Grandparent Tales: Exploring the Intergenerational Transmission of Life Stories through Photographic Expressive Arts

Anita C. Reyes, Dr Terrence Hays and Dr Mary M. Read¹

California State University, Fullerton, CA

Abstract

The aims of this qualitative study are (1) to learn what grandparents most want their grandchildren to know about them; (2) to investigate how grandparents communicate family history and their own life stories to their grandchildren; (3) to explore the role and meaning of family photographs in the communication of grandparents' stories; and (4) to gather the experiences of grandparents within expressive arts workshops as they create and illustrate their own life story books to be shared with their grandchildren. Workshop participants will attend six weekly, two hour sessions in which they will be invited to tell, write and/or record their stories through narratives, photographs, voice recordings, art, poetry and other expressive techniques of their choosing. Data will be collected from approximately 30 participants through the use of open-ended interviews before, during and after they have attended the workshop series. The results of this investigation could serve as a guide for community agency counsellors, family therapists, parent educators, senior activity directors, gerontologists, social workers and support group facilitators who wish to incorporate expressive arts, phototherapy and/or storytelling techniques into their work with older adults and families.

Now that I am old and infirm I fear I shall no more be able to roam among the beautiful mountains...I can only paint my pictures and spread my colour over the cloud-topped mountain to transmit for future ages the hidden meaning which lies beyond all description in words.

[c.A.D.400] (The Quote Cache 2006)

Introduction

This study seeks to explore how grandparents experience the intergenerational transmission of family stories. Just as elders worldwide have served the role of passing on ancestral history through storytelling, art, music, photographs and books, grandparents today are often the only ones who can provide details of the family history for their grandchildren's generation. Even though people are living longer, however, societal changes have introduced a number of barriers to intergenerational communication. These include such factors as attitudes toward elders, long distance grandparenting, high divorce rates, estrangement within families and custodial grandparenting (Kornhaber 2002).

With the passing of a grandparent, families frequently end up with a dusty box of old photos, the identity of persons depicted unknown, the meanings of the images, and the related family stories, gone forever. Thus, grandchildren may grow up without a sense of ancestral continuity and identity. At some point in the future, when they want to know more about their heritage, perhaps to share with their own children and grandchildren, they may find that the historical knowledge has died with their grandparents. When stories are written down, however, they live on and can be handed down in their original form from generation to generation (Kandel 1995).

This study will investigate how grandparents communicate family history and their own life stories to their grandchildren and will explore the role and meaning of family photographs in the communication of grandparents' stories. In addition to storytelling and photographs, other means of communication through artistic expression by grandparents will be examined within an expressive arts workshop. Through the use of open-ended interviews, participants' experiences will be gathered as they document and illustrate some of their life stories into book form to be shared with their grandchildren.

Review of the Literature

Following is an overview of some of the barriers to intergenerational communication identified in the literature, as well as research on the modalities to be utilised in the current study.

1. Changing Attitudes about Elders

Although cultures differ in their attitudes toward elders, many older people in developed nations feel that they are not valued, that they are a burden or that they have very little to contribute (Kornhaber 2002). Indeed, the aging of the baby boomer generation (those born between 1946 and 1964) in the United States, Japan and Australia, among other nations, has generated considerable concerns about the burdens imposed on a smaller workforce of younger people who must provide social security for a growing population of older adults (Moody 1992). Seeing older people as a burden rather than as a resource is a significant shift from the traditional honoured position of elders in tribal societies and other cultures throughout history (Adams et al. 1996). Kornhaber states, 'Sadly, most people today, including grandparents themselves, vastly underrate their ability to serve as a valuable resource for children' (Kornhaber 2002 p.vii).

2. Long Distance Grandparenting

Over the last 200 years or so, there has been a shift from a primarily agrarian society, in which the older generation often remained in close proximity on or near the family farm, to an industrial age that sees family members scattered across the country, or the world, in response to job markets in larger cities. Today,

grandchildren growing up hundreds of miles away may see grandma and grandpa only once or twice a year and may have little contact in between visits (Kornhaber 2002).

3. Estrangement Due to Divorce and Other Family Issues

It is often an acrimonious divorce that prompts many custodial parents to curtail contact with the families of their ex-spouses, thereby denying the children a chance to have relationships with half of their relatives (Kornhaber 2002). In addition, divorce frequently results in the alienation of children from one of their parents over time, even though joint custody or visitation rights may be ordered by the courts (Kirkendale 2006). There are also those grandparents who are estranged from their own children for any number of reasons. There may have been a history of abuse, neglect, alcoholism or abandonment in the family. The adult children may have engaged in drug use or other behaviours that drove a wedge between themselves and their parents. Or there may simply have been a misunderstanding that resulted in a falling out between parents and their grown children (Kornhaber 2002).

4. Prevalence of Custodial Grandparenting

While many grandparents may have limited or no contact with their grandchildren, in other families stressful circumstances can propel the older generation into becoming caregiving or custodial grandparents. These grandparents take on the sole responsibility of rearing their grandchildren in the absence of the parents, or of providing substantial care while parents are working. They often face a host of emotional, legal, health and daily living challenges as they find themselves in the position of raising young children in their later years (Kornhaber 2002).

In any of the circumstances described above, the important grandparenting roles of sharing their own life stories and passing on family history often break down due to a number of factors, including lack of contact in long distance, divorce or estrangement situations, lack of time in custodial grandparent families, or lack of a sense of value of the older generation by families and by grandparents themselves (Kornhaber 2002).

Modalities to Be Utilised in the Current Study

This study explores the experiences of grandparents regarding the preservation and intergenerational transmission of their life stories through the use of a number of creative endeavours including expressive arts, photography, storytelling and bookmaking. In addition to providing practical means of passing down family history, engaging in these activities has been shown to have therapeutic benefits, as well (Birren & Deutchman 1991; Kandel 1995; Rubin 1999; Weiser 2002). Following is a brief description and review of the literature on each of these modalities.

1. Expressive Arts

Expressive arts techniques encompass a variety of modalities that can be utilised in therapeutic or educational settings. These fall within two broad categories: visual arts and performing arts. Visual arts can include working with drawing and painting implements, paper, clay, paint, chalk, cloth, wood, canvass, glue and a variety of other materials. Performing arts can include activities such as listening to different genres of music, playing musical instruments, singing, dancing, puppet play, storytelling, writing and/or reading poetry or stories, and acting out short vignettes (Gladding 1998; Hays 2002; Malchiodi 2003).

Research findings suggest that expressive arts techniques can provide an enjoyable outlet and means of self-exploration for older adults (Krause & Fryear 1983). Further, imagination and creativity can continue to thrive into old age (Cohen 2005) Rather than lending credence to the adage that 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks', studies reveal that more older adults than ever before are pursuing previously unexplored creative interests upon retirement (Cohen 2005).

A classic study published in the early 1970s reported that older adults who took an oil painting class exhibited significantly greater longevity and life satisfaction than a group of similar age and health who did not (Dawson & Baller 1972). This research paved the way for many other studies that would suggest that engaging in art making has positive benefits (Erikson et al. 1986; Berlind 1994; Birren & Deutchman 1991; Simonton 1996; Cohen 2005). Further, creative expression can lead to positive feelings, which, in turn, result in improved performance of the immune system (Bejjani 1993; Cohen 2006) In fact, for older adults, 'creativity is motivated by the prospect of self-actualisation, which is a strong motive for overcoming or compensating for even the most disabling conditions of old age' (Atchley 1999 p.10).

In his ongoing creativity study begun in 2001, Gene Cohen and his colleagues at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. have found that seniors who participate in community-based arts programs experience improvements in 'social skills, mobility, physical health and overall good mental health' (Cohen 2005 p.2). In addition, brain stimulating activities like art, reading, writing and word games, along with an active lifestyle, alleviated sleep and mood disorders in the elderly and improved vocabulary and life satisfaction (Cohen 2006).

Many other researchers have suggested that there are benefits of expressive arts techniques for older adults. These include such modalities as pottery making (Doric-Henry 2004), creative sandtray play (Baker 2004), sewing, sculpture, sketching and ceramics (Brett-MacLean & Magid 2004), music (Hays 2002) and lifebook creation (Magniant 2004). Often overlooked in the field of expressive arts therapy is the use of simple snapshots as a means of creative self expression (Weiser 2002).

2. Therapeutic Photography and Phototherapy

While photography may be considered another form of expressive arts, it has unique qualities, an expansive history and particular therapeutic applications that define it as a field unto itself (Weiser 1999). Further, distinct differences between the terms therapeutic photography and phototherapy are identified in the literature (Weiser 2004).

Phototherapy involves the use of photographs and/or photography by a psychotherapist working with children, adolescents, adults or older adults. It has been shown to be a non-threatening modality that is effective in empowering clients while helping them to explore their worlds and their relationships, to heal from trauma and to adjust to life changes. Therapeutic photography differs from phototherapy in that it can be utilised by an individual, or within a group format, without a therapist being involved. Photography can become an activity for relaxation, lifting mood, self-exploration, rehabilitation or a number of other therapeutic benefits (Weiser 1999).

Through Photovoice, a social action research methodology developed by Wang and Burris in 1992, photography has been shown to provide insight into community problems when cameras are put into the hands of disadvantaged populations, such as the homeless, older adults or underprivileged youngsters (Wang & Burris 1994; Wang 2005). In several studies, the utilisation of Photovoice methods led to much needed social awareness and laid the groundwork for change when underserved populations were *heard* through the act of photographing their worlds (Wang & Redwood-Jones 2001; Blackman & Fairey 2003; Wang & Pies 2004; Webb 2004; NSW Government 2006).

Phototherapy has a long history that goes back to the decade of the development of the camera around 1850 (Diamond 1856). It re-emerged nearly a hundred years later during World War II when Josephine Herrick used photography as therapy for hospitalised soldiers (Perchick 1992). Since then there have been a number of research studies profiling the therapeutic benefits of photography (Nelson-Gee 1975; Wolf 1976; Ziller & Smith 1977; Zwick 1978; Hogan 1980; Zakem 1983; Troeller 2001; Entin 2004; Weiser 2004).

In 1997, Rachel Weiner of Israel studied the use of photographs as therapy for a population of demented elderly. David Krause (Krause 2005) of Ohio has produced a number of publications and continues to teach phototherapy workshops, including ones for geriatric populations, while Judy Weiser (2006) maintains an extensive web site on phototherapy practice and research. Pam Koretsky of North Carolina, Ana Seara of Toronto and Marianne York of San Francisco counsel older adults using their photographs to help open discussions about their lives, experiences, feelings and intergenerational ties (Koretsky 2001; Seara 2006; York 2006). In his work with patients suffering from Alzheimer's disease, Cohen has developed what he calls

'biographical interventions' (Cohen 2005 p.3). These video biographies created by family members from old photos have helped patients improve their recall of important family information.

Art therapist Linda Madori (2006) developed a comprehensive program described in her book, *Therapeutic Thematic Arts Programming for Older Adults*. Her program, which includes such expressive arts modalities as music, dance, poetry and sculpture along with photography, provides older adults with an enriching environment to meet their cognitive, emotional, physical and social needs. Her research suggests that the program promotes creativity, increases social interaction, stimulates brain functioning, encourages appropriate movement and is flexible enough to allow for unique, person-centred experiences (Madori 2006).

While phototherapy has continued to make its mark upon the therapeutic community, Weiser (2005) believes that photography is generally under utilised by most therapists, social workers, teachers and others. However, she feels that photography holds many attributes that make it ideal for facilitating self-disclosure, self-exploration and family insight, while helping to promote physical and emotional healing. A photographic image has the power to transport us to the time and place of meaningful events in our lives, or to bring an ancestor up through history to be with us in the room right now (Weiser 2002).

However, a photograph without the story behind it is just a collection of shapes in lights and shadows. If the stories are not recorded in some way, they may be lost to future generations (Kandel 1995).

3. Storytelling

The writing, telling or recording of family stories are means of establishing intergenerational connections, bringing about a stronger sense of self, anchoring the child, young adult or older adult in his or her ancestry, and documenting familial history for a sense of continuity within the family (Caldwell 2005; Wyatt-Brown 2003). In essence, stories are vehicles 'for the transmission of culture, values, beliefs and knowledge' (Davis-Berman & Berman 1998 p.4). While engaging elders in telling the stories of their lives is beneficial for their morale and sense of identity (Atkinson 1995; Birren & Fisher 1990; Butler 1963), Wyatt-Brown (2003) proposed that 'all of life is punctuated by stories ... and, at every stage, narratives can prepare people for the future or steel them to bear the troubles and routines of the present' (p.6).

Stories that are only transmitted verbally, however, tend to fade or change over time. A family story that is repeated from generation to generation, while valuable, is subject to distortions with each retelling until it may bear little resemblance to the original event (Kandel 1995).

4. Bookmaking

There is a permanence and accessibility of books, which make them an ideal receptacle for stories of family heritage (Kandel 1995). As such, they may be superior to video tapes, audio recordings and computer discs,

the contents of which may become inaccessible as technology changes. It is the enduring, and the endearing, quality of books that prompted the researcher in this study to adopt this art form as the culminating product for each member of exploratory workshops for grandparents. The books will hold some of the life stories, photographs and self-disclosing artwork that participating grandparents choose to share with their grandchildren. And they will serve to document, illustrate and illuminate grandparents' life stories for many years to come.

Importance of the Study

This study is an exploratory expedition into the experiences of grandparents in their role as intergenerational storytellers. It is from the grandparents themselves that we will learn how they conceptualise, understand and fulfill this role in communications with their grandchildren. By introducing a variety of expressive arts modalities within a group format focused on recreating and documenting personal stories for grandchildren, it is also from the grandparents that we will learn more about how to effectively facilitate their fulfillment of this role. This study is predicated on the belief that much can be learned from the older generation, from the colourful details of a life story to the implications of research such as this for society as a whole. The results of this investigation could serve as a guide for community agency counsellors, family therapists, parent educators, art therapists, gerontologists, social workers and support group facilitators who wish to incorporate expressive arts, phototherapy, storytelling or bookmaking into their work with families and older adults. As Hillary Rodham Clinton said:

Some of the most powerful works of art have been produced by older Americans by hands that have engaged in years of hard work, eyes that have witnessed decades of change, and hearts that have felt a lifetime of emotions. Our whole society benefits when older Americans use their talents and experiences to become involved in the arts as creators, teachers, mentors, volunteers and audiences. (Clinton 1996)

Conclusion

The image of elderhood continues to change as the baby boomers take their prominent place in the fabric of an aging society. Aging is becoming accepted as a natural part of life. As more of us step willingly into the process of aging with our eyes wide open, we are freed to experience life anew with each novel project we undertake. We can choose any creative outlet we like to express ourselves and thereby place our stamp upon the world. Whether we paint or poetize, parabolize or perform, dance or decorate, draw or dramatise, whatever gets our 'creative juices' going will likely keep us young at heart, physically well and happy for years to come. And when we step off the planet, others will benefit from our having been here and having left pieces of ourselves – our art, our photographs, our stories – as gifts for the generations that follow.

REFERENCES

Adams, J., Bornat, J. & Pickett, M. 1996, 'You wouldn't be interested in my life; I've done nothing', in *Reviewing Care Management for Older People*, eds J. Phillips & B. Penhale, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, pp.102-116.

Atchley, R. 1999, Social Forces in Aging: An Introduction to Social Gerontology, 9th edn, Wadsworth, Belmont, CA.

Atkinson, R. 1995, The Gift of Stories: Practical and Spiritual, Application of Autobiography, Life Stories and Personal Mythmaking, Bergin and Garvey, Westport, Connecticut.

Baker, A. 2004, 'The use of sandtray with older adult clients', in *Art Therapy with Older Adults*, ed R. Magniant, Charles C. Thomas, Springfield, IL, pp.35-52.

Bejjani, F. Ed. 1993, Current Research in Arts Medicine, MedArt International, Inc., Chicago.

Berlind, R. 1994, 'Editor's statement: Art and old age', Art Journal, vol.53, pp.19-21.

Birren, J. & Deutchman, D. 1991, *Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults: Exploring the Fabric of Life*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

Birren, J. & Fisher, L. 1990, 'The elements of wisdom: Overview and integration', in *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins and Development*, ed R.J. Sternberg, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp.317-322.

Blackman, A. & Fairey, T. 2003, *Photovoice: Philosophy & Mission*, Retrieved 21 October 2005 from http://www.photovoice.org/html/whoarewe/philosphy.

Brett-MacLean, P.& Majid, M. 2004, 'Fostering well-being and community in a continuing care setting: The George Derby Artworks Program', in *Art Therapy with Older Adults*, ed R. Magniant, Charles C. Thomas, Springfield, IL, pp.69-100.

Butler, R. 1963, 'The life review: An interpretation of reminiscence in the aged', *Psychiatry: Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes*, vol.26, pp.65-76.

Caldwell, R. 2005, 'At the confluence of memory and meaning--Life review with older adults and families: Using narrative therapy and the expressive arts to re-member and re-author stories of resilience', *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, vol.13, no.2, pp.172-175.

Clinton, H. 1996, *Creativity. From a monograph for the National Assembly of Local Arts Agencies, Americans for the Arts*, Retrieved 29 June 2006 from http://cas.umkc.edu/casww/sa/Creativity.htm

Cohen, G. 2005, *The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain,* Center on Aging, Health & Humanities, George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA, Basic Books, New York.

Cohen, G. 2006, The creativity and aging study: The impact of professionally conducted cultural programs on older adults, Retrieved 15 June 2006 from http://www.nea.gov/resources/Accessibility/caFR4-30-06R3.pdf

Davis-Berman, J. & Berman, D. 1998, 'Lifestories: Processing experience throughout the lifespan', *Clinical Gerontologist*, vol.19, pp.3-11.

Dawson, A. & Baller, W. 1972, 'Relationship between creative activity and the health of elderly persons', *Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied*, vol.82, pp.49-58.

Diamond, H. 1856, 'On the application of photography to the physiognomic and mental phenomena of insanity', Paper presented to the *Royal Society*, England, May 22, 1856.

Doric-Henry, L. 2004, 'Pottery making on a wheel with older adults nursing home residents', in *Art Therapy with Older Adults*, ed R.Magniant, Charles C. Thomas, Springfield, IL, pp.5-34.

Entin, A. 2004, Photography as visual media., *The Amplifier: The Official Newsletter of APA Division 46, Media Psychology*, Spring, vol.1-2. Retrieved 06 July 2006 from http://www.apa.org/divisions/div46/amp04total.html

Erikson, E., Erikson, J. & Kivnick, H. 1986, *Vital Involvement in Old Age: The Experience of Old Age in our tim,* W. W. Horton, New York.

Gladding, S. 1998, Counseling as an Art: The Creative Arts in Counseling, 2nd edn, American Counseling Association, Alexandria, VA.

Hays, T. 2002, *Music in the lives of older people*, Unpublished Doctoral thesis, School of Health, The University of New England, NSW.

Hogan, P.1980, *The use of photography as a social work technique,* Unpublished Masters thesis, Department of Social Work, San Jose State University.

Kandel, S. 1995, 'Grandparents tales: Stories our children need to hear', *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol.57, pp.28-172.

Kirkendale, W. 2006, *Do's and don'ts of parental alienation syndrome*, Retrieved 13 July 2006 from http://www.divorcedfathers.com/parental.htm

Koretsky, P.2001, 'Using photography in a therapeutic setting with seniors', *Afterimage, Nov/Dec,* pp.4-5.

Kornhaber, A. 2002, The Grandparent Guide: The Definitive Guide to Coping with the Challenges of Modern Grandparenting, Contemporary-McGraw Hill, New York.

Krause, D. & Fryear, J. 1983, (eds) *Phototherapy in Mental Health,* Charles C. Thomas, Springfield, IL.

Krause, D. 2005, Personal communication via email on 10/20/05.

Madori, L. 2006, *Therapeutic Thematic Arts Programming for Older Adults*, Health Professions Press, Baltimore, MD.

Magniant, R. 2004, 'Lifebooks with older adults: Making memories last', in *Art Therapy with Older Adults*, ed R. Magniant, Charles C. Thomas, Springfield, IL, pp.53-68.

Malchiodi, C. 2003, *Handbook of Art Therapy,* The Guilford Press, New York.

Moody, H. 1992, *Ethics in an Aging Society,* The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore & London.

Nelson-Gee, E. 1975, 'Learning to be: A look into the use of therapy with Polaroid photography as a means of recreating the development of perception and the ego', *Art Psychotherapy*, vol.2, pp.159-164.

NSW Government 2006, *Photovoice: Social change through photography,* Community Builders NSW. Retrieved 21 October 2005 from

http://www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au/getting_started/needs/photo.html

Perchick, M. 1992, 'Rehabilitation through photography: The power of photography as physical and emotional therapy', *Photographic Society of America Journal*, vol.58. Retrieved 15 Octtober 2005 from

http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1206/is_n12_v56/ai_13293900/print.

The Quote Cache. 2006, Retrieved 13 June 2006 from http://guotes.prolix.nu/Art/.

Rubin, J. 1999, Art Therapy: An Introduction, Fred Babb, Torrance, CA.

Seara, A. 2006, *The new veteran's portrait studio and photography centre,* Retrieved 06 July 2006 from http://www.sunnybrook.ca/files/AHJanFeb2006.pdf

Simonton, D. 1996, Creativity. Encyclopedia of Gerontology: Age, Aging and the Aged, vol.1, Academic Press, San Diego.

Troeller, L. 2001, 'Photography and healing', *Afterimage*, Nov-Dec, pp.6-7.

Wang, C. 2005, *Photovoice: Background—Biography of Carolyn Wang*, Retrieved 16 July 2005 from http://www.photovoice.com/background/bio.html

Wang, C. & Burris, M. 1994, 'Empowerment through photo novella: Portraits of participation', *Health Education Quarterly*, vol.21, pp.171-186.

Wang, C. & Pies, C. 2004, 'Family, maternal and child health through photovoice', *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, vol.8, pp.95-102.

Wang, C. & Redwood-Jones, 2001, 'Photovoice ethics: Perspectives from Flint Photovoice', *Health Education & Behavior*, vol.28, pp.560-572.

Webb, T. 2004, 'PhotoVoice: A starting point for social action?' University of Technology, Sydney. Retrieved 21 October 2005 from

http://www.cpe.uts.edu.au/pdfs/starting_point.pdf.

Weiner, R. 1997, 'Use of photographs as therapy for demented elderly', *Activities, Adaptation & Aging,* vol.21, pp.47-51.

Weiser, J. 1999, PhotoTherapy Techniques: Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums, 2nd edn, PhotoTherapy Centre Press, Vancouver.

Weiser, J. 2002, 'Phototherapy techniques: Exploring the secrets of personal snapshots and family albums', *BC Psychologist*, Winter, pp.26-27.

Weiser, J. 2004, 'Phototherapy techniques in counselling and therapy: Using ordinary snapshots and photo-interactions to help clients heal their lives', *The Canadian Art Therapy Journal*, vol.17, pp.23-53.

Weiser, J. 2005, *Phototherapy: History and development*, Retrieved 06 October 2005 from http://www.phototherapy-centre.com/history.htm.

Weiser, J. 2006, *Who is doing what where*, Retrieved 05 July 2006 from http://www.phototherapy-centre.com/widww.htm

Wolf, R. 1976, 'The Polaroid technique: Spontaneous dialogues from the unconscious', *Art Psychotherapy*, vol.3, pp.197-214.

Wyatt-Brown, A. 2003, 'The power of stories', *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging, Fall*, vol.27, pp.6-8.

York, M. *Marianne Gontarz York Photography*, Retrieved 06 July 2006 from http://www.marianegontarzyork.com/.

Zakem, B. 1983, 'Phototherapy intervention: Developing a comprehensive system', in *Phototherapy in Mental Health*, eds D. Krause & J. Fryrear, Charles C. Thomas, Springfield, IL, pp.201-210.

Ziller, R. & Smith, D. 1977, 'A phenomenological utilization of photographs', *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, vol.7, pp.177-182.

Zwick, D. 1978, 'Photography as a tool toward increased awareness of the aging self', *Art Psychotherapy*, vol.5, pp.135-141.