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Children's books have the potential to affect cultural norms and attitudes about older adults in many ways. The purpose of this study was to investigate the portrayal of grandparents in children's literature. Sixty-four children's books published since 1985 were randomly selected and content analyzed. In general, there was an overwhelming positive portrayal of grandparents in these books. Positive grandparent characteristics such as independence and happiness were depicted in a majority of the books the authors examined. Other characteristics such as wisdom and understanding were portrayed in slightly less than a majority of the stories. Although some of the stories depicted grandparents with various disabilities, physical impairment did not detract from the positive depiction of the grandparent. Future research might investigate the variance in the portrayal of grandparents along racial/ethnic and gender lines. For example, how are grandparents from various demographic groups portrayed in terms of status, wisdom, functional abilities, or equity?

## Positive Portrayal of Grandparents in Current Children's Literature

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When we think of grandparents, the cultural images that generally come to mind are of a gray-haired person sitting in a rocking chair, baking cookies, playing ball with a grandchild, or participating in some other leisurely activity. However, grandparents are not necessarily old. Their ages can range from age 30 to 110, with the grandparent role generally occurring between the ages of 49 and 53 (Hagestad, 1985; Mills, 1999). Consequently, grandparenthood cannot simply be defined by chronological age. Rather, social role is a more appropriate way to define this important family relationship. Becoming a grandparent has been described as a "counter-transition" because it is a life course transition produced by the role change of another family member (Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985). Therefore, grandparenting is about intergenerational linkages and not merely about old age (Pruchno & Johnson, 2000).

Today, an unprecedented number of people in American society are grandparents (Pruchno & Johnson, 2000). It is estimated that approximately 94% of all older adults occupy the social role of grandparent (Hooyman & Kiyak, 1988), and 50% are great-grandparents (Roberto & Stroes, 1992). Yet, despite this high proportion of older adults who are

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grandparents and great-grandparents, popular culture has contributed to ageist views of grandparents as being old, ignorant, timid, and forgetful. Moreover, studies of contemporary television, commercials, and children's programming suggest that older people are generally underrepresented in the popular media (Davis, 1987). But, are ageist attitudes toward older people a contemporary phenomenon? If the answer to this question is yes, then we must ask whether older persons were ever held in high esteem and venerated in earlier times. There is debate over this issue. On one hand, some historians argue that wealth and control of property have always been more important than age in determining one's status (e.g., Achenbaum, 1978; Fischer, 1977). On the other hand, other historians have suggested that there was a golden age of aging in America in which older adults were held in high esteem as evidenced by clothing styles that emphasized mature features, the use of white-powdered wigs by young and old alike as a symbol of status (and respect), or other rights that were accorded to elders, such as sitting in the front pews during religious ceremonies. More important, in traditional times, it was believed that knowledge and spiritual grace were the domain of older people. However, this status gradually disappeared as a societal value between the late 18th and mid-19th centuries (see Demos, 1978; Quadagno, 1999).

The goal of this study was to analyze contemporary children's literature to identify the positive ways in which grandparents are portrayed. Historically, children's literature has been viewed as an inadequate vehicle to transmit positive aspects about the elderly. Even in children's literature the portrayal of older adults has been ageist and stereotypical. For example, Ansello (1977) conducted a content analysis of 656 children's books. Only 16% of these books had any depictions of older adult characters. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of the older adults in these books were depicted in a stereotypical fashion. They were sick, infirm, and looked old.

Another content analysis of children's books found that in these stories, no older adult characters made significant decisions (Hurst, 1981). Other researchers also have reported that older adult characters did not have major roles in children's stories (Peterson & Eden, 1977). Researchers have argued that it is negative portrayals of older adults in many children's books that lead to the development of ageist and negative views in generations of children (Constant, 1977; Crook & Belcher, 1979).

In analyzing the portrayal of grandparents in children's literature, this study examined two important research questions: First, do contemporary children's books discuss positive images of grandparent-grandchild relationships? If so, what topics reflect this positive portrayal? Second, do

these contemporary children's books present grandparents in diversified ways? If so, what types of diversity are expressed?

### THE ROLE OF GRANDPARENTS

Grandparents have always been a part of civilization's social and family networks. Historically, the age of grandparenting occurred much sooner when people had children and their children gave birth at much younger ages. However, the increase in life expectancy and the increasing population of older adults have created a very large pool of grandparents in today's society. Szinovacz (1998) emphasized the complexity of examining grandparents and their relationship with other family members because there is constant change in the nature of these intergenerational relationships. For example, grandparenting as a phase is lasting longer, and each grandchild that joins the family network may change the dynamics of how a grandparent is treated or treats other grandchildren (Szinovacz, 1998). Grandparents have the potential to have a significant impact on their grandchildren's emotional development and self-esteem (Adkins, 1999; Griff, 1999; Lavers & Sonuga-Barke, 1997). Consequently, there is a rapidly growing population of grandparents and step-grandparents who may have a significant impact on generations of children. This intergenerational link between grandparents and their grandchildren has implications for long-term family relations. For example, will family interactions, attitudes, and perceptions about growing older lead to long-lasting, closely knit family bonds or to long-term relationships that are strife with conflict? Moreover, how will media images of grandparents affect grandchildren's perception of older adults and old age in general, and the perception and status of grandparents in particular?

### STORYTELLING AND GRANDPARENTS

Many adults have fond childhood memories of a grandparent telling a story or reading a book to them (Nussbaum & Bettini, 1994). Quite often, the storytelling skill of the grandparent was demonstrated on the basis of whether the child would believe the story. McKay (1993) has examined the ways in which grandparents affect the lives of their grandchildren through storytelling. The analysis stressed the importance of grandparents personalizing the stories they tell their grandchildren. A recent Nobel prize-winner recalls the positive effect on his personal life that his grand-

father's storytelling had (Saramago, 1999). Joseph Bruchac's famous career as poet and storyteller was likely influenced by his grandparents who raised him (Ricker, 1996). Bruchac's story *Fox Song* (1993) is one of the books analyzed in this study.

Other researchers have also emphasized the importance of mutual storytelling between grandparents and grandchildren (Strom & Strom, 1987). In an examination of the importance of grandparents' storytelling, Kandel (1996) found that telling stories to grandchildren had positive effects among six different ethnic groups that participated in the study. Hope for the future and a sense of the continuity of life are some of the benefits that children gain when read to or told stories by grandparents (Levine, 1998).

### **IMAGES OF GRANDPARENTS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE**

Literature that features the positive aspects of intergenerational relationships between grandparent and grandchild has a unique opportunity to develop positive attitudes of children toward older adults (Hittleman & Hittleman, 1996). Yet, although not all children's books depict older individuals in a positive light, some researchers have pointed to a gradual improvement of the depiction of older adults in children's literature (McGuire, 1992). For example, in many novels that contain depictions of grandparents, there are images of veneration, value, and status among the older adults. These grandparents assist their families in a variety of ways and pass on cultural heritage to the younger generations (Kang, 1993). Nonetheless, other researchers have been quick to point out the negative aspects of the portrayal of older adults in current children's literature. For example, Janelli (1988) studied 37 children's books published between 1985 and 1990. Although she found some improvement and modernization of the images of older adults in the stories, she still found negative images of the grandparents.

### **METHOD**

For the purposes of this study, 64 books were randomly selected for evaluation of the portrayal of grandparents in children's books that are referenced in the Books in Print Index. To meet selection criteria, the books had to contain human grandparents (not animal) and be classified within

the Books in Print Index as an easy reader or as a juvenile reader book. On average, the sampled books were approximately 32 pages in length.

A content analysis of the books was conducted using three reviewers. A coding sheet, developed by the authors, guided identification of topics discussed and the number of pages devoted to the areas of interest. A small sample of books not used for the main study was used for a pilot study for interrater reliability, which was established at .90. Three coders examined both the table of contents and the index to determine if the topics of interest were discussed, and to what extent. Once appropriate children's books were identified, each reader evaluated the content of the 64 selected books. The categories coded for the portrayed image of the grandparent role included positive, negative, and neutral. Each reader rated the role of the grandparents in the story based on these categories. In addition, coding categories were constructed to classify the diversified images of grandparents. These categories included physical health and functional ability, dealing with life and death issues, active grandparents (e.g., those who worked), and veneration (hero figures). The overall impression of each book was based on a determination of which characteristics were shown by the grandparent in the story.

Because of the positive nature of the older adults in many current children's books, some researchers have used these types of children's books, reading them to older adults for recreation and therapy purposes. Beland (2000) has read children's books to older adults in nursing homes, senior centers, and retirement communities. A large majority of older adults in these settings report enjoyment and pleasure while they listen to these books.

## RESULTS

Table 1 summarizes the results of the content analysis. Of the 64 books examined in this study, only three grandparents were not viewed positively. The portrayal of these grandparents was rated as "borderline negative" by the researchers. A total of 75 grandparents were viewed positively in these stories. In 64 (100%) of the books, at least one grandparent was actively involved with grandchildren. In 90% of the books, the grandparents were depicted as happy. This is not to say that if they were not rated as happy that they were sad or depressed. Rather, it means that the positive trait of happiness was featured. In 56% of the books, the grandparents were depicted as being very independent and able to take care of themselves. In 47% of the books, grandparents were depicted as wise, and in

**TABLE 1**  
**Distribution of Grandparent Characteristics in Children's Books**

	<i>Number of Books by Characteristic</i>	<i>Percentage of All Books Reviewed</i>
Portrayal of grandparents in books		
Positive	61	95
Negative	2	3
Neutral	1	2
Grandparent with disability		
Yes	15	23
No	49	77
Book author		
Male	9	14
Female	55	86
Stories portraying ethnic diversity		
	22	34

38% of the books, they were depicted as understanding, especially with grandchildren.

Grandparents with obvious disabilities were depicted in only 23% of the books. Yet, for the most part, the disability had no bearing on the positive image of the character within the story. It should be noted that 53% of the authors/illustrators dedicated the book to their own grandparents or their own grandchildren. In one instance, the authors of the book were a grandmother and granddaughter team (Wyse & Goldman, 1998). Of the 64 books examined, several also represented different ethnic groups, including Jewish American, Hispanic, African American, Hawaiian, Vietnamese, Italian American, and Polish American.

#### **POSITIVE PORTRAYAL OF GRANDPARENT WITH DISABILITY**

It may be difficult for some to understand how an older grandparent can be depicted in a positive role and yet have a major disability. In *Grandma's Walk* (Hines, 1993), Donnie visits Grandma, who uses a wheelchair. His favorite activity is to take a walk with her. Grandma is a good storyteller, and so together they take an imaginary walk to the seashore and smell the salty breeze, walk barefoot on the warm sand, observe animals, and build a sand castle. At the end of the story, Donnie hugs his grandmother and says, "You're the best walker in the whole world." Several other examples of the positive portrayal of a disabled grandparent were found. For example, in

*The Memory Box* (Bahr, 1992), a grandfather realizes he has the beginning signs of Alzheimer's disease and starts a memory box with his grandson to keep memories of all the times they have shared. At the end of this story, the grandfather is concerned about how his daughter (the grandson's mother) will take this illness, and so he tells his grandson, "When it gets bad, bring out the Memory Box. Show her what I remember." The reality of the debilitating effects of dementia and cognitive decline among older adults also is apparent in *A Beautiful Pearl* (Whitelaw, 1991). Here, grandma's mind is deteriorating from the effects of Alzheimer's disease. However, grandmother presents Lisa, her granddaughter, with a special gift on Lisa's birthday. "It's a beautiful pearl, a beautiful pearl." "A beautiful pearl for a beautiful girl, I say. Yes Lisa, you're a beautiful girl." Lisa responds, "I love you, grandma."

In another story featuring a grandparent with Alzheimer's, the grandson learns to see the world of long ago through grandpa's recollection. Grandson and grandfather enjoy wonderful times together, even when grandpa forgets things and calls him by the wrong name in *A Window of Time* (Leighton, 1995). At one point, the grandfather's daughter gently rebukes her aging father and says, "Dad, your time machine is on the fritz again." Glancing at his grandson, the grandfather replies as if he is in agreement with the daughter—"Well, well, is it now?" Then grandpa looks over to his grandson and gives a wink, reassuring him that all is well. The accompanying picture shows the grandfather and grandson hugging each other.

Of the books examined for this study, there are three that include a grandparent with a disability or social problem that challenge the positive aspect of these characters. In *Can You Hear Me, Granddad?* (Thompson, 1986), granddad has a hearing impairment. The granddaughter keeps trying to tell him about the things she is going to do, but grandfather keeps twisting them around. "We're going to the zoo." "What's that? Glue? You've fallen in glue?" The story continues like this, and there is no question that the story is humorous. Older adults who have heard the story also think it is humorous. However, it does have the potential to be insulting to some. In *Sara and Grandmother Rose* (Ramos, 1992), the grandmother and granddaughter, Sara, are homeless. Grandmother Rose does everything possible to survive—work, find shelter and food. Despite these efforts, Sara dies during the winter, but not without thinking she is in heaven now because this is what her grandmother told her. In *Sunshine Home* (Bunting, 1994), Timmie, the grandson, learns to deal with the difficulty of Gramma being placed in a nursing home. The grandmother is happy to

have her family visit but is primarily depressed because she wants to go home but believes that she will not.

#### DEATH OF A GRANDPARENT

Even when the death of a grandparent occurs in these stories, it has a positive influence on the surviving family members. In *Granddad Bill's Song* (Yolen, 1994), the grandson approaches various family members to determine what they were doing when Granddad Bill died. The responses are of pleasant memories that each person had of the grandfather. The grandson, Jon, eventually realizes that by talking to family and friends about their recollections, he is in a sense communicating with his grandfather. In *Great-Grandmother's Treasure* (Hickcox, 1998), it is the death of the great-grandmother that finally reveals the treasures she had kept secret for so long. "There they were, all the special treasures! And no wonder nobody could see them. They were the things she had given away. There were the smiles of course, and peanut butter cookies, ghost stories, and Mud Puddle Soup."

#### GRANDPARENTS AND WORK

The work role has been associated with friendship networks and self-esteem, especially for men. Staying on the job is one of the factors that is believed to enhance life expectancy. Grandparents in some of these stories not only remain gainfully employed, but represent an interesting array of occupations. A grandson boasts about his grandfather being a "hard worker" in *Grandpa Is a Tugboat Captain* (Kreisler, 1999). A Black grandfather is employed as an actor in a community playhouse during the summer in *Grandpa's Face* (Greenfield, 1988). Donna goes on the rounds with her grandfather in *The Jukebox Man* (Ogburn, 1998). After watching her grandfather repair broken jukeboxes and change records at work, Donna dances with him to her favorite tune. A young Guatemalan girl and her grandmother grow closer as they weave some special creations and then make a trip to the market in hopes of selling them in *Abuela's Weave* (Castaneda, 1993). Anne's grandfather tells her how he became interested in flying in the early days of flight, when barnstorming was popular, in *Grandpa Is a Flyer* (Baker, 1995). But, at one point, grandfather says, "Now what say we stop talking about it and do some flying?" In another story, Nam is a young boy in Vietnam whose grandfather is a farmer. In *Grandfather's Dream* (Keller, 1994), Nam and his grandfather are waiting for cranes to come back to their small village.

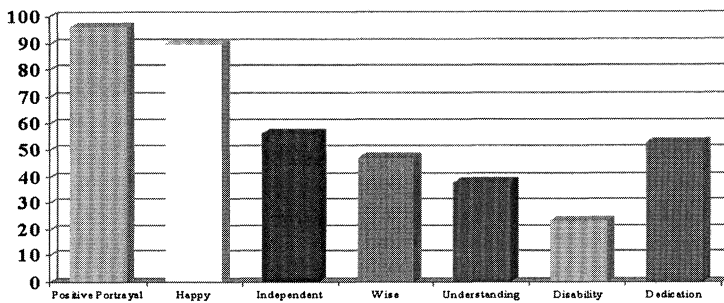
### THE GRANDPARENT AS HERO IN THE STORY

Several of the books examined not only depicted the grandparent in a positive manner, but the character was a hero or heroine in the story. They solve family problems, fix things, or inspire family, especially grandchildren. In *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman, 1991), Grace wants to play Peter Pan in the upcoming school play. Her classmates say she cannot because she is a girl and she is Black. Her grandmother tells her that she can do anything she wants to do if she sets her mind to it. Later, the grandmother takes Grace to a ballet that features a Black ballerina. Grace is inspired, practices, and is selected to be Peter Pan. *Thunder Cake* (Polacco, 1990) is based on a true story about the author who was afraid of thunderstorms. Her grandmother, Babushka, helps her overcome her fear by redirecting the child's attention to making a cake—a Thunder Cake.

Years ago, many people had clothes made for them by tailors. Gabby usually has her grandfather, a tailor, make her a navy coat for the winter. This year, she wants a purple coat. How does Grandpa solve the dilemma, as Gabby's mom thinks a purple coat is silly? In *The Purple Coat* (Hest, 1986), grandpa makes a reversible coat—navy on one side and purple on the other. In another story, the grandfather wants to teach his granddaughter how to see the world in different ways. So, in *Looking for Angels* (Gregory, 1996), Sarah's grandfather shows her how to look for the sleeping sun, jewels in the garden, a circus outside the window, and angels. Not only are some of the characters depicted nonstereotypically, but very much so. In *My Grandma Has Black Hair* (Hoffman, 1988), Sylvia does not want to be called Granny or anything such as that. She drives a Volkswagen Beetle for a car, has a rude parrot for a pet, and she does not sew or cook well. She has a husband who also does not look like any typical grandfather. When the granddaughter confronts Sylvia about how she is not like a storybook grandmother, she replies, "Well, flower, I'm not going to change, so the books'll have to" (see Figure 1 for a distribution of grandparents' personal and/or physical characteristics portrayed in the books).

### DISCUSSION

This study was designed to analyze the content of current children's books and the types of images of grandparents (positive, neutral, or negative) that are portrayed in contemporary children's stories. Specifically, the goal of this study was to determine the extent to which grandparents are portrayed in positive ways, and whether children's books present a diversified perspective on grandparents. This article was not developed



**Figure 1: Percentages of Books That Met Selected Criteria**

from the standpoint of conventional research manuscripts. Rather, the authors wanted to classify the positive portrayal of older adults in children's stories for the purpose of emphasizing the veneration and status of older adults. Such stories are used in recreational therapy for older adults at senior centers and in other community and institutional settings. Quite often, stories such as those outlined in this article are viewed by elders as a source of reminiscence, self-validation, or pride in their own accomplishments. Moreover, these stories also point to the importance that grandparents have in their grandchildren's and families' lives. It is clear that the majority of contemporary children's books dealing with grandparents are sensitive to the various ways in which grandparents interact with their grandchildren and to a broad range of grandparent lifestyles and experiences. It is worth noting that a majority of the books reviewed for this study were written by females ( $n = 55$ ). It is also noteworthy that of the 64 books analyzed, only 12 discuss both grandparents, and 11 of these were authored by women. The fact that the majority of these books were written by women may be a confirmation of kin keeper theories, which suggest that women maintain stronger ties with family members and are more involved than men in activities that maintain family ties. It has been reported that many women derive greater enjoyment from nontask activities (e.g., telling stories to young relatives) than to task-oriented activities (e.g., meal preparation). The kin keepers serve to keep family members in touch with each other. This role is mainly played by women, with a minority of men engaged in kin-keeping activities (Connidis, 1989). The small proportion of stories that discussed both grandparents may reflect the importance of grandmothers in their grandchildren's lives. On the other hand, this may also reflect differences in mortality among older men and women. A seemingly plausible explanation is that grandchildren have

more involvement, recollections, and memories of their grandmothers due to the death of the grandfather early in the grandchild's life.

Perhaps a more important issue emerges from our examination of the seven stories that address issues of health, functional ability, and disability of the grandparents. As noted earlier, although the grandparents did have obvious disabilities, they were still portrayed in positive ways. As for heterogeneity of images of grandparents, the 34% of these books that did discuss such issues expressed sensitivity to diverse experiences and a value for diversity. Across all of the children's books that we evaluated, the non-verbal message communicated through the graphic images seems to support the printed message of the grandparent being valued, respected, and appreciated by the grandchild, and vice versa.

## CONCLUSION

Not only are current children's literature depicting grandparents in positive ways, they are doing it in a very aggressive and diversified manner. Grandparents are typically involved in not only playing with their grandchildren and telling them stories, but oftentimes are primary caretakers of them. The children's stories that we have reviewed here represent many different ethnic groups and social situations, including racially mixed families. Even though some of the grandparents portrayed had noticeable disabilities or even died in the stories, these situations did not detract from the overall positive impression of the grandparent.

As we enter the new millennium, and the life expectancy of older adults is extended, the prospect of shared intergenerational relationships over longer periods of time is greater than any other time in history. Consequently, the portrayal of grandparents in all forms of media and communication will play a significant role in determining how children, young people, and society as a whole perceive and treat this important family relationship.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This line of research could be improved by analyzing the level of congruence between the written portrayal of grandparents and the graphic images used in the children's books. In addition, future research along these lines should consider the variance in portrayal of grandparents along racial/ethnic lines to assess the similarities and/or differences in the ways in which gender, health and illness, status, veneration, and importance of the grandparents are portrayed.

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