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Running Head: Intergenerational Communication Through Stories

Writing a Connection:

Intergenerational Communication Through Stories

Ellen Bouchard Ryan¹, Kristine A. Pearce², Ann P. Anas¹,

and

Joan E. Norris³

Author Corresponding Address

Ellen Bouchard Ryan
McMaster Centre for Gerontological Studies,
McMaster University, KTH-231
Hamilton ON L8S 4M4
ryaneb@mcmaster.ca
Tel: 905-525-9140, ext. 24995
Fax: 905-525-4198

¹ McMaster University

² University of Toronto

³ University of Guelph

“Everyone needs to have access both to grandparents and grandchildren in order to be a full human being.” (Mead, 1972 , p.311)

One of the most important relationships many people experience within their lifetime is that between grandparent and grandchild. The experience of having been a grandchild and then a grandparent, gives one a true stake in humanity through connections back in time two generations and forward two generations (Norris, Pratt, & Kuiack, in press). These connections are forged through communication, including the sharing of stories.

As people begin to live longer and healthier lives, greater numbers of people will be undertaking the role of the grandparent for longer periods (Giarrusso, Silverstein, & Bengtson, 1996; Kennedy, 1990). This increase in grandparenting can significantly affect society as both grandparents and their grandchildren have much to gain and contribute through this special family relationship. Yet, it is sometimes difficult for younger and older family members to communicate with each other because of different interests, stereotypes of aging, geographical distance, and the fast pace of contemporary life.

In this chapter, we explore story writing as a means of bridging the generations. First, we briefly review the literature concerning the relationships between grandparents and grandchildren and the role of storytelling within those relationships. Second, we present a narrative analysis of letters and stories written by grandparents for grandchildren and by grandchildren for their grandparents. Major themes from both grandparent and grandchild writings are described in addition to specific benefits associated with inter-generational communication through writing. Finally, we discuss the implications of this study in terms of grandparent-grandchild relationships and the importance for older adults to record their life stories for family.

Communication Between Grandparents and Grandchildren

Scholars have described the many roles grandparents play in their grandchildren’s lives. Grandparents give grandchildren love and affection, support, trust, connections to the past, family heritage, moral values, and act as role models (Brussoni & Boon, 1998; Kalliopuska, 1994, Kornhaber, 1996; Szinovacz, 1998). In return, grandchildren give grandparents joy, inspiration,

love, and hope for the future (Kalliopuska, 1994).

The roles and meanings of grandparent-grandchild relationships are highly diverse in modern North American society (Silverstein, Giarrusso, & Bengtson, 1998; Strom et al., 1999; Tomlin, 1998; Williams & Nussbaum, 2001). Major sources of variability include cultural differences, gender of grandparent, parental divorce, and cases where the grandparent takes on the role of the parent. Moreover, roles and the relationship inevitably change as the grandparent and the grandchild traverse through the stages of life (Norris & Tindale, 1994; Roberto & Skoglund, 1996). For example, individual variability in the meaning of grandparenthood has been assessed by Kivnick (1983). Life-history interviews were carried out with grandparents aged 40 to 90 years, yielding five dimensions of grandparent meaning: centrality—grandparenthood central to an older person's life; valued elder—passing on tradition and being valued in the role; immortality through clan—commitment to the future of the family; reinvolvement with personal past—identification with own grandparents; indulgence—leniency towards grandchildren. It is problematic to apply this typology to all grandparents, because additional diversity is quite likely (Norris & Tindale, 1994). Nevertheless, the conceptualization does remind researchers of the underlying importance and richness of the grandparenting role to older adults.

It is often difficult for grandparents and grandchildren to maintain optimal relationships with each other (Harwood & Lin, 2000; Silverstein et al., 1998; Williams & Nussbaum, 2001). The increased pace of life associated with technological change can make it difficult for different generations to connect. Young people may be busy and have little contact in general with older people whom they might consider slow and out of date. The relationship can be strained by the difficulties of some life stages such as adolescence for grandchildren and frailty of extreme old age for grandparents. Geographical distance may exacerbate the impact of these potential obstacles. Yet, level of satisfaction can remain high even with declining frequency of contact as grandchildren age, and the relationship can be enriched by efforts on the part of grandparents and/or grandchildren at any stage of their lives (Kornhaber, 1996; Tomlin, 1998). In most

families, the generations adapt to changing circumstances to support and maintain cherished beliefs, values and patterns of relating (Norris et al., in press).

Storytelling

Societies all over the world have especially valued the stories of their older members as a way of passing on the wisdom of experience from generation to generation (Kenyon, 1996, 2002; McAdams, Diamond, St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; Mergler & Goldstein, 1983). Older persons can fulfill their call to generativity by transmitting cultural and family values through stories for their grandchildren (Norris, Kuaick, & Pratt, present volume). In contemporary North America, stories told by older adults are viewed as more effective than those told by young adults (Adams-Price, 1998; Pratt & Robins, 1991).

The act of sharing stories has long been associated with the grandparent's role, and is one of the most frequently recorded types of exchange between grandparents and grandchildren (Kornhaber, 1996; McKay & Caverly, 1995; Tomlin, 1998). Grandparents play a crucial role in passing on information about family members and historical events through storytelling. This activity facilitates identity formation and builds strong relationships between the grandchildren and all of their family members (see Norris et al.; Pratt & Fiese, present volume). In addition, grandparents use stories to teach moral values even as they entertain and establish a sense of closeness.

Nussbaum and Bettini (1994) conducted a study in which college students shared stories reflecting the meaning of life with one of their grandparents. Gender differences occurred in which grandfathers spoke more reticently and more about mastery, while grandmothers were more likely to emphasize the salience of family to their definition of self and to their happiness. Grandchildren rarely told stories, but rather offered lists of qualities or a set of points. The contrasting fluency of grandparent stories suggests that storytelling tends to be unidirectional from grandparent to grandchild in many families.

Story Writing

Although older adults have traditionally passed down valuable information to younger generations through storytelling in face-to-face situations, this intergenerational communication can also be done through writing. One can write letters and share written stories with grandchildren and one can write one's memoirs to share with the family.

Life stories can help preserve one's immortality. Grandparents may feel more satisfied in knowing that their memories and beliefs will carry on through their grandchildren. Writing the stories enables people to take an active approach to their lives by allowing them to express themselves and to explore their sense of identity and continuity. Moreover, exchanging written stories or letters can transcend geographical distances which limit opportunities for face-to-face encounters (Harwood, 2000).

Schuster (1998) investigated the effects of nursing home residents' writings on familial relationships and found that the perceived status of the older person was raised when the written works were shared with family members. While nursing home residents are often not viewed as contributors to society, this study found that the writing activities caused the younger generation to view the elders as more "complete", "accomplished" people, which transformed the way they related to their elders. The writing activities gave the residents a sense of control and raised self-esteem since they actively created works, often for family occasions such as weddings and family reunions. Thus, both the older adults' views of themselves and the younger generations' perceptions were positively transformed, leading to more satisfying interactions.

The Present Study

Collecting Intergenerational Stories

Within this project designed to stimulate intergenerational communication, we invited older adults, young adults, and elementary school children to write stories. The older adults were asked to write a story, poem, or letter addressing a grandchild, or someone like a grandchild, on any subject matter they chose. It was suggested that the story be centered around a past memorable event, a lesson or a moral that was of value to them, and that it could be something

they might want to share with the younger person on a special occasion. Young adults and children were asked to write a story, letter or poem for, or about their grandparent, or any other older adult whom they considered to be a grandparent figure in their lives.

The call for stories by the older adults (aged 60 years or older) was open to the public but focused on those affiliated with Gerontological activities at McMaster University. The younger groups were university-aged students completing stories for a Gerontology creative writing assignment and local elementary school children, ranging in age from 5 to 15 years old, who participated as part of a class project.

All of the submitted stories were rated by at least two evaluators on their publishability, relevance to intergenerational issues, and goodness of fit with the instructions. Those receiving the highest ratings were selected for analysis and publication in one of two collections entitled “From Me to You: Intergenerational Connections Through Storytelling” (Book I; Ryan, Elliot, & Meredith, 1999) and “Exchanges Between Us: More Intergenerational Connections” (Book II; Ryan, Elliot, & Anas, 2000). There were 62 older authors (53 females and 9 males), 38 university authors (36 females and 2 males), and 52 elementary school authors (41 females, and 11 males). Even though a few of the writers were not actually writing to their grandchild or grandparent, we will refer to the older group as the “grandparent authors” throughout the chapter. Both the young adults and school children will be referred to as the “grandchild authors”.

Narrative Analysis

These stories were examined using a thematic analysis approach to describe what grandparents and grandchildren chose to convey, how this exemplified meaningful intergenerational communication, and the value of story writing in the grandparent-grandchild relationship. Thematic analysis has been identified as possessing many benefits because it addresses the individual’s point of view, experiences, life views and beliefs (Luborsky, 1994). We used both approaches outlined by Luborsky (1994) to discover themes: searching for repeated or recurring statements, and examining statements marked by the author as being especially

significant. This approach is well established in other research on narrative content, including studies of grandparenting (e.g., Morrow-Kondos, Weber, Cooper, & Hesser, 1997; Roberto, Allen, & Blieszner, 2001). An open coding system was used to create a complete list of themes and patterns in the writing. During this process, input was obtained from two of the other chapter authors. Where there were disagreements about which themes were present or where themes overlapped, discussions were held to reach consensus. Each story quotation given throughout the remainder of this chapter is identified with a code corresponding to Book I or Book II and the number of the first page of the story.

Grandparent Themes

The most evident themes identified in the older adults' stories were: history, family, advice, and life story. Also, the stories provided a window into the various relationships that many grandparents share with their grandchildren.

History. One of the most common themes that emerged from the older adults' stories was the theme of history. The majority of references to history focused on the war, the depression, and the conveniences that society now has acquired compared to those that were available in the past.

Historical examples from the stories include:

It may seem strange to you why anybody would run for 5 miles to get a popsicle, when in those days a popsicle was only worth 3 cents, but these were the days of the great depression and even 3 cents were hard to come by. (Book I, p. 52)

The world of today has brought many wonderful changes. To hear from my Mother I had to wait three weeks for a letter to come by ship. My granddaughter talks to her Mother on the E-mail three times a week . . . I bless the technical world of today; it keeps her close to all of us. (Book I, p. 93)

We grabbed a couple of blankets and Skipper . . . hurried down to Citadel Hill. From time to time the sky would light up with the glow from an explosion. I never did understand what all the minor explosions were about but they were definitely there throughout the night. (Halifax Explosion, December, 1917; Book II, p. 28)

The use of specific historical examples in the older adults' stories support the notion that grandparents undertake the role of the provider of history to the younger generation (Kornhaber, 1996; McKay & Caverly, 1995; Roberto & Skoglund, 1996). Through the use of concrete and

personal experiences, as shared in the grandparents' stories, grandchildren may begin to interpret historical events as having had a personal impact on their own family. Since the younger generation has not been directly exposed to similar historical experiences such as the World Wars, grandparents may view their grandchildren as being "remote" to these particular experiences. This gap in historical knowledge between the generations may provide grandparents with the opportunity to enlighten their grandchildren about history through the act of writing. Similarly, grandchildren may become more interested in their grandparents' lives, and in historical events in general as they come to see their own personal, family connections to the past. Ultimately, understanding one's personal connection to the past may lead to the establishment of a new relationship between the two generations.

Family. Similar to the theme describing historical events, many older adults wrote to their grandchildren about their family history. Stories in which this theme emerged often described family members whom the grandchild had not been acquainted with. Examples of this theme include:

You never knew your great grandparents, at least on your father's side but I know you're interested. Since I love to tell stories, I thought I'd like to share with you a little walk down memory lane . . . My mother, Katie, your great Grandma, was the youngest of twelve children, born in 1884, pioneer times in the pioneer country of Grey County. (Book I, p. 22)

[Grandpa] said that when he was a little boy, his grandfather, born in 1790 in a log cabin in our area, used to get up about four o'clock in the morning . . . This was the man whose portrait, darkened with age, hung in a heavy frame on the wall behind us. I had never had any idea that it represented a real person . . . I had heard almost nothing about our predecessors. (Book I, p. 62).

I think that most of us during our lifetime wonder about our roots. We are curious about our ancestors, and from which set of parents we inherited certain traits, and set of values . . . my father, William Burton Allen, was a descendent of the Empire Loyalists . . . my other great-great-great-great-great-grandfather was one of the first Yorkshire settlers to emigrate to Canada, in 1772. (Book II, p. 132)

In these stories, the grandparents have used their writing as a means of communicating to the grandchild a portion of their family history. Within the descriptions of the family ancestors, the older adult is able to describe to the grandchild where they see themselves as belonging within the

larger family history. Writing about the family's history may thereby provide for some older adults the opportunity to develop a "coherent story about one's self." The older adult may also be able to use story writing as a means for evaluating one's life in relation to the larger family. As one author writes, "much of what I have preserved would otherwise have been lost forever. Knowledge of my forbearers' achievements has given me encouragement and strength when times were difficult" (Book I, p. 62). This writer appears to feel a sense of worth from being able to preserve and learn from the family history.

The stories discussing family history also provided the grandchildren with an opportunity to learn about people that they might not have personally known or whom they may have only "known" through hearing stories about them. Learning about one's family ethnic "roots", for example, appears to help grandchildren to establish their sense of identity—a common challenge encountered by young people (Giarrusso, Feng, Silverstein, & Bengtson, 2001). A sense of identity may be fostered as the grandchildren begin to see themselves in relation to the people described in the stories. Specifically, they may learn whom they resemble, or how they differ from their family, which thereby, may help to solidify a sense of identity for the grandchild. This point will be further discussed in the grandchildren section of the chapter.

Advice. Many of the stories contained advice that the older adults wanted to share with their grandchildren. These pieces of advice were typically life lessons they had learned and appeared to have the intention of trying to benefit the younger generation by expressing the knowledge they had gained. Examples from stories in which the theme of advice emerged include:

Your entire life will be a path of choices . . . Don't be afraid to choose. Live the questions; that's the only way to the answers. (Book I, p. 79)

I can honestly say that I have lived a richer life by engaging with my mistakes, I have come to realize that the one who never makes a mistake is likely someone who never takes a risk either . . . My story of mistakes is meant to help you avoid making the same ones. (Book I, p. 24)

May you always shine and succeed in whatever you undertake. Also respect your teachers as they contribute so much to the moulding of your character, outlook, knowledge and progress of your life . . . (Book II, p. 79)

The grandparent literature suggests that grandchildren interpret one of the roles grandparents play is that of providing advice or wisdom to help them in their lives (Kornhaber, 1996). Based on the frequency of the theme of advice within the stories included in this study, it is evident that these older adults also saw their role as one in which they provide guidance and offer advice to the young. This sense of generativity or caring for the younger generation is an important developmental goal of later life, according to Erikson (Gatz & Zarit, 1999). Writing stories that offer advice is one method older adults may use to attain a sense of generativity (Norris et al., present volume).

In some of the stories containing advice, the grandparents attempted to describe the similarities between themselves and their grandchildren. Within their stories, the grandparents chose to write about life experiences or lessons that they felt their grandchildren would also encounter in their lifetime. By doing so, the older adults create a “common ground” where grandchildren and grandparents can potentially relate better to one another. Ultimately, the result of pointing out the similarities with the younger generation could be one of greater communication; that is, grandchildren may come to realize that their grandparents may have had similar life experiences and may be a valuable source of knowledge. For example, grandchildren may begin to see their grandparents as undertaking the role of the “teacher” where the grandparent provides advice to help the grandchild learn, and potentially to help them avoid making similar mistakes (McAdoo & McWright, 1994).

One technique for communicating the theme of advice was the use of figurative language. Life metaphors have been identified as helping to explain a difficult concept or to describe the grandparents’ life experiences to the grandchild in a way that the grandchild can easily understand (Nussbaum & Bettini, 1994). Examples of life metaphors include:

I see life as a cathedral—a personal cathedral with marvelous stained glass windows portraying a life story in all its many colours and with windows under construction . . . Your cathedral has a strong framework, because a loving family helps create the basic framework, but the design of the windows takes a lifetime, and that’s the intensely personal part. The windows are constructed of your life’s experience. (Book I, p. 79)

In this example, it is evident that the author is attempting to compare the qualities of a cathedral to life. Using this figurative device helps to emphasize to the grandchild that each person experiences different life events which contribute to the creation of one's individuality. Although the following quote comes from a story which was not selected for publication, it is given here as an example of an especially vivid metaphor:

I would liken Life to learning alpine skiing which I took up at 35 between children 3 or 4. With never a lesson I developed my own technique, not parallel exactly nor graceful, but I can dare the higher peaks and get down them unscathed. And so, my dear, I don't wish for you skiing without moguls. Else how . . . will you develop your technique to surmount life's problems.'

In this example, the author uses the metaphor to explain to the grandchild the value of trying new experiences as well as the importance of developing one's own individual approach to life. The moguls are also used to represent life's challenges. Within this story, the grandparent is not only describing an event in her life that the grandchild may find interesting (i.e., that the grandparent learned to alpine ski), but is also providing advice or a life lesson to the grandchild at a more in-depth level. The use of metaphor is a creative writing technique that grandparents may use to capture their grandchild's attention, in order to transmit and share the information. Metaphor is one example of the complexity of language, which has been shown to increase in later adulthood (Adams-Price, 1998).

Life Story. Some of the older adults' stories described an event in their life that was significant to them. One example of a story that contained the theme of the life story began as follows: "It was a happy childhood in spite of the Depression of the early 1930's" (Book I, p. 85). As the story continues, the writer describes to her grandchild how she grew up in Ireland, later moved to Canada where she was married, and eventually raised the grandchild's mother. The grandmother concludes her story by writing:

Telling you this little bit about the first 25 years or so of my life makes me wish . . . that I had asked my mother and father to tell me about their young lives and what their parents were like. . . Learn what you can from your parents and grandparents (Book I, p. 85).

The grandparent has described her life to her grandchild and, in so doing, has undertaken the process of reviewing her life as well. Writing this story has helped the grandparent realize the importance of knowing about one's family, and the grandchild is able to come to an understanding that there may be more to the grandparent's life than previously realized. This point is further exemplified in a story in which a grandmother describes an event in her younger life when she stole a lipstick from Mr. Brown's Variety Store and the life lesson she learned from doing so:

To this day, as an adult, I am unable to examine any item in a store without an awareness of Mr. Brown standing beside me reminding me that no item is mine until I pay for it . . . My dear grandchild you have your whole life ahead of you and you will face many challenges which will require you to make choice. With the support of your loving family and community, I know you will make the right ones. (Book I, p. 58)

From this story, it is clear that the grandparent has learned from her mistakes and is using the medium of writing to relay a portion of her life story. Other research has confirmed the idea that values teaching is an important part of the grandparent role for many older adults (see Norris et al., present volume). The anecdote chosen by this grandparent is a clear example of an attempt to transmit a personally central value—honesty—in an intergenerational context. Many of the life stories we have discussed in this chapter contain such obvious values teaching strategies, made palatable through entertaining or compelling narrative. The grandchild receiving the story above may especially benefit because the events took place when the grandparent was a child, helping the grandchild to relate to it, and because the tone of the story is light-hearted and engaging.

Two other examples of the life story are those in which the grandparent's experience in elementary school is described. One writer began his story describing how he was enrolled in school and the type of school he attended: "I was enrolled in the nearest school, the always reliable one-room schoolhouse with five full grades . . . All my early teachers were seventeen-year olds" (Book II, p. 139). The grandparent continues to describe his early experiences in school and concludes the story stating: "It was the end of my education as a child. From now on, I was a workingman earning his living, as many of my age, not quite thirteen" (Book II, p. 139). Another writer describes a similar topic. The writer begins the story stating, "I started to school when I

was almost seven” (Book II, p. 85) and continues on to describe the school, her teacher, and her first experiences in a classroom environment. The grandparent concludes the story by describing how almost 50 years later she was reunited with her grade one teacher where she then realized that her parents had been right about her teacher being one of the best. This quotation also exemplifies how new perspectives on one’s life can be discovered through the recounting of experiences. Parenthetically, there is also here an implicit message to the grandchildren to listen to one’s parents (advice).

Grandchildren Themes

A thematic analysis of the stories submitted by children and young adults was also conducted. The process was more difficult here than for the grandparents’ and young adults’ stories since the children tended to be descriptive rather than content-oriented in their writing. This supports Bamberg’s claim (1987) that descriptiveness is an “early stage in children’s narrative development” (as cited in Juncos-Rabadan, 1996, p.681). The main themes that emerged within the stories are as follows: appreciation of what grandparents have done for them, family relationships, acknowledgment of losses in old age, and regard for grandparents never known or passed away.

Appreciation For What Grandparents Have Done. One common theme that emerged was that of the grandchild’s appreciation for the support and encouragement grandparents offer them. For example, one grandchild wrote that her grandfather was “always there to support and to encourage . . . [her]” (Book I, p. 138). Similarly, in another example, one author wrote: “I want you to know that you have shaped my dreams for the future . . . I want you to know how much you have influenced my life . . . you will always be my hero” (Book II, p. 267). It is clear from these quotations that grandparents have a significant impact on their grandchildren’s lives.

One recurring idea that appeared throughout some of the stories was that of appreciating grandparents for passing on knowledge, skills and values. It could be inferred that grandchildren may perceive grandparents as undertaking the role of “teacher” and see themselves as undertaking

the role of “student” or “listener.” For example, one grandchild wrote, “we both like old planes. A lot of what I know comes from Grandpa telling me facts and stories about World War II planes. Grandpa got me interested in planes” (Book II, p. 258). The grandchild in this example acknowledges the influence the grandfather has played in his developing interest of airplanes. This common interest in planes may serve to strengthen the grandparent-grandchild relationship as they may share stories with one another and learn from each other. A second example of the idea of grandparent as “teacher” is evident when a grandchild writes about her grandmother, “She taught me how to share, how to cook and many other things” (Book II, p. 233).

Another common role that grandchildren often attributed to their grandparent was that of providing a sense of fun and friendship. Examples of this idea can be seen in the following quotations:

I decided to write about my Grandma. She was really cool. She loved to dance . . . Her favorite place to dance was on the coffee table (Book I, p. 116)

Good to me/Really funny . . . Never yells . . . Make me laugh/Adores me (Book I, p. 118)

I have learned that everyone has a story to tell, all you have to do is take time to listen and care . . . Thank you for not only being my Gran, but my friend as well (Book II, p. 248)

One example from a university-aged grandchild who also saw her grandparent in a “fun-loving” way was described in a story. She writes, “This is perhaps one of the best qualities of a relationship with a grandmother; namely the absence of the need to discipline” (Book I, p. 127). It is clear from these examples that many grandchildren associate their grandparents with “fun” and “friendship.” Perhaps this fun-seeking/friendship role has contributed to the meaningful relationship that often develops between grandparents and grandchildren. Specifically, some grandchildren (as the university-aged grandchild points out) may recognize that grandparents and grandchildren can love one another in a similar manner that a parent loves a child but without the need to discipline, thereby contributing to the special relationship often shared between the two generations.. (See Norris et al., present volume, for a further discussion of the relationship-building role of intergenerational narrative).

Family Relationships. A second theme that emerged in some of the grandchildren's stories related to communicating the important role that grandparents play within the family unit.

Examples include the following:

Don't leave me here, all by myself, I love you too much, you know everyone needs you and myself. You can't go, we'll all be left in sorrow. (Book I, p. 101)

She is the center of our family, the glue that keeps us all together and our moral leader . . . I do not know what would happen to our family if we ever lost her. (Book II, p. 303)

In these examples, the grandchild is emphasizing the significant influence that grandparents have within the family. Based on these quotations it would seem that the grandchildren see their grandparents as playing a central role in keeping the family unit together. Since grandparents also interpret one of their roles as being family-oriented (Nussbaum & Bettini, 1994), it is clear that this message is being communicated to the grandchildren.

Some grandchildren recognized that their grandparents had helped provide them with a sense of identity and family history. This act of providing their grandchildren with a sense of who they are is a role that is consistent with past findings (see Kornhaber, 1996). In a letter addressed to her now deceased grandfather, the author explains the relief she feels at knowing where she has come from. She writes, "What matters now to me is that I know who you are and therefore to some extent who I am. I have a more complete image of myself and I like it" (Book I, p. 143). This quotation exemplifies the influence that grandparents can have on their grandchild's life. Knowing about the grandparent has helped this grandchild gain an understanding of who she is and of her family's past. Similarly, in another story, one of the younger children's stories reads:

I wanted to write about my grandfather because I didn't know him and I wanted to know a little about him. I learned that even though my cousins and I didn't know him, we all have a piece of him in our own different way and that's better than any gift from a store! (Book II, p. 223)

In this example it is clear that through story writing, the grandchild has benefited by the opportunity to learn about her grandfather, perhaps by asking other family members questions about him. By doing so, she has gained a sense of identity and connectedness to her grandfather

as she is able to identify similarities between herself and her grandparent despite not personally knowing him. In addition to the connection the grandchild has made with her grandfather, she also may have inspired stories about him from other family members which has fostered a connection with the family as a whole.

Acknowledgment of Losses in Old Age. While research has suggested that grandchildren interpret the grandparent's role as one in which they provide advice to the young (Kornhaber, 1996), some of the university-aged grandchildren offered advice and support to their grandparents. Generally, this occurred because either the grandparent was ill or had lost his or her spouse. It is important to acknowledge that the grandparent/grandchild relationship is generally characterized by a reciprocal interaction, and therefore, providing advice is an act that can be performed by both generations (Norris & Tindale, 1994). Each generation holds the potential of learning and benefitting from one another. For example, one author points out some of the positive experiences that can emerge as one ages by writing qualities associated with the letters in the words "Growing Old": "I wish you would find some positive changes that come with getting older . . . G is for the experience of becoming a grandparent, R is for those that have earned our respect . . . W is for the wisdom acquired over the years" (Book I, p.157). Another example in which the grandchild tries to empathize with the grandparent occurs when one grandchild writes, "I know you are frustrated, but the process of aging is one that is confusing to everyone . . . I understand you have been through a lot of tough times during your life" (Book I, p. 138). Regardless of whether it is the grandparent or the grandchild who is offering the advice or support, the intentions seem to be well-meaning. Specifically, each generation, through writing, is attempting to express their concern for one another. In each case, story writing is an attempt to provide the other generation with support, guidance, and encouragement.

Regard for Grandparents Never Known or Passed Away. Throughout many of the stories, grandchildren expressed their feelings about grandparents who have passed away or who were never known. One university-aged grandchild has come to the realization that she does not

“believe [that] people realize how much an influence grandparents can be, but until they don’t have them anymore they will not appreciate the enormous contributions they make in their lives” (Book I, p. 143). This quotation exemplifies the great impact that grandchildren see grandparents as playing in their lives. Other examples include: “You’re why I’m alive right now, But you died and I ask how? . . . but . . . you’ll always be with me” (Book I, p. 117) and “Others think you’re gone/but I know you are still here” (Book I, p. 140). These stories, that are written by the two different grandchild age groups, demonstrate how grandchildren may cope with the loss of a grandparent. Specifically, the grandchildren have come to the conclusion that despite the death of their grandparent, the grandparent will continue to live on. Perhaps this belief that the grandparent continues to live on even though others may not believe it (as one grandchild’s story points out), demonstrates the special connection grandparents and grandchildren have with one another. Also, grandchildren may feel comforted in knowing that grandparents will live on in their memories because of the stories that have been shared between them or from stories told about their grandparents by other family members. For example:

A lot of the things that I remember about my grandpa are stories that I hear and not vivid memories (Book II, p. 279)

[T]he only things I know about Grandpa are the stories his children tell about him . . . Often when we go to visit Grandma, her sons and daughters stand around the kitchen telling stories about the old days. (Book II, p. 303)

In these two examples, the importance of telling stories is evident. Not only can stories connect grandparents and grandchildren in present-day life, but other family members can provide grandchildren with an opportunity to connect with grandparents they might not have known by sharing stories about them with the grandchildren. Other examples in which grandparents are associated with stories include:

My grandpa likes to tell stories of when he was a kid and when he was working in the navy. (Book II, p. 234)

They tell you stories/While you fall asleep with them hugging you tight. (Book II, p. 250)

This association between grandparents and stories is seen often in the ways the grandchildren describe their grandparents as storytellers. Sharing the stories is one way that each generation can relate to one another, and reinforce the grandchildren's perception that their 'memories' of the grandparent will live on. Perhaps the grandparent's stories serve as "memories" of the grandparent to the grandchild that can be kept and shared even after grandparents pass away.

Some of the younger grandchildren expressed their feelings regarding the absence of grandparents. One story illustrates how the lack of a relationship with grandparents can affect a grandchild: "As a child, I remember feeling a void created by the absence of an extended family . . . a grandparent with whom I could have contact with . . . the geographical distance between us prevented the formation of an emotional closeness" (Book I, p. 127). In this example, the sadness that the grandchild feels at not knowing her grandparent is evident. On the other hand, one young grandchild wrote: "Doesn't it feel good knowing that they are always there? Whether they are next door or miles away, they are always there for you" (Book II, p. 235). In this example, the grandchild comments on the dependable relationship that grandparents and grandchildren can have with one another despite geographical distance. It is clear that the nature and quality of the grandparent/grandchild relationship can vary from family to family. However, it seems that while the grandparent/grandchild relationship can vary, the stories in this study commonly reflected the valuable influence that grandparents can have in their grandchildren's lives.

Benefits of Story Writing

The time-honored reason for writing letters to family members has been to overcome geographical distances separating authors and recipients. Although the authors in our project took this purpose for granted, grandparents and occasionally grandchildren did explicitly identify within their stories numerous benefits of exchanging written stories and letters (see Table 1). Some grandparents explicitly stated that the purpose of their stories was to preserve or pass down a legacy. Writing is an effective medium for preserving legacies because it is less likely that the

story will be misconstrued or forgotten. Knowing that the legacy will continue to be passed on may serve to strengthen family relationships as each generation understands and continues to pass on family history. Story writing also serves as a means to create new connections and strengthen existing ones between the generations (Norris et al., present volume; Pratt & Fiese, present volume). For the participants in this study, writing provided the opportunity to express thoughts or feelings that might otherwise have been left unsaid. For some, writing may be a more comfortable form of communication or may be perceived as the only means to convey one's message or have one's message 'heard' by the receiver. Being able to express oneself can also have therapeutic value (Schuster, 1998). As well, story writing might also lead to future opportunities for the writer and the reader to converse. For example, some stories pointed out a common interest between the generations; others created opportunities for the reader to take an active role in the relationship as the story posed questions or invited later interaction based on the story. Finally, some grandparents transcended time in writing for the future to unborn, or very young grandchildren; some grandchildren wrote in memory of grandparents (sometimes never known).

Summary

Writing offers grandparents and grandchildren the opportunity to express themselves as well as to establish a link with the other generation. Nussbaum and Bettini (1994) found that sharing stories in their study was primarily "unidirectional from grandparent to grandchild" (p.78). In our study however, both groups succeeded in connecting across the generations. The grandparents' stories focused on the themes of history, family, advice, and life story, while the grandchildren's stories expressed appreciation, family, acknowledgment of age-related losses, and regard for absent grandparents. Intergenerational writing can strengthen the grandparent-grandchild relationship by supplementing face-to-face communication and by overcoming obstacles of geography and time.

Intergenerational Connections and Lifespan Development

Intergenerational communication through writing enabled grandparents to pass on the lessons learned through their life experiences. Family stories serve to foster development and to regulate behavior and affect (Gatz & Zarit, 1999; McAdams et al., 1997; Pratt & Fiese, present volume). Through storywriting, grandparents were able to strive toward two important developmental life stage goals of generativity and wisdom (Erikson & Erikson, 1998). Conveying aspects of one's life story to a grandchild directs an older person's attention to the generative aspects of one's life and thereby strengthens a sense of contribution and connection with contemporary society. Pasupathi (2001) argues for the benefits of telling one's life story for different audiences and the role of the story recipient in shaping the sense of memory and self. Sharing life stories of who we are is one of the key strategies outlined by Kenyon (2002) for expressing ordinary wisdom; both teller and recipient grow from such expressions.

Young grandchildren reveal in their stories concerns with reliable and trusting relationships, while older grandchildren demonstrate interest in the identity issues of adolescence and early adulthood (Erikson & Erikson, 1998). Committing their thoughts and concerns to paper and sharing them with grandparents may also facilitate psychosocial development in children in moving from one stage to another. As well, the grandparents' own identity can be strengthened by the written offerings of appreciation for the ways in which they have made a difference in their grandchildren's lives.

On a broader level, we would argue that fostering the grandparent-grandchild relationship through the exchange of letters and stories can contribute to improving understanding of aging issues in general. Many scholars have acknowledged the central role of relationships with grandparents in the development of positive aging attitudes (Kornhaber, 1996; Williams & Nussbaum, 2001). Improving this key intergenerational relationship can enhance intergenerational communication beyond the family for both young and old (Ryan, Meredith, MacLean, & Orange, 1995). The following story by a nine-year-old grandchild exemplifies this learning:

My grandparents are wonderful. I have two grandmas and one grandpa. So three, but I did have four. I had one more grandpa. His name was Russel. He died when I was five. All I

remember is that he used to call me his little Pixy Girl. I know he loved me just like I loved him. I love all my grandparents. My dad's mom Grams helps me very much. She's the one that taught me how to hold a fork and knife. Then there's my dad's dad. He is very nice, old, but wise and loving. You can't forget my mom's mom! She is very smart, old, but young in a way. I do not mind what they look like. I know I will always love them, it's just the way life goes. (Book II, p. 238)

Value of Intergenerational Writing

As compared to storytelling, storywriting offers some key advantages. Sharing stories beyond the face-to-face situation extends the range of strategies for fostering the grandparent-grandchild relationship, which may be undermined in contemporary society by waning interest in traditions and heritage and by a fascination with what is new and modern. Reliance on the telephone for social connections across geographic distances emphasizes superficial communication as compared to traditional letter writing. The increasing availability of email to all generations opens the way for a resurgence of intergenerational communication through the printed word - both the quick and spontaneous and the longer more reflective message (Harwood, 2000). In cases where the parents are divorced, the written mode may be especially useful to grandparents and grandchildren because this type of communication relies much less on the parents for the arrangement of face-to-face meetings (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001).

The printed word can overcome the limitations of geography and time. As well, older adults with hearing impairments or other difficulties in oral communication can be expected to enjoy a special advantage in developing a writing relationship with grandchildren. In our study, participants wrote to family members far away or who lived only in their minds. Recorded family stories are important assets within families because of the changing interests associated with life-span development. All too often, by the time we want to 'hear' the stories, the tellers are no longer available to us. In addition, the writing of stories is a work of art, an accomplishment which contributes to an older person's sense of remaining active and productive and which fosters a young person's burgeoning sense of competence and participation in the world into which they are growing (Koch, 1977; Schuster, 1998). Moreover, Schuster (1998) underscored the way in

which recognition beyond the family for older persons' writings transformed relationships within the family.

Facilitating Story Writing

The purpose of making our two collections of intergenerational stories available to the public is to inspire young and old with the feasibility and potential of exchanging stories with younger and older members of their own families. Grandparents might consider writing their life story (memoirs) for the family in a series of short texts, sent to individual recipients or to all family members over a period of time. This option not only seems more manageable to a number of potential authors, but also can create a more receptive and responsive audience. Directly involving grandchildren in the preparation of a recorded family/life story can also enrich intergenerational connections. Likewise, grandchildren might be encouraged to consider their correspondence with a grandparent in terms of a series of letters/stories that might build into a larger work.

It is also important to consider facilitating the writing of stories for older adults who cannot undertake this task on their own. Many communities offer courses on memoir writing, and healthy seniors often form mutual support groups to encourage each other in this endeavor. Koch (1977), Schuster (1998), and John (1992) have shown the value of assisting nursing home residents to write their stories or to create poems. We have begun to explore the merit of writing down aspects of the life story of individuals with dementia to foster conversational remembering and to help caregiving staff become acquainted with them (Hagens, Beaman, & Ryan, 2003; Ryan, Schindel Martin, & Beaman, in press; Thorsheim & Roberts, 2000). Older adults with visual impairment would require some assistance to put their stories into writing, either through transcriptions of their tape recordings or accessible computer hardware/software. The written mode offers a special advantage for grandparents whose grandchildren no longer speak the family tongue as illustrated in The Bonesetter's Daughter (Tan, 2001) by the fictional account of a translator being hired to make an older person's memoirs accessible to younger family members.

Future Research and Conclusion

Future research concerning individual differences in themes would be of interest, with attention to the role of age and gender among both grandparents and grandchildren, either as authors or as recipients (see Nussbaum & Bettini, 1994; Williams & Nussbaum, 2001). It should be remembered that the grandparents and grandchildren involved in our project were predominantly female, perhaps influencing the nature of our findings; “men are more likely to write about external things, while women are more likely to be personal and write about internal states” (Ray, 2000, p. 78). In addition, our participants, particularly the grandparents, were highly selected volunteers in keeping with our goal to analyze effective writing samples. To complement our procedure, greater variation in quality and content perhaps could be observed by collecting writing samples in a more controlled setting. Pratt and Norris (1999), for example, reported on the use of written narrative as a means of exploring a wide variety of themes in the moral and social reasoning of older adults. It would also be particularly valuable to recruit grandparent-grandchild pairs for a study in which they would write for each other over a period of time. With such a longitudinal design, it would be possible to track the development of themes across each pair over the evolution of their correspondence.

We conclude in the words of a grandchild author who demonstrates the value of storywriting between the generations:

Memories are neatly stored and cherished;
Then retrieved when apart
To re-live the special moments.
This bond between grandparent and grandchild-
Forever sealed in love. (Book I, p. 9)

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Author Note

Ellen Bouchard Ryan and Ann Anas, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences and the McMaster Centre for Gerontological Studies; Kristine Pearce, Department of Occupational Therapy; Joan Norris, Family Relations & Applied Nutrition.

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Correspondence concerning this chapter should be sent to E. B. Ryan, Dept of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neurosciences, HSC-4N77A, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON CANADA L8N 3Z5, E-mail: ryaneb@mcmaster.ca).

Table 1.

Benefits of Story Writing

Type	Evidence from Stories
Overcome Geographical Distance [Implicit acceptance of time-honored role of letter writing]	
Legacy	<p>“I want you to know this [importance of Prayer] since you are now at the age that I was when my Mother left this legacy to me” (Book I; p.75).</p> <p>“I want to be faithful to the legacy that was passed on to me, and I now pass on to you, which is your rightful heritage” (Book II; p.135).</p>
Create New Connections	<p>“I can appreciate the confusion you feel about your future . . . Although more than fifty years separate me from a situation similar to yours, I can remember the feelings, if not all the details, that accompanied my path to independence from family life” (Book I; p.79) –(attempts to identify with the grandchild which may lead to discussion as to how the grandparent reacted to similar situations currently being faced by the grandchild.)</p> <p>“You decide when my grandchild is old enough for my letter (Written to the unborn grandchild’s parents; <u>Book II; p.36</u>).</p>
Express Unsaid Feelings	<p>“...feel that writing to each other has made us closer because I can write things to you that are hard to say in person. You make me feel special the way only you can” (<u>Book I; p.157</u>).</p> <p>“The hardest part of dealing with your disease is that you no longer remember who I am. I guess that is why I am writing you this letter . . . this is the only way I can tell you how much I love you” (<u>Book I; p.138</u>).</p>

- Future Opportunities to Converse “I have quite a few [stories] compiled in a loose-leaf binder. I’ll let you read them sometime, if you want to” (Book I; p.85).
- “I would like you to think about this letter, and I will ask you later what you think of what I’ve said” (Book I; p.14).
- Opportunity to Express Self “Your tenth birthday is almost here and it is a special milestone for us all and I think this is a good time to talk to you about WORDS” (Book I; p.10)
- “I won’t go into detail about what took place when.... I’ll let my story speak for itself” (Book II; p.21).
- Surpass Time (A letter written to be given to a grandchild in ten years when he is old enough to understand): “It must be hard for you to accept the fact that the Grandpa, whom you loved and had fun with, who read to you and played games and catch with you, has disappeared into an old man in a wheelchair who has difficulty remembering any one” (Book I; p.57).
- “To my yet unborn grandchildren who will someday face the world with all its challenges” (Book I; p.58)
-