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Unci Na Gaka: Lakota Grandparents Perspectives on Raising Grandchildren

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“Unci” (unh-chee) and “Gaka” (gah-gah) are Lakota terms for grandmother and grandfather respectively. These terms are generally used as terms of affection in the traditional Lakota families, while those Lakota families who are more acculturated use the more common terms, “grandma and grandpa”. Hassrick (1964) states that historically the role of grandparents in the “Sioux” tiospaye (term for Lakota extended family) was tantamount to nearly that of the supernatural deities; e.g. appeals to the Creator often began with “grandfather” or “grandmother”. So the influence of the grandparents in child rearing was accepted, encouraged and valued. While it was customary for Lakota grandparents to raise grandchildren, it was more common when the children were orphaned due to the parents’ death (Hassrick, 1964). Today, many Lakota grandparents find themselves in the position of being the sole provider and care giver of their grandchildren even though the children’s parents are still living. The purpose of this paper is to examine the experiences of contemporary Lakota grandparents who are raising their grandchildren.

Generally, the rate of grandparents raising their grandchildren on a full time basis is on the increase (Fuller-Thomson, Minkler, & Driver, 1997) and according to the Census Bureau (2010) there are more people age 65 and older than in previous censuses. Furthermore, American Indians are only 2% of the total U.S. population but have a higher rate of raising their grandchildren than other ethnic groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). As to the reasons grandparents being the primary care provider for their grandchildren, the circumstances vary. Kelly (1993) found that abuse of the child, coupled with substance abuse by one or both of the parents is often cited as a feature of this phenomenon. While there are multiple stressors associated with grandparents raising grandchildren (Sands & Goldberg-Glen, 2000), Hayslip and Kaminski (2005) found from

a review of the literature that grandparents often endure these stressors in the interest of their grandchildren and to keep them out of foster care. While there is a dearth of literature on this topic, there is limited research on American Indian grandparents raising and parenting their grandchildren on a full time basis. One study done by Kopera-Frye (2009) found that American Indian grandparents who are the primary caregivers of their grandchildren cite legal issues as primary needs. Another study was done by Fuller-Thomson and Minkler (2005) on two hundred twenty two American Indian grandparents, finding that over fifty percent of them experienced raising a grandchild for five years or longer.

The documented experiences of American Indian grandparents raising grandchildren can inform the family, extended family, Tribal governments, agencies and programs on how to design, develop and deliver service programs targeted at American Indian grandparents who are raising their grandchildren, which can ultimately lead to a better quality of life for both the grandparents and the grandchildren. If the grandparents die at an early age, who will care for the grandchildren, especially if they are very young children.

The purpose of this study is to document the perspectives of American Indian grandparents who are raising their grandchildren on a full time basis. Four Lakota grandparents were interviewed with focus on the following questions: what are the experiences of American Indian grandparents raising their grandchildren; what does it mean to be a grandparent parenting their grandchildren; what kinds of community resources would be helpful in addressing the difficulties and challenges of parenting their grandchildren. Overall, the life expectancy rate for all other races in the United States is higher than American Indians and Alaska Natives (Indian Health Service, 2011). The implications of this are serious, not only for the grandparents, but particularly for the children who are being raised by grandparents.

Background and Rationale

American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) elders and children are among the most vulnerable of populations; one example being that American Indian adults having a higher incidence of depressive symptoms than adults in the general population (Whitbeck, McMorris, Hoyt, Stubben and LaFromboise, 2002) and there has been an increase in the rate of abuse and neglect of AI/AN children during the period of 1992-1995 (Cross, 2000). American Indians/Alaska Natives have the lowest median income of all races (U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2004-2005). Additionally, AI/AN youth have the second highest incidence of being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). The vulnerability of AI/AN children and elders is exacerbated by grandchildren being raised by grandparents under these extremely harsh conditions. Fuller-Thomson and Minkler (2005) found that AI/AN grandparents are raising grandchildren at a higher rate than Hispanic white and non-Hispanic white populations and noted that in addition to the stress of poverty, grandchildren and grandparents live in crowded housing conditions; both of which contribute to poor health of the grandparents. While there is great interest in research on grandparents raising grandchildren which has resulted in important studies, there is less research on American Indian and/or Alaska Native grandparents. There is even less research on the experiences of specific tribal populations. This study examines the perspectives of grandparents from the Lakota people, a Plains Indian Tribe for purposes of documenting information that can be used to inform services and related services for Lakota grandparents who are raising grandchildren.

Mooradian et al (2006) acknowledges that historical trauma that includes federal policies designed to assimilate and acculturate American Indian people is a significant factor in shaping the role delineation of contemporary grandparents. Experiencing severe abuse and trauma at

boarding schools (e.g., forcing students to cut their hair when some Tribal/Village cultures have strong spiritual beliefs and taboos about how hair is treated and beating individuals when they spoke their Native language) instilled a sense of shame about their cultural identity and ultimately had an impact on parenting and grandparenting roles. Yellow Horse Brave Heart and DeBruyn (1998) conclude that the historical oppression American Indians/Alaska Natives have experienced has led to “historical unresolved grief” (p. 68); which has had an intergenerational manifestation of substance abuse, depression, a sense of shame and a pervasive sense of loss, to name a few of these factors. To add to the complexity of the expanded role of being the primary caregiver for their grandchildren, it has been shown that they have higher rates of depression than grandparents that are non-caregivers (Leticq, Bailey and Kurtz, 2008). Additionally the study showed that for grandparents who live in rural areas, isolation and lack of community supports and resources are major stressors.). Smith et al (2000) described a growing interest relative to the increase in grandparents caring for grandchildren as impacted by societal and policy changes, including the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978; an important piece of legislation that required child welfare agencies to seek out relative placement for foster and adoptive children. On societal dynamic is the increase in incarceration of women, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the related substance abuse epidemic in which many children were orphaned, abandoned or removed from homes due to drug use (Smith et al, 2000).

Recommended strategies and policy implications to address the needs of American Indian/Alaska Native grandparents include advocacy, developing training models that increase cultural competency and strengthening social work standards (Mooradian et al 2006). Healing work with American Indian/Alaska Natives to address historical grief using culturally appropriate and culturally specific methods, such as the Lakota Wiping of Tears ceremony, is needed (Yellow

Horse Brave Heart and DeBruyn, 1998). More research with American Indian/Alaska Native grandparents is needed, particularly in the area of mental health of the grandparents and the grandchildren (Letiecq et al, 2008). More specifically, research on American Indian/Alaska Native grandparents is needed with specific Tribes to ensure that the findings can translate to policy and program development and implementation at the local level and in a culturally appropriate way. Other policy recommendations include subsidized guardianship programming, support services and strategies to address the unique housing needs of grandparents caring for grandchildren (Smith, Beltran, Butts and Kingson, 2000). While these policy recommendations are geared toward the general population of grandparents raising grandchildren and not specifically the American Indian/Alaska Native population, these recommendations deserve further discussion particularly in the area of cultural appropriate implementation of such policies and programs. Support groups are needed to help combat the stress associated with parenting young children and/or teenagers, but need to be developed and implemented in a culturally specific manner.

The conclusions from this literature review are that first, there is very limited research on American Indian/Alaska Native grandparents raising their grandchildren and very few, if any, on grandparents from specific Tribes. The few research studies that have been done on the AI/AN grandparent population focus on the challenges and generally conclude that care of grandchildren is a cultural practice that has evolved from a role of traditional teaching and guidance to that of full time care giver due to the parents experiencing substance abuse, incarceration, death and other circumstances that prevent them from caring for their children (Letiecq et al, 2008; Mooradian et al 2006). Second, it is clear from the research that the conditions and circumstances that lead to grandparents being the sole caregiver for their grandchildren are multifaceted, complex with intergenerational grief and loss as underlying features (Yellow Horse-

Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). Finally, the literature is not specific to any particular Tribe, the research and discussion focuses on “American Indian” grandparents raising grandchildren that, while important, risks stereotyping individuals.

This study will focus on gathering data relative to the needs of a specific population for which there is no data available, Lakota grandparents who have raised or are raising grandchildren. The perspectives of Lakota grandparents on their experience of raising or having raised their grandchildren will be documented through an interview survey, with emphasis on identification of needs and recommendations for supportive services. The information can be used to inform policy, practice, and program services to improve the quality of life for Lakota grandparents who are raising their grandchildren and improve the quality of life for their grandchildren.

Research Method

The phenomenon of Lakota grandparents raising grandchildren was explored through a cross-sectional design face to face interview survey (Appendix I) administered to four Lakota grandparents who either have raised a grandchild or grandchildren on a full-time basis or who are currently raising a grandchild or grandchildren on a full-time basis. The rationale for using the cross-sectional design interview survey is based on features that include capturing data at one point in time and identifying community needs (Creswell, 2012). The interviewees were four individual Lakota grandparents who live on a Plains American Indian reservation; and who belong to a sub-group of a population of grandparents raising grandchildren. Using this homogenous sampling method, selection of interviewees was non-random and through convenience or opportunity, with respect to the limited time available to gather the data. Additionally, the option of doing a telephone survey was included to allow for winter weather conditions that may prohibit

travel or other circumstances that prevent a face to face interview. However, all interviews were done in person and face to face.

Five Individuals that were known to be raising grandchildren or have raised grandchildren were contacted by phone to introduce the study and the researcher. All of the grandparents were from the same Tribe and lived on the same Plains Indian Reservation. Only four individuals were interviewed as one individual had a family emergency and could not complete the interview. There was one male and three females. The age ranges of the interviewees was 45-54 and 55 and over. One of the individuals was widowed and the other three were all married. The number of grandchildren being raised by the grandparents ranged from one to six. The age range of the grandchildren currently being raised was 2 years to 9 years old and the age range of the grandchildren of those interviewees that were in the category of having raised a grandchild was 21 to 22 years of age. All of the interviewees met the sample criteria of either currently raising a grandchild or had raised a grandchild.

Once consent for the interview was granted verbally; a time, date and location was established for each interview. The interviewees were all given an opportunity to choose a location and all chose their homes as the interview site. The researcher then prepared and made copies of the interview questions (Appendix I) and a letter (Creswell, 2012) which provided a summary of the research study and explained the potential benefits and risks, issues of confidentiality, the reciprocity factor consent for using the responses from the survey and issues of data protection, access and ownership (Glesne, 2011). The letter also included the title of the project, the name and contact information for the researcher, the date of the survey, and a description of the survey process including how long the interview will take and the interviewees' right to refuse to respond to any questions or stop the interview at any time (Creswell, 2012).

Glesne (2011) cites Patton's work (2002) in the development of the different types of interview questions and how they fall into categories of experience/behavior, opinion/values, feelings, knowledge, sensory and background/demographics. Because of the time limitations of this research study, the survey respondent was asked if the interviewer could follow up with either an email or phone interview to clarify responses to questions. Given that building trust and rapport with the interviewee was limited by the research methodology, feeling questions were limited and background/demographics and opinion/values questions was the focus.

The researcher established rapport and used trust building techniques such as inquiring about the interviewees' family, work and general questions that indicated interest in him or her as a person and not just as an "interview subject". Once rapport was established, the interview began and the researcher asked for consent to tape record the interview using a digital recorder. All of the interviewees gave consent and this was captured as part of the tape recording.

The interview survey questions focused on eliciting feedback on the perceived experience of raising grandchildren. The general experience with emphasis on needs and recommendations or suggestions for services relative to grandparents raising children were posed as interview questions. The interview survey questions were asked by the interviewer; probing questions were used to expand on the responses. The responses related to demographics were recorded on each survey instrument. Additionally, Lakota cultural protocol was observed in the interview process. For example, one cultural protocol include not staring or looking directly into the eyes of the interviewee, particularly if the individual is older than the researcher and being comfortable with pauses and silences. Another cultural protocol observed was the seating position; the interviewer positioned herself so she would not be facing the interviewee directly.

Two of the four interviews took place in the homes of the interviewees; the third interviewee chose a local gathering center for the interview location and the fourth individual chose their place of employment for the interview location. The location was decided upon by the interviewees. With the exception of one, all interviews were completed without interruption. The interview that was interrupted was due to children and adult relatives of the interviewee coming in unexpectedly and not realizing an interview was taking place.

Once the interview survey was completed, the interviewer extended appreciation to the interviewees and a 20.00 cash honorarium was provided to the interviewee. The responses to the interview surveys were stored in a sealed envelope. Tape recorded interviews were transferred from the digital recorder to the interviewees computer and were labeled with initials of the interviewee and the date of the interviewee. The tape recorded interviews were reviewed as well as the transcriptions of the tape recordings. The responses were compiled and analyzed by hand. Themes were identified and codes were assigned to the themes that emerge from the open ended questions.

FINDINGS

Relative to the phenomenon of Lakota grandparents raising grandchildren, there were two major themes that emerged from the interviews with the four grandparents; a sense of love, attachment and responsibility for their grandchildren and role transformation.

Love, attachment and responsibility

“... grandchildren are really special, they bring something out in you. Um, like, it’s like you love your children and then when your grandchildren come it’s like, cause you love them as much but it feels different.”

This quote from a grandparent raising her granddaughter characterizes the love for her and how it is “different” and perhaps it is this love as well as a strong bond and a sense of responsibility that form the foundation for bearing the full responsibility of caring for the grandchild or grandchildren. This is relevant to Yellow Horse-Brave Heart’s (2000) supposition that “the degree of attachment to others appears deeper for the Lakota when one examines the degree of involvement in extended kinship networks” (p.263) and the Census Bureau’s (2010) finding that American Indian grandparents have the highest rate of raising grandchildren than any other ethnic group. One grandparent said “we just have to step up as grandparents”, a reference to when the grandchildren’s parents were no longer able to care for them due to various circumstances. Another grandparent characterized her love and sense of responsibility for caring for her grandchild in this way:

“So, I feel that it’s something I need to do because I love them and I can’t see them with anybody else but their parents but of course they can’t do it. So, I’m just there temporary until they hopefully straighten up one day soon and are able to take them back.”

Sub- themes that emerged relative to the theme of love, attachment and responsibility was that all of the interviewees expressed their needs in terms of their respective grandchildren’s needs when asked what their specific needs were and there was an expressed desire and even an expectation that their children (the grandchildren’s parents) would get help and return to care for their children. Questions were asked directly and indirectly about their own needs as grandparents and after some encouragement and responses related to their grandchildren’s needs, there seemed to be almost a reluctance to finally discuss what they needed. This seems to be an indication that the needs of the grandchild/grandchildren are primary to their own needs. This is consistent with Hayslip and Kaminski (2005) findings that despite the complexity and sometimes

overwhelming nature of caring for their grandchildren, grandparents often took on the responsibility in the best interest of the grandchild. All the grandparents need as financial, but only in the framework of what their grandchild needed and not in the interest of boosting their own economic or financial stability. Another need expressed was time for their own needs, exemplified by one interviewee's comments below:

Question: We talked about some needs that your son has, that your grandson's mother has and recreational needs that your grandson has; we talked about some respite care that you and your husband need and monetary resources. Are there any other needs that you can think of that you would need as a grandparent, as a grandmother, just specific to you?

Grandparent Response: "That's a hard one because it's really hard to think about, um, your own needs when you're used to taking care of everyone in your family. But one thing that I would like to do is to have a day completely to myself. Where I could take care of things like, you know, I might want to get a haircut or I might want to go to a movie by myself or something like that. But, occasionally, I do that, but in the back of my mind I'm always thinking about well I should go to Wal-Mart to buy grandsons clothes or wonder what kind of toy he would like".

So having time to take care of one's own needs was challenging and when time was available, grandparents often used their time to do things for their grandchild. Assistance with the day to day care of the grandchildren, particularly when caring for more than one grandchild and when the grandchild was an infant, toddler or had high maintenance needs, was also of primary concern. Two of the four grandparents were not expecting to become parents again after having raised their children, but willingly took on the responsibility for the best interest of the grandchildren. One of the four grandparents had never parented before and "everything was new". The fourth grandparent's grandchild made a choice to live with her grandparents although her parents had a home and were together. This grandparent did not elaborate on the reasons the grandchild chose to live with her grandparents at the age of six but it was not inquired into as the

circumstances of the grandchildren being in the custody of the grandparent was not a focus of this study.

Role transformation

All of the grandparents expressed that one of the most significant experiences of raising their grandchildren was the change from being a grandparent whose primary role was to nurture, guide and provide cultural and spiritual teachings to an expanded role that includes those elements but also a full time caregiver. This role creates dynamics not previously experienced when the grandchildren were not in their full time care. One of the dynamics is related to discipline; one grandparent expressed a fear of being too lax in disciplining their grandchild and the resulting outcome. The grandparents interviewed report that the role transformation created tension within themselves and among the parents of their grandchildren and themselves. The toll that the role transformation took on the grandparents often resulted in anger and resentment toward the parents, as expressed by one interviewee:

“And one of the things I felt was resentment toward her father and her mother, because they brought this life into this world but yet were not responsible for her so there were times I was caring for her and when I needed to do something or wanted to do something and I was caring for her, I would think what’s her biological mother doing, what’s her biological father doing, they are not burdened or they not feeling the stress of caring for this child, they just kind of produced her and just left her to fend for herself...”

However, grandparents that expressed anger and resentment toward the parents were quick to point out that the harsh feelings were not directed at the grandchild, as this exchange shows:

Interviewee: “...I didn’t focus resentment on the child I focused the resentment on the mother and father.”

Interviewer: How did you deal with the resentment, with the feelings of the resentment?

Response: "...I think uh, I would look at her and pity her...look at her for the situation she was in, so I would push away the feelings of resentment toward the father and just focus on what I had to do."

The feelings that grandparents have as a result of seeing their grandchildren suffer due to the absence or actions of their parents are often not expressed which contributes to feelings of resentment and anger. Three of the grandparents interviewed recommended a weekly "Talking Circle" be held for grandparents who are raising grandchildren. This is a cultural term for a supportive activity in which individuals sit in a circle, burn sage or sweet grass (herbs that are believed to have healing and medicinal attributes and are native to the Plains), pray and then talk about their issues while receiving non-judgmental support from the other participants. One grandparent said she would like to participate in a Talking Circle for women only.

Discussion

Overall, the role transformation was key to other significant changes including daily lifestyle changes, limited mobility due to caring for the grandchild, particularly when the grandchild was an infant or toddler; the presence of other family members who assisted with the daily care of the grandchild was expressed as a positive. As one grandparent said, "if it wasn't for my mother and other family members, I don't know what I would have done..." (in reference to receiving help from family members).

The grandparents interviewed in this study offered recommendations and suggestions for responding to needs and services for grandparents raising grandchildren that include basic services such as transportation to medical appointments and other errands; child care, respite time for the grandparents; economic assistance and organized supervised activities for the grandchild-

dren that includes recreation and social/emotional development services. The grandparents expressed a desire and hope that their adult children would one day receive help so that they can be healthy parents to their children and be reunited with them. Another recommendation is that a needs assessment should be developed that identifies the grandchild's needs as well as the grandparents. The needs assessment would be implemented using a home visitor model and the results would be used to design and develop services and related supports. Other recommendations for services include therapy, counseling and healing work with the grandchildren and grandparents. Yellow Horse-Brave Heart (2000) suggests that survivors of trauma be offered the opportunity of a Lakota ceremony called "Wiping of the Tears" as a way to process complex grief. It is suggested that grandparents, grandchildren and the parents be offered cultural healing opportunities that include the Wiping of the Tears ceremony as well as other appropriate ceremonies that would assist them in dealing with the grief, anger and resentment that arises when grandchildren are abused, abandoned or are orphaned and left for the grandparents to care for.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the experiences of four Lakota grandparents who either raised or are currently raising grandchildren. The themes that emerged were love, attachment and responsibility and role transformation; these were discussed relative to the responses in the interviews with the grandparents. This study documented their recommendations and suggestions for supportive services for grandparents who are raising grandchildren as well as for the grandchildren. The limitations of this study include the issue of "backyard" research as the researcher was known in the community where the interviews took place; survey respondents knew the researcher in a different capacity, whether it was personal, professional or social. It was initially thought that the

interviewer being in the unfamiliar role of researcher may cause some anxiety and may impact the responses among survey respondents (Glesne, 2011). Although this did not appear to be the case and all the interviewees expressed having no discomfort or anxiety about the interviewer or the process of the interview, it was still a concern for the researcher. Another limitation is that this study has only one source of data and not multiple sources of data that would serve to more fully inform this study (Glesne, 2011). The small sample size will also be a limitation for generalizing the results to the target population. A larger sample size would greatly enhance a study of this type. Other areas of related research include examining grandparents' parenting styles, perspectives of grandchildren who are being raised or have been raised by grandparents; application of a best or promising practice such as the AARP'S Grandparent Information Center (GIP) service; and a symposium for grandparents raising grandchildren that focuses on identification of needs, resources and best practices. A more in-depth study of specific tribal population's needs, resources and recommendations for services would add to this field of study, particularly in the area of culturally appropriate grandparent services. There is very little research in the area of "role transformation" of American Indian/Alaska Native grandparents raising grandchildren. An interesting question that surfaced from this study is that with Lakota grandparents taking on an expanded role, are they too spent from providing day to day care to fully provide those teachings necessary for the cultural and spiritual education of the Lakota grandchild? This is an area for future research.

This study can inform those who are in a position of developing and administering programs and services for Lakota grandparents who are raising grandchildren and this study can be built upon for further and more in-depth research. Finally, although the four grandparents that were interviewed described their days as long and often times exhausting, both physically and

emotionally, the love for their grandchildren shone brightly through the frustration and tiredness and two of the grandparents felt compelled to give encouragement to other grandparents raising grandchildren and encouragement was offered to the grandchildren, these are the words of one of the grandparents in the Lakota language:

Blehiciyapo, Wakanyeja ki unsikapi. (Take heart; gather strength because the children are pitiful).

Unci na Gaka ohiniya nawicahu po, tenihila pi (Listen to your grandparents, they cherish you)

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Appendix I

Interview Questions

- 1) I am Male Female
- 2) I am Single Married Divorced Widowed
- 3) I am in the Age range of : 35-44 45-54 55+
- 4) Please list the number of grandchildren that you are raising on a full-time basis:___
- 5) Can you describe what it is like to be a grandparent raising a grandchild or grandchildren?
- 6) How long have you had the primary responsibility for raising your grandchild/grandchildren? Please choose one:
 - a. 0-3 months
 - b. 4-6 months
 - c. 7-12 months
 - d. 1 year or longer but less than 2 years
 - e. 2 years or longer but less than 3 years
 - f. 3 years or longer but less than 4 years
 - g. 4 years or longer but less than 5 years
 - h. 5 years or longer
- 7) Can you talk about some of the needs you have specific to raising your grandchild/grandchildren?
- 8) Are you aware of any programs or resources that address needs you might have as a grandparent raising a grandchild/grandchildren? Yes ____ No ____
 - a. If yes, please list them here:

- 9) In your opinion, what are some of the services needed for grandparents raising grandchildren in your community?
- 10) In your opinion, what are some of the services needed for grandchildren being raised by grandparents?
- 11) Is there anything else you would like to share?