Grandparent-Grandchild Contact Loss:
Findings from a Study of "Grandparent Rights" Members

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RÉSUMÉ
L'interruption des relations entre les grands-parents et les petits-enfants n'a pas suscité beaucoup d'attention dans le cadre des recherches en sciences sociales et ce, en dépit du fait que l'importance évidente des liens d'attachement entre le grand-parent et le petit-enfant fasse l'objet de nombreuses discussions. Cet article présente les résultats d'une étude exploratoire sur la perte du contact entre grands-parents et petits-enfants réalisée au moyen d'un sondage mené à travers le Canada auprès des principaux membres de cinq groupes préconisant les droits des grands-parents. Comme les préoccupations de ces groupes de grands-parents l'indiquent, il existe quatre principales séries de circonstances associées à la rupture du contact avec les petits-enfants, soit le divorce des parents, un conflit avec les deux parents, la mort d'un enfant adulte et l'adoption de beaux-parents à la suite d'un remariage. Les grands-parents dont les enfants adultes sont des parents sans la garde de leurs enfants (dans la plupart des cas il s'agit des grands-parents paternels) risquent le plus de perdre le contact avec leurs petits-enfants, et les beaux-enfants adultes semblent être les principaux médiateurs dans la relation continue entre les grands-parents et les petits-enfants. L'interruption de l'accès aux petits-enfants est perçue comme ayant de graves conséquences pour les grands-parents, et cette situation influence grandement les politiques socio-juridiques et la pratique thérapeutique.

ABSTRACT
Discontinuity of grandparent-grandchild relationships has been largely overlooked in social science research, despite the fact that the salience of the grandparent-grandchild attachment bond is the subject of considerable discussion. This article reports the results of an exploratory study of grandparent-grandchild contact loss, by means of a survey of the core membership of five "grandparent rights" groups across Canada. As reflected in the particular concerns of this membership, there are

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Mots clés: Grands-parents, petits-enfants, enfants adultes, accès, perte de contact.
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four primary circumstances associated with grandparent loss of contact with grandchildren: parental divorce, conflict with both parents, death of adult child, and stepparent adoption following remarriage. Grandparents whose adult children are noncustodial parents (mostly paternal grandparents) are at high risk for contact loss, and adult children-in-law appear to be the primary mediators in the ongoing grandparent-grandchild relationship. Disrupted grandchild access is seen as having profound negative consequences for grandparents, and this has important implications for socio-legal policy and therapeutic practice.

Children’s loss of contact with a salient attachment figure has become a focus of methodological inquiry in recent years, with particular attention paid to the disengagement of noncustodial parents from their children’s lives subsequent to divorce (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Furstenberg, Nord, Paterson, & Zill, 1983; Kruk, 1991). Discontinuity of grandparent-grandchild relationships, however, has been overlooked in research, despite the fact that the salience of the grandparent-grandchild attachment bond is otherwise the subject of considerable discussion (Kornhaber & Woodward, 1981; Kivnick, 1982; Bengtson & Robertson, 1985). In the absence of empirical data, "grandparent rights" have become the subject of legal debate (Ingulli, 1985; Thompson, Scarlora, Limber, & Castronnero, 1991), and grandparents have begun to organize and lobby for improved legal and therapeutic resources for those at risk of disrupted or severed relationships with their grandchildren, based on what they perceive to be their "special" and "unique" status as grandparents. At present, there is little available literature to assist policy-makers and human service professionals in relation to these grandparents. This article is an attempt to provide needed information regarding salient dimensions of the issue, and to examine implications for social policy and therapeutic practice.

The nature of grandparent-grandchild relationships is largely shaped by the kinds of relationships shared by grandparents and their adult children. Parents mediate the relationship between grandparents and their grandchildren, and the grandparent-grandchild relationship rests upon the voluntary consent of both parents (Robertson, 1975). This mediating role takes on added significance during times of stress in the grandparent-parent relationship, such as during parental divorce, particularly when grandparents become triangulated in the marital dispute. Despite the "norm of non-interference" in parent-child relationships (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1985), evidence suggests that grandparents often support the position of their own children in parental disputes during divorce, and as a result may become closer to their own child but isolated and estranged from their former child-in-law (Kalish & Visher, 1982).

Divorce significantly alters many grandparent-grandchild relationships. In the majority of instances, mothers become custodial parents, and post-divorce contact between maternal grandparents and grandchildren often increases as grandparents assume a parent-like role in children’s lives. Fathers are typically noncustodial parents after divorce, and paternal grandparents’ contact with their grandchildren is usually highly dependent on the level of the father’s contact with his children. These grandparents appear to be particularly at risk of reduced or lost contact with their grandchildren due to the noncustodial status of their sons (Spicer & Hampe, 1975; Ahrons & Bowman, 1982).

Parental divorce is not the only circumstance associated with grandparent-grandchild contact loss. Ingulli (1985) cites the following situations in which grandparents may seek legal access rights to their grandchildren: children in intact two-parent families (where there has been a serious falling out between grandparents and the child’s parents); children in the care and custody of one biological parent (subsequent to death, divorce, informal or temporary separation, or stepparent adoption); and children living with neither of their biological parents (others acting in loco parentis, foster care, termination of parental rights, or termination of parental rights followed by adoption). Empirical research examining these circumstances of grandchild contact loss, however, is largely lacking.

Other factors influence the level of grandparent contact with grandchildren, including the age of the grandparents, their health status, parental mobility and geographical proximity to grandchildren. Younger grandparents are more likely to remain in contact, whereas older grandparents, particularly those in poor health, have less contact (Johnson, 1988). Grandparents who are geographically distant have less contact (Johnson, 1988; Gladstone, 1987; Matthews & Sprey, 1984). Gladstone (1987) concluded that factors associated with increased visiting for grandparents following a child’s divorce include residential propinquity, the appeal of the grandparent’s home, the employment status of the adult child, and the absence of the adult child-in-law in instances where the child-in-law had previously impeded access. Age of grandchildren may also be a significant factor: older children are more likely to directly indicate their desire for grandparent contact.

This article reports the results of an exploratory study of grandparent-grandchild contact loss. This study sought to explore salient aspects of grandparent-grandchild contact loss unexamined in the literature, by focusing on critical factors and events contributing to initial access difficulties, and those associated with eventual loss of ongoing contact, from the perspective of this group of grandparents.

The following research questions were addressed:
1. What are the primary factors contributing to and circumstances associated with grandparent-grandchild access difficulties?
2. What are the primary factors contributing to and circumstances associated with (a) ongoing contact loss following initial access difficulties, and (b) restoration of grandchild contact following initial access difficulties?
3. What is the impact of grandchild access difficulties and ongoing contact loss on grandparents?
Method

Sample and Instrumentation
The membership of five Canadian "grandparent rights" organizations concerned with grandchild access were surveyed. The following groups were included in the study: the GRAND (Grandparents Requesting Access and Dignity) Society (with branches in Toronto and Ottawa), the Canadian Grandparent Rights Association (Vancouver and Calgary), and "Orphaned Grandparents" (Edmonton). It was felt that a comparison of the experiences and responses of grandparents in the five Canadian locales with active "grandparent rights" groups would enable conclusions to be drawn about the findings with greater confidence than a study limited to a single locale would have allowed. The five groups were seen to be comparable in terms of their stated dual purpose: advocacy (a forum for political lobbying related to grandparent rights) and self-help (emotional support to members experiencing disrupted or severed relationships with their grandchildren).

Contact was made with the presidents of each of the organizations, who in turn informed their membership (via letter and personal contact) about the study. Those members who opted into the study were interviewed either by the principal researcher or research assistant, in the grandparent's home. Fifty-five grandparents agreed to participate in the research and were interviewed. Of the 55 grandparents, all but three had experienced some access difficulties with at least one of their grandchildren at some point in their lives. The three grandparents who had not experienced difficulties became members of the organization primarily to offer support to other grandparents.

The analysis in this paper focuses on the 52 respondents who had experienced difficulties maintaining contact with their grandchildren. Of these, 11 resided in Toronto, nine in Ottawa, 10 in Vancouver, 15 in Calgary, and seven in Edmonton. The interviews were completed in the summer of 1992.

The source of the data was a structured interview combining fixed-choice and open-ended questions. The interview took the form of a six-part questionnaire focused on demographic and family history data, the nature of the grandparent's involvement with the grandparent rights organization, various aspects of the grandparent-grandchild relationship before access difficulties and contact loss, reasons for and circumstances surrounding access difficulties and contact loss, the impact of access difficulties and contact loss upon the grandparent and the grandparent-grandchild relationship, and legal aspects of the grandparent's present situation. Starting with questions and answers structured in a brief, "fact-giving" way provided a useful context within which to better understand the more reflective and often complex nature of later open-ended questions. In the great majority of cases, grandparents were willing to share large amounts of intimate, often painfully sensitive information.

Coding and Data Analysis
As a large number of the questionnaire items were of an open-ended variety, and because of the exploratory nature of the study, each interview was fully transcribed. While the structured questionnaire items were pre-coded, preparation for data analysis involved the post-coding of the open-ended question responses. The final coding frame was thus comprised of both pre-coded classification of structured questions and post-coded categories of open-ended responses. The development of coding categories for the open-ended questions followed a grounded method of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rose, 1982) of grandparents' responses, identifying similar clusters of constructs, themes, and issues derived directly from the respondents, and the labelling of categories in accordance with the major themes. Coding categories thus emerged directly from the gathered data, an analytic technique central to exploratory survey/interview research (ibid.), and a coding frame was developed specifying the relevant categories for each of the variables generated for data analysis.

Once all the data from each interview were coded, frequency tables were generated, and crosstabulations of the main independent and dependent variables were produced. SPSS was used for the quantitative analysis. A combination of qualitative and quantitative measures was used as best addressing an exploratory research undertaking of the questions under study.

The primary dependent variable in the analysis was the current level of grandparent-grandchild contact, as distinct from initial access difficulties. Respondents were first asked whether they had ever experienced difficulties in maintaining contact with some or all of their grandchildren; initial "access difficulty" was thus operationalized in terms of the respondent's own perception of difficulty in maintaining contact— for some, this translated to no contact over a prolonged time period, while for others this meant not enough grandchild contact. Respondents were then asked whether they were still experiencing access difficulties with these grandchildren, and to indicate the amount of current grandchild contact (on a weekly, monthly, and annual basis), and time elapsed since the last physical contact. They were also asked to identify whether they considered their current level of contact to be "frequent," "infrequent," or "non-existent." On the basis of this perception, grandparents were grouped along a continuum from frequent to no contact. Those classified as having "restored contact" were those grandparents who, following an initial period of access difficulty, now saw themselves as having frequent contact, or had in fact become the physical custodians of the grandchildren in question; those grouped in the "lost contact" category either perceived themselves as having infrequent or no contact since the initial period of access difficulties.

In utilizing the respondents' own perceptions in operationalizing "access difficulty" and "current level of contact," it is assumed that however individual definitions deviate from "objective reality," it is these individual definitions and perceptions that create present experiences, and are what one faces and acts upon; thus to study grandparent-grandchild contact loss
is necessarily to study and treat seriously grandparents’ self-reports of those experiences. Measures of the actual amount of grandchild contact and time elapsed since last contact were also taken; while these are not used in the following analysis, they did in fact coincide with grandparents’ perceptions of their contact with their grandchildren.

**Limitations of the Study**

Data were obtained from the perspective of grandparents only; adult children and grandchildren were not interviewed to corroborate this information. Further, the sample was, in effect, self-selected, and the degree of representativeness of data gathered from a group of "grandparent rights" members may be questioned. As the study is based largely on retrospective interviewing, the degree of accuracy of the data may further be challenged.

As an exploratory endeavour, however, the research was able to generate rich data from the 52 grandparents who had experienced access difficulties. Research studies allowing grandparents to define and expound their own perceptions about their experience of access difficulty and contact loss are extremely rare; as such, a case may be made for the value and validity of such "grandparent-centred" research, where a grandparent's testimony is considered valid for its own sake, and represents a legitimate focus for empirical study. To study grandparent-grandchild contact loss necessitates a beginning focus on grandparents' self-reports of this phenomenon. Members of "grandparent rights" organisations see themselves as "the tip of the iceberg," and a voice for a much larger group of grandparents facing lost or threatened loss of contact with their grandchildren. Their views as key informants may represent an important beginning point in delineating salient dimensions of grandparent-grandchild contact loss.

**Results**

The 52 grandparents spanned a range of income and occupational categories, with 20 grandparents in paid employment, 27 retired, and five unemployed. The mean age of the respondents was 60.4 years, ranging from 40 to 78. Of the 52 respondents, there were 45 females and seven males, reflecting the preponderance of grandmothers involved in the organizations. Thirty-two of the grandparents were married, 10 divorced, nine widowed, and one single. The number of grandchildren per respondent ranged from one to 17.

Grandparents’ reasons for joining the grandparent rights group reflected the stated purpose of each organization: advocacy and self-help. Grandparents affiliate themselves with the grandparent rights movement for a variety of reasons, and some grandparents indicated more than one main reason for joining. Grandchild access difficulties, however, were the primary concern for 77 per cent of the members. Other reasons given were: to offer support to other grandparents (mentioned by 17%), lobbying and political action regarding grandparent rights (12%), to obtain support from other grandparents (12%), and concerns regarding child abuse (8%).

In regard to their relationship with their grandchildren prior to initial access difficulties, most grandparents described having been actively involved with and closely attached to their grandchildren, assuming a multiplicity of roles: a repository of care and unconditional love, a source of play and recreational activities, a purveyor of family traditions, providing stability, security and emotional support to grandchildren. Above all, respondents stressed the "specialness" of the grandparent-grandchild relationship; from their perspective, the grandparent-grandchild bond was salient and unique. Given the heterogeneity of grandparenting roles among today's seniors, and the fact that grandparenthood is largely idiosyncratic and not equally significant to all grandparents (Wood & Robertson, 1976), the reported centrality of grandchildren in the lives of this sample of grandparents is worth noting (although not surprising, given the self-selected nature of the sample).

While the nature of grandparent-parent relationships prior to access difficulties was not examined in detail, grandparents reported varying degrees of closeness between their adult child/in-law and themselves prior to the development of difficulties. While it seems likely that the onset of grandchild access problems is related to prior difficulties in grandparent-adult child/in-law relations, no such pattern was reported by the respondents, except in cases where both parents withheld access in two-parent family situations.

**Initial Access Difficulties**

What are the primary factors contributing to and circumstances associated with grandparent-grandchild access difficulties? Grandparents were asked to identify the main reasons why they initially experienced difficulties in maintaining contact with their grandchildren, and the specific circumstances surrounding this onset. Four distinct circumstances were identified (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Circumstances</th>
<th>% (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parental divorce</td>
<td>56 (29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intact two-parent family (conflict with adult child/child-in-law)</td>
<td>23 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of adult child</td>
<td>12 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remarriage/Stepparent adoption</td>
<td>10 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100 (52)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A range of events and circumstances surround initial grandchild access difficulties, and in this regard, the members of Canadian grandparent rights organizations are a diverse group. While parental divorce is identified as the primary circumstance in grandparent-grandchild access difficulties, a sig-
significant proportion of the grandparents did not experience access difficulties directly attributable to parental divorce. Both parents (in intact two-parent families) may deny grandparent access, difficulties may occur after the death of one’s adult child, or initial problems may begin to surface following stepparent adoption (subsequent to the divorce and remarriage of the custodial parent).

While each of the grandparents’ stories about disrupted grandchild access was unique, distinct patterns emerged in each of the circumstances. In parental divorce, the access dispute occurred between the grandparents and only one parent, the adult child-in-law, who was also the custodial parent. The non-custodial parent was reported to have had diminished contact with the children, and in some cases had completely disengaged from their lives. Intact two-parent family situations, on the other hand, involved a grandchild access dispute between the grandparents and both parents (the adult child and the in-law). One or both of the parents were reported to have objected to the continuing “interference” of the grandparents, or have had a prolonged period of conflicted relations with them. In situations involving the death of one’s adult child, the dispute occurred between the grandparents and the adult child-in-law, who remained as the children’s guardian after the other parent’s death. Contact with grandchildren was more likely to diminish gradually in this circumstance, and most of these grandparents reported concerns regarding their grandchildren’s unfinished “grief work” related to the death of the parent. In remarriage/stepparent adoption situations, the dispute was described as being primarily between the grandparents and the adult child-in-law’s new marital partner. In these cases there were reported to have been few problems between the grandparents and the adult child-in-law (the custodial parent) prior to the new partner legally adopting the grandchildren, despite the fact that the adult child (the non-custodial parent) had diminished contact with the children. These grandparents felt that the new stepparent was primarily responsible for the emergence of difficulties, although the adult child-in-law concurred with the new partner in regard to limiting grandparent contact.

In addition to examining circumstances, respondents were asked what they perceived as the reasons for the access difficulties they had experienced. Eighty-one per cent identified the discouragement of contact by their adult child-in-law, 23 per cent cited discouragement by their own adult child, 13 per cent indicated geographical distance/transportation difficulties, and 8 per cent identified financial constraints. Thirty-three of the 42 grandparents citing discouragement of contact by their adult child-in-law reported that access was directly refused or withheld; other grandparents indicated that contact was more gradually diminished without any direct discussion of the issue, the relocation of the child-in-law and grandchildren (or lack of knowledge of the grandchildren’s whereabouts), the constraints of restricted or supervised visits, and legal prohibition of access. All 12 of those citing discouragement of contact by their own adult child indicated direct access denial.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Circumstances</th>
<th>Male % (N)</th>
<th>Female % (N)</th>
<th>Total % (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Divorce</td>
<td>18 (3)</td>
<td>74 (26)</td>
<td>56 (29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-divorce*</td>
<td>82 (14)</td>
<td>26 (9)</td>
<td>44 (23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100 (17)</td>
<td>100 (35)</td>
<td>100 (52)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi Square 14.88, df = 1, p < .001
Phi 0.53

*Includes intact two-parent family, death of adult child, and remarriage/stepparent adoption.

For 67 per cent of the grandparents having experienced access problems, the adult child was male and the in-law female. Sex of the adult child-in-law was a significant factor in regard to the circumstances related to access difficulties: in divorce situations, the child-in-law was more likely to be female, while in non-divorce situations the child-in-law was more likely to be male (Table 2). The data suggest, therefore, that in divorce situations, paternal grandparents may be at particularly high risk of losing contact with their grandchildren when the mother is the custodial parent. Conversely, the data suggest that in non-divorce situations, maternal grandparents may be at more risk of contact loss.

Restored and Lost Contact
What are the primary factors contributing to and circumstances associated with (a) ongoing contact loss following initial access difficulties, and (b) restoration of grandchild contact following initial access difficulties? While grandparents had experienced access difficulties at some time in their relationship with their grandchildren, a number of them were able to eventually restore contact. Eight per cent had obtained legal custody of the grandchildren in question, 25 per cent currently had what they defined as “regular and frequent” contact, 31 per cent had “infrequent” contact, and 36 per cent had lost all contact with their grandchildren. Thus two-thirds were still experiencing problems and a third had achieved some measure of resolution and were now at least in regular contact with their grandchildren.

The circumstances surrounding initial access difficulties were not significantly related to whether or not contact was restored. It is noteworthy, however, that in 14 of the 34 divorce situations (including loss of grandparent-grandchild contact following stepparent adoption), contact was eventually restored; whereas three of the 18 grandparents in the non-divorce group restored contact, suggesting that the prognosis for re-establishing contact appears to be extremely poor if both parents withhold access (in a two-parent family situation), or if access problems occur subsequent to the
death of one's adult child. This also suggests that the likelihood of restoring contact is somewhat higher in divorce than in non-divorce situations.

The data lend some support to Gladstone’s (1989) assertion that while divorce is a significant factor in grandchild access difficulties, grandparents may be able to renegotiate contact and are not necessarily powerless in this regard. This seems to apply particularly in the event of access difficulties following stepparent adoption; all the grandparents in this circumstance were able to eventually re-establish contact. However, it must be noted that a majority (20 of 34) of the total “divorce” category of grandparents were unsuccessful in restoring regular contact. And where both parents deny access in non-divorce situations, or an adult child is not available to facilitate access (following death of the adult child), contact loss appears likely to persist.

Grandparents were asked whether their adult child and child-in-law had encouraged or discouraged their contact with their grandchildren, and how each of them had done so. The level of the child-in-law’s encouragement of contact was found to be a significant factor in whether grandparent-grandchild contact was eventually lost or restored (Table 3); those with lost contact reported discouragement of contact by the child-in-law, those who were able to restore contact indicated that contact was encouraged, neither encouraged nor discouraged, or sometimes encouraged, sometimes discouraged.

It appears that the adult child-in-law, rather than the grandparent’s own adult child, is the primary mediator in the ongoing grandparent-grandchild relationship: in the great majority of cases of lost contact, the child-in-law was reported to have discouraged contact. It may be that conflictual relationships between grandparents and their children-in-law are more likely to be sustained over time than conflicts between grandparents and their own adult children. The data gleaned from this study support this hypothesis: when asked about the nature of their present relationship with their adult child and in-law, 76 per cent (35 of the 46 grandparents whose adult child and in-law were still living) described the relationship with their adult child as “friendly,” as opposed to only 13 per cent (7 of 52) with their child-in-law. Seventy-five per cent characterized their present relationship with their child-in-law as “unfriendly” or “non-existent.”

In relation to access difficulties, respondents were asked about their experiences with and thoughts about legal and therapeutic resources and provisions. Fifty-six per cent had at some point consulted with a lawyer regarding their relationship with their grandchildren (about half of these resulted in some form of court action), 29 per cent had some form of therapeutic contact, and 6 per cent had consulted with a family mediator. Grandparents were most likely to consult a lawyer in situations where access difficulties surfaced subsequent to divorce, as opposed to other circumstances ($p < .05$). And legal consultation was often accompanied by therapeutic contact; 12 grandparents had consulted both a lawyer and a therapist.

Grandparent utilization of legal and therapeutic resources appeared to have some impact on their current level of contact following access difficul-
ties. Grandparents using these resources had a higher likelihood of re-establishing contact with their grandchildren than those not using these resources (Table 3).

Grandparents were also asked whether they thought that the legal system is an appropriate forum to address grandchild access difficulties. Interestingly, despite the fact that a number of grandparents who made use of the legal system to gain access to their grandchildren were able to restore contact, there was no significant relationship between the current level of grandparent-grandchild contact and perception of the legal system as an appropriate forum to address access difficulties. Grandparents generally did not consider recourse to the legal system to be a desirable means of resolving access disputes, and this included many of those who had made use of the legal system and had achieved what they considered to be a successful outcome. There were no differences between the "divorce" and "non-divorce" categories in this regard. The "good" end did not appear to justify the "bad" means; only 25 per cent of the grandparents felt that the legal system was an appropriate forum for resolving access disputes. When probed, some grandparents identified family mediation as a more desirable alternative, others felt that the legal system largely ignored the emotional elements of the problem, viewed legal resolution as an adversarial and damaging process, identified therapeutic resources as a better alternative, or felt that the legal system was largely insensitive to children's needs in the process.

Consequences of Lost Contact
What is the impact of grandchild access difficulties and ongoing contact loss on grandparents? When asked, "What have you found to be the most difficult aspects of not having contact with your grandchild(ren)?", the great majority of grandparents described having experienced, in different ways, a grief reaction containing all the major elements of bereavement, related directly to the absence of their grandchildren and role loss, subsequent to initial access difficulties. They described having been connected to their grandchildren in an intense and intimate way, and considered their "grandparenting" role to be an integral part of their self-identity. Their attachment to their grandchildren was reflected in their thinking about their grandchildren when not with them ("often" or "very often" for 87%) and wanting to be with their grandchildren when not with them (85%).

Forty-four per cent of grandparents reported new physical health problems and 46 per cent emotional difficulties resulting from reduced or lost grandchild contact. Grandparents identified several aspects of contact loss that contributed to their grief and sense of loss. The most commonly reported were worrying about their grandchildren's safety and well-being (54% of respondents), the fear of never again having contact with their grandchildren (37%), profound sadness and depression (29%), and the loss of an important role in their lives, and feeling "empty," "useless," or "unfulfilled" (27%). Also mentioned were lingering feelings of hurt and victimization, being shut out of their grandchildren's growth and development, missing extended family gatherings and events, and not being able to pass on family history and traditions to their grandchildren; these were reported by between 8 and 15 per cent of respondents. Those grandparents who were able to restore contact with their grandchildren came to a resolution of their grief; for others, involvement in the grandparents' rights organization provided a sense of hope for future restoration of contact. Most "lost contact" grandparents, however, reported feelings associated with being "stuck" along the bereavement continuum: numbness, shock and denial; anger, rejection and betrayal; hopelessness and depression.

As many of the respondents were politically active in the area of grandparent rights, they were asked for their perception of the most effective means to address the problem of grandparent-grandchild access difficulties and contact loss. A significant proportion (78%) focused on the need for legislative changes, and when asked directly about the efficacy of existing legislation, almost all indicated that the present laws should be changed to further grandparents' rights of access to their grandchildren. When probed in this regard, legally guaranteed right of access was cited by 73 per cent, specific recognition or naming of grandparents in access legislation (as a distinct category of persons with rights of access) by 35 per cent, and the need for uniform access legislation across Canada by 22 per cent. Also mentioned were legally mandated family mediation, the legal right of involvement of grandparents in divorce proceedings, and required consultation with grandparents by child welfare authorities prior to admission of children into care (each by 9% of respondents). The grandparents' emphasis on needed legal changes to deal with the issue of grandchild contact loss was interesting in light of their stated aversion to utilizing legal mechanisms to obtain rights of access. In fact, grandparents considered law reform that would further their rights of access to their grandchildren as likely to act as a deterrent to denied grandchild access and thereby reduce the need for legal involvement, litigation, and adversarial proceedings.

Further suggestions were offered. Some grandparents stressed that rather than resorting to legal means to resolve access disputes, grandparents should remain patient and adopt a "non-interfering" stance, particularly if grandchild contact was disrupted subsequent to divorce; others suggested the need for open communication and direct negotiation with parents around access; and yet others felt that legal involvement should be avoided "at all costs". On the other hand, however, several respondents stressed that disrupted access should be followed by immediate legal consultation. Other suggestions included: the need for early therapeutic involvement; use of family mediation resources; always keeping the "best interests of the child" in the forefront, whatever the course of action followed; and ensuring continuity of contact and not breaking contact with grandchildren for even temporary periods. A number of grandparents stressed the importance of attempting non-legal resolution first, and using the legal system as a "last resort".

In sum, there are many reasons why grandparents lose contact with their
grandchildren; some come to a resolution of access disputes, others gradually lose all contact with their grandchildren; some make use of legal and therapeutic resources, others do not; some find that these resources help, others do not. The longer-term impact of contact loss is varied, and there are conflicting views regarding the most effective means of addressing difficulties. The membership of the "grandparent rights" movement in Canada thus reflects a diversity of experiences, circumstances, and outcomes.

Discussion

The salience of the grandparent-grandchild attachment bond is a subject being widely discussed, and empirical investigations have been conducted from various perspectives. There is general agreement, however, that grandparents are highly variable in the enactment of their roles, with some only peripherally involved in their grandchildren's lives, while others take on the full complement of grandparenting roles (Wood & Robertson, 1976). Making broad generalizations about grandparents through an analysis of grandparenthood which merely assumes an active involvement of grandparents in their grandchildren's lives lacks credibility; rather, what is needed is a recognition of the heterogeneity of grandparenthood and complexity of mediating factors and processes which account for existing variations. The purpose of the study reported here was to identify some of the key factors associated with grandchild access difficulties and contact loss amongst a politically active group of grandparents, who considered their grandparenting role to have been an important part of their identity and an important component in their everyday lives.

Initial Access Difficulties and Ongoing Contact Loss

Grandparents experience grandchild access difficulties following different events and circumstances. Access problems following conflict with one's adult child and/or child-in-law in intact two-parent families, the death of one's adult child, and stepparent adoption following remarriage are almost as frequent as access difficulties following divorce. Further, a substantial minority of grandparents who experience an initial period of access problems are able to restore regular contact, utilizing a variety of strategies and resources; the majority, however, find themselves continuing to lose contact.

Regardless of the circumstances surrounding grandparent-grandchild access difficulties, the data reinforce the centrality of parents as mediators of the grandparent-grandchild relationship. What has been largely overlooked in previous accounts, however, is the fact that the child-in-law, who is also the custodial parent in most cases, rather than the grandparent's adult child, is the primary mediator in the ongoing grandparent-grandchild relationship. Whereas there was no relationship between the level of the adult child's encouragement of contact and subsequent grandparent-grandchild contact, the relationship between the adult child-in-law's encouragement of contact and ongoing contact was significant: most of the "lost contact" group of grandparents cited the discouragement of the child-in-law as a primary reason for their continued lack of contact, and most of these referred to direct access denial in this regard. It is also important to note, however, that custodial status, not gender of the child-in-law, is likely to be the significant factor related to contact loss, as most of the adult children-in-law were custodial parents. Also, it may be that conflictual relationships between grandparents and their adult children are less likely to be sustained over time than conflicts between grandparents and children-in-law.

The data presented here suggest that there are certain subgroups of grandparents which may be at higher risk of losing ongoing contact with their grandchildren than has been assumed. Contact loss in non-divorce situations – intact two-parent family situations or following the death of one's adult child – is likely to persist; when both parents deny access, or if one parent denies it with no possibility of intercession from the other parent, the prognosis for restored contact appears to be very poor.

The majority of grandparents in the study cited the divorce of their child as associated with contact loss. Lending support to Gladstone's (1987) findings, some of these grandparents are able to negotiate or otherwise deal with the initial access problems and restore contact with their grandchildren. A large proportion, however, do not.

In the great majority of divorce situations, the adult child-in-law was female, reflecting the preponderance of maternal custody outcomes in the divorced population. This also indicates that since most divorced fathers become noncustodial parents, many of whom lose contact with their children (Furstenberg et al., 1983; Kruk, 1991), maternal grandparents, whose contact is highly dependent on the ongoing father-child relationship, may also be at high risk of losing contact with their grandchildren. When divorce reduces or eliminates contact between a noncustodial father and his children, the relationship between the grandparent-grandchild generations is likely to be drastically altered. Current accounts have largely overlooked the salience of parental custodial status as a determinant of post-divorce grandparent-grandchild contact, particularly smaller-scale studies not using representative samples. Existing analyses fail to recognize the intractable nature of post-divorce conflict between many former spouses, often resulting from an adversarial process of child custody and access determination, and the "spill-over" effect on grandparents' relationships with their children-in-law.

Legal and Therapeutic Implications

In addition to the constraints identified above, the "norm of non-interference" (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1985) may further limit the extent to which grandparents experiencing loss of contact with their grandchildren feel able to insist on their rights of access. Concern about interference in their children's affairs and difficulty assimilating the reality of grandchild absence re-
sult in considerable reluctance on the part of many grandparents to insist on grandchild contact in the initial stages of contact loss. Concern about antagonizing parents and thereby jeopardizing ongoing contact with grandchildren may serve as a "Catch-22" against grandparents: early action toward restoring access may heighten parent-grandparent conflicts, which may in fact exacerbate access difficulties; on the other hand, inaction in the initial stages of access difficulties might jeopardize future contact, as patterns of diminished or no contact tend to become established and consolidated over time. This double-bind situation may be particularly pronounced during the divorce of adult children. There are few social rules or traditional models guiding grandparents as they enter the uncharted territory of negotiating new post-divorce relationships with their children, former in-laws, and grandchildren.

Currently in Canada, apart from Quebec, the issue of grandparental rights of access to grandchildren has not been given explicit recognition in legislation (see Andreuik, 1994). Grandparents may petition for access as interested third parties in divorce proceedings; whether access is granted them is determined according to the "best interests of the child" standard, the nature of the previous grandparent-grandchild relationship and level of contact, the existence of animosity between parties, and the child’s wishes. From grandparents’ perspective, the existence of such a provision does not effectively address the problem of contact loss. In the absence of a specific statute providing grandparents with legal standing to access, they continue to report considerable difficulty securing ongoing contact. While the presumption of grandparent contact always being beneficial to children is problematic, and the competing interests of grandparents, parents, and children will always be a complex issue for the legal system, special legal recognition of grandparents may be justified by the uniqueness and salience of the relationship—in those cases where ongoing grandparent-grandchild contact serves to preserve developed attachment bonds.

The implications of the study for socio-legal policy and therapeutic practice are considerable. While those grandparents in the study who availed themselves of legal and therapeutic resources in regard to grandchild access difficulties reported fewer negative outcomes than those who did not, the majority of grandparents did not consider recourse to the legal system to be a desirable means of resolving access disputes, citing detrimental effects for all concerned parties. A core concern of the grandparents in the study was the fundamentally adversarial nature of legal processes in dealing with denied grandchild access. The primary advantage of enshrining grandparental right of access to grandchildren, apart from preserving existing attachment bonds, was seen to be the avoidance of such processes. Consistent with the views of the grandparents in the study, the existence of grandparental rights statutes in the U.S. has not dramatically increased litigation; rather, litigation is more likely to be employed as a last resort. While the legal impact has been minimal, the social impact of these statutes has been dramatic (Wilson & Deshane, 1982). Any legislative changes furthering grandparents’ rights of access to their grandchildren should thus serve to effectively reduce the need for legal involvement, litigation, and adversarial proceedings.

In the therapeutic realm, grandparents in the study often saw themselves as excluded from family therapy and mediation processes, which was seen to further jeopardize their ongoing contact with their grandchildren. Given grandparents’ reluctance to utilize adversarial means to deal with access difficulties, therapeutic agents may be instrumental in providing alternative mechanisms to deal with impasses as they occur. Family therapists and mediators thus need to adopt a more inclusive definition of the family system, assess the nature of existing grandparent-grandchild relationships, and utilize a multi-generational model of family practice.

In regard to the post-divorce family in particular, therapeutic agents need to be aware of the fact that new roles and relationships need to be negotiated beyond the "binuclear family" (Ahrons, 1987), to include the extended post-divorce family, including grandparent-adult child, grandparent-in-law, and grandparent-grandchild relations. Such a process will serve to empower grandparents in regard to their ongoing relationship with their grandchildren. This approach assumes that given the opportunity to decide on their involvement in therapeutic and conflict resolution processes, grandparents who do participate are likely to become important resources both in the therapeutic endeavour and as supports to children adjusting to the consequences of their parents’ divorce. Grandparent involvement can thus be reframed in a positive aspect, particularly in divorce situations where parents may begin to view grandparental contact as a threat to their new post-divorce identity.

Both legal and therapeutic professionals are in a position to have considerable impact on grandparent-grandchild relationships. It is only when these professionals begin to address the needs and advocate on behalf of the involvement of grandparents in family law, therapy, and mediation that we will begin to see increasing numbers of grandparents initiating requests for help. To date, despite the proliferation of "grandparent rights" self-help organizations, grandparents experiencing grandchild access difficulties and lost contact continue to experience a profound sense of loss and victimization.

References


Monitoring the Outcomes of Quality of Care in Nursing Homes Using Administrative Data

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RÉSUMÉ
Les données administratives obtenues des cueillette de routine et les modèles de risques proportionnels de Cox sont utilisés afin de comparer les résultats de soins prodigués tout en contrôlant les effets de l’âge, du sexe et du niveau de dépendance. L'étude révèle que la qualité globale des soins prodigués dans les centres d’accueil du Manitoba est bonne, mais que dans certaines régions et dans certains types de centres d’accueil, les résultats sont moins bons chez certains résidents que chez d’autres. Ces indicateurs de résultats ne doivent pas être considérés comme des signes spécifiques de soins de moindre qualité, mais comme des «décès» suggérant le besoin d’un examen plus approfondi, la méthodologie et les résultats obtenus dans cette étude étant encore au stade expérimental. L'étude démontre également que des données secondaires fournissent un point de départ relativement peu coûteux pour l'évaluation des résultats obtenus à la suite des soins de santé prodigués en centres d’accueil.

ABSTRACT
Routinely-collected administrative data and Cox’s proportional hazards models are used to compare outcomes of care while controlling for age, sex and dependency level. The results indicate that the overall quality of nursing home care in Manitoba is good but that residents in certain regions and in certain types of nursing homes have specific outcomes that are poorer than others. These outcome indicators must not be treated as definitive signs of poorer care but as “triggers” suggesting a need for a closer look because the methodology and outcomes used in this study are still in the experimental stage. The results also indicate that secondary data provide a relatively inexpensive starting point for evaluating outcomes of nursing home care.

Key Words: Outcomes, Quality of Care, Nursing Home.
Mots clés: Résultats, qualité des soins, centres d’accueil.
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