discussions. Hence, divorce was a

"taboo" topic, and it is clear to the grandchild that they were "not to talk about it." Unlike the absent grandparent, the grandchildren have an established relationship with these grandparents. Therefore, many times, the grandchildren resent the avoidance of this topic and think the grandparents "could have done more."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of grandparental support following divorce. In emerging as the most frequently cited type of support, the *empathic grandmother* demonstrates that grandparents can be an important source for coping and comforting during this family transition. The fact that grandchildren rarely had to ask for this type of support demonstrates that it may be an expected role in this relationship (i.e., perfect grandparent stereotype; see Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1994). Because this type of support is nearly always a grandmother and is typically provided by a grandparent with whom the grandchild is emotionally close, it also demonstrates that this emotionally supportive role is based on the relationship, not simply the family position. In other words, grandparents by nature may not automatically be emotionally supportive, and grandchildren do not instinctively turn to grandparents for emotional support unless there is a foundation of a positive relationship. The *absent grandparent* barrier demonstrates the effect that lack of a quality GP-GC relationship can have on the supportive function of these interactions.

An additional aspect of the *empathic grandmother* is the nature of the supportive interaction. As outlined in the descriptions, these interactions are described as nonjudgmental, understanding, and accepting of the situation. This is in direct contrast to the *critical grandparent* barrier and, to some extent, the *silent grandparent*, where grandchildren's feelings are not affirmed, taken into account, or recognized. Therefore, the desired comforting and supportive interactions from grandparents supports Burleson's (1990) claim that successful supportive interactions are neutral in evaluation and demonstrate involvement of the support provider and attentiveness to the emotional needs of the grandchild.

In comparing the *empathetic grandmother* and the *straightforward grandfather*, there is an obvious gender effect in terms of supportive behaviors such as comforting and nurturing, although *grandfathers* were still considered supportive. Because this is most likely an effect of socialized sex roles, it will be interesting to see if these roles change as the generations who were raised in a less traditional social context become grandparents.

The role of the grandparent as a family "historian" has been documented (Kornhaber & Woodward, 1981; Nussbaum and Bettini, 1994) and now extends into the domain of explaining a divorce. Similar to the *empathic grandmother*, these interactions seem non-judgmental of the parent's decision and seem to function as a way to decrease the ambiguity or vagueness of why the parents separated. One question that was not answered in this study was the fidelity of the grandparent's explanations. In other words, does the grandparent(s) provide an accurate depiction of what transpired leading to a divorce, or do they construct these messages in a way to shelter the grandchild from information that may be potentially harmful?

Whereas the previous categories encompass situations of comforting interactions, the *stable generation* and *peacekeepers* categories demonstrate that grandparent support can be enacted by creating a sense of stability in the family. Whether keeping things "normal" or attempting to maintain relationships with former in-laws, these categories support Barth's (2004) contention that having a nondisruptive, unwavering family context is important for grandchildren in post-divorce families. In fact, the *parent supporter* represents a way in which the grandparents attempt to buffer the negative effects of parental separation in an indirect manner.

Although there are barriers to social support and, subsequently, unfavorable and potentially harmful ways of acting, the overall trend is that, if a grandparent relationship has a strong positive foundation, then they may help minimize the potential negative effects of divorce. Hence, these findings coupled with the previous research on grandparent influence lend further support to the importance of GP-GC relationship in the lives of both family members. By focusing on social support in these relationships, we attend to the interpersonal process in these relationships. Hence, future research should continue investigation into supportive interactions between grandparents and grandchildren. Furthermore, this may offer support to proponents of grandparent rights following divorce (e.g., visitation rights) in that it demonstrates the positive effect of grandparent contact and stability during the family transition.

Additionally, extending our understanding of the grandchildren's perceptions may pave the way to understanding *expectations* of grandparental support, which is important due to the fact that grandparents are not always aware of the conflicts that are precursors to divorce (Myers & Perrin, 1993). Hence, grandparents may be hesitant or unprepared to offer support because these problems were unknown (Eckenrode & Wethington, 1990). Therefore, in understanding expectations and barriers to support, grandparents may gain insight into their family roles after divorce—a role which, while significant (Cogswell & Henry, 1995), may still be relatively unclear to many grandparents (Gladstone, 1987; Schutter & Scherman, 1997).

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