

Grandparents Rediscovered

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"The grandfather or the grandmother gives the child the sense of the continuity which comes from a common life style, a shared religious tradition and cultural values, and particular experiences, which, told and re-told as a family saga, become part of the family folklore."

ALTHOUGH there is an increasing number of gerontology courses, both in academic and in non-academic settings, there is still a shortage of good teaching material. One of the most exciting educational tools can be student recollections about their grandparents. Just as reminiscences of the aged about their past experiences can help the elderly cope with the aging process,¹ so reminiscences about an aged person can help students learn about the aging process. Discussions about grandparents are useful on two levels. First, the biographical facts that the student reports can serve as illustrations of general aging concepts used in teaching of as a natural, complex and multi-phased phenomenon. Second, discussions about grandparents can unlock attitudes and feelings that students may not feel free to express in relation to their clients, but which inevitably color the way they will act as social work professionals with elderly people. The exploration of the appropriate use of these feelings and attitudes in the treatment of clients can lead to a freer and less stereotyped view of the aged.

The importance of reminiscences about grandparents was demonstrated clearly this year during a nine month in-service training course held under

¹See Allen Pincus, "Reminiscence in Aging and its Implication for Social Work Practice", *Social Work* Vol. 15, No. 3 (July 1970), pp.47-53, and Judith Liton and Sara C. Olstein, "Therapeutic Aspects of Reminiscence", *Social Casework*, May 1969.

the auspices of the Israel Ministry of Social Welfare for 18 social workers assigned to serve the aged in public welfare district offices in Tel Aviv and surrounding areas. Although the group members were all Jewish social workers who were acclimated to the prevailing Israeli culture, in many respects they were a heterogeneous group. There were 13 women and five men from different countries and diverse cultural backgrounds. Only five of the 18 students were born in Israel. The others came from Islamic countries (2) Europe (11) the United States (1) and South America (1). Most of the students who were born abroad had come to Israel as single adults after the holocaust in Europe and World War II, but a few had come either as refugee children alone or accompanying their immigrant parents. The youngest member of the class was in her early twenties, the eldest in her sixties. Although a few members of the group had completed a university education, most of the group had not. They had an equally wide range of experience in working with the aged, ranging from less than a year to more than ten years.

The course was designed to prepare students for direct service with the aged. The course content was developed on two tracks. One track focused on the nature of the aging process, the needs of the aged, and an evaluation of existing policies and services for the aged. The second track dealt with practice and skills-development of the social worker.

It was important to find a way to reach everyone in the group; to select some common denominator that would make the class sessions a genuine educational experience. One of the first assignments was a request that students describe one of the old persons in their caseload. The student accounts were bland and colorless, written in a kind of social work jargon that blurred any resemblance to the specific, the particular or the distinctive qualities of the individual. Later the students were asked to describe the first older person who had some significance in their lives. Most students described either a grandmother or a grandfather. Their reminiscences were fresh, joyous, and immediate. The many cultural differences within the group did not blur the common threads of a universal human experience.

The reminiscences about grandparents helped students understand some of the following concepts about aging:

1. Aging is a sociological as well as a biological and psychological phenomenon.

We reviewed the literature which compared the position of the aged in technologically advanced and in developing countries. We discussed the evidence which led investigators to conclude that the aged who possessed strategic knowledge had a high social status in developing countries characterized by strong religious traditions, binding kinship ties and extended family patterns. Reminiscences about grandparents gave us additional evidence which illustrated these generalizations.

For example, one student who was born and brought up in Morocco, remembered her grandfather as a man in his seventies. She described him as:

A fine looking bearded man of medium height, always well groomed and neatly

dressed. On the Sabbath and holy days, instead of his customary dark clothes he wore white. He used a cane, not because he needed help in walking, but as one of the signs of age. A widower, his children and grandchildren lived in his home. Most of the time he was studying the Bible and the commentaries on the Bible. In the synagogue he was so respected that he was never called by name but addressed as Rabbi. A kindly man, he enjoyed talking with and teaching his grandchildren.

She recalled that when she went to the synagogue with him, children and adults ran toward him to kiss his hand, and he would bless them. As a little girl, she felt that she was honored by having him as her grandfather.

As other students who had been brought up in agricultural societies discussed their recollections of the superior status of their grandparents within extended family groups, it was a natural next step to describe the problems of the many aged who had come to Israel when they were old and ill. We then analyzed the reasons for their difficulties in adjusting to an industrialized society with different cultural values, where the "non-productive" aged have a low status, or at best, a status that is ambiguous.²

The reminiscences about grandparents also stimulated discussion about the difficulties some students were struggling with as they tried to relate to people from a totally different cultural background. We discussed the ethnocentrism of the aged themselves, and the self-segregation of various nationality groups either within institutions or in the community. We also explored some of the conflicting demands on the social worker, that is, to

²Even in the kibbutzim, where it was anticipated that Socialist egalitarianism would eliminate the status and role losses of the aged, there is abundant evidence that role strains are present. See Yonina Talmon, "Aging in Israel", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (Nov. 1961).

be sensitive to the cultural imperatives of the different national groups, at the same time to be aware of her own cultural biases in dealing with people from other societies³.

2. *The individual life cycle is related to the family life cycle. Grandparents can be the transmitters of family tradition. They can be symbols of family continuity or discontinuity.*

Through his relationship with his grandparents the child can experience some of the continuities and the discontinuities of his family life cycle. The child who knows his grandparents has a first hand experience of the family drama of which he is a part. The grandparents tell the child stories that have a special flavor. Only a grandfather can begin a story with the words, "Once upon a time when your Daddy was a little boy", or even, "Long, long ago when I was a little boy". The grandparent transmits the family tradition within his own unique cultural framework. By his very presence, the grandparent enriches the child's world. Thus:

A human being, the family reunion teaches, is a creature who: is born into a family, lives without and within it, colors and shapes it with his being, brings to it his gifts, his acts, replenishes it with his children, and diminishes it—his final shaping—with his own death.⁴

The grandfather or the grandmother gives the child the sense of the continu-

³In a research study of differences between urban aged from either Oriental or European countries of origin, it was found that the two groups differed markedly with respect to household organization, contact with children, social relationships outside the family, and patterns of leisure time activity. Differential services were recommended for these 2 groups. See Hannah Wehl, "Jewish Aged of Different Cultural Origin in Israel", *The Gerontologist*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Summer, 1970).

⁴Leslie Farber, "Family Reunion", *Commentary*, January 1974, p.42.

ity which comes from a common life style, a shared religious tradition and cultural values, and particular experiences, which, told and re-told as a family saga become part of the family folklore.

At the same time, grandparents can be, in themselves, examples of the discontinuity of the family experience. The different reactions of social work students in the United States and in Israel illustrate this point. The United States is a nation of people who have descended from immigrants; Israel to this day is largely a nation of immigrants. In the United States, students who were the grandchildren of immigrants spoke of their grandparents as though they were an exotic people from another place as well as from another time. Student reactions in the United States confirmed sociological findings that the differences between the old and the young were greater than they had been in the past. These differences included the rural surroundings in which today's aged were raised, the large numbers who were foreign born, had a limited formal education, were manual workers if they were men, or housewives if they were women. In all these aspects they differed from their grandchildren; they shared neither interests, outlook on life, or lifestyles with them.⁵

Some of the students in the United States had experienced role reversal as children. They became the teachers and interpreters, occasionally for their parents, more frequently for their grandparents. These young people, whether they were Chinese, southern Blacks, or Russian Jews, were sensitive to the differences between the slow paced rural past and the urban American culture of which they were a part.

⁵Zena Smith Blau, "Old Age in a Changing Society", *New Viewpoints*, New York, 1973, pp. 68-69.

It was the grandchildren, thoroughly at home in their new environment, who were the mediators between the different cultures. They saw their role as helping the grandparents to understand, to adjust and to become assimilated into the new world.

In Israel on the other hand, students usually had a more intimate involvement with the world of their grandparents. For many students, immigrants themselves, it was a world they had known well before they were ripped out of it either by wars, by the massacre of Jews, or through their voluntary immigration to Israel. The tradition represented by the grandparents belonged to a cherished past which was a part of their lost heritage. It was a past that was enshrined in an aura of sentiment, all the more treasured because its values were alien to a modern industrialized society.

In Israel, as in other countries, many students reported that they had been brought up by a grandmother acting with, or as a surrogate for, parents.⁶ In these instances, particularly if the relationship began when the child was very young, the grandchild was deeply involved with the grandparent. The role of the grandparent as the teller of family stories was always linked with the notion that the grandparent was the role model for standards of behavior. A typical comment is the following:

She had great influence on me since I saw her as a symbol of womanhood. As a child I hoped to be like her. I loved to be with her and to listen to stories of my childhood.

⁶Peter Townsend, in *The Family Life of Old People*, Penguin, London, p. 43, notes that more than half of the grandparents in a working class section of London were involved in the regular care of their grandchildren. The same percentages obtained for American middle-class families. See Gordon Streib, "Family Patterns in Retirement", *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1958).

A student who had emigrated from Poland as an adult described her grandmother as a widow who had brought up her grandchildren after her own son and daughter-in-law died. She described her as:

A strong woman. I don't remember her ill. She was tall, erect, had white hair, dark eyes of goodness, strong hands, a colorful kerchief on her head. She always wore long, dark dresses with deep pockets. We, the grandchildren were always curious to see what grandma had in those pockets. Everything was there—pencil, paper, strings and sweets. I remember the long winter evenings in distant Poland when we (the grandchildren and grandmother) sat on the top of the stove and she gave us sponge cake she had made, with hot tea or hot milk and told us stories.

While this student spoke admiringly of her grandmother's business ability which enabled her to maintain the family, the warmth of her grandmother's loving attention to her was the keystone of her memories of her childhood.

When this student worked in the field, the aged person with whom she was most empathic was someone strong, self-reliant, but giving. She admitted that she had some difficulty working with "dependent" clients. She felt that if they were challenged appropriately they could shake off their "lethargy" and be more self-reliant.

Students did report that as children they had a relationship characterized by Townsend as "privileged disrespect between alternate generations."⁷ Parents were expected to maintain authority, grandparents sometimes were a loving refuge from the strictures of the parents.

Simone de Beauvoir characterizes the special quality of the relationship between grandchildren and grandparents as un-dramatic, because the child feels neither the resentment nor the

⁷Ibid, p.106.

revolt which he expresses towards his parents. She says:

The grandparents are spared all those factors—desire for self-identification and compensation, feelings of guilt and frustration—that cause the ambivalence of the parental state. They can love the children in a completely disinterested, wholly generous manner because they have neither rights nor responsibilities; it is not the grandparents who are required to assume the thankless task of bringing them up, of saying no, and of sacrificing the present to the future.⁸

De Beauvoir points out that despite the initial difficulty for both men and women at the beginning of their entrance into what she calls the "reversed Oedipus" phase of grandparenthood, in general, women are more involved with the lives of their grandchildren and more able to tolerate the feeling that they are being "set back" a generation, than men. Despite this observation, there is no way of knowing how students perceived the respective influence of grandmothers as against grandfathers. In addition, students tended to mention only the grandparents with whom they had favorable relationships. There is no way of knowing how many students had had unhappy relationships with grandparents,⁹ but if there were any they were certainly only a few.

It is no accident that in one of the best recent journalist accounts of the treatment of the aged in the United States, the author begins with reminiscences of her grandparents. She writes, "My Grandfather Curtin used

⁸Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, G. P. Putnam & Sons, New York, 1972, p.475.

⁹There is some evidence that grandmothers do not always exert a benign influence. See Maurine Boie La Barre, Lucie Jessner, and Lon Usery, "The Significance of Grandmothers in the Psychopathology of Children", *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, Vol. XXX, No. 1 (1960), pp. 175-185.

to refer to old age as "a hell of a long sentence, with no time off for good behavior".¹⁰ When she started writing the book, her young friends told her that the subject of aging was dull and boring, but they always pointed to one old person they knew and loved, who they felt was a special case. Similarly if students reminiscing about grandparents can see that the aged are the aggregate of these special cases, they can begin to view the aged not as problems but as human beings of value.

3. Each stage in the life cycle contains its own developmental tasks.

The notion that each stage in the family life cycle contains developmental tasks was clearer for students who could remember how their grandparents had dealt with some of their life crises. As the grandchildren reviewed some of the ways their grandparents had adapted to changes, among them to widowhood, to retirement, to maintaining contact with children and grandchildren, to having an interest in people outside the family, and to finding meanings in life, their behavior illustrated the varied ways of dealing with the challenges faced by aged clients now, and in time to be faced by the students themselves.

It did not seem to matter what grandparents were like; solemn or frivolous, rich or poor, conventional or unconventional—if their grandchildren cherished their memories they valued those qualities they associated with a beloved figure. Thus one student, born in Israel wrote:

My grandmother was very pretty and very vain about her appearance. At that time (the beginning of the forties) her appearance was very unusual for Israel. She dressed for her early morning shopping

¹⁰Sharon R. Curtin, *Nobody Ever Died of Old Age*, Little Brown & Co., Boston, 1972, p.3.

with great care. She wore a parasol in the summer, an umbrella in winter, gloves, and always walked with a straight back. Her appearance spelled "elegance". Her home was full of beautiful objects that she had brought with her from Austria. She had one of the few grand pianos in the country. I loved to sit at the piano and hear her play or listen to her beautiful voice singing. I used to go to concerts and to museum exhibits with her. She died when I was 12 and it was a severe blow.

Another student, equally loving, described her grandmother who lived with her family until her death. When her granddaughter first remembered her, she was:

Approximately 65-70, short, lean, pale, always dressed in dark colors. Her face reflected sadness, because of the deep pain at the loss of four of her sons who had emigrated to the United States, and whom she never saw again. She was easy going, quiet and always willing to help others. She always kept busy either doing housework, visiting the sick. Because she was religious, she spent hours reading the Bible and going to the synagogue. Through her, at an early age, I understood the realities of life, that is, to see aging as an integral part of the business of living.

A third student described the grandmother she met for the first time when she was an adolescent.

I met my grandmother when I came to Israel at the age of 14. I had imagined that she would be stooped, and that her face would be wrinkled. When I saw her (she was then 72) I was surprised by her smooth face, her erect head, and her straight carriage when she walked. She dressed modestly, and always shone with cleanliness. From the first moment we had a close relationship and a feeling that we had known one another for years. She was a good hearted and generous woman, of wide horizons, who read many books and was interested in politics. On every visit to us she was full of presents for me. We worried about her wasting money; more important was the fact that she was with us.

All students emphasized two attributes of a beloved grandparent. First those traits which made him a unique

and special human being. Second, the way the grandparent coped with the biological changes of age, and with the role and status depletion. Third, the grandchild described himself as the delighted recipient—of gifts, of attention and admiration and of love that was not counted or measured.

4. Aging is normal, and aging and illness are not necessarily coincidental.

The experience of students confirmed the truth of this concept for them. That is, they tended to describe their grandparents as relatively healthy and to view their minor ailments as natural accompaniments of the aging process. Students, as children, had viewed their grandparents as healthy, infinitely old, and immortal. In retrospect as they discussed the fact that the aged represent two generations, they saw in the treatment of their grandparents when they were very old, patterns of care that they did not feel should be perpetuated for their clients. Young people, without exception, were aware of the hospitals, the homes for the aged, and the nursing homes for the chronically ill in which some of their grandparents received care at the very end of life. In several instances students said that watching grandparents "withering" in institutions convinced them that home care was the only decent solution to health problems of the aged. Some of the irrational resistance to institutional care of any kind for the aged—even needed care—clearly stemmed from childhood experiences in seeing grandparents in institutions.

5. Dying is normal and inevitable and death can be prepared for so that the end of life can have dignity and meaning.

Wasser points out that the concept of losses is central to understanding per-

sonality development, and that social workers must understand the meaning of grief and mourning if they are to help an older person cope with his losses and regain his sense of mastery of his environment.¹¹

The death of a grandparent is usually the child's first experience with death and with loss. Children concerned about the possibility of their own death are usually told that death comes only to the very old, and in this sense, that death will not come to them in any future time that they can foresee. Thus, a little girl is usually told that neither she nor her mother will die until they have grown old enough to be grandmothers or even great-grandmothers.¹²

Although there is little in professional literature about the relationship of children to the death of grandparents, we know that it is not always the natural, non-traumatic occurrence that we want to believe it to be. The child's reaction to the death of a grandparent will vary considerably according to the age of the child at the time of death. Children of the latency or elementary school period do not see death as irreversible, between the ages of five and nine, death is personified, and only after the age of nine do children begin to view death as a process which will take place in all of us, which marks the end of corporeal life.¹³

Students talked freely of their feelings of loss when a beloved grandpar-

¹¹Edna Wasser, *Creative Approaches in Case-work with the Aging*, FSSA, 1966, p. 18.

¹²Robert A. Furman, "The Child's Reaction to Death in the Family" in Bernard Schoenberg, Arthur C. Carr, David Peretz, and Austin H. Kutscher, *Loss and Grief: Psychological Management in Medical Practice*, Columbia U. Press, 1970, p. 72.

¹³Maria H. Nagy, "The Child's Theories Concerning Death", *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 1948, 73: 2-27.

ent died. Some spoke of their anger at having been abandoned. Several students whose grandparents died before they knew them, spoke of feelings of shame and deprivation that they were singled out as children who had no grandparents. They spoke of teachers or older relatives who, they felt, were surrogate grandparents to them. A few students whose grandparents had perished in the holocaust in Europe spoke of their feelings of guilt that they had survived and relatives had been killed, but these feelings were related to family rather than specifically to grandparents.

The death of grandparents usually introduces the concept of death to the child. Although the intensity of the relationship that antedated the loss, the age and the emotional maturity of the child, and the exact circumstances of the loss all vary with the individual, the child's way of dealing with the knowledge and with this early grief and loss (avoidance and denial, or acceptance and the working through of grief) will be factors in the formation of his attitudes toward aging and death when he is an adult. As a social worker with the aged, it is essential for the worker to be aware of, and to have dealt with his own reactions to death and loss.

Conclusion

Grandparents are the first aged people with whom a child may have had a close relationship. Children who had close associations with grandparents are more likely when they become adults to perceive of the aged as vital human beings, who may need help in times of crises, but who want to remain self-directing as long as possible.

There is some evidence that students who reported pleasurable memories of

their grandparents had higher positive reactions to old people than those with unpleasant or neutral memories.¹⁴ Although we recognize that these memories are highly selective and influenced by the student's personality—these recollections of earlier experiences with life, loving and death, are vivid and emotion laden. The challenge is how we can use these student reminiscences in teaching so that the worker can become a more effective practitioner.

Reminiscences of grandparents can be used to teach the sociological concept of role ambiguity. We can become more sensitive to the fact that many of the aged are still, in Irving Rosow's felicitous phrase "with us but not of us".¹⁵ Understanding grandparenthood as an ambiguous role without clear cut rights and responsibilities makes it easier to understand some of the role strains to which middle-aged as well as aged clients are reacting.¹⁶

Experience with grandparents can illustrate certain psychiatric concepts. It has been suggested that students who felt guilty about relationships with parents and grandparents might try to overprotect the older client. Conversely, counter-transference reactions might be stirred up in young students struggling to work out their separation from parents. In this instance they might unconsciously withhold emo-

tional support in dealing with an older client.¹⁷

Sometimes class discussion can help students see that the over-idealized grandparent of the "Golden Age" of their childhood bore little relationship to the person they had actually known. These students needed to relax some of their rigid standards for client behavior, and to be able to work with some of the imperfect human beings who comprised their caseloads.

Some students found the role of grandchild so gratifying that they continued it in trying to form a relationship with their older clients. For example, one student reported that when she began working she addressed all her women clients as "Granny", until one client told her sharply that they weren't related. Class discussions of transference and counter-transference took on more meaning after this report.

In those few instances where students had close and continuing relationships with grandparents which continued into adulthood, the concepts of life cycle and developmental stages were useful practical as well as theoretical constructs. For the majority of students who, in a peer-oriented, age-segregated society had little contact with the very old, reminiscences about grandparents were their primary "source material".

The most important function of these reminiscences were that they helped to lessen some of the feeling of estrangement from the process of growing old. Students who recreate the infinite variety of their grandparents' lives are in no danger of stereotyping the aging. It is the stereotyping which leads to the

¹⁴Ann Hudis, "An Introductory Course in Gerontology: Development and Evaluation", *The Gerontologist*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Aug. 1974).

¹⁵Irving Rosow, "And Then We Were Old", *Transaction*, January-February, 1965.

¹⁶There is some evidence that, contrary to popular belief, some older students in the U.S. continue to maintain positive relationships with grandparents. See J. Robertson and V. Wood "Significance of Grandparents: Perceptions of their Young Adult Grandchildren", *The Gerontologist*, October 1974, Vol. 14, No. 5, Part II, p. 75.

¹⁷Elinor P. Zaki, "Casework with the Aging", *Summary of Workshop Discussions*, p. 273, *Social Casework*, Vol. XLII, May-June 1961, p. 273.

separation between the generations. Neugarten writes:

So long as we believe that old people are poor, isolated, sick and unhappy (or, to the contrary, powerful, rigid and reactionary) we find the prospect of old age particularly unattractive. We can then separate ourselves comfortably from older persons and relegate them to inferior status.¹⁸

Student reminiscences of grandparents help them to see the differentiation and uniqueness of many older people and how the differentiation continues throughout the life cycle.

Recollections about grandparents help to remind the student that the

¹⁸Bernice Neugarten, "Grow Old Along with Me! The Best is Yet to Be", *Psychology Today*, December 1971, p. 46.

aged he wishes to help continue to be his teachers. For the young, the prospect of their own aging and death are remote and frightening contingencies and they defer thinking about or studying these painful subjects as long as possible. Through guided reminiscence about significant aged persons in his past the student can be brought into creative contact with his own aging. He can learn to care for the aged, not because they are a special group who need protection and isolation, but because he cares for people of all ages and expects that through the disciplined use of self, he can bring his clients of every age, not just the enhancement of their current social functioning, but also realistic hope for the future.

The Impact of Changing Lifestyles on a Family Service Agency*

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"What will destroy us is not change, but our inability to change—both as individuals and as a social system. It is only by welcoming innovation, experiment, and change that a society based on man's capacity to love man can come into being".

IN RECENT years the Jewish Family and Community Service of Chicago became aware through the client—our best source of learning and education—that we needed to reexamine our current practice. We found that our professional skills were not always used as effectively with cases involving new life styles. In examining the problem of the worker, it became evident that our own values interfered with use of our treatment skills. An increasing percentage of our intake requests centered around problems emerging in the framework of non-traditional family life styles. We wondered whether we would see still more such cases if we resolved our own value conflicts, which would make us more available to these clients.

For example, a few years ago we did not see homosexual couples, clients in group marriages and young unmarried couples living together, nor did we get such telephone intake calls as a 19-year-old, Jewish, middle-class, unmarried woman requesting counselling because she never had achieved orgasm. The impact on the worker of such requests sharply brought to the attention of administration that staff was ready to examine the new types of client requests and to find ways to acquire the skills to meet the requests. It became clear that to be effective in broadening our skills we needed to

explore workers' values and biases related to the clients' new social patterns. We also needed to integrate changing values with Jewish values. To help meet staff's needs, a seminar was set up to look at various aspects of changing social patterns in our Jewish community. Our seminar explored three areas:

1. Effect on practice of changing social patterns
2. Workers' values regarding variant life styles
3. Agency's need and readiness to change its image in the Jewish community

The seminar was tremendously helpful in highlighting and delineating some of the problems and dilemmas we face in serving increasing numbers of clients involved in new modes of living. This article deals with many of the questions and dilemmas we face in our practice today. We are fully aware that we do not have the answers and do not presume to offer any here. We do hope, however, to pose significant questions for consideration because we all need to put our minds to these issues and come to terms with them.

Inasmuch as we are a family agency and for the past several years our focus has been on family treatment, we started in the seminar to look at today's family. In the not too distant past we used the "intact" family in staff training. Now we needed to explore such categories as divorce and the

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