CONVERSATION TOPICS AND COMMUNICATION SATISFACTION IN GRANDPARENT-GRANDCHILD RELATIONSHIPS

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*This article investigated college students' and their grandparents' (*n = 103 dyads) reports of topics in conversation with each other. For grandparents and grandchildren, family and education were the two most frequently mentioned topics. Other popular topics were leisure and friendship for both grandparents and grandchildren. A cluster analysis was performed to group the grandparent-grandchild dyads according to their topic reports. Four dyadic clusters were identified: family relationships, social activity talk, social and work talk, and impersonal events. Grandparents and grandchildren demonstrated moderate levels of agreement in the topics they reported. No association was found between reports of topics and communication satisfaction whether the reported topics were treated individually or dyadically. Theoretical implications for the literature on intergenerational communication both within and outside of family contexts are discussed.*

Previous studies on intergenerational relations have provided us with increased knowledge about the role of talk in propagating and perpetuating stereotypes of the elderly (Henwood, Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1993; Hummert & Shaner, 1994; Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood, 1986), the structure of interactions featuring elderly participants (Boden & Bielby, 1986), the role of age identity in talk through the life span (N. Coupland & Nussbaum, 1994), and certain unusual

features of such communication (e.g., painful self-disclosures to strangers, adult disclosures of chronological age; N. Coupland, Coupland, & Giles, 1991). The vast majority of this work has examined interactions between strangers. An additional element of importance that needs to be considered is what younger and older people actually discuss. Given that grandparent-grandchild (GP-GC) relationships might be the most frequent and satisfying connection between these two generations (Williams & Giles, 1996), it is important to return to a fundamental level and examine the content of talk in this relationship as well as the ways in which that content relates to the quality of the relationship. Therefore, this article examines topics of conversation in the GP-GC relationship from both the grandparent's and the grand-child's perspectives.

Understanding more about the content of GP-GC conversation will yield a number of useful outcomes. First, the topics that emerge may be useful in programs to assist intergenerational relationships. In some cases, very basic help such as providing ideas for what to talk about may be helpful (although we would resist prescriptive approaches based on limited data). Second, examining associations between topic use and relational satisfaction may help us understand more about the ways in which this important family relationship operates successfully for some individuals. When the relationship is working, what are the key topical themes that can be identified? Third, identifying important topics and understanding the quality of relationships in which those topics occur in different proportions will illustrate the diversity in the GP-GC relationship and help us understand the various types of GP-GC relationships that exist. Comparisons with previous work may also illustrate some ways in which talk in this relationship resembles (or does not resemble) talk in other intergenerational settings. Theoretically, this work helps us build models of successful intergenerational communication and family communication. The GP-GC relationship may be the most intimate intergenerational relationship, and it provides the majority of intergenerational contact for many young people (Williams & Giles, 1996). It plays an important role in both parties' lives (e.g., Folwell & Grant, 1999; Kennedy, 1992; Roberto & Stroes, 1992). The quality of the GP-GC experience influences grandparents' psychological well-being (Harwood & Lin, 2000; Roberto, 1990) as well as younger adults' motivation and stereotypes concerning contact with older adults in general (Harwood, 2000c; Tomlin, 1998). Factors that influence grandparents' and grandchildren's perceptions of GP-GC interactions include demographic factors such as gender and family lineage (e.g., Roberto & Stroes, 1992), cognitive factors such as perceived closeness (Folwell & Grant, 1999; Pecchioni & Croghan, 2000), types of accommodative behavior (Harwood, 2000b), experiential factors such as contact frequency (Brussoni & Boon, 1998), and the medium of the communication (Harwood, 2000a).

Research on GP-GC relationships provides a more complete picture of modern familial structure and relational networks and is fundamental for a better understanding of intergenerational interaction as a whole. The current study is an investigation of a fundamental element of GP-GC communication: what grandparents and grandchildren talk about.

TOPICS OF CONVERSATION

As Boden and Bielby (1986) stated, topics are the "interactional stuff of conversation" (p. 74). Previous research on topics of conversation has examined a variety of adult settings, with a few studies examining older people. Haas and Sherman (1982) examined the topics of conversation reported among adults. Among other things, they found that women reported talking about family, relationship problems, men, health, and media, whereas men reported conversations focused on women, money, news, and sports. Among friends, the other gender was reported most often, coworkers discussed work, and family members tended to discuss family.

Topics of conversation in communication including elderly participants have become a subject of some research in recent years. Boden and Bielby (1983, 1986) examined the organization of topics in peer-elderly conversations and found a number of ways in which "the past" draws individuals together in interaction and works as a "template or frame through which present meanings are both shared and collaboratively produced" (Boden & Bielby, 1986, p. 74). Thus, co-reference to shared past experiences (wars, economic eras) is more than simple reminiscence but builds shared identity and joint understanding. J. Coupland, Coupland, Giles, and Henwood (1991) noted a similar pattern. They viewed certain references to the past as age markers— specific conversational markers that indicate an individual's age or contribute to a categorization as elderly.

Coleman (1986) reported that older men's conversations often focus on events (e.g., being in the army), whereas those of older women often focus on family life. Consistent with Coleman's findings, Stuart, Vanderhoof, and Beukelman (1993) found that the topic of family predominated in elderly women's talk. However, among older (late 70s) respondents, references to friends and acquaintances increase and references to family decrease. Friends of similar age who have shared and are currently sharing in the process of aging are likely to be more empathic communication partners than younger individuals. A related feature may be the loss of spouses in this age group, especially for older women (Lee & Ishii-Kuntz, 1988; Roberto & Kimboko, 1989). This may enforce an increased reliance on friends as opposed to family.

The work of J. Coupland, Coupland, Giles, and Wiemann (1988; J. Coupland et al., 1991) also bears on this discussion, although these

authors do not explicitly frame their discussion in terms of topics. They note frequent painful self-disclosure (PSD) in talk by older women in both inter- and intragenerational settings. PSD consists of potentially embarrassing and at times elaborate disclosure of information on issues such as illness, bereavement, and financial or life-situation problems. J. Coupland et al. (1988) argued that these topics are problematic for (particularly young) listeners and that they violate the norms of conversation accepted among the young (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Henwood et al., 1993). J. Coupland et al.'s (1991) work also demonstrates that older adults often disclose their chronological age in talk, and their age will itself become a topic of talk. J. Coupland et al. noted that this can serve the function of accounting for decrement or at times offering a contrast between actual and predicted (based on age) decrement. Positive contrasts are often made explicit by younger conversational partners' praise (e.g., "you're wonderful for 83, aren't you?!").

The research described thus far has focused on intergenerational relationships outside of the family context. Individuals in such contexts may rely on scripts or stereotypes to maintain interaction due to the relative absence of developed relationships and individualized conversational routines (Harwood, McKee, & Lin, 2000; Hummert, 1999). Research on intergenerational interaction in the family context is less common, but a small amount of work has examined topics in this context. All such work (and indeed a good proportion of all work on this relationship) studies college-age grandchildren, as is the case with the current study.

Nussbaum and Bettini (1994) tape recorded conversations in which grandparents were asked to tell a story to their grandchildren that captured the "meaning of life." They found that the vast majority of grandparents disclosed their age in the context of telling the story (see above). Grandfathers talked about health issues and youth experiences, whereas grandmothers talked about family issues and family history. Webb (1985) examined grandchildren's recollections of GP-GC conversational topics and found family, school, and health to be most commonly reported, whereas death, religion, and the weather appeared less often. Webb found that topics in the GP-GC relationship displayed considerable variation in ratings of intimacy.

Webb's (1985) work provides part of the impetus for the current study. Whereas considerable work exists on issues of miscommunication and problematic features of intergenerational interaction, less work tells us what younger and older people talk about. If a paucity of topical resources exists for the individuals in intergenerational encounters, this could be one source of anxiety in such interactions and a key point for breakdown. Suggestive evidence that this is the case derives from Boden and Bielby's (1986) work described earlier, which

demonstrated that "the past" is a crucial resource in communication between elderly individuals. This topic is not a shared resource in interactions with younger people; therefore, it would be useful to know what resources are available in intergenerational interactions, particularly those that occur frequently as is the case for GP-GC interactions. As noted earlier, we feel that understanding more about topic use in this relationship will enhance our understanding of intergenerational communication as a whole: In the future, we can compare topics occurring in GP-GC relationships with those that occur in intergenerational interactions between non–family members. Theoretically, this study should also contribute to our broader understanding of what predicts relational satisfaction (at least in this context): Are particular conversational topics or patterns of topic use related to communication satisfaction in this relationship?

Although there are similarities between Webb's (1985) study and the current one, the current study aimed to improve on Webb's approach in a number of ways. First, Webb's study examined only grandchildren's reports, whereas the current study examined dyadic data. Frequent calls have been made for the literature in this area to examine reports of both grandparents and grandchildren (Szinovacz, 1998). Second, the current study aimed to go beyond simple descriptive data concerning reports of topic usage by examining the relationship between reported topics and communication satisfaction. Third, the current article attempted to construct a new set of topic categories to try to correct for the large number of low-frequency categories reported by Webb as well as to account for grandparents' responses. Finally, Webb asked respondents to report the topics of their most recent face-to-face interaction with their grandparents. Our survey asked respondents to report the topics of a typical GP-GC conversation, a prompt that we felt would yield more representative responses. We also aimed to make some analytical advances over Webb's research, most importantly by considering topic use in a multivariate fashion by identifying clusters or profiles of GP-GC topic use.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the past research, this project sought to expand our knowledge of GP-GC conversations in four ways. First, we aimed to identify topics of conversation reported by both parties as being frequently discussed in GP-GC relationships and understand more about the relative frequency of use of those topics.

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What topics do grandparents and grandchildren report discussing in GP-GC conversations?

Second, we aimed to uncover clusters of grandparent and grandchild dyads based on the topics they reported talking about. It seemed likely to us that patterns or profiles of topic use might be more informative than piecemeal consideration of topics.

> *Research Question 2 (RQ2):* Can we identify clusters of GP-GC dyads based on reports of conversation topics?

The third research goal was to investigate the extent to which grandparents and grandchildren report the same topics as being common in their interactions. Such agreement may be crucial in terms of understanding relational success and failure. Relationships in which grandparents and grandchildren report different topics may be qualitatively different from those in which they provide similar reports (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1993; Harwood, 2001). In other words, the level of agreement on topics may reflect the level of common ground in the relationship or the degree of relational intersubjectivity.

> *Research Question 3 (RQ3):* To what extent do grandparents and grandchildren report similar conversation topics?

Finally, we attempted to discover whether successful relationships frequently feature talk about specific topics. Thus, three subquestions were developed to examine the association between reports of conversational topics and GP-GC communication satisfaction. First, it was important to understand whether conversations about particular topics occurred in interactions characterized by particular levels of communication satisfaction. Second, we were interested in whether levels of communication satisfaction significantly differed among the topically based clusters of GP-GC dyads identified in RQ2. Third, as hinted at above, we were interested in whether grandparents and grandchildren who reported similar conversational topics tended to report higher levels of communication satisfaction. It is reasonable to predict that partners who share similar perceptions of their relationship and their communication might be more positively inclined toward one another than partners with differing perceptions.

> *Research Question 4a (RQ4a):* Are reports of talking about specific topics related to GP-GC communication satisfaction?
> *Research Question 4b (RQ4b):* Are there significant differences in levels of communication satisfaction between GP-GC dyads that are clustered based on topic use?
> *Research Question 4c (RQ4c):* Is the level of GP-GC agreement on topics related to GP-GC communication satisfaction?

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Young adults (n = 180) were recruited from an introductory communication class at the University of Kansas. The class fulfills a campuswide requirement and includes diverse majors. In groups of 8 to 20 people, participants were asked to provide a mailing address for a living grandparent with whom they had spoken in the previous 12 months. Individuals with more than one grandparent (approximately 82% of the sample) were asked to select any one grandparent. The students then completed a survey about their relationship and communication with that grandparent. The researchers mailed a similar questionnaire to the grandparent, accompanied by a postage-paid envelope addressed to the university. To ensure that the grandparent responded with regard to the appropriate grandchild, the grandchild's name was included on the cover sheet in the packet sent to the grandparent. Grandparents and grandchildren were informed that their responses were confidential and would not be seen by their grandchild/grandparent. Grandchild and grandparent responses were connected with code numbers. A total of 147 responses were received from the grandparents (response rate = 82%), of which a final sample of 103 was usable. Twelve questionnaires were excluded because of extensive missing data or because they were completed inappropriately (e.g., not by a biological grandparent). Respondents were also excluded when no response was provided to the open-ended question that is the focus of the current analysis. Responses of the grandchildren whose grandparents responded and did not respond were compared on certain variables from the survey. A few statistically significant (p < .05) relationships indicated that responses were received from grandparents toward whom the grandchildren felt more positive while conversing and who had less negative attitudes toward their grandchildren (from the grandchild's perspective). Most relationships were nonsignificant.

In the final sample, the grandchildren were 67% female and 33% male (mean age = 20.02 years, SD = 2.68). Their grandparents were 81% grandmothers (53% maternal) and 19% grandfathers (55% maternal) (mean age = 75.43 years, SD = 6.09, range = 60-98). Before mailing, the addresses of the grandparents were coded for location. Kansas residents constituted 44% of the grandparents, with the remainder from other central states (37%), the eastern United States (14%), and the western United States (5%). Participants were 91% White (4% Black, 2% Asian, 3% other). Parental divorce was indicated by 24% of the grandchildren. On average, grandparents and grandchildren reported that typical conversations lasted 30 to 40 minutes.

MATERIALS

In the questionnaire, participants provided an open-ended report of up to three conversation topics that were most frequently talked about with their grandparent/grandchild. A coding scheme was inductively developed to examine these open-ended responses. Through extensive reading of the responses and consideration of previous literature, an 11-category system was developed by the second author and two assistants (see Table 1). The category system was developed in an iterative process of generating categories, examining their fit to the responses, and then modifying the categories or their definitions (see Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the later stages of development, this involved examining intercoder reliability coefficients and modifying categories with low reliability. Finally, the first author and another assistant were trained and practiced using the finalized coding scheme. Once trained, both researchers coded approximately 19% of the responses (101 randomly selected topics that were not part of the practice materials) and achieved the reliabilities listed in Table 1. Reliabilities were strong with the exception of the history and leisure categories, which were slightly below desirable levels. These two coders then independently coded the remaining data.

In addition, participants completed a general evaluation of communication satisfaction in a typical conversation with the target (their grandchild/grandparent) using a shortened version (five items) of Hecht's (1978) communication satisfaction scale ($\alpha = .77$ for grandparents, .90 for grandchildren; $M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.78$ for grandchildren; $M = 4.36$, $SD = 0.53$ for grandparents; scores ranged from 1 to 5, with high scores indicating high satisfaction, and the items were as follows: "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"). The items were selected based on factor structures and reliability coefficients in previous intergenerational research using the entire scale. This measure was used as a criterion variable in the analyses.

RESULTS

**RQ1: GRANDCHILDREN'S AND GRANDPARENTS'
REPORTS OF TOPICS IN GP-GC TALK**

As can be seen in the first two columns of Table 2, the most commonly reported topics by grandchildren are education, family, friends, leisure, and current events. The grandparents' reported topics showed

Table 1
Definitions of Topic Categories and Intercoder Reliability Information

Topic Category	Operational Definition	α^a	% Agreement
Family	Talk about specific family members, family in general, or family history (not family history in broader historical context)	.86	93
Education	School in general, classes, assignments, not social life	.85	95
Occupation	Jobs, past jobs, career plans	.89	98
Leisure	Hobbies, activities in community, cultural activities, travel, clothes, nonacademic school activities; anything that is fairly specifically how a person spends daily activity time (not school, work, etc.)	.63	91
Contact	Invitations/plans for visits with one another, calls, talk about past visits	1.00	100
Weather	Any reference to weather or other element of immediate environment (e.g., physical setting of the conversation)	.90	99
Current events	Anything going on in the world removed from the two individuals (sports events, current wars, Monica Lewinsky, etc.)	.79	97
Health	Reference/inquiry about health, operations, not phatic "how she's doing" unless health oriented (e.g., "how her ulcer's doing")	.86	99
History	Historical reference (e.g., the war), personal history in historical context (e.g., "what it was like growing up in the depression"), not personal history without historical context	.66	99
Friends	Boyfriends, girlfriends, friends at school, her girlfriends	.90	97
Other	Topics that do not fit in the above categories, vague references (e.g., "what's going on," "activities"), nontopics	.65	83

a. Krippendorff (1980).

a similar pattern: Education, family, leisure, friends, and occupation were the dominant topics. Very few reports were related to future contact, weather/environment, or history. Substantially more grandchildren than grandparents reported talking about current events. For both generations, a significant percentage of the reported topics was categorized into the other/miscellaneous category. These topics included responses that were idiosyncratic and/or too vague to comfortably fit within any of the 10 topic categories (e.g., "Cuba," "her hyper dog," "morality"). We will return to this issue in the Discussion section.

Table 2

*Grandchildren's and Grandparents' Reports of Topics in Conversations With Their Grandparents or Grandchildren and Reports of Agreement (*n = 103 dyads)

Topic	Grand-children		Grand-parents		% of Grandparents Agreeing With Their Grandchildren	% of Grandchildren Agreeing With Their Grandparents
	n	%	n	%		
Education	76	73.8	73	70.9	51.7	66.0
Family	60	58.3	47	45.6	76.3	79.5
Friends	24	23.3	21	20.4	50.0	16.7
Leisure	22	21.4	22	21.4	36.4	36.4
Current events	22	21.4	5	4.9	0.0	0.0
Health	9	8.7	11	10.7	20.0	50.0
Occupation	6	5.8	18	17.5	18.2	80.0
Weather	5	4.9	2	1.9	33.3	27.3
Contact	4	3.9	1	1.0	0.0	0.0
History	1	1.0	0	0	25.0	28.6
Other	51	49.5	56	54.4	31.2	38.5

Note. The second through fifth columns represent the number of grandchildren or grandparents reporting a particular topic and the percentage of the total for each. The sixth and seventh columns represent the extent to which grandparents and grandchildren reported the same topics as one another. For instance, of the 76 grandchildren who reported talking about education with their grandparents, 51.7% of their grandparents also reported talking about education.

RQ2: CLUSTERS OF GRANDPARENTS AND GRANDCHILDREN BASED ON TOPIC REPORTS

To investigate RQ2, a cluster analysis was performed to group the dyads based on both parties' reports of topics. The analysis used Ward's method as applied to the present/absent coding of 10 topics (not including "other") for grandparents and grandchildren. Ward's method is appropriate for these nonmetric data, and the method tends to result in clusters with relatively equal numbers of observations (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1992). The final number of clusters was determined by examination of the agglomeration schedule and dendrogram. Four mutually exclusive clusters of GP-GC dyads emerged from this analysis: clusters that focused on family relationships, social activities, work and school, and impersonal events. The clusters (summarized below) were labeled in terms of the topics that were prominent and those that were consistently absent in each cluster (see Table 3 for details).

*Cluster I: Family relationships (*n = 41, 40%)*.* This was the largest cluster, comprising dyads reporting conversation topics of education, health, and family. Reports of talking about occupational issues were

Table 3
Clusters of Grandparent (GP)-Grandchild (GC) Dyads Based on Reports of Their Conversation Topics

Cluster	Topic Talked About	% of Topics[a]	% of Cluster[b]	Topic Not Talked About	% of Topics	% of Cluster
Family relationships (n = 41)	GC education	0.7	90.2	GC occupation	42.3	100.0
	GP education	48.7	90.2	GP occupation	42.4	87.8
	GC family	60.0	87.8			
	GP family	12.8	46.3			
	GC health	66.7	14.6			
	GP health	90.9	24.4			
Social activity talk (n = 26)						
	GC friends	70.8	65.4	GC events	29.6	92.3
	GP friends	33.3	26.9	GP leisure	28.4	88.5
	GC education	30.3	88.5			
	GP education	20.5	57.7			
	GC family	15.0	34.6			
	GP family	27.7	50.0			
Work and school (n = 20)						
	GC education	72.7	72.7	GC leisure	22.2	90.0
	GP education	21.3	59.1	GP leisure	18.5	75.0
	GC occupation	66.7	20.0	GC family	44.2	95.0
	GP occupation	61.1	55.0	GP family	21.4	60.0
Impersonal events (n = 16)						
	GC events	36.4	50.0	GC education	55.6	93.8
	GP events	40.0	12.5	GP education	43.3	81.3
	GC family	23.3	87.5	GC occupation	16.5	100.0
	GP family	14.9	43.8	GP occupation	17.6	93.8
				GC leisure	13.4	90.0
				GP leisure	12.3	62.5

a. This column indicates the number of reports of this topic in this cluster relative to all reports of this topic.
b. This column indicates the number of reports of this topic in this cluster relative to the number of *n* in this cluster.

rare. Compared with the other three clusters, the dyads grouped talked about more personal and intimate issues (especially, perhaps, the health topics).

*Cluster II: Social-activity talk (*n = *26, 25%)*. This cluster included GP-GC dyads reporting topics concerning friends and education. When examining both parties' reports respectively, more grandparents reported discussing other family members. Grandchildren rarely reported talking about current events, and grandparents did not report talking about leisure.

*Cluster III: Work and school (*n = *20, 19%)*. This cluster was characterized by reports of task-oriented topics (occupation and school). Family, leisure, or daily activity topics were seldom reported. Other topics such as weather and contact, either reported by grandchildren or grandparents, were also grouped in this cluster. However, due to the low frequency of total number of these topics reported (i.e., weather and contact; see Table 2), the label of this cluster reflected only the most significant topics reported by both parties.

*Cluster IV: Impersonal events (*n = *16, 16%)*. This was the smallest cluster, and dyads here reported talking primarily about current events or politics and did not focus on their personal lives. Topics in this cluster were the least diverse. Topics such as education, occupations, or leisure were largely absent from both sides' reports. Family topics were reported by grandchildren more than grandparents.

RQ2: LEVEL OF GP-GC AGREEMENT ON THE CONVERSATION TOPICS

The sixth and seventh columns of Table 2 indicate the extent to which grandparents and grandchildren reported talking about similar topics. We report the extent to which, when one party reported talking about a particular topic, their partner also reported that topic. Cell sizes in cross-tabulations of topic reports were too small to justify a traditional statistical analysis (e.g., chi-square). Hence, we simply examined descriptive data concerning agreement. As can be seen in Table 2, both grandparents and grandchildren had relatively high levels of agreement on the topics of family and education. However, average agreement levels across topics ranged from 30% to 40%, a level we would characterize as modest. There appears to be a trend whereby grandchildren's reports of topics were more likely to agree with that of their grandparents' than vice versa.

To further examine the level of GP-GC agreement, a new variable was created. Dyads were scored based on the number of matches in the two parties' topic reports (i.e., when the three topics reported by both parties were the same, the dyad was scored 3; when no overlapping

topics were reported, the dyad was scored 0). Of 103 GP-GC dyads, 4 (3.9%) reported the same three topics. Twenty-five dyads (24.3%) had two topics in common, 52 (50.5%) had one topic in common, and 22 dyads (21.4%) did not have any topic in common ($M = 1.11, SD = 0.78$).

RQ4: THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN CONVERSATION TOPICS AND COMMUNICATION SATISFACTION

Relationships between reports of talking about the 10 conversation topics (excluding the "other" category) and the measure of communication satisfaction were tested by examining point-biserial correlations between reports of talking about each topic and the GP-GC communication satisfaction scores (RQ4a). None of the 20 tests demonstrated a significant association between reports of talking about a topic and GP-GC communication satisfaction. For these correlations, statistical power to detect medium effect sizes ($r = .3$) was high (.85). To further investigate RQ4, we looked for differences between the clusters of GP-GC dyads identified in RQ2 with respect to their reports of communication satisfaction (RQ4b). The results again showed no significant association between reported topic profiles and grandparent or grandchild communication satisfaction (grandchild: $F(3, 102) = 0.16$, $p = .92$; grandparent: $F(3, 102) = 0.47$, $p = .70$). A final analysis was conducted to examine whether the level of dyadic agreement on topics (as represented by the new variable created under RQ3, above) was related to either party's perceptions of communication satisfaction (RQ4c). No significant correlations were found (grandchild: $r = .07$, $p = .47$; grandparent: $r = .11$, $p = .25$). Reported topics of GP-GC talk do not appear to be related to communication satisfaction, whether topics are considered at the individual or the dyadic level.

DISCUSSION

The discussion addresses the research questions in sequence, elaborating on their broader significance for our understanding of the GP-GC relationship. Limitations of the current research and options for the future are also discussed. In response to RQ1, we found that topics of family and education were reported frequently. The GP-GC relationship operates in a somewhat peripheral area of the family (at least in the United States). It is rare for grandparents and grandchildren to see each other on a daily basis (Harwood, 2000a). Hence, the combination of having a family connection and needing to "catch up" probably facilitates talk surrounding family issues. Our instinct is that this is an area in which GP-GC talk provides mutually interesting common ground between the parties. Although other topics might be significantly more interesting for one party than the other, both individuals are probably

concerned with family issues, and the dramatically different perspectives offered across the generations on these issues seem likely to make for stimulating interaction.

This has implications for theories of identity and intergroup communication. As noted at the outset, the majority of work examining intergenerational communication has focused on nonfamily interactions. In contrast, work on the GP-GC relationship has largely ignored its intergroup components. The current data provide some suggestions on ways in which intergenerational dynamics might play out in this relationship. The extensive reports of family as a topic suggest that this may be an intergroup context in which a common ingroup identity (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) is particularly salient. Gaertner and colleagues' (2000) theoretical position suggests that when people from different groups come to view themselves as sharing an identity, this will lead to more satisfying interactions. Hence, the salience of family in the current data suggests an explanation for previous findings that the GP-GC relationship is largely positive—certainly more positive than intergenerational relationships outside the family (where a common ingroup identity is less achievable, perhaps; Ng, Liu, Weatherall, & Loong, 1997; Silverstein, Giarrusso, & Bengtson, 1998). This raises interesting possibilities for examining links between talking about family issues, perceptions of a shared identity between grandparent and grandchild, and relational satisfaction. Examining close relationships from this intergroup perspective is a useful direction for the future.

The frequent reports of education as a topic are also interesting, given that this is probably focused largely on the grandchild. Williams and Giles (1996) have noted that topics centered on younger people often take center stage in intergenerational talk, and our data on the education topic suggest that this is also true in the GP-GC relationship. Williams and Giles suggested that this focus may result in perceptions of the younger person as egocentric, a result we suspect is less likely in the family context. Previous examinations of grandparents' narratives concerning their grandchildren suggest that grandparents have a high level of pride in their grandchildren's accomplishments (Harwood & Lin, 2000). Talking about school activities may reflect such levels of pride, at least for successful students. Theoretically, this has interesting implications in terms of the salience of age-group memberships in GP-GC conversations. Presumably, education might be a topic that increases the salience of the grandchild's age. In contrast, talking about health or history—topics that might emphasize the older person's age—was less frequently reported. In other words, it is possible that the younger person's age is acceptable as a salient conversational issue, whereas topics that emphasize the older person's age are avoided or suppressed. This, of course, is in marked contrast to findings in conversations with strangers, where age-related topics and age

itself are almost ubiquitous (J. Coupland et al., 1988; J. Coupland et al., 1991). The extent to which our suggestions are correct is worthy of further examination, particularly given that the salience of age in this context might have dramatic implications in terms of the influence of this relationship on more general attitudes toward aging (Harwood, Hewstone, & Paolini, 2001).

More discussion of the relative absence of talk about health and history is warranted, given the contrast of these findings with previous research (J. Coupland et al., 1991; N. Coupland, Coupland, Giles, Henwood, & Wiemann, 1988). Both grandparents and grandchildren may prefer talking about health issues with other family members (or even strangers) rather than with each other. Alternatively, the grandchildren in our study may have selected positive relationships to report on, and for them such relationships may be those in which these topics do not occur (Henwood et al., 1993, showed that young people find older adults' talk about health difficult to deal with). Finally, we should note here that Nussbaum and Bettini (1994) found health to be a common topic in grandfathers' talk to their grandchildren. It may have had low frequency in our study due to the small number of grandfathers present in our sample.

Two topic categories were reported in an asymmetrical fashion. Grandchildren reported current events as a topic substantially more often than the grandparents, and the grandparents reported talking about occupations substantially more than the grandchildren. Issues of salience may account for these findings. It is possible that talk about occupations and work may be important for grandparents, in that such talk may involve providing advice and sharing experience with their grandchildren. Such nurturing and mentoring behaviors can be important elements of the grandparent role (Harwood & Lin, 2000; Tomlin, 1998) and hence perhaps are remembered and reported more by grandparents. Grandchildren may enjoy more mutual/egalitarian discussions. For instance, they may feel more on an equal footing with their grandparent discussing an issue such as sports, which falls into the current events category.

In response to RQ2, we identified four clusters of GP-GC dyads based on their topic reports. These four clusters highlight four different patterns of conversation topics (i.e., family relationships, social activity talk, work and school, and impersonal events) that can be understood as sustaining relationship development. These dyadic reports of topics present a different way of understanding GP-GC relationship types. Previous approaches have tended to focus on typological approaches to account for variation in GP-GC relations by examining particular behavioral styles of grandparenting such as disciplining, parenting, or helping in the relationship (e.g., Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1985). In contrast, the current approach highlights identifiable dyads based on the content of their interactions. Our approach

may be linked to the previous typological approaches. For instance, relationships in which the topic of education is largely absent in the reports (impersonal events) appear on the face of it to be somewhat detached relationships in which fundamental life experiences are not addressed. Cherlin and Furstenberg (1985) included a detached style as one of their types. In contrast, relationships in which education, family, and health are discussed (family relationships) may well be relationships that are broader in scope and perhaps deeper (e.g., Cherlin & Furstenberg's influential style). Although our measures did not find differences in closeness, the differences in these relationships may be more in the matter of their centrality and importance in people's lives—casual, distant relationships may be quite satisfying if that is our expectation for the relationship.

Examination of RQ3 revealed only modest levels of GP-GC agreement on topics: Grandparents and grandchildren agreed on what they talk about roughly one third of the time. Such differences in perceptions of the content of talk are not surprising. Different topics are likely to be more or less memorable for different parties, and the same topic might be represented in different ways within our coding system. For instance, a conversation about a family member's job might have been coded as "family" for one respondent but "occupation" for another, depending on the precise wording of their response. Furthermore, estimates of agreement in our data may have been limited by restricting respondents to report only three topics that they discussed in these conversations. Allowing them to list all topics that were discussed might have permitted greater agreement. Specifying the situation in which the conversation took place might have also enhanced reports of agreement: If one participant was thinking of a quick telephone conversation, whereas the other was thinking of a lengthy face-to-face talk, the topics that they reported would likely be different. In the current context, we asked respondents to report on a typical conversation: Given such instructions, we think it is likely that they both had similar contexts in mind, but we cannot guarantee that.

Research on the GP-GC relationship (e.g., Harwood, 2001), and on other relationships (e.g., Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1993), has noted the importance of agreement or lack of agreement on relational definitions and perceptions. We hope that future work will examine whether agreement on what one talks about has similar implications: Preliminary examinations in our data suggest that this is not the case. Agreement on reports of topics was not linked to relational communication satisfaction (RQ4c). Indeed, nothing about the reports of topics appeared to be linked to satisfaction in our data (RQ4a, RQ4b). Previous intercultural work by Taylor and Simard (1975) is relevant here. They found that intergroup communication was often viewed as less satisfying and efficient than intragroup communication, even when all observable elements of the interactions were indistinguishable. In the

GP-GC context, it appears that what one talks about may not be as important as how one talks about it in determining satisfaction (see Pecchioni & Croghan, 2000, for similar findings). Future data collection in this vein should probably investigate the valence of particular topics (Pecchioni, 2000) as well as who initiates a topic. For example, one grandchild may be very happy to discuss school-related topics with the grandparent if he or she is doing well in school. Another grandchild, however, may try to avoid the same topic if he or she is struggling with schoolwork. Also, it is likely that topics raised by the other member of the dyad would exhibit more variability in valence (including highly dispreferred topics) as compared to topics raised by self. Theoretically, this is interesting given recent research predicting satisfaction in this relationship (e.g., Harwood, 2000b). At best, if conversation topics are an element in successful GP-GC relations, they apparently operate in interaction with other variables, as opposed to independently.

APPLIED IMPLICATIONS

Unfortunately, the current research does not yield many answers to key applied questions. We do not have very strong grounds for suggesting that GP-GC dyads should talk about specific topics, although the list of topics derived in the current study might serve as a guide for those who have "nothing to talk about" in these encounters. Particular topics do not seem more or less important in maintaining relational harmony. We do have some indications of diversity in these relationships from the data. In particular, analysis based on our clusters demonstrates that substantially different profiles of topics can result in equally rewarding relationships. Awareness of this diversity may be functional in encouraging more complex societal representations of the GP-GC relationship, which is often either overly sentimentalized or treated as largely peripheral. Indeed, recent trends of grandparents raising grandchildren (Minkler & Fuller-Thomson, 1999), providing day care for grandchildren (Hunts & Avery, 1998), or increasing contact with grandchildren following divorce (Adkins, 1999) suggest that the diversity in this relationship may be increasing. The context and content of conversations between grandparents and grandchildren will be radically different for those who see their grandparents on a daily basis in an immediate family context versus those who talk occasionally on the phone and see their grandparents only on special occasions in the company of other family members.

LIMITATIONS

First, the convenience sample in this study is limited in a number of ways. The grandchildren were fairly homogeneous in terms of age, ethnicity, and probably socioeconomic background because they were all

college students. That said, we find the college-aged grandchild particularly interesting to examine, given their emerging independence from their parents. Many students are in the early stages of negotiating the GP-GC relationship as a dyadic relationship, as opposed to having their parents determine the frequency and nature of GP-GC interaction (e.g., visiting the grandparent when and only when the parents do). The grandparents were also homogeneous in terms of ethnicity, and the majority was female. The gender imbalance is in part a function of the convenience sample: The course from which the grandchildren volunteered had a majority female enrollment. Demographic realities also influence the imbalance in the grandparent sample. Approximately 61% of those older than 70 are female, and with increasing age, the gender imbalance grows larger. Hence, women are likely to be grandmothers for more years of their lives (Spitze & Ward, 1998) and grandchildren are 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. These were relationships with fairly high levels of reported communication satisfaction. The mode of data collection undoubtedly contributed to this bias (i.e., grandchildren with negative perceptions of their grandparents may have chosen not to participate and grandparents with a negative view of their grandchildren may have elected not to return the questionnaire). In the future, it will be important to examine situations in which the GP-GC relationship is not functioning as well (see Folwell & Grant, 1999, for relevant methods). This issue is particularly pertinent given some of our nonsignificant results. High evaluations of satisfaction suggest the problems of ceiling effects, a lack of variation, and the ensuing difficulty in detecting correlations.

Another concern with the study is the size of the "other" topic category, which was in part a function of our open-ended response format. Several of the responses were too vague ("what's going on") or idiosyncratic ("her dog") to be coded into our categories. The open-ended question was appropriate for enhancing our understanding of the range of topics that occur in this relationship; however, it perhaps was not ideal for clearly categorizing all of them: a priori categories presented to participants would have achieved that goal more effectively (see below). Webb's (1985) methodological approach of asking about a specific conversation (the most recent) rather than our approach of asking about a typical conversation might be more effective in eliciting clearer and more easily codable open-ended responses, although we would argue that such responses might be less representative of reality. Webb did not report the size of her "other" category. We would suggest interviews with respondents in future studies to clarify their responses and gain a more in-depth understanding of topic negotiation in this relationship.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The current coding scheme appears to have utility for future investigations. In particular, the categories from our coding scheme could be usefully integrated into a combination closed-ended and open-ended instrument to enable better fit between respondents' sense of topics and our categories. Closed-ended categories would enable respondents to identify the best fit for a particular topic, rather than our inferring from their brief statements. Additional open-ended options would allow them to note topics that did not fit in our a priori categories. What people talk about seems intuitively to be a fundamentally important area of communication research, yet it is one that has received only sporadic attention. We hope this article may encourage others to measure this in systematic ways. Similarly, comparisons of the current data with reports for different family relationships (e.g., parents, siblings) would be interesting. The categories on which notable differences between the GP-GC dyad and these other relationships might be revealing as to the topics that are uniquely associated with the GP-GC relationship or indeed those that are uniquely absent. Examination of gender effects would be interesting: The low percentage of men in the current study—particularly in the grandparent group—meant that such comparisons would not have been productive here.

We feel that the clusters emerging in this study are useful in suggesting some patterns that might be examined in GP-GC discourse. For instance, the management of talk in work dyads might be interesting to examine in terms of the ways that advice is offered and accepted. In contrast, the pattern of talk in the family relationships dyads might reveal more in terms of how notions of family are constructed within this relationship. Above all, these clusters again emphasize the diversity inherent in GP-GC relationships and the need to avoid gross generalizations about the content or structure of this relationship.

Finally, the current work needs to be integrated into broader understandings of the operation of this relationship. Given that what people talk about does not appear to be a good predictor of relational satisfaction, the way in which topics interact with other variables (e.g., topic valence, who initiates the topics) needs to be further investigated. We also need to know more about the way topics fit into the broader communication process. For instance, in our study, estimates of the length of a typical GP-GC conversation ranged from 3 minutes to 180 minutes. These are clearly radically different contexts within which topics will receive qualitatively different treatments. The place of the GP-GC relationship within the broader family context also requires additional understanding (King, Russell, & Elder, 1998).

This article provides some of the first information about topics of GP-GC conversation and the association of topic use with communication satisfaction. This study uncovered commonly used topics, dyadic

profiles of GP-GC topic use, levels of agreement on reported topics, and their relationship with communication satisfaction. The findings indicated that topics of conversations between grandparent and grandchild might not be as influential as one might expect in terms of influencing relational satisfaction. However, these topic categories and clusters do provide important baseline information about the nature of grandparenting and some new ways of characterizing types of GP-GC relationships. Future research may uncover ways in which the use of topics is related to specific relational outcomes.

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