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Communicative predictors of solidarity in the grandparent–grandchild relationship

Jake Harwood

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ABSTRACT

This research examined college students' and their grandparents' ($N = 135$ dyads) self-reports of communication behaviors in the grandparent–grandchild (GP–GC) relationship. The research aimed to understand predictors of communication satisfaction, liking, and emotional closeness in the relationship from a basis in communication accommodation theory. For grandchildren, predictors included their perceptions of their grandparents' levels of accommodation and overaccommodation to them in interactions, as well as their own levels of accommodative involvement with their grandparents. For grandparents, perceptions of their grandchildren's accommodation to them best predicted solidarity. Neither perceived grandchild *overaccommodation* nor perceived grandparent *underaccommodation* were significant predictors in regression analyses, although both were significantly correlated with the criterion measures. Implications of the results for the study of the GP–GC relationship are discussed, and future applications of accommodation theory and intergroup contact theory are suggested.

KEY WORDS: accommodation theory • grandparenting • relational solidarity

The current study examines an important intergenerational relationship – the grandparent–grandchild (GP–GC) relationship – from the perspective

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of recent intergenerational communication research. The importance of communication to successful aging processes has become clear in recent years (Nussbaum & Coupland, 1995). Work has demonstrated that serious health consequences may ensue from inadequate communication environments (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; Rodin & Langer, 1977). Indeed, a substantial portion of the health decrement traditionally associated with aging may be, in one form or another, socially constructed (Coupland & Coupland, 1990; Rook, 1995). The relationship between communication and health in old age has been extensively theorized, resulting in sophisticated, empirically supported models (Hummert, 1994; Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood, 1986). However, such research has largely revolved around communication in rather depersonalized, relationship-free, settings. The current study applies such research to the GP–GC relationship, yielding interesting information about this neglected family relationship, as well as extending our knowledge of intergenerational communication.

Accommodation in intergenerational communication

The communication and aging research of the past 15 years has resulted in a relatively sophisticated understanding of important factors influencing intergenerational communication. Of particular relevance to the current study, Williams and her colleagues (Williams et al., 1997; Williams & Giles, 1996) have inductively examined various evaluative dimensions central to the experience of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in nonfamily intergenerational interactions. Williams' work has been grounded in communication accommodation theory (CAT: Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987; N. Coupland, Coupland, Giles, & Henwood, 1988a; Gallois, Giles, Jones, Cargile, & Ota, 1995). This work emphasizes the ways in which participants attune their communication to their partner, and the extent to which they perceive their partner as appropriately attuning to themselves. According to CAT, this attuning occurs with respect to perceived interpretive competencies (e.g., talking louder to accommodate a hearing deficit), conversation needs (e.g., selecting topics perceived to be appropriate to the other), or role relations (e.g., being appropriately deferential to a higher status individual) (N. Coupland et al., 1988a). Such attuning occurs in three ways that are central to the current study.

First, individuals may be perceived as *underaccommodative*, meaning that they fail to incorporate their partner's needs into their communication strategies. Such speech has been noted in intergenerational encounters, particularly from older adults. Excessive disclosure about painful events (e.g., poor health, bereavement) has been shown to occur, and to be somewhat disturbing for younger listeners who find it hard to provide appropriate responses to such disclosures (Henwood, Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1993; J. Coupland, Coupland, Giles, & Wiemann, 1988; Giles & Harwood, 1997). Behaviors such as excessive complaining or giving unwanted advice would also fit under the rubric of underaccommodation.

At the other extreme, *overaccommodative* communicators would go 'too far' in accommodating their partner's needs, for instance, by accommodating

towards a stereotype of their partner rather than their actual competencies. In the intergenerational communication literature, the most common example of such overaccommodation has been patronizing speech (Hummert, Shaner, Garstka, & Henry, 1998). Young people have been shown in some circumstances to overaccommodate to an older interlocutor by producing speech that includes exaggerated intonation, simplified syntax and vocabulary, and louder volume (i.e., speech targeted to a stereotype of older adults' interpretive competence: Caporael, 1981; Ryan, Hummert, & Boich, 1995). Such speech is evaluated negatively by older and younger adult observers (Harwood & Giles, 1996), and has been theoretically linked to negative consequences for older recipients (Ryan et al., 1995). Overaccommodation has also been described in older people's talk to the young, although this has received less attention (Giles & Williams, 1994).

Finally, and in contrast to the previously described strategies, appropriately *accommodative* communicators would take their partner's needs into account and communicate in a way that was sensitive to those needs, and not over- or under-played. Ng, Liu, Weatherall, and Loong (1997) describe accommodative speech as including features such as being attentive, supportive, and complimenting (Williams & Giles, 1996).

This research has provided tremendous insight into intergenerational communication; however, it has paid little attention to an important context in which such communication occurs – the grandparent–grandchild (GP–GC) relationship. We might predict that communication processes would be different in this context, and hence that determinants of satisfying communication might vary. That said, intergenerational communication inside and outside the family may be similar. This might be the case if the individuals involved orient to one another primarily on the basis of their age group memberships, or if the GP–GC relationship is treated as a model for communication outside of the family. Hence, the current research borrows extensively from the theoretical and methodological grounding provided in the intergenerational communication literature, and particularly accommodation theory, and applies it to the GP–GC relationship. We should note that both Ng et al. (1997) and Cai, Giles, and Noels (1998) have compared the prevalence of various accommodation processes in intergenerational relationships inside and outside the family. The current study builds on their work, which is described in more detail below.

The grandparent–grandchild relationship

Research in communication and aging is only just beginning to take into account the fact that intergenerational communication does not occur in a relational vacuum. For instance, work by Nussbaum and his colleagues (e.g., Nussbaum & Bettini, 1994; Williams & Nussbaum, 2000) has provided an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the ways in which communication and relationships in old age are intertwined in complex fashions. In a rare study of communication between grandparents and grandchildren, Nussbaum and Bettini (1994) tape-recorded conversations in which grandparents were asked to tell a story that captured the 'meaning of life' to their

grandchildren. They found that grandmothers told longer stories, and that the vast majority of grandparents disclosed their age in the context of telling the story. Grandfathers tended to talk about health issues and youth experiences. In contrast, grandmothers talked about family issues, in particular family history.

Ng et al. (1997) compared intergenerational accommodation processes within and outside the family from younger adults' perspectives. They found more positive accommodations within the family, and more satisfaction with intergenerational communication in family contexts. Cai et al. (1998) reported similar findings from older adults' perspectives, as well as providing data suggesting a relationship between perceptions of accommodations and levels of psychological adjustment. Neither study, however, examined the links between accommodation processes and relational satisfaction or solidarity.

A few other studies provide some useful piecemeal information about the GP–GC relationship. Holladay et al. (1998) interviewed young women to discover turning points in their relationship with their maternal grandmother. Among other turning points, they found that negative communication behaviors by the grandmother (e.g., lying, interfering) were perceived in retrospect as having a negative impact on the GP–GC relationship. Downs (1989) has shown that levels of mutual self-disclosure and grandparent storytelling in the GP–GC relationship are positively related to solidarity. Webb (1985) has provided descriptive information on topics that predominate in GP–GC conversation. Finally, Harwood (in press) investigated the relationship between communication media choice and GP–GC communication satisfaction, finding that telephone communication best predicts relational solidarity, when communication via other media is controlled. Beyond these isolated studies, systematic investigation of communication within the GP–GC relationship has largely been ignored (Downs, 1989). Most important, as noted by Williams and Nussbaum (2000), 'the pivotal role communication plays in determining the nature of the grandparent–grandchild relationship has received very little scholarly attention.'

This is unfortunate for many reasons. The vast majority of adults over the age of 65 are grandparents (Roberto & Stroes, 1992), and will have to negotiate this relationship. Data indicate that for both grandparents and grandchildren it is a more important relationship in their lives than is generally recognized (Brussoni & Boon, 1998; Sanders & Trygstad, 1993), perhaps second in importance only to the parent–child relationship (Kornhaber, 1985). In addition, this relationship provides a context in which many younger people have frequent and intimate contact with an older adult – a rare event outside the GP–GC relationship (Baranowski, 1982; Ng et al., 1997). Hence, experiences within the GP–GC relationship may be crucial in influencing younger adults' attitudes towards older adults in general (Kornhaber & Woodward, 1985; Matthews & Sprey, 1985; Silverstein & Parrott, 1997). Correlations between the quantity/quality of contact with grandparents and the young people's attitudes towards older adults in general

have been reported in the literature (e.g., Baranowski, 1982; Hillman & Stricker, 1996; Rosencranz & McNevin, 1969). However, such research has paid little attention to the internal dynamics of the relationship.

Two themes in the GP–GC relationship literature informed the design of the current study. First, the nature of the GP–GC relationship depends on a wide variety of exogenous factors. Research has shown that the most intimate GP–GC relationships tend to occur with grandmothers (especially maternal grandmothers; Somary & Stricker, 1998), between maternal grandparents and grandchildren of divorced parents (Johnson, 1988; Kennedy, 1992; cf. Cooney & Smith, 1996), in lower class families (Clavan, 1978), in physically proximate relationships (Fischer, 1983; cf. Somary & Stricker, 1998), and in particular cultural groups (Ikels, 1998). The work described in this paragraph indicates that any study of this relationship must first account for some basic structural features of the relationship. Szinovacz (1998a) provides data concerning grandparent variation on these dimensions.

Second, the GP–GC relationship has the capacity to be intimate, although it is not always so (Brussoni & Boon, 1998). For many grandparents, the relationship is a source of pride (Harwood & Lin, *in press*), and something that ‘keeps them young’ (Harwood, McKee, & Lin, 2000). For grandchildren, the relationship can be a place in which confidences are shared and family histories are learned, in an environment perceived as more ‘free’ than in conversations with parents (Harwood et al., 2000). Explaining variation in intimacy with nondemographic variables, however, is rarely attempted, and is one of the primary goals of the current study. What specific communication behaviors can effectively account for solidarity within the GP–GC relationship, and are they the same types of behavior that influence satisfaction in intergenerational relationships outside the family?

The current research

The current study examined grandchildren’s and grandparents’ evaluations of typical conversations between them. Research to date has rarely examined the communication that occurs in GP–GC relationships or the ways in which that communication relates to solidarity in the relationship. Clearly, uncovering particular behaviors, cognitions, and emotions associated with a satisfying GP–GC relationship is important in understanding why such relationships succeed or fail. Research to date has also tended to focus on either grandparents or grandchildren, very rarely examining the perspectives of both (Szinovacz, 1998b). In the current study, responses were gathered from matched GP–GC pairs in order to understand both individuals’ perspectives on the interactions. The grandparent and grandchild evaluated typical conversations between them on a wide variety of dimensions. The goal was to identify the specific evaluations of communication in the relationship that were associated with measures of relational solidarity.

Three measures of relational solidarity were examined as dependent variables: communication satisfaction, liking, and emotional closeness. These measures have previously been used successfully in examinations of

relationship functioning, and they examine a broad range of solidarity, from a casual enjoyment of interaction (communication satisfaction) to a deep level of intimacy in the relationship (emotional closeness).

Two research questions were developed, drawing on the two lines of research outlined above. First, previous research into the GP–GC relationship has examined exogenous factors that influence the GP–GC relationship. The current work examined those features in an attempt to replicate previous findings and to statistically control for the effects of these variables. When examining the effects of communication variables we wanted to remove possible confounds with exogenous variables previously shown to be relevant. The variables listed in RQ1 are those variables that have been most consistently examined and found to be significant in the literature.

RQ1: Can grandchildren's and grandparents' levels of communication satisfaction, liking, and emotional closeness in the GP–GC relationship be predicted by sex, grandparent age, lineage (maternal/paternal), and the divorce status of the middle generation?

Second, the study draws on Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), using the various measures of accommodation that have been studied in the intergenerational communication literature (described earlier). Given that accommodation is intrinsically linked to satisfaction in nonfamily contexts, we aimed to understand the ways in which it was related to solidarity in the GP–GC relationship. Hence, measures were taken to assess participants' ratings of their own use of various accommodative strategies, and their interpretations of their partners' use of such strategies.

RQ2: Which accommodative behaviors and cognitions are associated with communication satisfaction, liking, and emotional closeness in the GP–GC relationship?

Method

Participants

Young adults ($N = 180$) were recruited from an introductory speech communication class at the University of Kansas. The class fulfills a campus-wide requirement and includes a diverse array of majors. In groups of 8–20 people, these participants were asked to provide a mailing address for a living grandparent with whom they had spoken in the previous 12 months, and to complete a survey (described below) about communication with that grandparent. Individuals who had more than one grandparent (approximately 82% of the sample) were asked to select any one grandparent.

A similar (although shorter) questionnaire was mailed to the grandparent, accompanied by a postage-paid reply envelope. To ensure that the grandparent responded with regard to the appropriate grandchild, the grandchild's name was included on a sheet in the packet sent to the grandparents. Grandchild and

grandparent responses were connected with code numbers. Grandparents and grandchildren were clearly informed that their responses were confidential and that their grandchild/grandparent would not see their responses. Responses were received from 82% of the grandparents ($N = 147$), and 135 of these were usable. Responses of the grandchildren whose grandparents responded and those whose grandparents did not respond were compared on the variables central to the current analysis. The majority of the analyses revealed no significant differences. However, there were statistically significant ($p < .05$) relationships indicating that responses were received from grandparents with whom the grandchildren felt more positive while conversing, and who had less negative attitudes towards their grandchildren (from the grandchild's perspective).

In this final sample, the grandchildren were 67% female, 33% male (mean age = 19.96 years; $SD = 2.46$). Their grandparents were 82% grandmothers (53% maternal, 47% paternal) and 18% grandfathers (54% maternal, 46% paternal). The grandparents' mean age was 75.29 years ($SD = 5.91$). Before mailing, the addresses of the grandparents were coded for location. Kansas residents constituted 44% of the grandparents. The remainder were from other central states (37%), the Eastern US (13%) and the Western US (6%). The participants were 91% White (4% Black, 2% Asian, 3% others/missing). Parental divorce was indicated by 24% of the grandchildren. The grandchildren and grandparents were asked how often they communicated with the target grandparent. Most grandchildren (64%) indicated communicating *a few times a month*, and none reported less frequently than *a few times a year* (*once a year*, *less than once a year*, and *almost never* were not selected by any respondents). Most grandparents (50%) also reported communicating with their grandchild *a few times a month*, with only one respondent selecting the *once a year* option, and none reporting communicating less frequently than once a year. In an open-ended item, respondents were asked the situation in which their conversations occurred. The most frequent responses to this question were face-to-face (41%), telephone (10%), both telephone and face-to-face (40%), or these combined with other media such as e-mail (9%). Harwood (in press) provides additional data on media use in GP–GC relationships.

Materials

Grandparents and grandchildren independently completed a survey that focused on, respectively, one of their grandchildren/grandparents. The survey featured a number of sections; those relevant to the current article are described. Participants completed three general evaluations of relational solidarity with the target (their grandchild/grandparent). First, they responded to a shortened version of Hecht's (1978) communication satisfaction scale while thinking about 'typical' conversations with the target (5 items, $\alpha = .76$ for grandparents, $.89$ for grandchildren). The items were selected based on examination of factor structures and reliability coefficients from previous research using the entire scale in similar contexts (Items: I am generally satisfied with the conversations; I do *not* enjoy the conversations; I am generally dissatisfied with the conversations; I would like to have other conversations like those I generally have with my grandparent; These conversations flow smoothly). In addition, single items measuring each party's perceptions of his or her emotional closeness with the target (5 options: *very distant–very close*), and his or her liking of the target (5 options: *dislike very much–like very much*) were present. While single-item measures are subject to criticism, these are relatively clear items and

mirror those used successfully in previous research on GP–GC relations (e.g., Brussoni & Boon, 1998; Kennedy, 1992; Mangen, Bengtson, & Landry, 1988). These three measures (communication satisfaction, emotional closeness, and liking) were used as criterion variables in the analyses to be reported.

The pivotal sections in the questionnaire asked about a typical conversation between the parties. In particular, respondents evaluated various of their *own behaviors* in a typical conversation with the target (18 items), and various of the *target's behaviors* in a typical conversation (13 items for grandparent; 25 items for grandchild; items were measured on 5-point Likert scales). These items were derived from Williams et al. (1997), who developed a scale that assesses a range of accommodative behaviors and cognitions linked to satisfaction in intergenerational interactions. This scale has been useful in evaluating intergenerational communication between strangers (e.g., Harwood & Williams, 1998) and many of the items also seemed useful in evaluating GP–GC communication (Cai et al., 1998; Ng et al., 1997). A few items were added to measure elements specific to the GP–GC relationship (e.g., 'My grandparent provides interesting information about my family'). Although most items were identical in the grandparent and grandchild versions of the questionnaire, unique items were included when the topic seemed relevant to only one age group (e.g., 'I feel respect for my grandparent's knowledge and wisdom').

The majority of the items on the scale were explicitly developed in the context of CAT. Hence, in the current research, subscales were developed with reference to the previous work using the questionnaire and CAT principles. The goal was to derive reliable measures of accommodative behaviors by the self and perceptions of accommodation, underaccommodation, and overaccommodation by the target. The scales emerging from this process are presented in Tables 1 and 2, along with the items making up those scales, their reliability coefficients, and descriptive statistics. Cai et al. (1998) and Ng et al. (1997) both distinguished accommodative (positive) and nonaccommodative (negative) dimensions in their use of similar items. The current study sought to make finer distinctions in line with the research on intergenerational accommodation. A copy of the questionnaire is available from the author.

In terms of self-evaluations, grandparents and grandchildren both rated a series of items measuring their own level of *accommodative involvement* in the encounter. These items measured the degree to which the rater engaged in positive other-oriented behaviors (i.e., accommodation), and was interested in maintaining/pursuing the conversation. Second, grandchildren and grandparents both rated a series of items measuring their level of *reluctant accommodation*. This dimension was uncovered by Williams and Giles (1996) as an important determinant of satisfaction in intergenerational encounters. The items measured the extent to which the individuals felt constrained in the encounter, or unable to be themselves. Third, both participants provided assessments on scales designed to measure accommodation to the *role-relations* between them. These included different items for the two generations. For the grandchildren, issues of respect were seen as central to their role-relationship with their grandparent. For the grandparent, providing advice and talking about family history were central. In both cases, these items assessed the extent to which participants engaged in behaviors that reflected traditional role-relations between grandparents and grandchildren. Finally, the grandchildren assessed the extent to which they engaged in *interpretability strategies*: Communication behaviors performed to accommodate the perceived interpretive competence

TABLE 1
Dimensions of grandchildren's evaluations

Dimension: Items

Grandchild Accommodative Involvement (alpha = .72; $M = 3.93$; $SD = .58$): I share personal thoughts and feelings; Talk about topics my grandparent enjoys; Compliment my grandparent; Don't know what to say (R); Look to end the conversation (R); Want to leave (R)

Grandchild Reluctant Accommodation (alpha = .75; $M = 2.86$; $SD = .77$): I have to 'bite my tongue'; Avoid certain ways of talking; Don't always say what I think; Don't act like myself; Avoid certain topics

Grandchild Accommodating Role-Relations (alpha = .76; $M = 4.38$; $SD = .70$): I show respect for his/her age; Feel respect for his/her knowledge and wisdom

Grandchild Interpretability Strategies (alpha = .85; $M = 2.39$; $SD = 1.12$): I speak louder; Speak slower than normal

Perceived Grandparent Accommodation (alpha = .85; $M = 4.26$; $SD = .61$): My grandparent compliments me; Shows affection for me; Shows respect for me; Shares personal thoughts and feelings; Is attentive; Is supportive

Perceived Grandparent Overaccommodation (alpha = .76; $M = 1.75$; $SD = .80$): My grandparent negatively stereotypes me as a young person; Talks down to me

Perceived Grandparent Underaccommodation (alpha = .80; $M = 2.33$; $SD = .79$): My grandparent complains about his/her life circumstances; Complains about his/her health; Is closed-minded; Talks about his/her health; Expresses racist/prejudiced opinions; Makes angry complaints; Gives unwanted advice

Perceived Grandparent Topic Management (alpha = .72; $M = 4.10$; $SD = .70$): My grandparent tells interesting stories; Provides interesting information about history; Provides interesting information about my family

Note. (R) indicates reverse-scored items.

of their grandparents (e.g., speaking louder, presumably to accommodate a hearing impairment). Such behaviors are crucial in the intergenerational context, as they are often viewed as the core of speech styles that might be deemed patronizing by the recipient. These measures were not deemed relevant to the grandparents' questionnaire.

In rating their partner's behaviors, both grandparents and grandchildren rated the degree to which they perceived their partner as *accommodating* to them. Second, both parties rated the degree of *overaccommodation* by their partner (e.g., 'talks down to me'). As noted earlier, such overaccommodation has been observed in examinations of young people's talk to elders, and has also been suggested as an issue in how older people address the young (Giles & Williams, 1994). Third, grandchildren rated their grandparents' behavior in terms of its level of *underaccommodation* (e.g., complaining about health). These items were not present in the grandparents' questionnaire because the literature does not suggest they are an issue for older adults in dealing with the young. Finally, the grandchildren rated the extent to which their interests were accommodated by their grandparents (e.g., 'My grandparent tells interesting stories'). These behaviors reflect one dimension of accommodative discourse management that N. Coupland et al. (1988a) describe in terms of *topic management*. As a set, these

TABLE 2
Dimensions of grandparents' evaluations

Dimension: Items

Grandparent Accommodative Involvement (alpha = .60; $M = 4.29$; $SD = .42$): I share personal thoughts and feelings; Talk about topics my grandchild enjoys; Compliment my grandchild; Don't know what to say (R); Look for ways to end the conversation (R); Want to leave (R)

Grandparent Reluctant Accommodation (alpha = .76; $M = 2.25$; $SD = .72$): I have to 'bite my tongue'; Avoid certain ways of talking; Don't always say what I think; Don't act like myself; Avoid certain topics

Grandparent Accommodating Role Relations (alpha = .65; $M = 3.71$; $SD = .66$): I try to give advice; Try to provide guidance to my grandchild; Talk about family history

Perceived Grandchild Accommodation (alpha = .82; $M = 4.20$; $SD = .49$): My grandchild compliments me; Shows affection for me; Shows respect for me; Shares personal thoughts and feelings; Is attentive; Is supportive

Perceived Grandchild Overaccommodation (alpha = .64; $M = 1.66$; $SD = .75$): My grandchild negatively stereotypes me as an old person; Talks down to me

Note. (R) indicates reverse-scored items.

scales measured self and perceived other accommodation, overaccommodation, underaccommodation (from old to young), and specific elements of discourse management and attention to role relations embodied in this relationship. Together, they provided a broad picture of the nature of communication accommodation within this relationship, both in terms of perceptions and enactment of accommodative behaviors.

Analysis

A correlation matrix of the variables was examined to gain a general impression of their relations to one another. The specific research questions were then examined in six hierarchical regression analyses. In each regression, the criterion variable was a measure of relational solidarity (communication satisfaction, closeness, or liking), assessed by the grandparent or the grandchild. Each criterion was predicted in three steps by: (a) control variables (both parties' sex, grandparent age, lineage (paternal/maternal), divorce in the middle generation), (b) the interaction term (grandparent sex X lineage), and (c) the specific measures of intergenerational communication described in Tables 1 or 2. The sex and lineage variables were both converted to standardized scores prior to computation of the interaction term (Aiken & West, 1991). Examination of VIF and tolerance information in the regression analysis did not indicate multicollinearity problems (all VIFs < 2.5, tolerances > .4).

Results

Correlations

As can be seen in Table 3, most measures from the grandchildren were significantly intercorrelated and correlated with the solidarity measures. The primary exception was the use of interpretability strategies (speaking louder, slower), which was unrelated to all other variables. The strongest intercorrelations between predictors were perceived grandparent overaccommodation with perceived grandparent accommodation (negative) and grandparent underaccommodation (positive), as well as own accommodative involvement with own reluctant accommodation (negative) and perceived grandparent accommodation (positive). The variables with the strongest correlations to the measures of relational solidarity were own accommodative involvement, perceived grandparent accommodation, and perceived grandparent overaccommodation.

For the grandparents, generally significant intercorrelations were also present, although to a lesser degree (Table 4). Perceptions of grandchild overaccommodation were strongly related to own accommodative involvement (negative) and own reluctant accommodation (positive). In addition, ratings of own accommodative involvement were negatively related to reluctant accommodation, and positively related to grandchild accommodation. The measure of accommodating role relations was only weakly associated with the other predictors, particularly reluctant accommodation, own accommodative involvement, and grandchild overaccommodation. The variable with the largest relationship to the satisfaction measures was the assessment of grandchild accommodation; measures of perceived grandchild overaccommodation and own accommodative involvement were also significantly related to the criterion measures. Measures of reluctant accommodation and role relations were less strongly associated with relational solidarity.

Regression analyses

Significant predictor variables in the six regression analyses are summarized in Tables 5 and 6 for grandchildren and grandparents, respectively. The narrative description below includes statistics relevant to blocks of variables (R^2 is used to indicate adjusted R^2). The tables and the narrative are organized by criterion variables, first for the grandchildren's data and then for the grandparents' data.

Predictors of relational solidarity for grandchildren. The global measure of *communication satisfaction* was not significantly predicted by either the set of demographic variables in step 1 ($R^2 = .01$) or the interaction effect in step 2 of the regression ($R^2 = .02$). However, the set of intergenerational accommodation variables did predict significant variance in grandchildren's evaluations of communication satisfaction ($R^2 = .69$, $F(14, 118) = 22.43$, $p < .001$; R^2 change = .68; F change(8, 118) = 35.99, $p < .001$). In the final model, three variables predicted significant unique variation in communication satisfaction. Grandchildren's level of accommodative involvement, and their perceptions of their grandparent as engaging in accommodative behaviors were both positively associated with communication satisfaction. In addition, perceptions of their grandparent as being overaccommodative were negatively associated with overall satisfaction (see Table 5).

The first two steps of the regression were again nonsignificant in predicting *liking* of the grandparent (step 1: $R^2 = .00$; step 2: $R^2 = .01$). The only set of

TABLE 3
Intercorrelations between all predictor and criterion variables for grandchildren

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Communication satisfaction	-	.64***	.64***	.73***	-.55***	.42***	-.09	.70***	-.69***	-.52***	.44***
2. Liking for grandparent		-	.62***	.46***	-.37***	.24**	-.05	.55***	-.58***	-.34***	.37***
3. Emotional closeness to grandparent			-	.55***	-.37***	.21*	-.05	.63***	-.50***	-.31***	.21*
4. Accommodative involvement				-	-.57***	.29**	-.05	.62***	-.53***	-.37***	.41***
5. Reluctant accommodation					-	-.24**	.10	-.49***	.45***	.45***	-.32***
6. Accommodating role relations						-	.06	.40***	-.33***	-.39***	.43***
7. Interpretability strategies							-	.02	.09	.16	.02
8. Grandparent accommodation								-	-.62***	-.44***	.44***
9. Grandparent overaccommodation									-	.63***	-.26**
10. Grandparent underaccommodation										-	-.11
11. Grandparent topic management											-

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

TABLE 4
Intercorrelations between all predictor and criterion variables for grandparents

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Communication satisfaction	–	.39***	.40***	.58***	–.58***	.05	.53***	–.44***
2. Liking for grandchild		–	.31***	.23**	–.20*	.03	.30***	–.20*
3. Emotional closeness to grandchild			–	.30**	–.17	.24**	.56***	–.30***
4. Accommodative involvement				–	–.61***	.17	.44***	–.49***
5. Reluctant accommodation					–	.02	–.26**	.51***
6. Accommodating role relations						–	.39***	–.02
7. Grandchild accommodation							–	–.29**
8. Grandchild overaccommodation								–

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

TABLE 5
Significant predictors of relational solidarity for grandchildren (in final model of regression)

Criterion variable (measure of relational solidarity)	Significant predictor variables	Beta	<i>pr</i>
<i>Communication satisfaction</i>	Accommodative involvement	.35***	.42
	Grandparent overaccommodation	-.28***	-.32
	Grandparent accommodation	.19*	.23
<i>Liking of grandparent</i>	Grandparent overaccommodation	-.36**	-.30
	Grandparent accommodation	.25*	.21
<i>Emotional closeness to grandparent</i>	Grandparent accommodation	.47***	.39
	Accommodative involvement	.28**	.26

Note. Partial correlation is indicated by *pr*.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

TABLE 6
Significant predictors of relational solidarity for grandparents (in final model of regression)

Criterion variable (measure of relational solidarity)	Significant predictor variables	Beta	<i>pr</i>
<i>Communication satisfaction</i>	Grandchild accommodation	.39***	.43
	Reluctant accommodation	-.31***	-.33
	Accommodative involvement	.23**	.24
	Grandparent sex \times lineage interaction	-.17**	-.24
	Role relations	-.15*	-.19
<i>Liking of grandchild</i>	Grandchild accommodation	.25*	.21
<i>Emotional closeness to grandchild</i>	Grandchild accommodation	.48***	.43

Note. Partial correlation is indicated by *pr*.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

variables that significantly predicted the grandchild's liking of the grandparent was the accommodation block entered in step 3 ($R^2 = .38$, $F(14, 118) = 6.87$, $p < .001$; R^2 change = .38; F change(8, 118) = 10.56, $p < .001$). Two variables predicted significant unique variation in liking of the grandparent in the final regression model. Perceived grandparent overaccommodation was negatively associated with and perceived grandparent accommodation positively associated with liking.

Grandchildren's perceptions of *emotional closeness* to their grandparents were not significantly predicted by the first two steps of the regression (step 1:

$R^2 = .06$; step 2: $R^2 = .06$). Perceptions of emotional closeness were predicted by the block of accommodation variables ($R^2 = .42$, $F(14, 118) = 7.88$, $p < .001$; R^2 change = .40; F change(8, 118) = 11.99, $p < .001$). Grandchildren's accommodative involvement and their perceptions of their grandparents' accommodation were both positively associated with closeness.

Predictors of relational solidarity for grandparents. The global measure of *communication satisfaction* was not significantly predicted by the first block of variables ($R^2 = .00$). Entry of the interaction effect (grandparent sex X lineage) in step 2 of the regression resulted in a borderline significant increase in variance accounted for (R^2 change = .02; F change(1, 121) = 3.52, $p = .06$). The set of accommodation variables predicted significant variance in grandparents' communication satisfaction evaluations ($R^2 = .53$, $F(11, 116) = 14.16$, $p < .001$; R^2 change = .52; F change(5, 116) = 27.76, $p < .001$). In the final model, the interaction term predicted significant variation in the criterion. Further examination revealed a cross-over pattern whereby paternal grandfathers ($M = 4.44$, $SD = .66$) were slightly, but nonsignificantly, more satisfied than maternal grandfathers ($M = 4.20$, $SD = .64$). In contrast, maternal grandmothers ($M = 4.52$, $SD = .38$) were significantly more satisfied with the conversations than paternal grandmothers ($M = 4.31$, $SD = .54$, $t(108) = 2.31$, $p = .02$). In addition, four of the accommodation variables predicted communication satisfaction. The grandparents' reluctant accommodation and enactment of role relations (e.g., offering advice) were negative predictors of communication satisfaction. Their level of accommodative involvement was a positive predictor of the criterion, as was the perception of grandchild accommodation (see Table 6).

In predicting the extent of *liking* the grandparent felt for the grandchild, only the variables entered in the third step of the regression reached significance (step 1: $R^2 = .00$; step 2: $R^2 = .01$; step 3: $R^2 = .08$, $F(11, 116) = 1.95$, $p = .04$; R^2 change = .06; F change(5, 116) = 2.61, $p = .03$). Only the grandparents' perception of their grandchild's accommodation in the encounter accounted for significant unique variance in the final model.

Grandparents' ratings of *emotional closeness* with their grandchildren were significantly predicted by the first block of demographic variables ($R^2 = .06$, $F(5, 122) = 2.47$, $p = .04$). In this first step, the lineage variable was a highly significant predictor of closeness (Beta = $-.23$, $p = .009$, $pr = -.23$). Maternal grandparents rated their closeness to their grandchildren as significantly higher ($M = 4.47$, $SD = .65$) than paternal grandparents ($M = 4.13$, $SD = .81$). Adding the interaction term in step 2 did not account for significant additional variance ($R^2 = .05$). Significant additional variation was accounted for by the accommodation variables ($R^2 = .31$, $F(11, 116) = 6.28$, $p < .001$; R^2 change = .26; F change(5, 116) = 10.17, $p < .001$). In the final model, only the grandparents' perception of their grandchild's accommodation in the encounter accounted for significant unique variance.

Summary of results

The measures of accommodation behaviors by self and other were mostly inter-correlated, with the exception of grandchildren's ratings of accommodating grandparent interpretive competence. Most of the accommodation measures were statistically significant predictors of relational solidarity in bivariate correlations. In regression analyses, ratings of other's accommodation to self were the strongest unique predictors of relational solidarity for both grandparents

and grandchildren. In addition, grandchildren's perceptions of grandparent overaccommodation (negative stereotyping, talking down to me) were a strong negative predictor of solidarity variables, and perceptions of own accommodative involvement with the conversation were a strong positive predictor. For grandparents, a number of accommodation variables and the interaction between grandparent sex and relational lineage combined to predict communication satisfaction, but perception of grandchild accommodation was the only significant predictor across regression analyses.

Discussion

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) has broadened its scope in recent years, taking on new levels at which individuals accommodate one another (e.g., discourse management, role relations) and new conceptions of the nature of that accommodation (e.g., overaccommodation, underaccommodation). These developments have enabled application of CAT to new contexts. The current study examined the role of accommodation processes in intergenerational relationships within the family, and constitutes one of the first attempts to apply CAT to the realm of personal relationships. This discussion outlines implications of the current findings for research on GP–GC relationships and CAT. Limitations of the study are also described.

Grandparent–grandchild relationships

The place of the grandparent in the family has been somewhat ignored in the family communication literature, compared to the focus on marital and parent–child communication (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1993). This is unfortunate given the demonstrated importance of the GP–GC relationship to its participants (Kornhaber, 1985), and to the family system as a whole (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Hopefully the current data will spur future attempts to understand this relationship and its relationship to the broader family (e.g., by incorporating reports from the middle generation). This study illustrates some ways in which the GP–GC relationship might provide interesting challenges to family researchers. For instance, it is clear that intergroup issues can be salient and extremely influential in this relationship (e.g., in the negative consequences of grandparents negatively stereotyping their younger relatives). As is elaborated below, the examination of intergroup issues within the family is an intriguing issue for future research.

Moving to more specific comments, we were struck by the lack of significant relationships between the control variables and the measures of relational solidarity. There were no significant effects for sex of grandchild or grandparent, age of grandparent, or middle-generation divorce. One effect emerged for lineage: In line with the previous literature, maternal grandparents reported themselves as emotionally closer to their grandchildren than paternal grandparents (Somary & Stricker, 1998). In addition, one

interaction between lineage and grandparent sex emerged. This effect was somewhat consistent with the previous literature in that maternal grandmothers rated the highest levels of satisfaction in the relationship (Smith, 1991). However, paternal grandfathers were next highest in communication satisfaction, whereas much previous literature indicates that they are the group that is most distant from their grandchildren (Smith, 1991). There was a relatively small number of grandfathers in our sample, so perhaps this result should not be overinterpreted.

The small number of findings for these exogenous variables is surprising given the large volume of previous research that has focused on them. It is possible that this sample of college-student grandchildren reveals a somewhat different influence of these demographic variables. For instance, perhaps children from divorced families rely on their grandparents and become closer to them earlier in childhood, but the effect does not persist into the college years (Cooney & Smith, 1996). The effects that did emerge for demographic variables both involve the lineage variable in the grandparents' evaluations. Most previous research on this variable has also investigated grandparents' perceptions, suggesting that lineage may be of less relevance to grandchildren (Giarrusso, Stallings, & Bengtson, 1995).

Accommodation theory

These results provide new information about the accommodation strategies associated with relational solidarity for grandparents and grandchildren. As a set, the communication variables performed considerably better than the demographic variables in predicting communication satisfaction, liking, and emotional closeness. This might be expected, as the communication variables asked about specific behaviors that are theoretically pertinent to relational success. That said, the specific variables that repeatedly showed predictive power are of interest.

For both grandparents and grandchildren, the most consistent predictor of relational solidarity was perceptions of their partners' level of accommodation to them. That is, grandchildren and grandparents who perceived their partners as complimenting them, showing affection, showing respect, sharing personal thoughts and feelings, being attentive, and being supportive were consistently more content and involved in their relationships. For grandparents, perceptions of grandchild accommodation were the most powerful unique predictors of *all* the criterion variables. Williams and Giles (1996) have noted that young adults often place the onus for communication success or failure on their older partners. The current study suggests that older people do this too, even in a close personal relationship. This could be predicted from a CAT perspective. While our own behaviors may *reflect* our orientation toward our partner (broadly convergent or divergent), our orientation is likely to be *determined* by their behaviors, not our own. Another individual who accommodates us is likely to engender satisfaction, liking, and closeness. That, in turn, should lead to our adoption of accommodative behaviors towards the other. In other words, while the current data are merely correlational, the fact that other accommodation emerged

as such a strong predictor is consistent with the theoretical causal ordering of relationships between these variables.

In addition, we should note that grandparents' *overaccommodation* of their grandchildren emerged as a significant predictor of the grandchildren's relational solidarity. Older people's patronization of younger people has received relatively little attention in the literature (cf. Giles & Williams, 1994). The current data indicate that for young people it has explanatory power in their assessments of relational solidarity, even when other measures of accommodation are controlled. Indeed, in explaining *liking* of the grandparent, it was the single strongest predictor in the current data. This finding should be interpreted in the context of the means on these variables. Perceptions of grandparent overaccommodation had a mean score of 1.75 on a 1–5 scale, implying that it was a relatively infrequent occurrence. However, in the relationships in which it does occur, it has significant implications for outcomes.

In contrast, perceptions of other behaviors that have received considerable attention in the literature were less informative about the state of the relationship in general. For grandparents, perceptions of overaccommodation by their grandchildren did not significantly predict any of the measures of relational solidarity, in spite of a large body of literature examining the problems associated with young people patronizing their elders (Ryan et al., 1995). Likewise, for grandchildren, perceptions of grandparents *underaccommodating* them were not predictive of relational solidarity, despite extensive research examining underaccommodative behaviors by older adults toward young adults, and young adults' problems in dealing with such behaviors (Henwood et al., 1993; J. Coupland et al., 1988; N. Coupland, Coupland, Giles, Henwood, & Wiemann, 1988b). How do we account for these apparent disparities?

First, the statistical methods are relevant. As can be seen by examining the correlations in Tables 3 and 4, both young overaccommodation and elder underaccommodation *were* significant negative predictors of the relational solidarity measures in a simple bivariate analysis. However, these relationships disappeared in the regression, presumably because the variance they share with the outcome measures was also shared with other measures of accommodative behavior. Second, we should not forget the context. Cai et al. (1998; also Ng et al., 1997) note that accommodative behaviors are more common in family than nonfamily intergenerational encounters, and that affect tends to be more positive in family contexts for both younger and older respondents. This suggests that under- and overaccommodation may be more problematic in stranger interactions as opposed to family contact. Within the family, these behaviors probably occur less frequently, and may be more easily managed than in nonfamily contexts. A grandparent might be more willing to provide a friendly reminder that s/he's 'not senile yet' to a grandchild, and hence deflect overaccommodation (Harwood & Giles, 1996; Ryan et al., 1995). Likewise, a grandchild might be truly concerned by a grandparent's health problems, and hence not view painful self-disclosures as intrinsically

underaccommodative. This, of course, has interesting implications for our own *a priori* conceptualization of certain behaviors as over- or underaccommodative.

Overall, these data suggest that the CAT has untapped explanatory power in close relationships. It is worth reiterating the effect sizes: The accommodation variables alone accounted for an average of 38% of the variance in the criterion measures, even when a number of demographic variables was controlled. In addition, while the measure of other's accommodation to self was most powerful across grandparent and grandchild analyses, other measures demonstrated different predictive potential for grandparents and grandchildren (e.g., grandparent overaccommodation was important for grandchildren; grandchild overaccommodation was not significant in the regressions of the grandparent data).

We see exciting directions for future research building from the current data. First, it would be useful to examine the accommodation variables described in this study in a cross-lagged longitudinal design. Such a design would allow a better understanding of the types of accommodation that are truly *predictive* of future relational success, as opposed to merely being correlated with such success. Such research would provide new insight on the communicative processes that drive relational development, and indeed those that precipitate relational dissolution. To our knowledge, little work has examined accommodation processes in close personal relationships, yet the current analyses suggest that such processes have the potential to explain considerable variation in long-term relational outcomes (Cai et al., 1998; Ng et al., 1997).

An additional important challenge for the future will be to forge links between examinations of the GP–GC relationship and the broader literature on intergenerational relations. One interesting arena for such work will be in the context of contact theory (Allport, 1954; Hewstone & Brown, 1986). Briefly, this theory suggests that contact with particular members of an outgroup can have positive consequences for attitudes towards that outgroup as a whole. However, this statement is qualified by a large number of conditions on the nature of the contact (e.g., it must be cooperative rather than competitive, the outgroup member must disconfirm stereotypes of his or her group, the situation must have acquaintance potential: Allport, 1954; Brewer & Miller, 1988). In addition, recent work suggests that the contact must also be 'intergroup': the outgroup member must be perceived as somehow typical of his or her group, and group memberships must be salient (Hewstone & Brown, 1986). Otherwise, for example, young people might comfortably maintain negative attitudes towards 'old people,' while treating their grandparent as a special or atypical member of that group with whom they have a very positive relationship (a phenomenon originally termed 're-fencing' by Allport, 1954). The intergenerational situation is one in which, particularly for younger people, the vast majority of intergroup contacts may occur within a small number of family relationships. Hence, the processes that occur within that relational context deserve more attention as we study the development of negative attitudes towards the aging

process and older people. What are the communication processes in a GP–GC relationship that facilitate the development of more positive attitudes towards aging? What are those that encourage fencing-off the individual family member from the group as a whole? The current research has established some of the behavioral bases for positive contact with a specific member of an age outgroup. Future work should examine which particular behaviors encourage generalization of positive attitudes from the specific outgroup member to the group as a whole (Hamberger & Hewstone, 1997; Herek & Capitano, 1996; Pettigrew, 1997; Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997).

Finally, the current study illustrates the utility of examining personal relationships from both an intergroup and an interpersonal perspective. An approach grounded in accommodation theory and an awareness of intergroup processes might be valuable elsewhere in the study of families, for instance in understanding gender relations in heterosexual couples, or age dynamics between parents and children.

Limitations

Briefly, sampling limitations should be acknowledged. The grandchildren in the current study were fairly homogeneous in terms of age, ethnicity, and probably socio-economic background. Likewise, their grandparents were ethnically homogeneous, and also rather skewed in terms of their sex (they were largely female). The sex imbalance is a function of the convenience sample – the course from which the grandchildren volunteered had a majority female enrollment. Demographic realities influence the imbalance in the grandparent sample. Approximately 61% of over-70s are female, and with increasing age the sex imbalance grows larger. Hence, women are more likely to become grandmothers and are likely to be grandmothers for more years of their lives (Spitze & Ward, 1998). Children are considerably more likely to have longer relationships with grandmothers than grandfathers (Matthews & Sprey, 1985).

The sample was also homogeneous in terms of the positivity of the relationships we examined, as revealed by the means in Tables 1 and 2. The mode of data collection undoubtedly contributed to this bias (i.e., grandchildren with negative perceptions of their grandparents may have elected not to participate, grandparents with a negative view of their grandchildren may have elected not to return the questionnaire). Hence, it is possible that we have uncovered variables that differentiate extremely satisfying relationships from those that are more neutral. In the future, it will be important to examine situations in which the GP–GC relationship is not functioning well and examine whether the influential variables in the current study are also important in those relationships. Folwell and Grant (1999) illustrate a methodological approach to gaining a more balanced sample.

The predictor variables in the current study demonstrate some substantial patterns of intercorrelation, which may raise concerns. First, we should note that examination of tolerance and VIF values did not indicate

multicollinearity problems. In addition, the predominance of significant correlations in Tables 3 and 4 should not be interpreted as indicating homogeneity in the relationships. The highly significant ($p < .01$) intercorrelations between the predictors ranged dramatically in size, from small relationships ($r^2 = .06$) to fairly large ones ($r^2 = .40$). This indicates that our predictors were not highly redundant measures. However, some predictor variables that have strong bivariate relationships with the criterion variables emerged as nonsignificant in the regression analyses for this reason. The regressions are designed to uncover the variables with the strongest *unique* influence on the criterion variables.

Clearly, these data provide only a first step in the examination of this important relationship. Much remains to be done in applying accommodation theory and other intergroup perspectives to the relationship, particularly in terms of understanding its development over time. Armed with the information from the current study, we can move towards a more complete understanding of GP–GC relational dynamics.

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