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# Critical self-reflection questions for professionals who work with grandfamilies

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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*Practice Brief***Critical Self-Reflection Questions for  
Professionals Who Work with Grandfamilies**

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**Abstract**

One of the reasons that grandparents raising grandchildren may not receive needed services is because they perceive professionals as being judgmental or holding negative attitudes toward them. As such, it is important for human service professionals to critically examine their opinions and attitudes toward grandfamilies, within the context of larger social structures, for the purposes of identifying those views that might interfere with the delivery of high quality services. This practice brief provides an overview of critical self-reflection questions that can be used, in a variety of ways, for training purposes. By utilizing these critical self-reflection questions, professionals can discover biases or attitudes that can then be addressed or challenged, to ensure that grandfamilies feel supported, respected, and affirmed by the professionals with whom they come into contact.

*Keywords:* grandparents raising grandchildren, critical self-reflection, service delivery, training

Despite having a variety of service needs, grandparents raising grandchildren may fail to seek needed services because they are discouraged or offended when

they encounter professionals who have little understanding of their family situation, hold misperceptions about their families, or are judgmental (Dolbin-MacNab, 2005; Dowdell, 1994; Gladstone, Brown, & Fitzgerald, 2009; Gibson, 2002; Hayslip & Glover, 2008). Negative biases among professionals may have a basis in larger society; for instance, burgeoning research indicates that young adults and traditional grandparents view custodial grandparents more negatively when grandchildren have problems (Hayslip & Glover, 2008; Hayslip, et al., 2009). Custodial grandparents are also viewed more negatively when the circumstances contributing to the caregiving arrangement are less socially acceptable (e.g., drug abuse, child abuse/neglect; Hayslip et al., 2009) or interpreted as being within the grandparents' control (Hayslip & Glover, 2008).

In addition to biases associated with family structure, pervasive ageism can result in professionals viewing older grandparents as incompetent, physically and cognitively impaired, and interpersonally difficult (Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005; Kite, Stockdale, Whitley, & Johnson, 2005; Nelson, 2002; Palmore, 2005). Given that custodial grandparents are frequently women, racial/ethnic minorities, and living in poverty (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2010), professionals' negative stereotypes and biases related to these issues may further contribute to grandparents' feelings of being judged and stigmatized. Indeed, intersectionality (Collins, 2000) highlights that "cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society, such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity" (p. 42). Thus, grandfamilies may be at risk of marginalization, oppression, and discrimination by human service professionals (and larger society) due to any number of social identities that combine to elevate their risk.

When professionals fail to understand grandfamilies or hold negative stereotypes about their family structure and social identities, this disconnect can result in a strained professional relationship or a frustrating service experience (Dolbin-MacNab, 2005; Dowdell, 1994; Gladstone et al., 2009; Gibson, 2002; Hayslip & Glover, 2008). Lack of information and biases about grandfamilies can also result in grandparents having to “teach” professionals about their caregiving arrangement. While taking an open-minded, respectful, and curious stance has been noted as being a central component of culturally competent practice (Dyche & Zayas, 1995), the necessity of basic information about a particular group (or presenting issue) has also been noted as a component of effective intervention with diverse populations (Sue, 1998; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). Thus, some grandparents may feel resentful if a professional is unaware of general information about their family constellation or services available to them (Gibson, 2002). For instance, I once worked with a grandmother who was angry about having to teach her caseworker the laws in her state related to enrolling her grandchildren in school. Finally, an additional consequence of a lack of understanding or negative stereotypes on the part of practitioners could be grandparents receiving poorer quality services (Berrick, Barth, & Needall, 1994) or choosing not to seek services at all, due to the anticipation of a negative experience.

In my professional work with grandfamilies, which includes clinical practice (i.e., family therapy and support groups), consulting with practitioners who provide service to grandfamilies, and research on service delivery, I have encountered a number of specific misperceptions or negative assumptions that might underlie professionals’ negative or disrespectful attitudes toward grandfamilies. These beliefs, some of which are documented in the literature, may be held by professionals, but can also be

held by custodial grandparents themselves. One of these beliefs is that grandparents raising grandchildren have failed as parents and will continue the bad parenting practices they used with their own children (Gibson, 2002; Hayslip et al., 2009; Peters, 2005). Another is that grandparents are completely overwhelmed by their caregiving responsibilities, which makes them unable to provide quality care for their grandchildren (Dolbin-MacNab, Johnson, Sudano, Serrano, & Roberto, 2011). In accordance with widespread negative stereotypes about older adults (Cuddy et al., 2005; Kite et al., 2005; Nelson, 2002; Palmore, 2005), there are also those who believe that grandparents are too old to be raising grandchildren or are to blame for their situations (Gibson, 2002; Hayslip & Glover, 2008). Other beliefs include feeling sorry for grandparents, assuming that grandparents “don’t mind” raising their grandchildren because it is culturally normative, or assuming that grandfamilies do not need outside supports, as “families should just step up and take care of their own” (Dolbin-MacNab et al., 2011). Finally, I have observed statements implying that children being raised by grandparents are “damaged” and unlikely to overcome their challenges and succeed as adults. This perception is often linked back to failures of the parents and the grandparents and phrased as “well, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree” (Dolbin-MacNab et al., 2011).

In considering the accuracy of these perspectives, research suggests that grandchildren may have higher rates of emotional and behavioral problems, when compared to other children (Billing, Ehrle, & Kortenkamp, 2002; Smith & Palmieri, 2007). There is also evidence that some grandparents may struggle with their parenting responsibilities (Hayslip & Shore, 2000) and use less-than-ideal parenting skills (Smith, Palmieri, Hancock, & Richardson, 2008; Smith & Richardson, 2008). Nonetheless, many grandparents also find raising their

grandchildren to be a positive, rewarding, and fulfilling experience (Waldrop & Weber, 2001). Moreover, in spite of experiencing very real stressors, grandparents and grandchildren demonstrate a wide range of resilient characteristics and positive outcomes, regardless of the structure of the family and the circumstances underlying the caregiving arrangement (Hayslip & Smith, 2013). In addition, there is evidence that custodial grandparents play an important role in preserving familial relationships, upholding cultural traditions, and maintaining community connections (Kopera-Frye & Wiscott, 2000). There is also evidence that being cared for by a relative (versus a non-relative) may be associated with better outcomes for children who have been removed from their homes (Winokur, Holtan, & Valentine, 2009).

When contemplating professionals' biases about grandfamilies, particularly in light of intersectionality (Collins, 2000), it is important to remember that these families are extremely diverse in terms of their demographic characteristics, needs, and experiences (Stelle, Fruhauf, Orel, & Landry-Meyer, 2010). For instance, grandfamilies are ethnically diverse and span the entire socioeconomic spectrum (Stelle et al., 2010). They are also diverse in terms of structure; grandchildren may be raised in two-grandparent or single grandparent homes, they may or may not have siblings or cousins living in their grandparents' homes, and they may live in homes with or without their parent(s) present (Ellis & Simmons, 2014). Additionally, for those unfamiliar with grandfamilies, it is easy to assume that these families form as the result of some type of failure or negative behavior on the part of the grandchild's parents or even the grandparents. Yet, grandfamilies form for a myriad of reasons that reflect a complex confluence of personal, relational, and contextual circumstances (Dolbin-MacNab & Hayslip, 2014). Clearly, it is difficult to make sweeping generalizations about the

structural or interpersonal characteristics of grandfamilies. Not all grandfamilies are alike and, due to the cultural patterns of oppression associated with the intersection of various social identities (Collins, 2000), some grandfamilies may be more at risk for experiencing misconceptions and negative stereotypes than others. Addressing Professional Biases with Critical Self-Reflection

Based on the research literature, it is clear that many assumptions about grandfamilies may not be entirely true (certainly not in all cases) and that interacting with professionals who hold these misconceptions may leave grandfamilies feeling stigmatized or judged (Dolbin-MacNab, 2005; Dowdell, 1994; Gladstone et al., 2009; Gibson, 2002; Hayslip & Glover, 2008). When grandfamilies experience negative attitudes and stereotypes from the professionals with whom they interact, it can be due to the professionals' lack of exposure or experience with grandfamilies (Corrigan, Green, Lundin, Kubiak, & Penn, 2001). As such, providing educational workshops can be a valuable strategy for increasing professionals' knowledge of grandfamilies, combating negative stereotypes, and reducing stigma.

Even with accurate information, professionals may still hold biases that can emerge, sometimes unintentionally or with great subtlety, in their work with grandparents and grandchildren. For this reason, and in accordance with classic approaches to teaching practitioners to work with diverse populations (McGoldrick, Giordano, & Pearce, 1996; Sue et al., 1992), training professionals to work with grandfamilies should involve going beyond simply giving information about grandfamilies. That is, practitioners should also be encouraged to be reflective about their practice and examine the personal biases and assumptions they bring to their work with grandfamilies. They should also consider how these perspectives impact the quality of



the services they provide (McGoldrick et al., 1996; Sue et al., 1992).

In numerous disciplines, reflective practice has been described as an important means of providing diverse clients with effective and respectful services (e.g., Brookfield, 2009; Heron, 2005; Hoffman, 1985; McGoldrick et al., 1996). Unfortunately, reflective practice has been referred to by a number of terms that are often used interchangeably, but are actually distinct (e.g., self-awareness, self-reflection, reflexivity, self-reflexivity, self-of-therapist). To combat the confusion that can result from the imprecise use of terms, I am situating this particular discussion within the concept of “critical self-reflection.” For professionals in contact with grandfamilies, engaging in critical self-reflection is an important process by which they can carefully examine their views toward grandfamilies, for the purposes of gaining awareness of how those views might impact their work with grandparents and their grandchildren. In accordance with intersectionality (Collins, 2000), professionals can also use critical self-reflection to discover the marginalizing power dynamics and oppressive social discourses related to gender, age, class, race, and ethnicity that can become part of professional practice (Brookfield, 2009; Heron, 2005). With that in mind, professionals can then develop strategies to empower grandfamilies and provide them with the best services possible.

In the context of reflective practice, critical self-reflection goes beyond reflecting on one’s professional behavior or personal experiences influence professional interactions (Brookfield, 2009). Critical self-reflection also includes an explicit consideration of the power dynamics and social structures associated with one’s practice (Heron, 2005; Brookfield, 2009). Practitioners who engage in critical self-reflection recognize that “the self is, then, a co-constructor of a social reality and cannot escape playing a

part in (re)producing the structures of society” (Heron, 2005, p. 344). As such, critical self-reflection invites professionals to uncover and challenge the power dynamics present in their practice, as well as the assumptions they make about appropriate approaches to intervention. This stance also encourages professionals to consider how their work might reflect and perpetuate dominant social discourses related to grandfamilies’ social identities (Brookfield, 2009).

In order to promote critical self-reflection among professionals who work with grandfamilies, the remainder of this brief provides a series of critical self-reflection questions that professionals can use to uncover potentially harmful (or helpful) attitudes and beliefs about grandfamilies. They also challenge professionals to consider intersectionality (Collins, 2000), power dynamics, and larger social discourses as they apply to practice with grandparents and grandchildren. After exploring these issues, professionals can then consider strategies for combating those factors that may negatively impact their work with grandfamilies. Specific suggestions for how to utilize these questions to improve service delivery are also discussed.

### **Critical Self-Reflection Questions**

In order to improve service delivery by promoting critical self-reflection among professionals who work with grandfamilies, a selection of the following questions could be used for reflection and discussion:

1. Why do grandfamilies form? To what extent are grandparents responsible for their situations?
  - a. What, in your life (e.g., past professional experiences, professional observations, social identities, etc.), contributes to these views?

- b. How might you be intentionally or unintentionally communicating these views to grandfamilies?
    - c. In what ways have grandparents' social identities or larger contexts contributed to them having to take responsibility for their grandchildren?
  2. What strengths do grandfamilies possess? How do these strengths facilitate their success?
    - a. In what ways do you facilitate (or block) grandfamilies from recognizing and utilizing their strengths?
    - b. In what types of grandfamilies are you more or less likely to see strengths?
  3. What challenges do grandfamilies experience? How do these challenges develop? How do these challenges shape what grandfamilies need in terms of support?
    - a. How are your views of these challenges informed by your social identities and/or larger social discourses?
    - b. In what ways do you perpetuate or combat these challenges in your practice?
    - c. How might some of these challenges be responses to larger contextual issues or power differentials?
    - d. To what extent might these challenges also be strengths or resources?
  4. What are your opinions about grandparents' parenting skills? To what extent do you see them as having valuable experience or wisdom versus being in need of parent training?

5. How have your professional interactions and experiences shaped your views (positively or negatively) of grandfamilies?
  - a. How have agency policies or your training influenced those views? How do they reflect dominant social discourses or intersectionality? (Collins, 2000)
  - b. How are you and the grandfamilies you work with “both empowered and disempowered” in your professional relationship? (Heron, 2005, p. 349)
  - c. What do you intend to accomplish and/or how do you intend to behave in your work with grandfamilies? How have those intentions developed, and how might they be helpful or harmful to grandfamilies? (Heron, 2005).
6. What personal experiences have you had with grandfamilies? Were those experiences positive, negative, or neutral?
  - a. How do those personal experiences shape your work with grandfamilies?
  - b. How do those personal experiences perpetuate or challenge disempowering perspectives on grandfamilies?
7. What do grandfamilies need to be successful?
8. What biases or blind spots do you have in relation to grandfamilies? How might these biases or blind spots impact your efforts to help grandfamilies be successful?
9. What biases or assumptions about grandfamilies do you see in in larger society?

- a. To what extent do you agree or disagree with them? How might you, intentionally or unintentionally, communicate these views to grandfamilies?
  - b. How do these views reflect issues of intersectionality and power differentials?
10. Based on your responses to these self-reflection questions, what could you do to improve the quality of services you deliver to grandfamilies?
- a. What can you do to shift your negative assumptions into more positive ones?
  - b. In what ways can you help empower grandfamilies to be successful or resilient?
  - c. How can you be more sensitive and responsive to issues of power, intersectionality, and social discourses that may marginalize grandfamilies?

#### **Utilization of the Critical Self-Reflection Questions**

These critical self-reflection reflection questions can be used in a number of ways, as part of various training or continuing education efforts. Not all of the questions would need to be used at any given time. Professionals could use the questions for personal exploration, perhaps reflecting on their responses to the questions in a journal or notebook. In a group setting, a facilitator or trainer could ask participants first to do some individual self-reflection on the questions and then facilitate a group discussion about participants' responses. Alternatively, a facilitator could divide participants into groups and give each group a few of the questions to discuss. The groups could then provide a summary of their discussion for the larger group. Consistent with a critical view (Brookfield, 2009), the facilitator should be prepared to challenge participants to view themselves and their professional behavior more

critically, particularly within the contexts of their own social identities, intersectionality (Collins, 2000), and dominant societal discourses related to age, class, race, ethnicity, and gender. In mental health work, supervisors could use these questions to promote critical self-reflection among their supervisees. Whatever the format, facilitators or supervisors may want to consider using these questions more than once, as professionals may gain new perspectives, and attitudes are likely to evolve and change over time. Additionally, trainers and supervisors should also be alert to variations in participants' willingness to examine critically themselves and their practice. Some professionals may be more open to this type of professional development than others – in these cases, facilitators may need to slow down their pace with the use of the questions or discuss a professional's reluctance in an individual setting.

Once professionals have worked through the critical self-reflection questions, facilitators or trainers can then provide research-based education about the misconceptions or false assumptions being made. They can also carefully draw the connection between professionals' assumptions, biases, and their professional behavior, particularly in relation to larger social forces. Professionals could then be guided in a process of conceptualizing alternative practice strategies for working with grandfamilies. For example, a professional could be guided to identify her assumption that custodial grandparents are to blame for their situations and helped to link that assumption to her own biases about families living in poverty. Then, she could be encouraged to realize how this assumption might result in her subtlety (or not) communicating this feeling to grandparents or not making adequate efforts to help grandparents access needed services. She could also be helped to realize how her bias further marginalizes a family that is already at risk. Perhaps after some additional education about the varied reasons

that underlie the formation of grandfamilies and further self-reflection, the professional in this example might intentionally work to find strengths in grandparents and make a concerted effort to learn more about their circumstances before jumping to conclusions about placing blame. In utilizing these critical self-reflection questions, it is important to note that many personal biases and assumptions may be difficult to challenge or change because they are deeply rooted in larger social structures and dominant societal discourses. As such, providing professionals with ongoing opportunities to reflect critically on themselves and their experiences working with grandfamilies is an essential part of quality service provision.

While much of the discussion here has been directed toward using these critical self-reflection questions with professionals who engage in a variety of human services, the questions can also be used in other settings. For instance, I have used these questions in a research setting, for the purposes of orienting my research assistants to the potential for their biases and assumptions to impact how they interview grandparents and grandchildren and how they analyze research data. One of my assistants, after reflecting on the questions, acknowledged that he “felt sorry” for the grandmothers we were interviewing because they were disadvantaged in so many ways. We discussed how, during the data analysis process, this resulted in him further disadvantaging our participants by inadvertently overlooking grandparents’ sources of resilience or times when they felt that their caregiving arrangement was not too stressful or challenging. By using these critical self-reflection questions, he was able to return to the data analysis with a more balanced and critical perspective, which ultimately improved the trustworthiness of the data analysis.

Beyond researchers and human service professionals, the critical self-reflection questions could also be used with teachers, medical providers, lawyers, pastors, or any other professional that might work with grandfamilies. For example, teachers could use these questions to consider how they approach and respond to students being raised by grandparents. Additionally, the critical self-reflection questions could be useful to advocacy efforts – that is, some or all of the questions could be used to educate groups that may be in a position to influence laws and policies that impact grandfamilies. For instance, agency leaders could use the questions to consider how their organizations approach grandfamilies, which could help them realize that the eligibility criteria for their services might be too restrictive, that grandparents and grandchildren should be eligible for additional resources, or that the agency is perpetuating difficulties or biases that some grandfamilies experience when trying to access resources. Whatever the audience, by encouraging professionals to be critically self-reflective about themselves, within the context of larger social structures, it is then possible to devise strategies to support grandfamilies, so that they are not left feeling judged, misunderstood, marginalized, or disempowered.

### **Conclusion**

Grandfamilies already experience a number of personal, logistical, and structural barriers to accessing and receiving needed services (Dolbin-MacNab, Roberto, & Finney, 2013). Feeling judged, misunderstood, or disrespected by the professionals charged with providing them with assistance (Dolbin-MacNab, 2005; Dowdell, 1994; Gladstone et al., 2009; Gibson, 2002; Hayslip & Glover, 2008) should not be an additional barrier. Despite the multitude of approaches to training practitioners to work with diverse populations and the growing literature on



interventions and programs for grandfamilies, little attention has been given to how to best train professionals to work effectively with grandparents and their grandchildren.

This practice brief introduces self-reflection as a key consideration when training professionals to provide respectful, high quality services to grandfamilies. Addressing self-reflection, particularly critical self-reflection (Brookfield, 2009; Heron, 2005), is a valuable addition to more traditional training approaches, which may only focus on imparting information about grandfamilies, their needs, and resources available to them. More specifically, by encouraging critical self-reflection, professionals can gain insight into and combat the biases and assumptions that result in grandparents feeling judged or unwelcome within a professional setting. Additionally, taking a critical stance provides professionals with the opportunity to examine and challenge the power dynamics and larger social structures at work in their practice (Brookfield, 2009; Heron, 2005). This type of critical stance is useful, as it can help professionals recognize and address how intersectionality (Collins, 2000) associated with grandparents' and grandchildren's various social identities (e.g., age, race, ethnicity, class, and gender) may increase their risk of marginalization, oppression, and discrimination. In sum, developing skills in critical self-reflection is a means by which professionals can learn to empower grandfamilies in ways that other approaches to training may not address.

While professionals who engage in critical self-reflection should be respectful to all grandfamilies and should avoid replicating oppressive power structures and dominant discourses related to grandfamilies' social identities, it is not a perfect training tool. For instance, professionals can be highly self-reflective and yet unwilling to alter problematic or oppressive points of view (Blasco,

2012). Critical self-reflection can also be particularly challenging (Heron, 2005), as it can be hard to separate one's perspectives from broader societal views. Finally, it can also be difficult for well-intentioned practitioners to consider the ways that they may perpetuate negative stereotypes and oppressive patterns of interaction (Heron, 2005). Despite these challenges, when professionals can truly critically examine themselves and the services they provide, they are in a better position to advocate for and strengthen the grandfamilies who seek their help. It is for this reason that critical self-reflection should be considered a key component of comprehensive training for professionals who work with grandparents and their grandchildren.

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