

# What It Means to be a Grandmother: A Cross-Cultural Study of Taiwanese and Euro-American Grandmothers' Beliefs

Todd L. Sandel

*Department of Communication  
University of Oklahoma*

Grace E. Cho

*Department of Psychology  
Middlebury College*

Peggy J. Miller

*Department of Speech Communication  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

Su-hua Wang

*Department of Psychology  
University of California at Santa Cruz*

This study investigates Euro-American and Taiwanese grandmothers' folk theories of their roles, discipline, and advice giving. In each case, 16 grandmothers of 3-year-old grandchildren participated in in-depth interviews that were customized according to local communicative norms. While grandmothers in both contexts were engaged in similar tasks and perceived their roles as distinct from that of mothers, their interpretations of these tasks differed. Euro-American grandmothers saw their roles as companions to their grandchildren; they did not see themselves as disciplinarians and found advice giving problematic. Taiwanese grandmothers saw themselves primarily as temporary caregivers; they readily disciplined misbehaving grandchildren and advised their daughters-in-law. Results contribute to the finding that grandmothers' roles are culture specific, leading to different understandings of the family unit.

A woman in one community was asked to describe the role of a grandparent. She replied, "You wait until you're needed. And you don't offer advice until asked for . . . And, uh [pause] you can enjoy them without enduring all of the loss of sleep." Another grandmother in a different community responded to the same question, "My daughters-in-law go out to work and make money; [they] help my sons make money . . . Grandmothers toil a little bit, take care of grandchildren until they are big . . . Wait until they start to go to school, then their fathers and mothers will care for them by their side." The former grandmother lived with her husband in a home separate from her children and grandchildren, 90 miles from her daughter, son-in-law, and 2-year-old granddaughter. The latter lived with her 2-year-old grandson, while the boy's mother and father lived in a separate home in a city 30 miles away.

Although these grandmothers were unique in some ways, each expressed beliefs that were echoed by other grandmothers in their respective communities, the former in the midwestern United States and the latter in rural Taiwan. Their voices invoke a shared cluster of beliefs about the nature of the grandmother role. Such culturally organized systems of beliefs about caregiving and family roles have been called *folk theories* or *ethnotheories*. The purpose of this article is to explore grandmothers' folk theories by comparing the meanings that Euro-American and Taiwanese grandmothers themselves attributed to the grandmother role.

Interest in parental ethnotheories began with Sigel's (1985) foundational work. Moving away from the dominant behaviorist paradigm, which claimed that behaviors are more important than beliefs and that parents lack knowledge of childrearing which only experts could provide, Sigel was interested in understanding the belief systems which parents drew upon to guide their everyday interactions with children. Subsequent studies conducted in a variety of cultures (e.g., Bond, Belenky, Weinstock, & Cook, 1996; Harkness & Super, 1996) found that folk beliefs are culturally organized and are shaped by the experiences of everyday life.

However, very little is known about grandmothers' folk beliefs in any cultural case. Studies of African American, Latino, and Asian families have found that extended family members serve as major caregiving figures (Gadsden, 1999; Hudley, Haight, & Miller, 2003; Parke & Buriel, 1997) and that grandmothers are important sources of parental ideas (Okagaki & Divecha, 1993). Nevertheless, as pointed out by Smith and Drew (2002) in the most recent *Handbook of Parenting*, research examining viewpoints from multiple generations is surprisingly neglected. Most research privileges the nuclear family unit and the mother's perspective. This study aims to broaden our understanding of families' ethnotheories by focusing on grandmothers.

We seek to understand the folk beliefs or commonsense understandings that Euro-American and Taiwanese grandmothers hold about the grandmother role, extending our earlier comparative work on grandmothers' beliefs about childrearing (Cho, Sandel, Miller, & Wang, 2005). How do grandmothers envision their "job" as

grandmother? What kinds of rights and responsibilities do they claim as grandmothers? How do they understand their role in relation to the child's mother? Taiwan provides a fruitful vantage point, as people enjoy a high standard of living, comparable to that in the United States, and they live under conditions of a democratic and open society (Rubinstein, 2000). However, the cultural practices and beliefs of families and grandmothers in these two contexts differ greatly. For example, while Americans are "individual-centered," Taiwanese are "situation-centered" (Hsu, 1981/1991). The self-construals of Americans are primarily idiocentric (Markus & Kitayama, 1991); they believe it important to protect the self-esteem of the individual, including young children (Miller, Sandel, Liang, & Fung, 2001; Miller, Wang, Sandel, & Cho, 2002). In contrast, the Taiwanese are allocentric, interdependent, and influenced by Confucianism and notions of filial piety (Hofstede, 2001; Wu, 1981). Comparing grandmothers in two very different cultures helps us to see a broader range of styles and possibilities for enacting the grandmother role.

Moreover, the questions we ask are timely, given the dramatic social changes that have occurred in both Taiwan and the United States in recent decades. In both countries, family size has decreased (Thornton & Lin, 1994; Uhlenberg & Kirby, 1998), women have moved into the work force (Hsiung, 1996; U.S. Department of Labor, 2005a), families have migrated to urban areas (Thornton & Lin, 1994; Uhlenberg & Kirby, 1998), and median family income has increased (Rubinstein, 2000; U.S. Department of Labor, 2005b). Fortunately, the literature in both cases includes some classic studies of grandmothers' perceptions of their roles that were conducted at roughly similar points in time, in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. These studies, discussed later, will allow us to compare our findings with findings from earlier eras in both cultures.

In addition to our substantive goals, our methodological goal is to understand grandmothers' meanings on their own terms. Thus, we chose in-depth interviewing as the best way to begin to make sense of their beliefs. Also, because we wanted to understand grandmothers from two different cultures, we took an ethnographic approach, customizing our procedures according to local ways (Briggs, 1986). This study, thus, furthers our long-standing methodological project of devising ways to make culturally valid comparisons within and across sociocultural groups (Miller et al., 2002; Miller, Wiley, Fung, & Liang, 1997; Miller, Hengst, & Wang, 2003).

In the remainder of this introduction, we review research on the roles and beliefs of grandmothers in Taiwan and the United States, spanning approximately the same amount of time.

## STUDIES OF GRANDMOTHERS IN TAIWAN

Modeled on Whiting, Child, and Lambert's (1966) "Six Culture Project" exploring child-training practices, Wolf (1972/1987; 1978) conducted the first ethnographic

study to focus on women in Taiwan. Living in a farming village in northern Taiwan in the late 1950s, she observed the interactions of family members; most lived according to the traditional Chinese style of extended families, established through virilocal (paternal) arranged marriages. She found that the most important relationships for women were across the generations, from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law to child. The young daughter-in-law came into marriage and motherhood at a disadvantage: she was an outsider to the family, and her relationship with her husband (including her affection for him) was perceived as a challenge to her mother-in-law's authority. Unlike men, who gained control through property and rights, a woman gained control by building relationships with her husband, her son (a daughter was born to "marry out" and belong to another family), and the outside world. This last relationship she built through participating in village life and "gossiping" with neighbors, family, and friends. Over time, with proper negotiation, a woman could be considered "successful" by becoming a "rugged individualist who has learned to depend largely on herself while appearing to lean on her father, her husband, and her son" (Wolf, 1972/1987, p. 41).

It is within this framework that the role of the grandmother emerged. Separate from her uterine family, the young mother's only source of help and advice to care for her new baby was her mother-in-law. Wolf (1978) put it this way: "No matter how antagonistic the young wife may feel toward her mother-in-law or how confident in her own abilities, at the birth of her first child she finds herself in need of the older woman as she will at no other time" (p. 232). The mother-in-law advised and assisted her daughter-in-law at this crucial time, knowing from experience that poor child care could result in the death of the infant. Only by the birth of the third or fourth child would the daughter-in-law feel confident and no longer need her mother-in-law's assistance. By this time, the grandmother's position as expert weakens, and if handled well, she "takes more pleasure in nurturing and spoiling her grandchildren than in competing with her mother" (p. 234).

Although not focusing on the role of women, Cohen (1976) and Harrell (1982) also studied families in rural Taiwan. Cohen (1976) was surprised to find in the Hakka village he studied that the extended family was the norm. His original hypothesis was that the extended family could be maintained only by the Chinese gentry. Instead, he discovered an economic basis for the extended family as members pooled their labor and resources. He also noted the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law: the mother-in-law was the "dominant figure" in the household, responsible for purchasing food for the family and in charge of the keys to the storerooms where tobacco and other agricultural products were stored. Daughters-in-law took turns working at home on household chores or working in the fields. Cohen did not discuss how child care was handled. However, Harrell (1982), who (like Cohen) observed "that families will remain together longer when it is of clear economic advantage for them do so" (p. 153), said that women pooled their labor and resources and that grandmothers cared for grandchildren.

From these early studies of families in Taiwan, it appears the “normative” role of the grandmother was to advise her daughter-in-law and assist with care for her grandchildren, usually in the first years of the child’s life. This practice was supported both by an economic system in which labor and resources were shared among members of the extended family along patrilineal lines, and by the struggle for control and agency which women gained through building relationships cross-generationally. Hence, there were both economic and interpersonal reasons why a grandmother would want to assume caregiving responsibilities for her grandchild and for her to freely advise the child’s mother. However, with rapid industrialization and urban migration experienced in Taiwan in recent decades, one wonders to what degree these traditional practices and beliefs have persisted.

More recent studies have documented changes affecting families and women, such as their greater participation in labor outside the home (Hsiung, 1996; Kung, 1978/1994), rising level of education (Rubinstein, 2000), and reduced frequency of arranged marriages (Thornton & Lin, 1994). Furthermore, the number of nuclear families has increased and extended families decreased, although not by much. Thornton and Lin (1994) found from a survey conducted in 1986 that 70% of all elderly parents lived with a married son, and Strom, Strom, Shen, Li, and Sun (1996) in their survey conducted in the 1990s found that two thirds of aging parents lived with an adult son or daughter. When comparing surveys of residents in Taipei taken in 1963 and 1991, Marsh (1996) found that males in the 1991 survey reported that they visited and gave support (e.g., money) to extended kin more than males did in 1963.

Finally, in a study of perceptions of communication behavior in grandparent–grandchild interactions, Lin and Harwood (2003) found that granddaughters reported less satisfaction and closeness in communication with grandparents than grandsons did. They believe that this may be due to two factors: (a) the traditional concept and practice that sons are preferred over daughters (e.g., sons carry on the family name and participate in ancestor worship), and (b) women are socialized to be more emotionally sensitive than men to the quality of a relationship. Thus, women are more dissatisfied than men when the relationship is not as close as desired. A second finding of their study was “that in Taiwan the participants’ *own* [italics in original] accommodation behavior contributed the most in predicting solidarity” (p. 556). The concept of filial piety may explain why grandchildren perceive that their own accommodation is important, as younger people should be more sensitive to their elders’ communication. Surprisingly, the same perception was found for grandparents’ perception of communication with their grandchildren. Lin and Harwood believe that this may be explained by another cultural construct, an allocentric self-construal (see Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and “strong identification with in-group members” (p. 557). Grandparents may be more willing to accommodate to grandchildren because they are more focused on others and wish to preserve in-group harmony. To them, these concepts are more important than the norm of deference to elders.

## STUDIES OF GRANDMOTHERS IN THE UNITED STATES

Research on grandmothers in the United States began in the late 1940s and 1950s, following the upheaval of World War II and demographic changes such as migration to urban areas and increased longevity. Emphasis was placed on the “isolated nuclear family” (Parsons, 1943/1954) and independence between the generations (Albrecht, 1954). Grandmothers played a limited role and stepped in as “rescuers” in times of crisis: “the grandmother in countless cases stands ready to shelter the divorcee and her children, to receive children and grandchildren in her home when apartments cannot be found, or the man is out of work” (von Hentig, 1946, p. 391). The three-generational household was viewed negatively as a “hazardous type of family living” (Koller, 1954, p. 206). The exception to this view was found in studies of African American grandmothers, who were characterized as “guardian of the generations” (Frazier, 1939).

The classic study of grandmothers’ beliefs, influenced by the Chicago school of symbolic interactionism, was conducted by Neugarten and Weinstein (1964).<sup>1</sup> They interviewed grandparents (both grandmothers and grandfathers) in 70 middle class families (apparently all Euro-American) in which the interviewer located a married couple with children and then one set of grandparents. Their research goal was “generating rather than testing hypotheses regarding various psychological and social dimensions of the grandparent role” (p. 200). They inductively found 5 styles of grandparenting, 3 of which were expressed most often: (a) “Formal,” who “clearly demarcated lines between parenting and grandparenting” (p. 202) and would baby-sit on occasion, but who felt that parenting was the job of the parents and that grandparents should not offer advice; (b) “Fun Seeker,” who joined the child in specific activities “for the specific purpose of having fun, somewhat as if he [*sic*] were the child’s playmate” (p. 202); and (c) “Distant Figure,” someone benevolent and distant who met with the grandchild only occasionally, usually on holidays and birthdays, “a somewhat intermittent St. Nicholas” (p. 203).

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<sup>1</sup>We acknowledge that Neugarten and Weinstein (1964) and Cherlin and Furstenberg (1986) studied both grandmothers and grandfathers. However, they found important differences between grandmothers’ and grandfathers’ beliefs and understanding of their roles. Neugarten and Weinstein (1964) found significantly more grandfathers than grandmothers described their role as a “reservoir of family wisdom.” Although some of the grandmothers called themselves a “parent surrogate,” none of the grandfathers did. Cherlin and Furstenberg (1986) found grandfathers older, in poorer health, and less likely than grandmothers to talk about their grandchildren. Hence, in their study, they overrepresented grandmothers. These gender differences resonate with our findings from this study, in that grandmothers in both cultural cases seemed to be understood as playing a more active role than grandfathers. Furthermore, in the Euro-American case, grandmothers found advice giving, akin to what Neugarten and Weinstein identify as “reservoir of family wisdom,” to be problematic.

A more extensive study of grandmothers' beliefs was conducted by Cherlin and Furstenberg (1986). On the basis of an earlier study of parents in maritally stable homes, they conducted telephone interviews with a national sample of 510 grandparents (both grandmothers and grandfathers). To enrich their findings, they followed this with face-to-face interviews with 36 grandparents from the national study. They found a range of styles of grandparenting. However, the style articulated most often was what they called the "companionate relationship" or "norm of noninterference": grandparents saw childrearing as primarily the responsibility of the parents; their role was to assist (e.g., baby-sit) occasionally, play with the grandchild, not speak out or offer advice to the parents, not discipline the grandchild, and take a more active role only when problems such as divorce arose. A distinctly different set of practices and beliefs was found among African American grandparents. Many took on a parent-like role, marked by such behaviors as disciplining a grandchild and caring for the child on a full-time basis when the child's mother or both parents were unable to do so.

In recent years, scholars have begun to look at the role of grandmothers among other ethnic groups in the United States. Hispanics, like African Americans, play a more active role in caring for grandchildren and live in extended families (e.g., Raphael, 1989; Rogler & Cooney, 1991) and function as cultural teachers (Facio, 1996), although the pattern is not the same as for African Americans (Bengtson, 1985). Bengtson and colleagues (Bengtson, 1985; Dowd & Bengtson, 1978) found that half of Mexican American grandparents wanted to live in the same neighborhood as their children, whereas a much smaller percentage of African American and Euro-American grandparents wanted to do so. Kamo (1998) found that Asian American grandmothers are more likely to be foreign-born, speak a language other than English, and coreside with grandchildren (Kamo, 1998). There are, however, very few studies of Asian Americans.

In sum, this review of the literature about grandmothers in both Taiwan and the United States shows us a number of differences, both in terms of practices and belief systems. Grandmothers in Taiwan have traditionally coresided with their adult children and young grandchildren, and they have shared in household tasks and child care. This was accompanied and supported by traditional norms of deference toward elders, rooted in the value of filial piety. Hence, grandmothers were looked to as sources of wisdom and advice by young mothers. In contrast, it is uncommon for Euro-American grandmothers to coreside with their adult children and young grandchildren and to play an active role in daily caring for grandchildren. Instead, many serve as baby-sitters or provide assistance on an occasional basis when requested. These practices are linked to beliefs in the "companionate relationship" and "norm of noninterference," helping only when asked or a major need arises, such as divorce.

## METHOD

This study was situated in two large towns in rural areas: Centerville (pseudonym), located in the midwestern United States and Chhan-chng (pseudonym), located in central Taiwan. The study combined ethnographic fieldwork with audio-recorded interviews. At each site, we interviewed the mothers and grandmothers of 16 young children. (This study is based only on interviews with grandmothers.) Because beliefs and practices that support children's development shift with age, this study focused only on the grandmothers of young children. Sandel and Wang collected data at both sites and depended upon informal, personal networks to recruit participants. Before providing more information about the participants and how they were recruited, we briefly describe the 2 communities. (For a more detailed description, see Miller et al., 2002.)

### Chhan-chng

Chhan-chng is a farming community of more than 33,000 inhabitants, covering an area of 16 square miles. Nearly all of its inhabitants are native Taiwanese: they are descendants of settlers who came to the island from China's Fujian Province during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries when Taiwan was under the control of the Qing Dynasty. Their native spoken language is Taiwanese (also known as Tai-gi, Hokklo or Minnanyu), the southern Chinese language spoken by the majority of the inhabitants of Taiwan (see Sandel, 2003). Most residents also speak Mandarin Chinese, the official language taught in local schools since 1945.

Extended three- and four-generation households are the norm, and many homes are attached to small farms, shops, and businesses. For example, two children lived with their grandmothers who operated small stores that were connected to the living quarters. These children were accustomed to seeing people come and go on a daily basis. In another case, the family's living quarters were located on the upper floors of a factory. Most of the children were quite accustomed to interacting with other children, young people, and adults of all ages. Few spheres of adult life were unknown to them; this open lifestyle is one that people in Chhan-chng say is very similar to the lifestyle of the past generation.

### Centerville

Centerville was developed after the coming of the railroad in the mid-19th century. The area had been a hunting ground of the Miami and Illini Indians, but the marshy land was not permanently settled until the early 1800s. The railroad platted out the town, and its Boston financiers advertised for settlers, mostly from England and New England. The newcomers, of British and German origin, drained the land and began to farm. Today, Centerville is best known as the home of a major, midwest-



ern university, one which draws students primarily from the Chicago area, but also from across the United States and around the world. Out of Centerville's total population of 100,000 people, over 40,000 make up the "special population" of students and their dependents who reside in Centerville for only a few years before leaving. The constant influx of people of diverse ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds brings to this community an atmosphere of vibrancy similar to that of many larger urban communities of the United States.

Two-generation households are the norm. None of the families in our study resided with the grandparents, and in many cases, grandparents and other extended family members lived a considerable distance away. Contact with these relatives was limited to talking on the phone or visiting during the summer or on holidays. Maternal grandmothers sometimes assisted when a new baby was born. In those families with grandparents living nearby, it was common for grandparents to visit on weekends or to baby-sit in the evenings. In a few families, the grandmothers helped with child care during the week.

### Participants

At each research site, 16 grandmothers, each with a grandchild 3 years old, participated in the study. Researchers contacted families in which participants owned their own home, and in most cases, the focal child's mother was currently married to the child's biological father; likewise, most grandmothers were still married. Exceptions occurred among 3 families: 1 in Chhan-chng, in which a mother was recently widowed and her child lived in an extended family with his grandparents and deceased father's brother; and 2 in Centerville, 1 in which the mother was recently divorced, and 1 in which the child was adopted. Chhan-chng grandmothers were slightly younger and less educated (mean age 57 years; education level 6 years) than grandmothers in Centerville (mean age 63 years; all had at least 12 years of education). The average number of children per family was 3 in Centerville families and 2 in Chhan-chng.<sup>2</sup>

### Household Organization and Caregiving Customs

Nuclear family households prevailed in Centerville, with children coresiding with their parents. Only 5 grandchildren had a grandparent who lived within an hour's drive. Extended family households were the norm in Chhan-chng, as 14 of 16 observed the traditional pattern of grandchildren living with their paternal grandparents. The remaining 2 lived in the same community (one next door) and saw their paternal grandmothers on a daily basis.

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<sup>2</sup>The average number of children among Centerville families was high because two families each had five children. In the remaining families, the number of children ranged from one to three.

Chhan-chng grandmothers played a major caregiving role for 10 of the 16 children, which is consistent with other studies in Taiwan (Strom et al., 1996; Wolf, 1972/87). In Centerville, mothers were the primary caregivers, or in some cases they shared child care responsibilities with nonfamily members. In homes in which both parents worked outside the home, children attended day care or were cared for by baby-sitters, rather than being cared for by grandparents.

We interviewed maternal grandmothers in Centerville and paternal grandmothers in Chhan-chng. When Centerville mothers were asked if a grandmother would be interested in discussing childrearing, they directed us to interview their mothers, even in cases in which the paternal grandmother lived in town and the maternal grandmother lived out of state. This is consistent with studies in Western cultures reporting that maternal grandmothers are more involved with grandchildren than paternal ones are (Smith, 1995). Also, it is consistent with the claim that better relationships between mothers and their mothers explains the matrilineal advantage in American grandparent–grandchild ties (Chan & Elder, 2000).

In Chhan-chng, we interviewed paternal grandmothers, a method consistent with the family structure of our Taiwanese participants (see Sandel, 2002, 2003, for description of family structure and life in Chhan-chng) and consistent with the cultural assumptions of local residents who helped us recruit participants. They took it for granted that the paternal grandmother was the appropriate grandmother to talk with and that the initial approach to the family should be made through her, not her daughter-in-law. (Similarly, Lin & Harwood, 2003, found a majority of young Taiwanese adults choosing a paternal grandparent and an even greater percentage of grandparents choosing their son's children as the person they focused on when recalling conversations of grandparent–grandchild interaction.)

## Procedures

*Recruitment.* In Centerville, mothers were our initial contacts, recruited through personal contacts and the participant pool at the local university. We explained to each mother that we also hoped to later interview her mother or mother-in-law; as mentioned earlier, all nominated the maternal grandmother. Grandmothers were contacted by phone, and all agreed to participate. In Chhan-chng, grandmothers were our initial contacts. Most participants were recruited by Mr. and Mrs. Dyoo, life-long residents of this close-knit community. They first contacted grandmothers and then accompanied the researcher to the family's home, introducing the researcher and explaining again the purpose of the visit (i.e., to learn about childrearing). After the grandmothers were interviewed, the mothers were invited to participate, and all agreed.

*Questions for grandmothers.* Grandmothers and mothers were asked the same questions; grandmothers, however, were asked to think about the questions as they pertained to the focal grandchild. Content areas included childrearing goals and values, discipline, strategies for promoting development, sources of childrearing information, shame and pride, and self-esteem and related ideas. The interview protocol was intended to provide a rough guideline for conversation; interviewers were encouraged to follow the grandmother's lead.

Questions about the role of the grandmother were asked in a number of ways. The first question directly addressed this issue: "As a grandmother, what kind of role do you play in X's [focal grandchild's] life?" Later, grandmothers were asked about this topic in a different manner: "How would you describe the role of being a grandmother compared to that of being a mother?" In addition, grandmothers were asked a number of questions about discipline and advice giving. As will be discussed, these were issues many grandmothers linked to their role.

The interviews were conducted in the grandmothers' native language: English for the American grandmothers and Tai-gi for the Taiwanese grandmothers. They were audio-recorded and lasted 1-2 hr. Researchers kept field notes about the physical space, participants, circumstances, and other relevant information.

*Analysis and interpretation of data.* The interviews were transcribed, verbatim, in English or Tai-gi, and they were coded in the same languages by researchers who were fluent speakers. Transcripts ranged from 20 to 40 single-spaced pages. Analysis and coding were done in original languages. Excerpts presented in this article were translated into English by Sandel and Wang.

We examined the grandmothers' speech to identify features of their folk theories of childrearing, especially as these pertained to the role of the grandmother. Our goal was not to test hypotheses, but rather to inductively discover the dimensions of the grandmother role from the participants' points of view. (However, it must be acknowledged that our data were biased by the questions we asked, as we emphasized issues of discipline and advice giving, as discussed later.) We reviewed and re-reviewed the tapes and transcripts to discern the main ideas expressed by grandmothers (Bloom, 1978; Gaskins, Miller, & Corsaro, 1992; Miller et al., 2003). We developed charts of frequently occurring terms or phrases associated with the role of the grandmother. In addition, passages in which such terms and phrases occurred were cut and pasted, including both the question and response, altogether coming to more than 50 single-spaced pages of notes, charts, quotes, and comments. This helped us see how each participant defined and conceptualized each term and whether a term was prompted by the researcher or emerged spontaneously in response to a different or related question. In sum, our aim was to develop a grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1999) and to capture the "conceptual density" of participants' speech, helping us to see "patterns of action and interaction" among participants. In this manner, theories of what it means to be a grandmother in each culture emerged as we looked at

plausible relations and the conditions of related concepts. Finally, heeding the advice of Briggs (1986) to “provide substantial excerpts from the transcripts [and to] resist standard editorial policies . . . that prescribe deletions of both the interviewer’s questions and all back channel cues from the transcripts” (p. 111), we quote at length from the interviews to show how the discussion unfolded and to make the grandmothers’ voices available to the reader.

## RESULTS

Looking across the interviews as a whole, one overarching theme expressed by Taiwanese grandmothers is that they see their roles as a temporary caregivers; Euro-American grandmothers see themselves as companions. Subsumed under these are a number of related beliefs and practices, including the issues of discipline and advice giving. We present these findings topically in order to draw attention to cross-cultural comparisons.

### Temporary Caregiver

Grandmothers in Chhan-chng said their job is to serve as the grandchild’s temporary caregiver. It is temporary, as the grandmother will hand over caregiving responsibility to the mother when the child is older, usually when the child starts school. Although the mother’s responsibility is greater (literally “*kha tang*” or “heavier”), as she is ultimately responsible for the child’s welfare, the grandmother is charged with substantial caregiving responsibilities during her grandchild’s early years. In her capacity as temporary caregiver, she feeds the child, sleeps with the child, takes the child out to play, and disciplines the child. Grandmothers engage in these tasks while the child is young so that the mother is free to work outside the home without worrying about the quality of care that the child is receiving.

When asked what “kind of grandmother” she was, Mrs. Cho replied, “To be a grandmother, it’s just that she [daughter-in-law] gives [her children] to me to care for. I just help her care for them. Otherwise I would just go and work [outside the home].”<sup>3</sup> When we visited Mrs. Iu for an interview, she was carrying one granddaughter on her back, watching the older one on the floor, and preparing the evening meal. She was asked if she knew someone she believes is a good grandmother, and she said, “Yes. All [the grandmothers] in the neighborhood are caring for grandchildren. This is a very normal situation.” Her responsibility as grandmother is to feed the child when hungry, and “[i]f you have time, you take her out to play . . . If she is crying just let her cry. That’s all.” Mrs. Ti also said it was her job to feed

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<sup>3</sup>All participants are referred to by pseudonyms. Names of grandmothers in Chhan-chng are written in Tai-gi (also called Hokkien, Taiwanese, Southern Min), using standard orthography (see Sandel, 2003).

grandchildren when they are hungry, and to keep them by safe by not "letting them run into the street." Thus, for these women, to be a grandmother primarily meant to care for the grandchildren's physical needs and safety.

### Companion

Euro-American grandmothers did not portray themselves as caregivers to their young grandchildren, but rather described a more lighthearted role that involved elements of playmate, companion, and friend. For example, Mrs. Simonson replied to a question about the role she plays in her granddaughter's life by calling herself "a friendly old lady." Mrs. McCleod said that her job was to take her grandson to the park and sometimes watch him in the evening. Mrs. Anderson said that she hoped her granddaughter would see her as "somebody she would always be glad to see and spend time with." Mrs. Beck said that she has a 3-year-old grandchild (not the focal grandchild) who lives up the street from her and commented, "I do baby-sit and read to them and play with them. When my grandchildren come I am free. I am on the floor playing with them, just uh, just doing what they want to do."

Most of these participant grandmothers believed that they play a limited but valuable role in their grandchild's life. For example, one grandmother said that grandparents can have quite an influence on grandchildren and that those without grandparents, "I think they lose out." Mrs. Nussbaum saw herself as a companion: "I'm there for him and enjoy him." However, comparing the role of grandmother with mother, she said, "A grandma has to just stand back and be always ready to help if asked. Never to interfere. I think the parents have the final word here." Mrs. Bennett echoed the belief that a grandmother plays a minor role, but is ready to step in and play a major role, by describing a hypothetical situation:

I think that this is important in this day and age is to know that grandparents are there as the supportive role and to let the child KNOW the grandparents. Because in these days of uncertainty we don't know if Mom and Dad go to work, if Mom and Dad are gonna get home. You . . . want them to know that if something happens that I would be there to step in and do whatever, you know, needs to be done.

Although it was not our intent to interview grandmothers whose daughters were facing major problems, during the study one mother divorced, and another was about to divorce. These cases helped us see how grandmothers "stepped in" in such situations. Mrs. Wolf, whose daughter was divorced, described her role as a "part-time caregiver," like Taiwanese grandmothers. She was the only grandmother to describe herself this way. Then, she described her tasks as part-time caregiver for her grandson: She picks him up most weekdays at 11:30 after preschool, brings him to her house, gives him lunch, plays and reads to him, and

watches him until his mother comes to pick him up. Mrs. Klatsky, whose daughter was in the process of getting a divorce, anticipated a change in her role, explaining that in the future she and her husband will play “a very active role” in their grandchildren’s lives as they support their daughter.

In sum, grandmothers in both cultural cases saw their roles as limited and involving less responsibility than that of the child’s mother. However, the duties and activities involved with playing this role differed across the cultural cases. Euro-American grandmothers saw themselves as companions, playmates, and as we will see in the following, part-time baby-sitters. They believed that the situation would change, however, if a problem such as divorce arose, and in that situation they would take a greater role in meeting the child’s physical needs. Taiwanese grandmothers saw their responsibility to meet the grandchildren’s physical needs. Although none said so directly, it seems that they perceived the period when a child is very young to be the time for them to “step up” and assist the child and mother.

## Discipline

Taiwanese grandmothers took it for granted that moral direction and discipline were part and parcel of their responsibility as grandmothers. Mrs. Kho matter-of-factly said, “A good grandmother corrects them [children] when they are wrong and encourages them when they are right . . . that’s the most important [thing], the rest doesn’t matter as much.” Mrs. Li was asked what she would do if the children were outside and did something bad. Would she discipline them? She replied, “Of course I will. I’ll praise them and I’ll scold them [laughs]. If she’s bad, I’ll take a tree branch [that is] beside her, and then she won’t dare.” Mrs. Ti said that when her grandson is bad, she will pick up a thin bamboo switch to scare him, and then he will be good. Mrs. Ang said, “I’ll discipline him. Will go ‘mm’ and he knows. All I have [to do] is give him a look and he’ll be afraid.” Mrs. Kho said that it was her job to teach her granddaughter right from wrong. She then illustrated one strategy for making the child behave—tell a “scary” story:

[I] have to tell them that they did this and that, and if they do it again next time, then grandma is going to discipline them and they will be scared . . . Like if they see gum on TV and they say, “Grandma, I want gum.” Don’t say, “Can’t eat it,” but say, “If you chew gum and swallow it, you will die. Wait till you are older then you can chew gum.” And they will say, “okay,” and not go behind your back and try it.

Grandmothers did not defer to the child’s mother when disciplining. When asked whose job it is to discipline the children, Mrs. Iu said that she is the only one who disciplines them. “My son is very tolerant. My daughter-in-law, she is too forgiving. Both of them don’t spank the children. I’m the only one who spansks them.” Even if the child’s parents are at home, she will hit and discipline them just the

same as if the parents were not at home. When comparing the minority of families in which the grandmother worked and the mother was the child's primary caregiver against those where the mother worked and the grandmother was the primary caregiver, we found no difference. For example, Mrs. Chng worked during the day and saw her grandson only in the evening. She said that her method for disciplining was the same as her daughter-in-law's: "First tell the child [what to do]. If the child doesn't listen, hit him so that next time the child is afraid. For example, when the child wants to pee, tell him to say so. If not, hit him so that it hurts and next time the child will tell you and will not need a diaper."

Although all of the grandmothers indicated that they did not hesitate to discipline their grandchildren, some grandmothers, like the mothers in our earlier study (Cho et al., 2005), expressed reservations about whether to hit the child and how hard to hit. Mrs. Liao said, "[I] hit the oldest [child] once. Hit him once like that, [but] don't have the heart. I hit my own leg and said, 'Oh, hitting like that hurts so much.' So I never do it." Mrs. Koa said that her daughter-in-law does not like it if she hits her grandson; thus, she feels constrained because the only disciplinary method available to her is to tell her grandson what to do. On the other hand, Mrs. Loa said that while her daughter-in-law hits the child, she will try her best not to hit her. "Use talking, talk with her. If she's not happy, then I'll call her over and tell her a story. She understands."

In contrast with Taiwanese grandmothers, the issue of discipline was a delicate one for Euro-American grandmothers. Because grandmothers will baby-sit, there may be times when a child misbehaves and needs to be corrected. Mrs. Leonard was asked if she disciplines her grandchildren. She responded, "Well. Well, I might tell them to stop something, you know, like that, but uh. Yeah, I, I, do that if they're doing something and their parents aren't there, but I wouldn't spank them or anything." Her response is interesting on a number of levels. First, notice the numerous hedges in Mrs. Leonard's talk: "well," "you know," "but uh," which implies a kind of hesitancy or tentativeness. Second, if we look at the content of the response, we see how Mrs. Leonard reframed discipline by underplaying it: "I might tell them to stop something." Furthermore, discipline would occur only in certain circumstances, when the parents were not present. Finally, she would not go so far as to spank her grandchildren. Thus, her conceptualization of disciplinary practices is strictly circumscribed. Mrs. Nussbaum employed a similar line of reasoning when talking about discipline. "Now, if they're [grandchildren] doing something wrong like touching the buttons on the television . . . Of course we correct them on that. But that's not quite the same, so, or plugs, electrical plugs and things like that. You can't let little ones do that." In this case, discipline is warranted because it is ordinary, "like touching buttons on the television" or potentially dangerous, "plugs, electrical plugs and things like that," and is something which "we"—implying any reasonable and responsible adult—would do in this situation.

Discipline is also problematic because it potentially infringes on the right of parents to be autonomous and independent. Therefore, many grandmothers framed the way they disciplined as allied with the child's parents. For example, Mrs. Brown said that at her grandson's home, his mother will not let him pull out the drawers in the kitchen. Although, she would not mind her grandson doing this in her home, she will not permit this because "I know that that's a no-no at home, so I try and maintain the same idea here, even though I don't necessarily agree." The children's parents are the ones who set the rules for the child. Another grandmother said that she "plays the baby-sitter" when she goes to her grandchildren's house. "I'm usually there to have fun, but I stick by the rules you know . . . Bedtime is bedtime whatever we decide before they [parents] leave. But for the most part we, you know, kind of play as buddies." Mrs. Meyer was asked whether she tries to shape her grandsons' behavior or personality when they visit her home. She first said, "No, I don't. I don't want to interfere." Then she added, "If I see 'em really doing something wrong, I would correct them you know and . . . I would never cross into Connie's parenting roles, you know. Because I know when she says no that's, that's what it is with the boys, and they had better listen." This grandmother claimed a warrant to discipline only in extreme circumstances when her grandsons were "really doing something wrong." Under most other circumstances, the mother was the one with the authority to discipline. Finally, Mrs. James said that the parent has the job of disciplining and training the child. In contrast, the grandparent is more likely to do "fun things."

A number of grandmothers said that they discipline only when the parents are not present. Mrs. Angelico said that if she were baby-sitting her grandson, his parents were not home, and he hit his baby sister, then she would have to discipline him. However, when his parents are present, she can have fun with him: "So I mean if we are playing and Brian does something that he is not supposed to, they'll [parents] see it right away . . . So that makes it easier for me. I don't have to discipline him, cause they'll take care of that." We conclude this discussion with a quote from Mrs. Beck which nicely illustrates many of the features of Euro-American grandmothers' understanding of discipline:

If they are here alone without their parents, I will take over yes . . . I have uh, my furniture isn't that great, but this one little guy, he always wants to get on the sofa and jump around and uh he can not do that here. And his parents tell him too, when they're here, but when I am here, then I make it a little stronger and he knows I mean business.

### Advice Giving

Advice giving was the final issue discussed by many grandmothers as associated with their role. Most Taiwanese grandmothers said that they freely give advice to their daughters-in-law, told stories of when they give advice, and they talked about



advice giving in a matter-of-fact manner. Mrs. Kho was asked if she ever has conflicts with her adult children about how they are raising their children. She replied, "No . . . she accepts that what Mom says is right. My daughter-in-law is *koai* [obedient and well-behaved] . . . Sometimes she doesn't know how to teach [her children]. Her time spent with the children is shorter." Mrs. Ong was asked if her daughter-in-law or son, when disciplining their children, will come and ask for advice. She emphatically said, "they will" and that they "have to ask." Mrs. Go commented on how she influences the way her son disciplines his child. Sometimes, she will tell him his way of disciplining is not good. Then, she gave this example: "Like sometimes when a child wakes up, but he [child's father] keeps trying to get her to go back to sleep. I feel you don't need to do this. If you keep coaxing her to go to sleep, she won't necessarily want to sleep." Hence, we found that most grandmothers freely advised their daughters-in-law and sons on matters concerning childrearing and that they discussed it in a matter-of-fact manner.

Some grandmothers, however, framed advice giving as problematic. When asked if her daughter-in-law comes to her for childrearing advice, Mrs. Li responded, "No. Because she is educated. I am not. I am dumber than her. Her [childrearing] method comes from reading books." Another said, "If we say a little extra [to our grandchildren], she [daughter-in-law] says, 'Hmm, now your grandma is spoiling you in a bad way!'" Mrs. Koa said that in the past, she would ask her elders and mother-in-law for advice. However, her daughter-in-law never comes to her for advice. Her husband, who was sitting beside her during the interview, then remarked, "They live on their own." For these grandmothers, advice giving was problematic, not because they reluctantly offered it, but because their daughters-in-law would not seek or heed it, a pattern that apparently departed from the traditional pattern in which daughters-in-law deferred to their mothers-in-law.

Euro-American grandmothers talked about advising their daughters in very different terms. An extreme position was stated by Mrs. Hopkins, who repeatedly said that she did not believe in interfering. She did not believe in giving advice, explaining that she raised her children in the way she thought best, without advice from her elders, and that she believed her children should do the same. A few grandmothers said that they do not advise unless specifically asked. The largest number, although not a majority, said that they advise their daughters on typical problems. However, all qualified the impact and import of such advice. For example, Mrs. Wolf said that she occasionally advised her daughter about behavioral issues such as child biting; then she added, "She [mother] is pretty independent and likes to form her own opinions." When asked if her children come to her for parenting advice, Mrs. Anderson said, "I don't know that they really do that much. They, I guess . . . maybe uh once in a while they might have a question. But I think really. I think they've got it all together pretty much. I guess there have been a few times when we have been asked something." She was next asked if she could recall which questions they asked. She replied, "No. Not right off hand. Basically they

haven't asked a whole lot." Finally, Mrs. Simonson said that her daughter will often call her on the phone and ask for advice about minor issues. She then recounted one time when her daughter called her on the phone about a minor childrearing crisis. She framed the story by warning the researcher, "Don't tell her!" implying a face threat to the daughter. Later in the story, she quoted herself, saying, "April, you have a college education and you're calling me?" Although she said this in a humorous or lighthearted manner and reported that her daughter laughed, she seemed to call into question that her daughter seeks her advice. It would be very hard to imagine one of her Taiwanese counterparts responding likewise.

In sum, Taiwanese grandmothers, although recognizing that the child's mother ultimately has a greater caregiving responsibility, did not regard their daughters-in-law as their equals in the task of parenting at the early stage. Rather, they believed that their greater age and experience, as well as the important role that they play in taking care of their grandchildren, entitled them to teach and discipline their young grandchildren and to offer caregiving advice to the child's mother.

Euro-American grandmothers, in contrast, more often couched the topic of advice giving delicately, implying that it is a communicative activity that may infringe on the rights of parents.

## DISCUSSION

In this article, we set out to explore grandmothers' folk theories by comparing the meanings that Euro-American and Taiwanese grandmothers themselves attributed to the grandmother role. This section addresses this question and concludes with a discussion of implications.

### Taiwanese and Euro-American Grandmothers' Folk Theories

Taiwanese and Euro-American grandmothers expressed culturally distinct understandings of the grandmother role. Taiwanese grandmothers said that they played a major role in their grandchild's first few years of life, when presumably caregiving needs are greatest. As the child gets older, begins to attend school, and requires less care, the grandmother's role diminishes and the mother's increases. In contrast, Euro-American grandmothers described themselves as playing a valued, but relatively minor, role in the lives of their young grandchildren, willing to step in to play a more substantial role only if problems arose in their daughters' families.

In the Euro-American case, grandmothers were deferential to their daughters, as illustrated in their framing of the issues of discipline and advice giving. The role that they constructed for themselves, in relation to their daughters and their very young grandchildren, seems to imply a discomfort with any role relationship that is

not egalitarian. This implicit egalitarian ideal is similar to Katriel and Philipson's (1981) classic analysis of Nacirema's "communication ritual," which they interpret as invoking an egalitarian social structure and respect for the other's autonomy. It also accords with Miller et al.'s (2001) finding that Euro-American parents tell stories to their children, or in the presence of their children, that reveal their own failures and weaknesses, again as a way of restoring the illusion of an egalitarian relationship. In our study, we found that Euro-American grandmothers were reluctant or unwilling to claim for themselves an elevated status as someone more knowledgeable and experienced in the task of childrearing. Likewise, they defer to their daughters' authority as autonomous decision-makers in knowing what is best for the young children. Perhaps, one could argue, they lower themselves even further in relation to their young grandchildren, literally putting themselves on the floor as the child's playmate and not taking on the responsibility as an adult who sets and enforces rules.

By contrast, the Taiwanese grandmothers did not seem to be at all uncomfortable inhabiting an asymmetrical role in relation to their daughters-in-law and grandchildren. When grandchildren misbehaved, grandmothers expressed little reservation about disciplining them, often with physical force. When a daughter-in-law asked for advice, they freely offered it without reservation. On the contrary, they expressed discomfort only when their daughter-in-law did not seek or accept advice. Therefore, we find in this case a different understanding of the relationship between generations, one that is hierarchical with deference given to elders. (It should not be overlooked, however, that mothers-in-law are obligated to their daughters-in-law, as they are expected to care for and meet the physical needs of young children. This implicates a cross-generational relationship that is reciprocal and not purely deferential.)

An earlier study by Sandel (2004) of stories of conflict between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law in this same community may help us understand findings from this study. The culturally preferred way to justify oneself when conflicts occur is to claim that one has treated elders with respect or to invoke elders as witnesses who testify to the justice of one's position. In other words, when a daughter-in-law does not seek or heed her mother-in-law's advice, she is violating the communal understanding of authority in families as residing in the elder generation, and the fact that some daughters-in-law did not follow this norm may indicate social change is afoot. An alternative explanation arises when considering the finding of Lin and Harwood (2003) that both grandparents and grandchildren reported their own accommodation in communication to contribute the most to predicting relational solidarity. There may be a greater sense of satisfaction in relationships when both grandmothers and their daughters-in-law are accommodating to each other. This begs the question, however, as to which comes first, accommodation to the other—by seeking and heeding advice—or via a satisfactory relationship.

Considering the theoretical implications of this study, we ask if cultural practices, such as coresidence, or the cultural beliefs articulated by these grandmothers are more important. That is, if Euro-American grandmothers lived with their grandchildren, would they be less deferential to their daughters, or would they be as careful when discussing the topic of discipline? Would advice giving be less problematic? Would Taiwanese grandmothers sound more like Euro-American grandmothers if they lived separately from their grandchildren and daughters-in-law? We do not have data from this study to definitively answer these questions. However, we do believe it is the cultural belief system, or folk theory, which takes precedence over such practices as coresidence. Further evidence comes from anecdotal observations of Taiwanese families living in the United States. When our friends give birth to a child, the question we hear asked is not if the grandmother will come, but when she will come. The same is true of Chinese families, and so-called "Overseas Chinese" who are ethnically Chinese, but live in countries in Southeast Asia such as Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, etc. The time of birth is perceived and interpreted as a time of need for the young mother and her child. Hence, many grandmothers will fly to the United States and live with their daughters-in-law (or sometimes daughters) for an extended period of 6 months to a year, usually limited only by the period of time the U.S. government puts on the visa stamp. This contrasts with Euro-American grandmothers who may visit for 1 or 2 weeks, at most, leave, and then say they are willing to visit when needed. Euro-Americans do not interpret birth and the young child's development as a time of need calling for their assistance and advice. Therefore, we believe these grandmothers' cultural belief systems are important (see Harkness & Super, 1996) and shape, guide, and limit what a grandmother does.

However, we do not claim that cultural practices and beliefs do not change over time, nor should we overgeneralize our findings. We acknowledge that this study focused on grandmothers who live in a rural, more traditional Taiwanese community, where practices and beliefs might differ from those in large urban areas. In the United States, our findings were limited to a subset of Euro-Americans. In the future, we could expand our study of American grandmothers to look at communities in metropolitan areas and different ethnic groups. We should also investigate grandmothers' understandings of their role in relation to older grandchildren. For example, how would a grandmother of a 10-year-old conceptualize being a "disciplinarian?" Future research should also involve observations of interactions between grandmothers and grandchildren to see how ethnotheories guide and are informed by everyday practices. Finally, we did not examine the beliefs of paternal grandmothers in the United States and maternal grandmothers in Taiwan. Future research could examine if there are differences across these types of grandparents.

## Making Room for a Variety of Understandings of the Grandmother Role

Our final conclusion is that the results of this study add force to the argument that Euro-American understandings of the family, and specifically of grandmothers, should not be treated as the norm, with other understandings treated as a deviation from this implicit standard. Recall that in the review of literature it was noted that studies of African Americans (e.g., Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986), Hispanics (e.g., Bengtson, 1985), and Asian Americans (e.g., Kamo, 1998) found grandmothers playing a greater role in caregiving and more likely to live in extended families. Viewed from this perspective, and in light of the results from the Taiwanese grandmothers, it is the Euro-Americans who appear to be "outliers," privileging the nuclear family, not preferring coresidence, and minimizing the grandmother's role. However, often researchers place studies of Euro-Americans at the "center," as does, for example, the *Handbook on Grandparenting* (Szinovacz, 1998). Studies of non-Euro-American practices and beliefs are placed in one section under the heading, "Variations in Grandparenting Experiences." The following two sections, "Grandparenting—Dynamics and Contingencies" and "Interventions in Grandparenting," are based primarily on studies of Euro-American populations. This mapping of research has the rhetorical force of linking Euro-Americans with an acultural, universalist perspective, and defining everything else as culturally specific.

This is not a new insight. Indeed, the idea of parental folk theory, as formulated by Harkness and Super (1996), for example, is that all caregivers are constrained and enabled by the particular set of shared beliefs that circulate in their culture. Nevertheless, scholars tend to see the world ethnocentrically, conflating the researcher's own folk perspective with a falsely assumed universal one (see Lutz, 1988). The value of cross-cultural research is that it illustrates the problems of the familiar (Miller et al. 2001) and displays different folk understandings of what it means to be a good grandmother. In the final analysis, knowledge of the variety of ways of imagining the grandmother role may help grandmothers in Taiwan and the United States see that there are other, perhaps better, ways to construct their roles.

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