Rebecca Raby

Teenage Girls and their Grandmothers

Building Connections Across Difference

While those in adolescence and old age tend to be quite separated in our society, a strong link frequently exists between grandparents and their adolescent grandchildren. "Teenage Girls and their Grandmothers: Building Connections Across Difference" draws on semi-structured interviews with 12 teenage girls and their grandmothers to qualitatively examine interactions between these generations. Each generation tended to rely on media, folklore and grandchild-grandparent contact to learn about the other generation. Both sets of participants reproduced stereotypes of adolescence and grandparenthood that would seem to exacerbate a division between these quite separate times of life. Two patterns prevented such a division: first, relatives were often viewed as exceptions to the stereotype, particularly in the case of granddaughters. Second, generational distinctions were used to build or mediate cross-generational relationships, especially in custodial relationships where the grandmother is parenting the granddaughter.

Teenagers and older adults are often involved in quite separate community and leisure activities, mitigating against strong links across generations. Yet strong bonds do form, especially between teenagers and grandparents (Boon & Brussoni, 1996; Matthews & Sprey, 1985; Baranowski, 1982). The bulk of literature on grandparent-grandchild relations addresses social-structural and life course features that either reduce or facilitate such intergenerational links. In contrast, this analysis concentrates on *interactions* between grandmothers and their adolescent granddaughters, specifically exploring how stereotypes about adolescence and grandparenthood, while potentially dividing generations, are also used to build cross-generational relationships, particularly in custodial relationships where the grandmother is parenting the granddaughter.

Literature review

Most literature on grandparent-grandchild relationships focuses on structural features that strengthen or weaken these relationships, particularly those linked to decisions made by the parents who separate the two generations. Quality of parent-grandparent relations, geographic proximity and frequency of childhood visits all influence grandchild-grandparent relations (Boon & Brussoni, 1996; Matthews & Sprey, 1985). Various studies also indicate the relevance of culture (Hurme 1997; Sokolovsky, 1997) and race (Saluter, 1996, Burton, 1996), though less so of class (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1985; Di Leonardo, 1987).

Maternal grandmothers tend to have a stronger role in their grandchildren's lives than either paternal grandmothers or grandfathers (Boon & Brussoni, 1996; Matthews & Sprey, 1985). Granddaughters are also slightly more likely than grandsons to connect with their grandparents (Hirsch, Mickus and Boerger, 2002). The importance of gender is not surprising, as kinship connections tend to be maintained by women (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Di Leonardo, 1987), grandmothers tend to live longer than grandfathers (Szinovacz, 1998) and maternal grandmothers are most likely to be custodial grandparents (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001). Grandparents' and grandchildren's ages (Troll, 1980; Burton, 1987), grandchildren's birth order (Szinovacz, 1998), grandparents' involvement with their own grandparents (Bengston & Robertson, 1985) and increased life expectancy (Szinovacz, 1998; Aldous, 1995) are also relevant.

Finally, there is also a growing literature addressing the increasing trend for grandchildren to be raised by their grandparents, particularly their grandmothers, often due to negative circumstances such as drug use or neglect within the intermediary generation (Goodman & Silverstein, 2001; Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2000).

Adolescents have more freedom than children to determine and influence how much contact they will have with their grandparents (Brussoni & Boon, 1998). Distancing between teenage grandchildren and their grandparents was indicated by Colleen Johnson (1983) and by Karen Roberto & Johanna Stroes (1992) yet while Marc Baranowski (1982) observes that modern teenagers tend to prefer spending time with peers than with family, he and Lynne Hodgson (1992) suggest that closeness deepens between grandchildren and their grandparents as they get older, perhaps as grandparents provide historical continuity (Baranowski, 1982). Both teenagers and (many) grandparents, as older people, also share a transition location, either entering or leaving a presumably stable adulthood (Hockey & James, 1993; Lesko, 1996) and an age-related marginality to middle adulthood, suggesting potential for solidarity (Hockey & James, 1993).

Suffice to say, while those in adolescence and old age tend to be quite separated in our society, a strong link frequently exists between grandparents and their adolescent grandchildren (Brussoni & Boon, 1998). Structural conditions affect the shape of specific grandparent-grandchild relations, condi-

tions that must be negotiated by grandparents and grandchildren. They also negotiate a range of available discursive materials. We see this in a variety of potential grandparenting styles and roles (Mueller, Wilhelm & Elder, 2002; Brussoni & Boon, 1998; Van Ranst, Verschueren & Marcoen, 1995) and in dominant stereotypes of adolescence and grandmotherhood examined below.

Methodology

This article draws on semi-structured interviews with teenage girls and their grandmothers that were primarily conducted to examine cross-generational perceptions and experiences of adolescence. A secondary aim was to explore the contexts within which grandmothers and granddaughters negotiate their relationships. This study should therefore be considered exploratory. I interviewed 12 teenage girls, two of whom were sisters, and eleven grandmothers (see Table A). Eight of the granddaughters were also available to be interviewed a second time in order to further investigate their experiences of adolescence. Teenagers ranged from 13 to 19, were either white or black, and came from a variety of religious and class backgrounds. Most lived in Toronto, although several in smaller surrounding cities. Grandmothers ranged from ages 54 to 85 and were more widely distributed geographically, with one living in California, one in Alberta and four others in Southern Ontario cities outside Toronto. Grandmother-granddaughter dynamics varied widely, with three grandmothers in on-going custodial roles, three significantly involved in care-taking responsibilities and three relationships spanning long distances. Two-thirds of the grandmothers were maternal.

Each interview was approximately one hour and pairs were interviewed separately. Pairs were found through diverse, informal contacts and advertising. All pairs who agreed to participate were subsequently interviewed. Granddaughters were asked about stereotypes of older people, of grandmothers and of adolescents, and about their relationship with their grandmother. Grandmothers were asked what it means to be a grandmother, how it differs from being a mother, whether there is 'stereotypical' grandmother and whether they fit that stereotype or not. They were also asked about their perceptions of adolescents in general and their granddaughters as specific adolescents. The relationships between the pairs were for the most part close and positive. There were, however, several grandmother-granddaughter pairs that were more distant. These pairs did not seem to produce dramatically different comments from those who were closer, except for those in custodial relationships (discussed below).

Interview transcripts were roughly coded into topic areas then all transcript portions pertaining to relationships between grandmothers and their granddaughters were temporarily separated from the full interview transcript and coded three times. As themes emerged from the data, these were listed separately. Full interviews were read through a final time to check the context of selected quotes. All coding and analysis was conducted by the author.

Table A: Respondents, Granddaughters and Grandmothers

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Level of caretaking
Rita	15	Caribbean / Anglo	Has custody
Marjorie	69	Anglo	
Janelle	18	Caribbean	Almost daily visiting
Bess	55	Caribbean	
Jazz	18	Caribbean- Canadian	High involvement in past, now occasional visiting
Sandy	63	Caribbean	
Angela	14	Anglo	Babysitting
Catherine	64	Scottish	
Tracy	17	Anglo	High involvement in past, now frequent visiting
Jan	67	Anglo	
Shannon	18	Caribbean	Daily contact, some parenting
Rose	68	Caribbean	
Jess	13	Anglo	Short, weekly visiting
Anne	73	Anglo	
Elizabeth	15	Anglo	Long distance, yearly visiting
Claire	72	European- American	
Allanah	18	Anglo	High involvement in past, then occasional visiting
Beatrice	85	Anglo	
Vienna	16	Anglo/Jewish	Long distance, yearly visiting
Gladys	84	Anglo	
Leah	15	Jewish	Frequent, weekly visiting
Shoshana	19	Jewish	
Hannah	69	Jewish	

Generalizations and stereotypes

Stereotypes can affect how we conceptualize ourselves and how others respond to us (Berger & Luckman, 1967). They are broad generalizations that are often compared to, and distinguished from, some kind of underlying truth. I asked respondents to discuss stereotypes of grandparents, grandmothers and teenagers. These stereotypes were sometimes acknowledged by respondents to be over-generalizations, yet they nonetheless discursively produce knowledge about teenagers and grandmothers. Most of the grandmothers knew few teenagers other than their own grandchild or grandchildren. Teenagers, similarly, did not interact much with older adults outside the family. Each tended to rely on media, folklore and grandchild-grandparent contact to learn about the other generation. Stereotypes adopted through media and folklore contribute to images of teenagers and grandmothers as poles apart.

Perceptions of teenagers

While some grandmothers were quite positive about teenagers, most notably Anne (73), most granddaughters and grandmothers viewed teenagers negatively, reflecting popular representations of adolescence that construct teenagers as social problems (Raby, 2002; Lesko, 1996; Griffin, 1993):

> Bess (55): *I don't know what's happening with this last generation today. No problem with my teenagers. Kids want to show off, some of them with friends, and will do things they don't want to do. No manners. No respect for no one—kids in the mall.*

> Jan (67): *I find a lot of kids rude, but in the general scheme of things, they don't—they wouldn't think of moving off the sidewalk to get out of your way, they'd walk through and that kind of thing, but that's not because they're teenagers, [its] because they're not properly brought up.*

Beatrice (85) identified teenagers today as hanging out in bars, drinking, doing drugs and getting into trouble and Claire (72) drew on her experience as a nurse in California to describe teenagers as trouble-makers and drug users. For these grandmothers such perceptions were presented as fact, with the caveat that their own grandchildren are exceptions. Most grandmothers also provided an explanation for why teenagers are such a problem, usually focusing on media influences, peer pressure or weak parenting.

The granddaughters also cited a number of stereotypes that people have about teenagers. They argued that people see teenagers as rude, uninterested, apathetic, trouble-makers, untrustworthy, and frightening. The granddaughters routinely perceived such portrayals to be unfair generalizations, however. Both Tracy (17) and Angela (14) suggested that people do not "give teenagers the chance" because they base their interactions on negative stereotypes. Several

felt that a subset of teenagers bring such portrayals on the rest of them and Jazz, Shannon, Elizabeth and Vienna all suggested that some teenagers behave badly because they're expected to. But overall, the young women were much more likely to identify stereotypes of teenagers as unfair generalizations based on the activities of a few. Neither grandmothers nor granddaughters discussed these stereotypes in relation to gender.

Several conclusions can be made here. First, most grandmothers made broad, negative generalizations about teenagers today, which they contrasted with their "good," exceptional grandchildren. This dichotomizing of "good" and "bad" teenagers was also evident in the teenagers' comments, although they were more likely to suggest that bad teens are in the minority. Importantly, however, grandmothers involved in parenting had a more complicated familiarity with their granddaughters, preventing them from idealizing them, but also softening their negative views of teenagers overall. Through parenting, grandmothers come to see teenagers as more contextualized.

To some extent, these comments are promising. Cross-generational contact seems valuable for disrupting negative stereotypes. Also, grandmothers are willing to provide explanations for teenagers' negative behaviour, shifting blame to external social influences. Yet it is unfortunate that the grandmothers do not expand on their admiration for their grandchildren to recognize that general, negative images of teens are not always accurate.

Perceptions of grandmothers and old age

Perceptions of grandmothers conflate with those of elderly women (Troll, 1980; Johnson 1983) and while some grandmothers are quite young, many are older, particularly when their grandchildren are teenagers (Connidis, 2001; Troll, 1980). Roma Hanks (2001) cites negative portrayals of grandmothers in children's literature in which grandmothers are presented as disabled, inactive and dependent, but she also suggests that television and internet representations of grandmothers are growing increasingly positive. Johnson (1983) interviewed grandmothers who identified the "traditional" conception of grandmothers as old, nurturing and maternal yet who were critical of this image as too narrow, domestic and "old." Ideally, they suggested, a "modern" grandmother "should be fun-loving" (1983:553), engaging her grandchildren in a diversity of activities.

In my interviews, several teenage respondents identified older people in general as judgmental (Rita, 15), frail and weak (Janelle, 18) and rude to teenagers (Tracy, 17). But these were the exceptions. Most equated grandmothers with old age and suggested that stereotypes of grandmothers frame them as maternal, older and active. These images were then compared to their own grandmothers, with a focus on specific activities such as baking, cooking, knitting, and playing cards:

Tracy (17): *Well, she likes to bake, you know, that kind of thing, and she*

> *takes care of the family. I don't know, she's just the grandmotherly type. It's hard to explain. It's mostly the baking thing, that's like.... She does the whole like playing bridge, lawn-bowling, the golf kind of thing. Like any other older person. There's a stereotype for you.* (small laugh)

Many sorted which activities fit from which ones did not. For example, Vienna (16) said that grandmas are stereotyped as "little, doing baking and wearing dresses" but observes that although her grandma bakes, she wears pants and is busy, strong and assertive. Similarly, Elizabeth (15) saw her grandma fitting the stereotype in some respects (e.g. knitting) but not others (e.g. she jogs and bikes). Often such distinctions made reference to age and whether their grandmother acts older or younger. Unexpectedly, unlike the more contextualized views of teenagers held by custodial grandmothers, custodial granddaughters viewed their grandmothers through overt dichotomies. Jazz (18) and Rita (15), both of whom were quite significantly parented by their grandmothers, were more likely to say that their grandmother is old and *directly* fits a stereotype. Yet Shannon (18) and Alannah (18), whose grandmothers also took on a parenting role, denied that there is a stereotype at all. Perhaps, for some, their grandmother's role is redefined through their care-taking while for others age or generational differences are felt more acutely in a custodial situation. Clearly, specific features of, and variations in, the custodial parenting dynamic need to be further explored.

The grandmothers cited similar stereotypes, especially regarding care-taking (the baking, knitting grandma) and fun (card-playing, lawn-bowling) but recognized greater diversity among grandmothers than the granddaughters did and several noted themselves as exceptions. Sandy saw herself as an atypical grandmother due to her lack of resources which prevented her from buying gifts. Marjorie saw herself as an exception because of her involvement in parenting and Jan identified herself as atypical because she plays blackjack. Like the grandmothers in Johnson's study (1983), most of the grandmothers also disassociated themselves from a more "elderly" image of grandmotherhood.

For both teenagers and their grandmothers, stereotypes of grandmotherhood were mentioned less frequently than those of adolescence, tended to be benign, and were often partially applied, if at all, based on specific activities. While specific teenage granddaughters were seen as absolute exceptions to stereotypes of teenagers, specific grandmothers were framed instead as *mediated* exceptions (based primarily on their activities). While there is promise for grandparent-grandchild relations to disrupt negative portrayals, too often relatives are framed as exceptions and common stereotypes would seem to create a gap between the generations. How are such gaps managed? How do people negotiate such stereotypes and generational differences in the *building* of relationships? I found a paradox here in that differences that would seem to separate these generations are used as tools to maintain connection.

Use of age effects and generation to negotiate relations

There were a number of ways that the respondents built relationships with one another: mutual care-taking, frequent phone calls or visits, discussing family dynamics, and shared activities such as card-playing or shopping, for instance. Some of the respondents saw their grandmothers every day and others only once or twice a year, but all participated in at least some of these activities, independent of the intervening generation. The relationships were considered valuable to both the granddaughters and the grandmothers. They were also negotiated across difference. In the remainder of this paper I focus on the active use and reproduction of age-related assumptions and stereotypes in the negotiation of these relationships.

Adjusting for generational age positions

One way in which distinct life course locations were used to build relationships with one another was through adjusting to, or allowing for, the other generations' age position. For example, granddaughters adjusted to their grandmothers based on mortality and the limited time available to build a relationship.

> Alannah (18): *She's older. I'm really beginning to appreciate her now more. Like the time that I spend with her because she's gonna be like 87.*

> Vienna (16): [after sleeping in during a visit to her grandparents] *And I felt bad too because I mean both my grandma and grandpa are getting older and I felt like I should have been spending more time with them but I was sleeping so much.*

They draw on their grandparents' distinct life course locations to emphasize the *need* for relationship. Several also suggested that they are more tolerant of their grandmothers because of age. Shannon (18) said:

> *Sometimes older people get ignorant about little things but I don't take them too much because of her age—she would say "why do you have to go out with your friends?" and I see she just wants company and so I stay home.*

Here age effects were drawn on to provide a context for deeper interaction, to facilitate connection through care-taking and to defuse fault or blame.

Similarly, Jeanne Thomas and Nancy Datan (1985) found that grandparents recognize that their relationships with their grandchildren change over time as the grandchildren age. For instance, as her granddaughter is now a teenager, Hanna (69) has adjusted towards being more of a friend: "I don't mean a friend that's the same age, but I try not to tell them too much—let their mother do it." Hanna and Anne (73) avoids feeling rejection by drawing on developmental assumptions that teenagers are inherently peer-related:

I: *Do you ever [interact] one on one?*

Anne: *Not as much now that she's getting older now. I did before, but no. Not as much now.*

I: *Are you sad?*

Anne: *No, because again, I think this is a natural stage. Right now, her friends are very, very ... and I remember, it was a chore and I don't want it to be a chore. You know.*

I: *To hang out with you?*

Anne: *Yeah.*

Similarly, grandmothers shifted their approaches to discipline. As Bess (55) stated "... there are ups and downs, especially at a certain age. 'I am big now, I can do this, I can do that.'" Beatrice does not think her grandchildren would listen if she got angry with them "for doing something bad" as they are older now. In these examples, potential conflict over behaviours is dealt with by referring to shifting age-based expectations. Clearly there are similar shifts in parenthood regarding discipline as families adjust to children growing up and moving out. In this instance, age norms provide a structure within which to make sense of relations.

Age differences as a source of assistance

Age differences and intergenerational ties can also be deployed as a source of assistance. In a particularly interesting interview excerpt, Alannah (18) referred to age and age difference to suggest an alliance between her grandmother and herself in opposition to her parents:

> *Yeah, I was freaking out that night, I was so angry at my stepmother. But my grandmother was very, like she freaked out on me and she, I remember she slapped me across the face and stuff. And I felt really bad for having to put like, an old woman through that. But she could totally understand where I was coming from, being her age and everything and her relationship with my dad and my stepmother, you know? She totally understood it and she really stuck up for me and everything.... So I appreciate that.*

Despite her grandmother getting angry at her and even slapping her, Alannah feels badly about the incident because her grandmother's an "old woman," suggesting that she should be spared intense conflict. Yet she also feels a connection with her grandmother, as they both know her father and stepmother and this knowledge creates an alliance between them. Also, her

grandmother's age supplies her with an understanding of the situation, perhaps a kind of wisdom or deeper knowledge of family relations than other family members might have.

Generational differences used to negotiate conflict

Finally, generational differences were used to link the two generations and to negotiate conflict. Life course theorists suggest that such generational issues are raised because of significant gaps between parenting and teenage experiences 50 or 60 years ago and today. Here I am interested in how such generational differences are emphasized and the effects of such emphases. For example, Vienna (16) thinks that her grandmother, Gladys (84), does not approve of how her mother raised Vienna and her sisters to be outspoken:

> ...*She's from a different time. The expectations are so different. But I think she's pretty good with dealing with it all, like she's not conniving or passive-aggressive about it at all, she's pretty accepting and adapting and I think it's because she's a really intelligent person.*

Vienna focuses on generational differences to provide a context for disagreements between her grandmother and her mother and then recognizes that despite this difference there is a good inter-generational connection because Gladys deals well with these differences and attributes this ability to particular personal skills that Gladys has. The conflict is about generation, but the connection is about personal abilities.

Such generational differences seemed particularly salient in custodial relationships. These strategic uses of age norms were most vividly illustrated in two custodial pairs that I interviewed, Rita and Marjorie and Jazz and Sandy.

Rita was 15 at the time of the interview. Her mother is white and her father, who she does not see, is Black. She was living with her maternal grandparents at the time of the interview as her (single) mother was having personal difficulties. Rita was clearly frustrated with aspects of her grandparents' parenting rules. She attributed these rules to generational differences:

> *Um. I don't know. Like I don't mind it here but it's just hard 'cause they're grandparents like they're so ... they grew up back when and they don't understand. That's what's hard. It's not who they are it's just their views on things are completely different and you can't change their mind no matter what 'cause they're right.*

Rita suggests that "it's not who they are," deflecting her criticisms away from their personalities and placing them onto structural features which neither she nor her grandparents can be held responsible for. She explains her anger at her grandparents as arising primarily from a conflict based on age differences: she considers older people to be judgmental and over-protective. In her

explanation of this conflict, Rita shows some acceptance of her grandparents' position. Rita's grandmother, Marjorie (69), similarly draws attention to generational differences in terms of parenting rules:

> *I don't think most grandmothers have to fully parent their grandchildren. And you know, they don't have to worry about making rules for them or anything like that. Mind you, my rules are much much less. I find it so difficult to know in terms of where to draw the line because we're two generations apart - that's a lot, it really is a lot and times have changed so terribly so, even when you bring up children, it's very hard to know like how strict, without going over the line, to be.*

Here Marjorie draws on the generational difference in order to address decisions that she must make in terms of parenting Rita, thus providing an explanation for why there may at times be conflict or disagreement between them over rules.

While she no longer lives with her grandmother, Jazz was partly raised by her grandmother, as her mother was only fourteen when she got pregnant. Both Jazz and her grandmother Sandy talked about the relationship as being like that of a second parent, and both drew on age and generation effects in order to negotiate this relationship.

> Jazz (18): ... *when I was younger I'd listen to my mom more than I'd listen to my grandmother. I never listened to my grandmother. Now it's just, I'd say the only difference is my mom, since she's, maybe because she's young, she understands me, I'm a teenager you know, she was a teenager not too long ago and like I said, my grandma's more old fashioned so she's just like "well study your works" and she call me and say "Jazz have you done your homework." Yes Sandy. Or I'll say no I don't have any homework, I did my work at school and she'll be like "You should bring your books any way home and study your books" (laughter) and my mom's like "ok, your homework's done, your homework's done." Just her being a little old fashioned, that's the only difference [between her grandmother and her mother].*

For Jazz, characterizing Sandy as old and old-fashioned allowed her to dismiss Sandy's discipline and to do things that her grandmother would not approve of, without destroying their relationship. Jazz especially draws on generational differences to explain conflict between them: "she grew up in the '40s and I grew up in the '90s and they're two completely different times."

While Jazz focuses on generational differences to explain aspects of her relationship with Sandy, Sandy (63) draws on discourses of adolescence. Explaining why she does not see Jazz quite as often as she used to, she says "Of course, you know teenagers—they find things to do where they are so, but I try to talk to her every now and then." Sandy also reflects on how Jazz positions

them both in terms of age in order to deflect Sandy's advice: "And you know like when I try to talk with her, she lets me know that this is a different age. 'Sandy, you're old, you're old now, I'm young.'" (Laughs). Both Sandy and Jazz talk of their love for one another and want to maintain a strong connection. They do so, in part, through drawing on age and generational differences (rather than, for instance, personality deficits) to explain their conflict and thus to preserve this connection.

Grandmothers and their adolescent granddaughters draw on and naturalize age-based expectations and stereotypes that would at first seem to separate them, to contextualize the others' behaviours and thus to connect positively. While they draw on discourses of adolescence and aging, there seems to be a sophistication to this process that is quite different from the blunt use of stereotypes to discuss grandmothers and adolescents in general. Thus age and generational differences do not act as barriers to connection but rather are highlighted and deployed in order to deflect conflict. These negotiations were particularly strong in two custodial relationships where there were tensions resulting from the grandparents' parenting roles and possibly extended exposure to each others' failings, preventing the relationship from being idealized. By deflecting criticism in this way, perhaps a positive connection with the grandmothers *as grandmothers* (rather than parents) could be maintained.

Conclusion

The closeness of a grandparenting relationship is often the result of decisions made by the intervening generation (Matthews & Sprey, 1985) and many other social-structural features, including culture, age of grandparents and grandchildren, maternal or paternal lineage, proximity, and gender. Generational segregation and stereotypes would seem to prevent connection between grandparents and their adolescent grandchildren, and yet there are also aspects of being an adolescent and of aging that suggest common bonds. While these relationships are shaped by structural, familial and discursive pushes and pulls, grandparents and teenage grandchildren make choices about the extent to which they pursue a connection. Many participate in these relationships as active agents that choose to build links. To build such links, my participants drew on social tools, such as stereotypes or age norms, to negotiate the relationship and to contextualize the others' behaviours. More generally, findings suggest that how we build our relationships often draws positively on difference. At the same time, these observations are exploratory, based on a fairly small number of interviews in which the focus was not primarily on grandparent-grandchild relations. A deeper investigation of such connections, including interviews with grandparents and grandchildren together, could explore these issues further: are there patterns behind stereotyping beyond what I have observed here? How are custodial relationships different from non-custodial ones? Also, what is the gendered nature of grandparenting relationships?

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