Focus on Grandparenting: Immigrant Seniors Tell Their Stories

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Background and Theoretical Framework

Sociocultural theory provides a framework from which to understand the important role that family members play in the lives of young children as they provide the first social context for children (Ishizawa, 2004).

Background

- Children‘s social context is key to the acquisition of cultural knowledge such as values, beliefs, attitudes, and language.
- Research has primarily focused on parents‘, teachers‘, and alternative caregivers’ influences on children‘s development (*e.g.,* learning, social, emotional, spiritual).
- Research examining the role grandparents, particularly immigrant grandparents, play in the lives of children is sparse.

Background, 2

Immigrant grandparents deal with unique challenges when forming relationships with their grandchildren

For example, immigrant seniors:

- tend to rely more on their families for support (Vo-Thanh-Xuan & Liamputtong, 2003)
- experience stress when their expectation that their grandchildren respect traditional roles and responsibilities conflicts with the younger family members‘ expectations (Thomas, 1999, p. 85).

Background, 3

- Communication between grandparents and their preschool grandchildren can be a challenge if the grandparents do not speak the dominant culture's language (*i.e.,* English and/or French) or if the grandchildren do not speak the family's first language.

- Parents have to play the role of 'communication broker' (Ng, He, & Loong, 2004).

Background, 4

Understanding or speaking their immigrant grandparents‘ first language has implications for children‘s development and learning.

- It has a positive effect on their academic achievement (Mouw & Xie, 1999)
- They tend to have greater metalinguistic awareness (Chen, Anderson, Li, Hao.Wu, & Shu , 2004).
- They acquire cultural knowledge, awareness, which Ishizawa (2004) refers to as “ethnic socialization”

Background, 5

Ethnic Socialization

Grandparents teach children "… a minority language, a religion, a history of an ethnic group, or values that differ from [those] of the dominant culture" (Ishizawa, 2004).

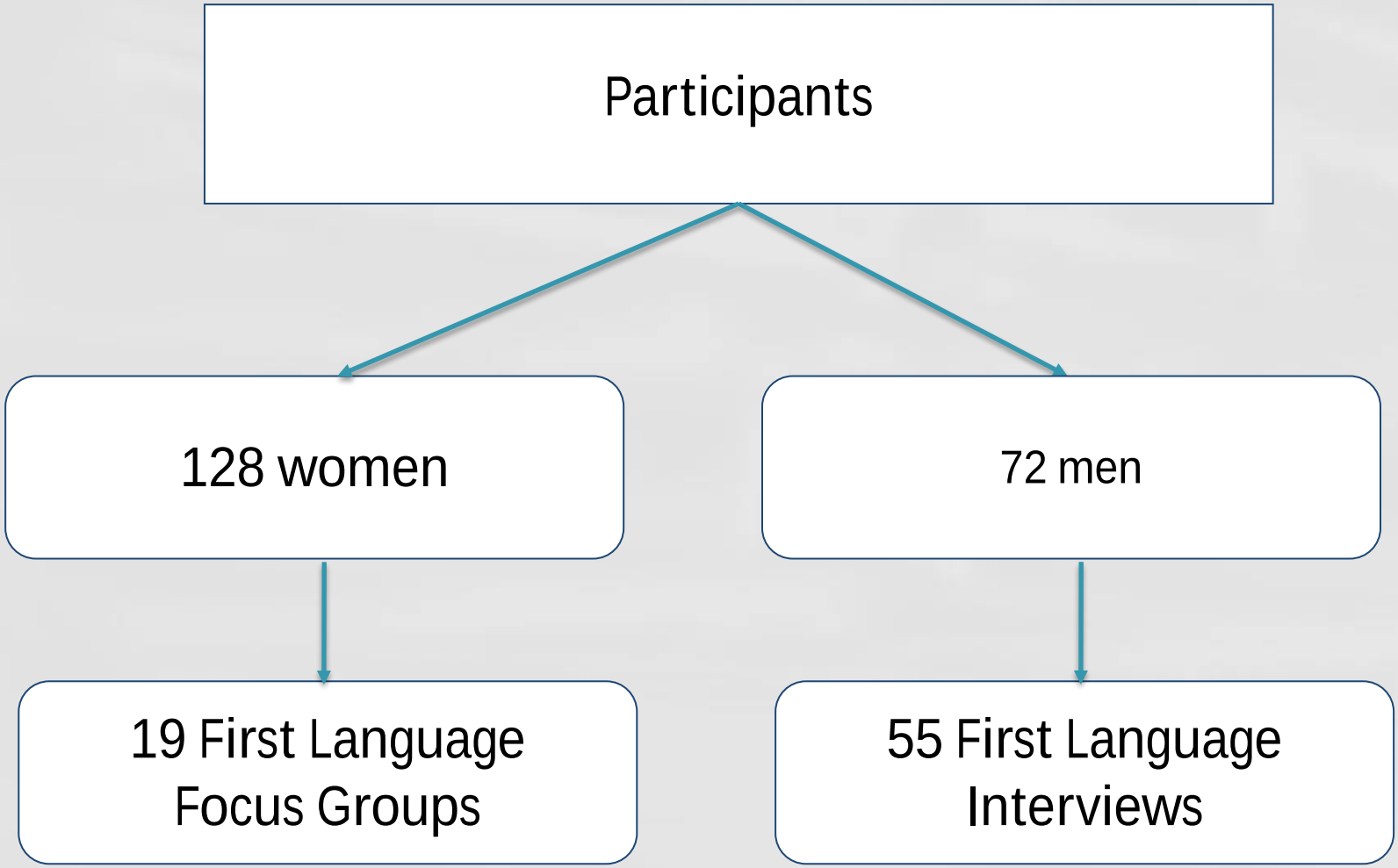
Background, 6

Immigrant grandparents often take on diverse roles within the family structure.

Examples:

- Caregiver
- Family Historian
- Generation-Skipping Value Transfer – children learn about their home culture directly from their grandparents (Ishizawa, 2004)

Our Research Project



Research Question - Grandmothers

Grandmothers' Focus Groups:

Some seniors have expressed the concern that their grandchildren cannot understand them. How important is it that families maintain the first language skills for their children?

Research Questions - Grandfathers

Grandfathers' Interviews:

1. What are the usual roles and responsibility of grandfathers in your culture?

2. What are the kinds of things you do with your grandchildren? Where are the places you go with them, or programs you attend with them, and what do you do there?

Key Findings - Roles

Caregiver

Their major responsibility and role in their grandchildren's life is to care for them while their parents are working or away from the home.

"The seniors should take care of their grandchildren. It's important, take care of their health, their education. Help them with their homework".

Caregiving for their grandchildren included: providing child care, feeding them, helping them to shower and dress, and taking them to and from school.

Key Findings – Roles, 2

Being A Role Model

Grandfathers discussed their responsibility of acting as a role model for their grandchildren and family.

For the grandfathers this included: being a peacekeeper; providing advice; being a leader; “serving as a good example”; being the “backbone of the family”

“Our roles are to model to grandchildren. We need to teach them to be good persons and become near to God and how to live moral lives”.

Key Findings – Roles, 3

Teaching Morals/Values

Teaching their grandchildren:

- cultural values
- religious values
- to become good human beings
- to be productive citizens
- etiquette (manners, social norms)
- to find their real identity

Key Findings – Roles, 4

Activities

Several of the grandfathers discussed their role of being involved in activities with their grandchildren.

Types of activities

- taking them on outings (e.g., park, shopping, movies)
- taking them for walks
- playing with them

Research Question

“When families are afraid that if their young children speak only their first language at home, they will not succeed in school, which is taught in English, what would you advise them to do?

Key Findings

An overwhelming number of grandparents responded that their grandchildren should speak their first language in the home as it would help them succeed in school.

Generally, grandparents believed that it is a myth that children will not do well in school:

> *"it's a misconception that if children are using a first language at home it is difficult for them to learn a second language and will affect their performance at school".*

Key Findings

Academic Success

Many grandparents have grandchildren who are bilingual and are doing well in school.

For the grandparents, speaking the family's first language in the home was not an issue because young children are "fast learners", they learn languages "quickly", and their "learning ability … [is] tremendous".

> *"Kids' learning ability is strong, they won't mix up the languages; some researchers even indicated that bilingual kids are smarter than monolingual kids, and it's beneficial for intelligence development."*

Key Findings

Grandparents believe that learning the family's first language benefits children in various ways…

Language Acquisition

When grandchildren speak their family's first language in the home, grandparents believe that learning English will not be difficult and it will be easier for them to learn other languages.

Key Findings

Cultural Transference

By speaking the family's first language grandchildren will:

- understand the family culture
- sustain their cultural identity and maintain their roots
- gain self-pride
- learn from listening to oral stories

"Language is a way to pass on
our culture, our traditions,
the lessons we've learned from our ancestors.
This learning is different from the learning in school."

Key Findings

Communication

"I don't like to be in a situation where I'm unable to communicate with my grandchildren."

- Grandparents stated that it was important to them to be able to communicate with their grandchildren and that their grandchildren communicate with them.
- It causes grandparents stress when they cannot communicate with their grandchildren, or if miscommunication occurs
- Grandparents stated that the ability to communicate acted as 'bridge' between the generations.

“Language is an important part of culture.
If our grandchildren do not learn the
language, our culture will be lost.
Everything our grandparents,
and their parents have taught us
will be lost forever.”

Thank You