CHAPTER 13

Grandparenting Styles:
The Contemporary American Indian Experience

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Much of the grandparenting literature and especially the descriptions of American Indian grandparenting focus on status and role shifts which aging women experience in relation to their parents, children, grandchildren and society in general (Amoss 1981; Nahemow 1987; Shanas and Sussman 1981). Primarily focused on the social, cultural and psychological outcomes of attaining grandparenthood, these studies, with a few noteworthy exceptions, assume grandparenthood to be shaped largely by social and biological factors over which the aging woman has little personal control (Schweitzer 1987; Tefft 1968).

Grandparenthood, however, is neither defined by the narrow constraints of biological and reproductive attainments nor executed solely within the parameters of cultural consensus. Rather, grandparental roles are expressed across a range of activities, purposes and levels of intensity so varied as to be identified as distinct grandparenting styles. Six grandparenting styles—cultural conservator, custodian, ceremonial, distanced, fictive and care-needing—are identified and discussed.

The findings presented here are based on the reflections of the North American Indian grandparents with whom I have worked since 1984, and my observations of their interactions with their grandchildren. The grandparenting styles listed above are defined by seven factors: (1) the quality and intensity of the relationship across the grandparent/grandchild generations; (2) the grandparents’ cultural and/or individualistic perceptions of what grandparenting roles should be; (3) accessibility of the grandchildren by the grandparents; (4) social and familial integration of the grandparents; (5) personal lifecourse goals of the grandparents; (6) social, economic and psychological stability of the children’s parents; and (7) the age at which grandparenthood is attained.

Freedom of choice in the creation of one’s particular grandparenting style is considerable. Some American Indian grandparents petition their children for the privilege of primary care responsibilities for one or more grandchildren. When parents are reluctant to relinquish care of a child to the grandparents, individuals who relish...
continuing child care responsibilities past their childbearing years develop alternative strategies both traditional and contemporaneous in origin. Establishment of fictive kinship, provision of foster parent care, and involvement in cultural restoration programs in the public schools are among the alternative roles available to older American Indians whose grandchildren, either because of distance or parental reluctance, are not immediately accessible to them.

While custodial, fictive, ceremonial and distanced grandparenting styles are evidenced cross-culturally, I suggest that the cultural conservator grandparenting style, if not particularly American Indian, is essentially a phenomenon of general ethnic minority-group membership. Fearing loss of identity as a people because of the relentless assimilationist influences of contemporary life, many ethnic minority members view their elders as vital cultural resources for their children. Grandparents as cultural conservators constitute a cultural continuity in that responsibility for the enculturation of the youngest generation was traditionally the role of the grandparents across American Indian tribal groups (Amoss 1981; Schweitzer 1987). Cognizant of the powerful influences which attract their urbanized, educated and upwardly mobile children away from tribal pursuits, many contemporary American Indian grandparents understand their roles as conservators and exemplars of a world view and ethos that may well disappear if they do not consistently and emphatically impart it to and enact it for their grandchildren. The ideological, enculturational and behavioral components of this grandparenting style are special concerns of this chapter.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE

Between 1984 and 1986, I interviewed 26 North American Indians who had lived for at least 20 years in either the West Coast urban centers of Los Angeles or San Francisco or in rural areas at least 500 miles away from their original homelands. All of the Sioux and Muskogean interviewees had returned to their childhood homelands in South Dakota and Southeastern Oklahoma less than five years before they were interviewed.

Upon retirement, strong family, economic, friendship and aesthetic ties pulled increasing numbers of older, “urban” American Indians back to tribal homelands. Retirees’ reduced incomes go further in American Indian communities where the cost of housing, utilities, medical services and some foodstuffs are federally subsidized. Rural family lands and ancestral homes provide the older American Indians much relished sanctuary from the hustle-bustle of urban city life. And lifelong friends and family provide easily accessed affectional supports, in contrast to the increasingly attenuated ones in urban centers.

Aside from being two of the three most heavily represented tribal groups in Los Angeles, the Sioux and the Muskogeans were also among the very first Native American urban relocatees to come to Los Angeles (Weibel-Orlando 1991). It was reasonable to assume, then, that they would be most heavily represented in the retirement-age American Indians I could identify. Aside from widely separated traditional territories, the Sioux and Muskogeans represent two distinct cultural traditions (Kroeber 1939).

The Lakota Sioux of the Pine Ridge Reservation were, at the time of Western European contact, nomadic, big game hunters of the northern plains. No one has written more persuasively about Sioux personality development than psychoanalyst Erik Erikson
Yet, in over 50 pages of descriptive text about Sioux child-rearing patterns, Erikson provides no clue as to the role of the grandparents in the enculturation of the Sioux child. There are, however, lengthy discussions of the mother’s role in shaping the world view of the developing child. From my observations of contemporary Sioux child-rearing practices and the predominance of both mother and grandmother and the shadowy nature of fathers’ and grandfathers’ involvement in the enculturation process, I suggest that now, as then, the Sioux family presents a strongly matrifocal profile.

Traditionally, the clear division of labor by sex (men did the hunting, women maintained the hearth and home) resulted in the absence of the Sioux men from the hearth for long stretches of time. When the men were on the hunt, or off on raiding forays, the women were left to their own devices in the rearing of the young. With work of their own to do on behalf of their husbands and families (preparing hides, gathering seeds and tubers, and curing meats), young Sioux mothers often left weaned toddlers in the care of their older siblings or other female members of the three- and, occasionally, four-generation band or residential unit. Often from the same generation as the children’s biological grandmothers, these women, as well as the biological grandmothers who shared their daughters’ teepees, would be addressed by their charges as unci, the Lakota term for grandmother. It is assumed, then, that Sioux grandmothers had as much input into the enculturation of the young child historically as they do today.

The Muskogean-speaking people (Creeks, Chickasaws and Choctaws) of this sample were originally village farmers from the southeastern states of Georgia, Alabama and Louisiana (Driver 1969). In the 1830s, however, their ancestors were summarily removed from their thriving communities and resettled in the territory which now comprises most of Oklahoma’s southeastern quadrant (Foreman 1934).

Again, what data we have about child-rearing practices and grandparenthood among these tribal groups are extremely sketchy and provide only hints as to possible enculturation practices during historical times. All three tribal groups were clearly matrilineal. Families were matrifocal as well as matrilocal. The typical family constellation consisted of three generations living in the ancestral village home or in its near vicinity and carrying out a yearly round of agricultural chores on behalf of the most senior female head of household. Use of large agricultural plots was passed through the matrilineage, though husbands and brothers worked the gardens outside the protection of the village palisades. When the men were not gardening or holding elaborate fertility rites around the agricultural calendar, they engaged in the many and continuing intertribal skirmishes and, by the eighteenth century, numerous wars with offending European interlopers (Driver 1969; Foreman 1934).

As with the Sioux, the Muskogean men were usually otherwise occupied and, therefore, had minimal roles in the care of the young children. We can assume that, as among the Sioux, much of the parenting responsibility of young children was “women’s work.” The younger Muskogean women, too, had work which carried them away from the hearth. Smaller family gardens within the village compounds were the responsibility of the women (Driver 1969). It seems likely that grandmothers would be expected to tend children while their parents gardened and prepared food.

Although the two culture areas represented in this sample are widely disparate, traditional ecological adaptations, they share several core cultural traits: division of labor by sex, predominance of the three-generation extended family residence pattern, and
relative absence of male involvement in the care of offspring during early childhood. I, therefore, suggest that child-rearing patterns and, particularly, the role of the grandparents in that process in these two culture areas were probably as similar historically as they are contemporaneously.

The eleven men and fifteen women in the sample ranged in age from 56 to 83 in 1984. Twelve people (seven women and five men) are Sioux and were living on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Fourteen participants live in the area traditionally known as Indian Territory in southeastern Oklahoma. Five of these (two men and three women) are members of the Creek and Seminole tribes. Six (three women and three men) are Choctaw, and one man and two women are Chickasaw.

The 26 participants represent seventeen households. Five women and one man were single heads of households. Out of fourteen families who had biological grandchildren, only five did not have grandchildren living with them. Of these five families, all had grandchildren who still lived on the West Coast or at least 500 miles away with their parents.

Seven families lived in the three-generational family setting Harold Driver (1969:236) described as the modal North American Indian household configuration. One family had at least one member from each of its four generations living under one roof. Eight grandparents were the primary caretakers for at least one grandchild. In seven cases, the parents of the grandchildren were not living in the primary caretaking households at the time of the interviews. In an eighth case, the mother lived at home but worked full-time. Here, the resident grandmother was the primary caretaker of the three grandchildren in the household during the work week.

The number of grandchildren in the household ranged between one and five. One family cared for a great-grandchild at least half of the day while his mother attended high school classes. All fourteen biological grandparents had other grandchildren who were not living in their homes at the time of the interview. These demographics illustrate that a substantial percentage of American Indian grandparents still assume primary caretaker responsibility for their grandchildren. Additionally, the multigenerational household still appears to be the modal family composition in the two focal tribal groups.

**GRANDPARENTING STYLES**

What little literature there is on the role of the North American Indian grandparents in the enculturation of their grandchildren during historic (sixteenth to nineteenth centuries) times tends to be sketchy, ambiguous and highly romanticized. Grandparents are depicted as storytellers (Barnett 1955:144). Grandmothers were mentors to girls about to become socially acknowledged as women (Elmendorf and Kroeber 1960:439). Grandfathers advised and spiritually supported boys old enough to embark upon the first of many vision quests (Amoss 1981). Grandparents became primary caretakers of children left orphaned by disease, war or famine (Schweitzer 1987). In all cases the literature depicts Indian grandparents as protective, permissive, affectionate and tutorial in their interactions with their grandchildren. Only more recently has Pamela Amoss (1986) offered an intriguing analysis of the ambiguous nature of Northwest Coast Native American grandmother myths in which the old women have the power both to protect and to destroy their progeny.
The generally acknowledged model of Indian grandparenting presented above fits most closely the cultural conservator and custodial models to be discussed. In both cases, I suggest that the impetus for such grandparenting styles in contemporary American Indian family life springs from the same conditions and concerns that shaped historical grandparenting modes: practical issues of division of labor and the efficacy of freeing younger women to participate more fully in the economic sector of the tribal community; nurturance of unprotected minors so as to maximize the continuance of the tribe as a social entity; and the belief that old age represents the culmination of cultural experience. Elders are thought to be those best equipped to transmit cultural lore across generations, thus ensuring the cultural integrity of the group.

In the sections to follow, six observed grandparenting styles are defined and illustrated by excerpts from life-history interviews with individuals who exemplify a particular grandparenting style. Grandparenting styles are not mutually exclusive categories. Rather, the grandparents who shared their life histories with me, over time, have manifested attributes of several caretaking styles both with the same children and across their assortment of other grandchildren, both biological and fictive.

Although this chapter deals mainly with women as grandparents, ten men in the study interacted on a continuing basis with their grandchildren. It, therefore, seems more precise to label the relational styles described as grandparenting, rather than grandmothering, styles. The grandfathers, although present in the homes, are less absorbed in the ordering of their grandchildren’s lives than are their wives. As described in nineteenth-century ethnographic accounts of American Indian family life, the grandfather, like the father, is more likely to be the soft, affectionate, shadow figure in the family constellation who leaves the discipline and socialization of the grandchildren to his wife or her brothers (Pettitt 1946). Rarely, and in this study only in the case of two men who were religious leaders, did grandfathers take on assertive roles vis-à-vis their grandchildren’s socialization. Today, as in the nineteenth-century accounts of Native American Indian life, raising children is essentially women’s work.

THE DISTANCED GRANDPARENT

Of the seventeen families in this study, only three are best described by the term “distanced” grandparent. In all three cases the grandchildren are living either on the West Coast with their parents or far enough away to make regular visits difficult. Nor do summer school vacations herald extended visits from the grandchildren in these families. Occasionally, the grandparents will make the trip west to visit their grandchildren. These visits, however, are infrequent and do not have the ritual qualities of the scheduled visits of the ceremonial grandparents. The distance between grandparent and grandchild is geographical, psychological and cultural. For the most part, the distanced grandparents understand the lack of communication with their grandchildren as the effect of children’s and grandchildren’s changed lifestyles. As one Choctaw grandmother told me: “Oh, they’ve got their own thing in the city. You know, they have their friends, and their music lessons and school activities. They’d get bored out here if they couldn’t get to a mall or the movies.”

In one case, the grandfather had had a child from a failed first marriage whom he has not seen since her birth. He was told that she has children of her own whom he also has
not seen. Instances of geographical and psychological distance are highly unusual and almost nonexistent among American Indian grandmothers. For example, one Sioux grandmother not only knew all of her grandchildren from her children’s formal marriages or publicly acknowledged, long-term liaisons, but also all of her biological grandchildren from her sons’ informal sexual encounters. In fact, the issue of grandparental responsibility to a new grandchild was such a strong cultural tenet, she sought out the assistance of a medicine man in determining the truth when a young woman presented herself as the mother of one of her son’s children and the young man refused to acknowledge the paternity of the child. Of concern was the child’s right to know who his family is and her responsibility to grandparent all of her grandchildren regardless of their legal family status.

The distanced grandparent, then, is a relatively rare phenomenon among North American Indian families. I find no reference to this kind of grandparenting style in the literature on traditional American Indian family life. If it occurred, it was usually viewed as a cultural aberration due to separation of family members through capture by enemies, death or marriage out of the group. Rather, the distanced grandparent appears to be an artifact of an earlier (1950s to the 1970s) migration of American Indians into urban centers. The distancing is gradual, accumulative and only exacerbated by the second and third generations remaining in the cities to work, go to school and become acclimated to urban life when grandparents decide to return to their homelands upon retirement.

**THE CEREMONIAL GRANDPARENT**

Only two cases of this grandparenting style were identified. In both cases the grandchildren live some distance from the grandparents who, as with the distanced grandparents, have returned to their ancestral homes after living for many years in urban centers. The quality, frequency and purpose of their family visits, however, distinguish their grandparenting style from the distanced grandparent. These families tend to visit with regularity. Every year, summer vacations are planned to include a sojourn with the grandparents. Flowers, gifts of money, clothes or plane and bus tickets are forwarded to the grandparents at most holidays and birthdays.

When grandchildren visit grandparents, or vice versa, the host communities are alerted. The entire family attends a steady round of ethnic ceremonial gatherings and social activities at which announcements of their visits are made and applauded. Frequently, the public announcements make references to the distances traveled and the venerable ages of the visiting or visited grandparents. That these features of intergenerational visits are equally and enthusiastically applauded by the spectators underscores the importance of cultural values, such as family cohesion and reverence for one’s elders, which are ritually enacted and legitimized by these public displays of the ceremonial grandparents.

Ceremonial grandparenting is expressed in other public forms as well. Grandparents are often asked to say prayers, lead honoring dances, or stand and allow the community to honor them in ceremonies which dramatize the traditional attitudes of respect and reverence for those who have had the spiritual power to live to old age. Families gain honor and visibility in their communities for fostering the health and well-being of their ancient members. Therefore, the ceremonial prerogatives of old age are sought out and
perpetuated both by the elderly person as one way of maintaining a public presence and by the elderly person’s family as one way of enhancing group membership and family status within their ethnic group.

Ceremonial grandparents provide ideal models of “traditional” (correct) intergenerational behavior for their children, grandchildren and the community. In time-limited interactions with their grandchildren, the venerated grandparents embody and enact those behaviors appropriate to their age and prestige ranking in the community. By watching the ceremonial displays of age and family cohesiveness, the children learn the appropriateness of veneration of the elderly and how adherence to community mores qualifies older individuals for displays of respect and love in old age. The children are taught appropriate ceremonial behavior toward their elders: assisting the unsteady of gait to the dance floor, fetching food and cold drinks for them and formally presenting them with gifts and performance in special ceremonies such as the Siouan powwows and giveaways and the Muskogean church “sings.”

Image 13.1
“Grandpa Whitecloud” (Pueblo) and his great-grandsons prepare to fancy dance at a Saturday night Many Trails Club powwow in Long Beach, California.
The ceremonial aspects of contemporary American Indian grandparenting are certainly consistent with historical accounts of public behavior toward tribal elders (Schweitzer 1987). In fact, insistence on public veneration of the elderly may now be exaggerated so as to underscore, once again, what is assumed to be the more positive approach to aging in American Indian culture vis-à-vis Anglo society. Both American Indians and non-Indians are aware of mass-media ruminations about the American preoccupation with youth and the warehousing of its elderly. As a counter to this, there is an insistence on elder spiritual leaders at Sun Dance processions and communal prayers at powwows and sings. In general, both aged men and women are expected to be in attendance at public events so as to be recognized and honored simply for being there at their advanced age. Such events tend to convince community members and non-Indians alike that American Indians know how to treat their elders.

**THE FICTIVE GRANDPARENT**

Fictive grandparenting is an alternative to the lack or absence of biological grandchildren. All three fictive grandparents in this sample are women. Two of the women had biological grandchildren living on the West Coast whose parents would not relinquish their care to the grandmothers. Solutions to their grandchildless homes included a variety of ingenious strategies. One Sioux woman applied for and received foster home accreditation. During the first two years of her return to reservation life she harbored seven different, non-related children in her home for periods of four to eighteen months. At one time she had four foster children living with her at the same time.

Well, I got to missing my grandchildren so much. And none of my kids would let me have one of their kids to take care of so I decided I had to do something. And there’s so much need out here . . . so I felt I could provide a good home for these pitiful Sioux kids whose families couldn’t take care of them. So I applied for the foster parent license. I was scared that maybe they would say I was too old at sixty-five. But, you know, within a week after I got my license I got a call from them. And they had not one, but two kids for me to take. (Sioux woman, age 67, Pine Ridge, South Dakota)

One Choctaw woman, a teacher’s assistant in the public school system, became involved in the development of teaching materials designed to introduce American Indian and non-Indian students to traditional Choctaw life. Simple readers and instructional sheets in English that provide study outlines for the acquisition of traditional Choctaw dances, games and foods have now evolved into a full-fledged Choctaw language-learning course. The grandmother’s skills as a Choctaw-speaking storyteller have allowed her access to dozens of kindergarten to third-grade children who fill the widening gap she recognizes between herself and her West Coast–based grandchildren.

One grandchildless woman had an informally adopted son living with her who was young enough to be her grandchild. (She was 83 and he was 25 when interviewed in Los Angeles in 1984.) He subsequently accompanied her to Oklahoma when she decided to return to her hometown in 1985.
He needed a home. And he didn’t want to live with his mother no more. And we didn’t know where his Dad was. And all I had was my daughter, who works all day and is practically blind, so she isn’t much help around the place when she gets home at night. I needed someone around here who can look after me, drive me places, help me with the shopping, and all that. So I adopted him when he was around seventeen and he’s been with me ever since. (Creek woman, age 83, Los Angeles, California)

Fictive grandparenting was not initiated by any of the men in this study. That is not to say, however, that men do not facilitate these types of relationships upon occasion. In fact, some older men, particularly if they are in command of medicinal or spiritual lore, will apprentice young men who they later adopt as kin if there is no blood tie between. Older women tend to initiate fictive kin ties for the broader personal, emotional, social, cultural and purely pragmatic reasons stated above.

THE CUSTODIAL GRANDPARENT

As Burton and Bengtson (1985) rightly and importantly point out, grandparenthood is not a status to which all aging women devoutly aspire. The ease and enthusiasm with which the status is acquired depends, to a great extent, on timing, personal career path aspirations of both the parents and grandparents, and the relative stability of the extended family structure. Although Burton and Bengtson’s findings are based on black family studies, the same can be said of the range of responses to grandparenthood among the American Indians I have interviewed. Custodial grandparenting occurs across cultures where unanticipated family trauma (divorce, death, unemployment, abandonment, illness, neglect or abuse) separates child and parents.

Three families in this study are best described by the term “custodial” grandparenthood. In all three cases, the grandchildren were those of daughters who had either died, had their children taken from them by the court system or had been abandoned by the children’s fathers and could not keep the families intact with their meager earnings or child welfare stipends. In all cases, the grandparents’ roles as primary caretakers were solicited either by the children’s parents or the courts, not by lonely grandparents rattling about in their empty nests.

In one family the grandmother was not only caring for a daughter’s three children but also one son’s child, as well as a great-grandchild, when interviewed. The custodial role essentially had been forced upon her by the misconduct or lack of parental interest of two of her children. She, begrudgingly, accepts the role in the best interest of her several troubled and abandoned grandchildren.

When is it ever going to end, that’s what I would like to know? All my life I’ve had these kids off and on. Especially with my daughter’s kids . . . Atoka’s has been with me since she was a year and a half. Her mother would go out and would be partying and someone was left with the child. But that person took off and left Atoka by herself. And the neighbors called me to tell me the child was all by herself, crying. The judge wouldn’t let her [the daughter] have her [Atoka] back so he gave her to me. Lahoma, she’s been with me since she was born, I guess. Pamela went with somebody. I think she was placed in a home, then she would come to stay with me for a while, then her mother would take her back, and then get into trouble again and the whole thing would start all over again…. [And] then,
there’s my sixteen-year-old granddaughter. She’s going to have a baby. And guess who’s going to take care of that baby when it comes? (Choctaw woman, age 57, Broken Bow, Oklahoma)

For the cultural conservator, having a houseful of grandchildren is an expected privilege of old age. In contrast, the custodial grandmother is often relatively young and unprepared to take on the caretaking responsibilities culturally appropriate to the status of grandmother.

Pressured by cultural norms and familial needs, this fifty-seven-year-old, soon-to-be great-grandmother feels powerless to act in her own personal behalf. Suffused since childhood with fundamental Christian values (charity, self-denial, motherhood, the sanctity of the family) and spurred on by the promise of heavenly rewards to those who endure an earthly martyrdom, she resentfully accepted her custodial great-grandmotherhood as her “cross to bear.”

THE CULTURAL CONSERVATOR GRANDPARENT

Being raised by one’s grandparents is not an enculturative phenomenon unique to either twentieth-century rural or urban American Indian experience. In fact, grandmothers as primary caretakers of first and second grandchildren is a long-established Native American child care strategy.

The cultural conservator role is a contemporary extension of this traditional relationship. Rather than accept an imposed role, the conservator grandparents actively solicit their children to allow the grandchildren to live with them for extended periods of time for the expressed purpose of exposing them to the American Indian way of life. Not surprisingly, the cultural conservator is the modal grandparenting style among the families in this study.

Image 13.2
On the occasion of the great-grandmother’s ninety-first birthday, four generations of Seneca women were called forward to be honored at a Saturday night powwow in Long Beach, California.
The grandparental style of six families is best defined by this term. One Sioux woman who had two of her grandchildren living with her at the time of the interview exemplifies the cultural conservator grandparenting style. The enthusiasm about having one or more grandchildren in her home for extended periods of time is tempered by the realization that, for her own children who grew up in an urban environment, the spiritual magnetism of reservation life is essentially lost.

She regards their disdain for tribal life with consternation and ironic humor and consciously opts for taking a major role in the early socialization of her grandchildren. She views her children as being just “too far gone” (assimilated) for any attempt at repatriation on her part. Her role as the culture conservator grandmother, then, is doubly important. The grandchildren are her only hope for effecting both personal and cultural continuity.

The second- or third-generation Indian children out [in Los Angeles], most of them never get to see anything like . . . a sun dance or a memorial feast or giveaway or just stuff that Indians do back home. I wanted my children to be involved in them and know what it’s all about. So that’s the reason that I always try to keep my grandchildren whenever I can. (Sioux Woman, age 67, Pine Ridge, South Dakota)

She recognizes the primary caretaking aspects of her grandmotherhood as not only a traditionally American Indian, but also as a particularly Lakota thing to do.

The grandparents always took . . . at least the first grandchild to raise because that’s just the way the Lakota did it. They think that they’re [the grandparents] more mature and have had more experience and they could teach the children a lot more than the young parents, especially if the parents were young. . . . I’m still trying to carry on that tradition because my grandmother raised me most of the time up until I was nine years old.

She remembers her grandparents’ enculturative styles as essentially conservative in the sense that those things they passed on to their grandchildren were taken from traditional Sioux lore. The grandparents rarely commanded or required the grandchild’s allegiance to their particular world view. Rather, instruction took the form of suggestions about or presentation of models of exemplary behavior. “Well, my grandfather always told me what a Lakota woman wouldn’t do and what they were supposed to do. But he never said I had to do anything.” She purposely continues to shape her grandmotherhood on the cultural conservator model of her own grandparents. “I ask [my children] if [their children] could spend the summer with me if there isn’t school and go with me to the Indian doings so that they’ll know that they’re Indian and know the culture and traditions. [I’m] just kind of building memories for them.”

Those cultural and traditional aspects of Sioux life to which this grandmother exposes her city-born grandchildren include a wide range of ceremonial and informal activities. An active participant in village life, she and her grandchildren make continual rounds of American Indian church meetings, senior citizens’ lunches, tribal chapter hearings, powwows, memorial feasts, sun dances, funerals, giveaways and rodeos. The children attend a tribe-run elementary school in which classes are taught in both English and
Lakota. The children actively participate in the ceremonial life of the reservation, dancing in full regalia at powwows and helping their grandmother distribute gifts at giveaways and food at feasts. Most importantly, those grandchildren who live with her for long periods of time are immersed in the daily ordering of reservation life. Through the grandmother’s firm, authoritative tutelage, complemented by their gentle and affectionate grandfather, and through the rough-and-tumble play with rural age-group members who, for the most part, can claim some kinship with the urban-born visitors, they learn, through observation, example and experimentation, their society’s core values and interactional style.

As stated earlier, the grandparenting styles are not mutually exclusive categories. Rather, this woman’s primary caretaking responsibility also includes elements of the custodial model. She sharply contrasts the stability of her home with the turbulence of some of her children’s urban social and psychological contexts.

I think I have a stable home and I can take care of them. Especially if the mother and father are having problems. This next June, Sonny [her daughter’s son] will be with me two years, and . . . Winoma . . . she’s been with me a year and a half. But this is an unusual situation. The parents . . . are going to get a divorce. That’s why I didn’t want them around there [Los Angeles] while this was going on. I think they’re better off with me.

Marjorie Schweitzer (1987) suggests that adults, especially women, welcome becoming a grandparent and are proud to claim that status. For the cultural conservator, primary caretaking is a role eagerly negotiated with children. For the Sioux woman in question, having her youngest grandchildren in her home and under her absolute custody for extended periods of time is just one more example of her acceptance and enactment of behaviors expected of properly traditional, older Sioux women. Her active grandmotherhood fulfills what she sees as an important cultural function not only for herself but also for her future generations. She exercises that function in ways that would have been familiar to her arch-conservative grandparents—a cultural continuity she finds particularly satisfying. “I think it’s a privilege to keep my grandchildren. When they’re grown up, they’ll remember and talk about when I lived with my grandmother…. Like I talk about living with my grandmother.”

**DISCUSSION**

The five divergent perceptions and expressions of grandparenthood presented here are clearly consequences of the individuals’ sense of personal control and initiative in shaping the style in which they carry out their grandparenthood. Clear parallels to the distanced and custodial grandparenting styles can be found in the descriptions of contemporary American grandparenthood (Stack 1974; Burton and Bengtson 1985; Simic 1990; Minkler and Roe 1993; Vesperi Chapter 7). Those factors which prompt these interactional styles among American Indian families—migration, psychological estrangement between the parental generations and relative instability of the parental household—also produce instances of these grandparenting styles among non-Indian families. Interestingly, neither of these styles is the cultural ideal for either American Indians or non-Indians. Popular American literature deplores the psychological distance
between generations, yet also views the child reared by grandparents as culturally and psychologically disadvantaged. While American Indians equally deplore the distanced grandparenting style, the grandchild in the custody of a grandparent, however, is seen as potentially advantaged by that experience.

Incidence of the ceremonial grandparenting style among non-Indians is not clearly indicated in the literature. I suggest, however, that it does exist in some form (the inclusion of grandparents in national and religious holiday celebrations, for instance). Where ceremonialism between grandparents and grandchildren occurs in Anglo-American families, however, it is prompted by different motivations. As the literature suggests, (Holmes 1986; Simic 1990) the noninterfering, affectionate grandparents who live independently in their own homes at some distance from the nuclear parental family but who join the nuclear family on ritually appropriate, if time limited, occasions is the Anglo-American cultural ideal. In contrast, the ceremonial grandparenting style among North American Indians is a compromise—at once pleasing and incomplete. It is symbolic behavior, enactments of one aspect of American Indian family life, in the wake of missing day-to-day intergenerational interactions.

Both the fictive and cultural conservator grandparenting styles are particularly American Indian adaptations. Current motivations for both styles are consistent with historical ones. Pragmatic concerns for providing emotional and economic supports in the absence of biologically mandated ones prompt fictive kinship designations today as in the nineteenth century. And the need to care for children while parents work and to fulfill a sense of continuing participation in family and community life prompted the cultural conservator grandparenting style then as now.

Today, however, presenting one’s grandchildren with traditional cultural lore has become a critical issue of cultural survival vis-à-vis a new and insidious enemy. Faced by consuming cultural alternatives and unmotivated or inexperienced children, American Indian grandparents can no longer assume the role of cultural conservator for their grandchildren as practiced historically. Rather, grandparents, concerned with continuity of tribal consciousness, must seize the role and force inculcation of traditional lore upon their grandchildren through a grandparenting style best described as cultural conservation.

The status, grandparent, is imbued with considerable sociostructural weight in that it, across cultures, automatically confers both responsibility and rewards to the individual upon the birth of the grandchild. The roles associated with grandparenthood, however, can be and are negotiated. Satisfaction with both status and role is an artifact of the individual’s sense of creating a grandparenthood consistent with both personal and cultural expectations.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is now more than a decade since I first talked with older Sioux and Muskogeans about their grandparenting experiences and fully six years since I wrote the first sections of this chapter. During that time I have kept in touch with approximately half of the grandparents of the original study. This longitudinal perspective prompts the cautionary tone of my concluding remarks. Most importantly, the ephemeral, situational, flexible
and time-limited nature of the practice of a particular grandparenting style by contemporary American Indians must be underscored.

The grandmother who, in 1984, had actively constructed and was carrying out her chosen role as a cultural conservator, was capable only of ceremonial grandparenting in 1995. This major shift in family role is the result of a number of situational factors. Her daughter moved to Rapid City (a 90-minute car drive away from the grandmother’s reservation home), found work and took her four children with her. The grandmother’s struggle with diabetes mellitus and heart disease leaves her insufficient strength to care for her now adolescent and teenaged grandchildren. Her grandparenting currently consists largely of occasional trips to and participation in annual powwows with her grandchildren and their sojourns at her prairie home during holidays and their parents’ summer vacations.

The relatively short American Indian life expectancy and deplorable morbidity rates vis-à-vis those of the general population are well-known and exhaustively documented (National Indian Council on Aging 1979, 1981; U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging 1989). The life trajectory of the woman who personified the custodial grandparenting style a decade ago also illustrates the fact that American Indians can expect their grandparents to be with them for shorter periods of time than can non-Indian Americans. In 1985 the, then, fifty-eight year-old custodial grandmother was diagnosed as having cancer. Already metastasized by the time the growth was discovered, the malignancy took her life within eighteen months of its diagnosis. The younger of the four grandchildren and great-grandchildren living with her when she died were taken in by various aunts and uncles. The teenaged grandchildren returned to Los Angeles to search for their drug-addicted mother. They periodically reappear at the homes of or phone their Oklahoma-based relatives when help is needed. Their preference for the urban pace and their peer group’s lifestyle in Los Angeles proved too strongly seductive to be extinguished by their grandmother’s attempts to bring them into the Choctaw Christian fold during their short time with her.

A third life trajectory not included in the 1990 version of this chapter underscores the influence of health and the aging process on grandparenting style. In 1984 a Hopi/Cherokee friend and colleague embodied the cultural conservator grandparenting style. Living in Los Angeles, one of her grandchildren had been with her since he was a toddler. Weekly she, with him in tow, attended local powwows and powwow dance classes. By the time he was six years old he was already winning powwow dance contests in his age class.

This woman’s grandparenting career also exemplifies the stylistic range with which individual American Indians practice grandparenting. To a number of her grandchildren she was their ceremonial grandmother, going with them to powwows and enrolling them in powwow dance classes even though they lived with their parents some distance from her home. To hundreds of Los Angeles-based American Indian children she functioned as a fictive grandparent in much the same way the Oklahoma-based Choctaw schoolteacher did. The director of the Educational Opportunity for Native Americans (EONA) program in the Long Beach Unified School District for over twenty years, she ensured that Native American school children had the opportunity to learn about their Indian heritages in culturally appropriate ways.
In 1995 she was no longer in Los Angeles. As with so many aging American Indians, her twenty-year struggle to control the onset of diabetes had taken its toll. Approximately a year earlier a complication of diabetes had legally blinded her and a mild stroke had left her partially paralyzed and speech-impaired. She had taken an early retirement and had been moved by her family to her sister’s home in Arizona to recuperate. Her now teenaged, live-in grandchild had returned to his mother’s home. The woman’s state of health had reduced her family role to distanced grandparenthood.

This woman’s chronic and progressive illnesses underscore a grandparental condition not immediately apparent to me a decade ago because of the relative youth of the 26 grandparents in the original sample. In fact, the passage of time prompts the conceptualization of a sixth grandparenting style. I think of it as care-needing grandparenting. Although I allude to this condition in the earlier discussion of the ceremonial grandparent, it did not occur to me to consider it a full-blown grandparenting style until now.

Native American children and grandchildren are expected to care for their failing family elders in their homes. Children are expected to read to their live-in, sight-impaired grandparents, to help them to the dance floor and to steady their gait by dancing hand-in-hand with them at powwows. Older grandchildren and their parents are expected to fix meals, run errands and handle the substantial paperwork involved with Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security and Indian Health Service entitlements. Ironically, the frailest elders have among the most important cultural lessons to teach their grandchildren. The culturally expected quality and range of interactions between the needful grandparents and their grandchildren underscore and illustrate core values which have always sustained the integrity of American Indian family life—respect for the elderly and the interdependence of all family members.

“Mitak oyasin”
(Lakota for “all my relations”)

NOTES
This research was funded by grant 1RO1 AGO 3794–2, from the National Institute on Aging.
1. The appropriateness of the use of the labels, Native American versus American Indian, has been discussed and disputed in the anthropological and historical literature for at least the last 25 years. I have used both, often in the same article or chapter. Because I am talking about older tribal people who generally use the term American Indian to label themselves, I feel it is appropriate to use the term in this chapter.
2. In 1953 the U.S. government initiated a program to relocate Native Americans in economically depressed rural areas to urban centers. In the following 40 years the U.S. Native American population shifted from a largely rural to an evenly distributed urban/rural mix. This dramatic demographic shift was due, in large part, to the federally-funded urban relocation directive.
3. In all cases fictitious names have been used to protect the privacy of those people who generously shared their life histories and views on grandparenthood with me.
4. All words and phrases in brackets have been added by the author to make the verbatim translation of the narratives intelligible to the reader.
5. This phrase is spoken during and at the end of most Lakota ceremonies. It is meant to remind the participants that they are related to and share responsibilities for all living things. It is meant to underscore interrelationality as a core cultural value.