

# Reflections from the Guest Editors: Introduction to the Special Issue on the Global Phenomenon of GrandFamilies

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**Introduction to the Special Issue**  
**The Global Phenomenon of GrandFamilies**

Guest Editors

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This Special Issue of *GrandFamilies* brings together six articles speaking to the issue of culture and grandparent caregiving. The issue of culture's influence and importance in understanding grandparents who raise their grandchildren is highlighted by discussion of the diverse nature of middle-aged and older persons who take on the responsibility of protecting and guiding their grandchildren under oftentimes adverse circumstances. While previous issues of aging journals such as the *International Journal of Aging and Human Development* and the *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships* have been devoted to grandfamilies, none has had an emphasis on the international focus such as the articles in this Special Issue.

The qualitative study of Harris, Wilfong, Thang, Phong, and Kim provides us with insights into the experiences of grandparents, most of whom were single grandmothers raising their grandchildren who had been orphaned by HIV/AIDS in Vietnam with little assistance from their extended families. This paper focuses upon the "environmental and psychological determinants of guardianship planning," finding four main aspects of such planning, viewed as an anticipatory coping strategy where grandparents thought about a point in the future when they

would no longer be capable of enacting their caregiving role. These four themes were 1) making plans with extended family, 2) investing in education, 3) not having options for guardianship/future care, and 4) seeing the orphan village as a last option for care. The extent to which grandparents' planning reflected each theme varied across many parameters, and some grandparents were proactive in planning for the future. However, Harris and colleagues found that the majority of Vietnamese grandparents had not established a guardianship plan and "simply hoped for the best." The authors argue for the wisdom of normative planning rather than planning based upon the grandparent's health or older age.

Aransiola, Akinyemi, Akinio, and Togonu-Bicksteeth studied health and hygiene behaviors in four selected West African countries: Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, relying upon archival data based upon recent Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), where poverty and a lack of education are commonplace. Among those health and hygiene issues studied were malaria and its prevention, diarrhea, and cholera. Among the preventative behaviors studied were 1) mosquito netting, where approximately 30% of households did not have such netting and even fewer slept under such netting at night, 2) handwashing to minimize the spread of preventable childhood diseases, where the availability of water and soap are critical, though they found some variability across countries in this respect. Though this paper's findings are straightforward, they are sobering, and they clearly underscore the health challenges faced by grandfamilies in West Africa, where surviving poverty and illness are daily struggles.

Complementing the papers that are international in focus, Dennis, Kepple, and Brewer II conducted a qualitative study employing indigenous methodologies to give them insight into the concepts of extended family and

kinship among Oglala Lakota elders on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation in South Dakota. The essence of kinship care and grandparenting behaviors related to such care is the notion of *community grandparenting*, in which elders extend the roles and responsibilities of grandparents to all youths in the community. They found three themes to characterize the commitment to caring for children: 1) providing parental guidance and resources, 2) offering cultural and spiritual guidance/teaching, and 3) modeling Lakota values. While this paper focuses on this sense of culturally-based commitment to the welfare of all children in the Lakota community, it helps us understand the importance of the dedication of those grandparent caregivers who are Caucasian, African American, and Latino, speaking to the universality of the challenges grandfamilies face and self-sacrifice expressed by grandparents in doing so.

Hsieh, Mercer, and Costa provide a systematic review that examines what we know about grandparent caregiving among indigenous peoples across the globe (United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Taiwan). Indigenous peoples have high rates of raising grandchildren as well as living in multigenerational homes, but their unique circumstances have received minimal attention in the literature. This review considers historical and contextual factors, including government policies that complicate, support, or challenge caregiving in these families both within and across the different cultures.

McKoy, Davis, and colleagues focus on grandparent caregivers, both those raising and helping in the care, of grandchildren in Jamaica, a country where many children are born to single women. These authors use role theory and an ecological approach to examine factors that influence Jamaican grandparents to initiate these important roles in the family.

In further considering the contexts of caregiving and their influence on outcomes, Poitras, Tarabulsky, Valliamee, Lapierre, and Provost break new ground as they compare grandparents who become foster grandparents with foster parents. Their analysis uncovers the impact of children's behavior on foster grandparents' depressive symptoms, and support the findings of many others about the longstanding impact on grandparents raising grandchildren on mental health.

While these papers are diverse in their focus and their methodologies (e.g. archival survey data, semi-structured ethnographic interviews), their contributions to our knowledge base pertinent to the tremendous diversity among grandparent caregivers are unique. Yet, they collectively underscore the resilience of grandfamilies and the importance of grandparents' personal commitment to the welfare of the children in the face of many personal, social, and financial challenges. In enlightening us regarding the experiences of international grandparents, they sensitize us to the limits of what we know about grandparents raising their grandchildren based upon findings from Western societies. Ultimately, they contribute to an understanding of the many mechanisms by which culture influences grandfamilies (see Cole, 2005) and reinforce the need to understand the contextual uniquenesses and globality of experiences among grandfamilies, as argued by Dolbin-MacNab and Yancura (in press).

### References

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