“Playing” with Traditional Roles

Grandparents Raising Their Grandchildren
Abstract

This study investigated the phenomenon of grandparent reparenting grandchildren within the primary caregiver role. Forty-five grandparents responded to a semi-structured interview protocol designed to explore the challenges of reparenting children. All respondents were reparenting without either parent of the grandchild within the household or any assistance from either parent. A thematic analysis was conducted of the central issues that emerged in the interviews. The central themes identified in this study included: expression of feelings for absent parent(s), role conflict and role compromises, lack of social assistance, validation from others, and grandparents at play. Overall, the results of this study indicate that grandparents are increasingly asked to take on more responsibilities for their grandchildren, which result in a number of role conflicts that affect grandparent households.
“Playing” with Traditional Roles:

Grandparents Raising Their Grandchildren

Over the last quarter century the American family structure has experienced a dramatic shift in its makeup due to a fifty percent increase in the number of grandparents parenting their grandchildren (Burnette, 1999). Sources estimate that there are anywhere from 4.5 million children (American Association of Retired People [AARP], 2003) to 6 million children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2002) in the United States living in grandparent-headed households. Other statistics indicate there are a disproportionate number of minorities, particularly African-Americans and Latinos, who are taking care of their grandchildren (AARP, 2003). Williamson, Softas-Nall, and Miller (2003) attribute the increase in the number of grandparents assuming the parental role to various social developments such as, “Increased drug and alcohol problems among young adults; increased divorce rates; harsher prison sentences for criminal acts, especially those involving drug dealing; the spread of HIV/AIDS; and an increased teen pregnancy rate . . . causing many children to be without adequate parental care” (p. 23).

Three policy developments have also contributed to the rising social trend. The first is the 1979 Supreme Court decision in Miller v. Youakim which determined that relatives caring for AFDC-eligible children were entitled for foster care benefits (Burnette, 1999). Another policy change was the Child Welfare Act of 1980 that stipulated a placement priority for children with relative caregivers (Burnette, 1999). The latest government reorganization that changed the face of parenting was the 1996 Welfare Reform Act which required unmarried teen parents to live at home or with adult supervision until they earned their high school diploma or General Education Development (GED) equivalency diploma in order to receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds and benefits (Sadler & Clemmens, 2004). The policy developments discussed previously have placed tremendous responsibility on grandparents as well as empowered them with certain legal rights.

The state of grandparent-maintained families today points to various negative trends. Children living with their grandparents are more likely to live in poverty and be uninsured than in households
headed by parents (USDHHS, 2002). The lack of earning potential for older adults of retirement age puts a great financial strain on these families. Also, the fact that caregivers cannot provide medical insurance for their grandchildren because they do not work or are not allowed by their employer unless they adopt, intensifies the uncertainty and stress that already exists in these vulnerable families.

The resulting dramatic rise in the number of parenting grandparents as well as the general negative impact on these families has applied pressure on the United States government to pass legislation that addresses the unique needs of this population. In the year 2000, the Older Americans Act was amended to include a new provision titled the National Family Caregiver Support Act that required federally funded programs to provide, “(1) information to caregivers about available services; (2) assistance to caregivers in gaining access to the services; (3) individual counseling, organization of support groups, and caregiver training . . . to assist the caregivers in making decisions and solving problems relating to their caregiving roles; (4) respite care to enable caregivers to be temporarily relieved from their caregiving responsibilities; and (5) supplemental services, on a limited basis, to complement the care provided by caregivers” (National Family Caregiver Support Act [NFCSA], Sec. 373). Federal monies are disbursed throughout the United States through local Area Agencies on Aging that fund projects that address the specific needs of each community.

Literature Review

The social phenomenon of parenting grandparents lends itself to an assortment of questions and approaches to research. Most research models investigated the impact of grandparents’ caregiving on a variety of personal aspects such as social ties (Mueller & Elder, 2003), life satisfaction (Bowers & Myers, 1999), lifestyles (Jendrek, 1993), and health (Minkler & Fuller-Thomson, 1999). Other models looked at the role of communicative predictors on solidarity in the grandparent-grandchild relationship (Harwood, 2000). Baydar and Brooks-Gunn (1998) utilized cluster analyses to identify the typology of grandmothers. Chase Goodman and Silverstein’s (2001) journal article analyzed the relationships between the grandparent, parent, and grandchild, and how the relative strengths and weaknesses between each bond in the “triad” predicted life satisfaction.
Research indicates that grandparents caring for their grandchildren are extremely vulnerable to changes in public policy and financial barriers. Watson (1997) looked at the effectiveness of educational programs for African-American grandparents and observed that the participant’s level of interest depended on their age and available resources. Sadler and Clemmens (2004) observed the impact of Welfare Reform on young grandmothers, teen daughters, and grandchildren living in the same household concluding that grandparents were more concerned with economic and social problems than with their relationship with their teenager. Landry-Meyers (1999) also looked at the impact of Welfare Reform on grandparent caregivers and consequently offered recommendations on intervention strategies for this group. Fuller-Thomson and Minkler’s (2000) study framed the issue of African American grandparents raising grandchildren as a social justice concern and explored the impact of various social programs on these particular caregivers. All in all, an assortment of public programs and polices were scrutinized through evaluation research methods in an effort to improve their utilization and effectiveness.

Kelley, Yorker, Whitley, and Sipe (2001) applied a multimodal, home-based intervention method to measure the impact of caregiving on psychological stress, social support, and physical and mental health. An attachment perspective was employed by Poehlmann (2003) to explore the intergenerational relationship processes in families where very young grandchildren are cared for by their grandparents. The most straight-forward of the references was a report based on focus groups and survey data gathered by AARP (2003). The report generated various recommendations for improving minority outreach through its data analysis. Williamson, Softas-Nall, and Miller (2003) discussed their findings of a qualitative study that explored the experiences and emotions of grandmothers caring for their grandchildren. Burnette (1999) interviewed seventy-four Latino grandparents and asked them about the services they used and made conclusions about their unmet needs. Haglund (2000) looked at grandmothers parenting grandchildren affected by parental cocaine abuse and discussed the impact of abuse and parental absence on these families. Finally, Edwards (2003) used a case study to describe issues that affected a boy raised by his paternal grandmother.
The theory that frames this research is role theory, which
“…is a science concerned with the study of behaviors that are characteristic of persons within contexts and with various processes that presumably produce, explain, or are affected by those behaviors. It is with the study of roles that this book is concerned, and with the many concepts with which roles are described, explained, predicted, studied, accounted for, learned, rationalized, perceived, and created” (Biddle & Thomas, 1979, p. 4).

Most of the research utilizing role theory tends to focus on social behaviors, social positions, and social systems (Biddle, 1979). Emphasis is placed on the examination and investigation of observable behaviors of individuals participating in different roles (Biddle & Thomas, 1979). For example, Sayles (1984) noted that “Elderly participants in an “extended care” class at a senior citizen’s center [were studied]…to determine if some of them could continually distance themselves from the “client” role” (p. 236). Sayles believed that many elderly participants used “role distancing” techniques in order to avoid being labeled as helpless or invalids even if they participated in the “extended care” class. Even though it was not the main focus of the study, the most useful information gained from this work was Sayles’ description of the senior center as a place where people saw themselves as doing “nothing” (p. 244).

Landry-Meyer and Newman (2004) utilizing role theory for analyzing grandparent caregivers, explored concepts such as “role timing,” “role ambiguity,” and “role clarity.” The authors argued that grandparents often make use of a variety of coping mechanisms, “…normalcy seeking, taking ownership, and title switching,” in order to take control of the situation they were dealt (p. 1022). The final issue they raise is that future research should focus on issues of role transitions and how they affect grandparent experiences.

Dein and Huling-Dickens (1997) focused on aging and mental health in various cultures such as the West, Japan, South America, and China. They explored various theories and how they applied to aging and put forth the statement that,

“…successful aging is related to maintaining reasonable levels of activity and substituting new roles for those lost with retirement…In the West, work roles are of enormous significance for
self-esteem, social interaction and identity. Thus on retirement the elderly may face the loss of
power, respect and social rewards.” (p. 114-115)

These statements are the foundation for much of the analysis put forth in this research project. There is a
great need for more studies that look closely at the role or roles played by grandparents parenting their
grandchildren. From these families’ experiences it may be possible to understand the basic human desires
that drive the grandparents and the children throughout this difficult time.

This research project focuses on the following questions:

*Research Question 1:* Which role, parent or grandparent, dominates the relationship between the
grandparent and grandchild?

*Research Question 2:* How do grandparents managing competing roles in reparenting experiences?

*Research Question 3:* How do grandparents describe their role as second time parent?

*Research Question 4:* In what ways are grandparents given social support in their caregiver role?

*Research Question 5:* In what ways do grandparents describe their life changes during the reparenting
period?

**Method**

**Participants**

The 45 participants in this study were recruited by students enrolled in a graduate seminar on
qualitative research at a medium sized Southwest university. Class members recruited participants
through networking with each other and the local community (see Granovetter, 1976). Some participants
were gathered by offering extra credit to undergraduate students who could provide contacts for the study.
Other participants were recruited by word of mouth through friends and relatives. A recruitment flyer was
also distributed at Senior Centers throughout the city. Finally, some contacts were enlisted through the
Child Crisis Center which runs a program funded by the National Caregiver Support Act called *Abuelos
con Cariño* that provides education, information, and referral resources to grandparents raising their
grandchildren. In order to encourage participation, all the grandparents were entered in a raffle for $100
that was drawn shortly after all the interviews were completed.
To qualify for the study, grandparent participants must be in the role of primary caregiver with at least one grandchild in the home or recently in the home (within the past six months). Participation was also based on the criterion that neither parent lived within the grandparent household. In particular, we sought to interview those grandparents who were “fully responsible” for the raising of their grandchildren. Each graduate student interviewer had to complete a minimum of five interviews with the option of conducting more for extra course credit. Originally interviewers attempted to achieve a balance between the number of men and women in the sample; however, due to the overwhelming number of grandmother parents, that criterion was eliminated.

The average age of participants was just over 61 years (\(M = 61.07, \text{SD} = 8.64\)), with the youngest grandparent at age 45 and the eldest at age 79. Women constituted 88.9% (N = 40) and men 11.1% (N = 5) of the sample. Ethnic makeup of participants included 68.9% Hispanic (N = 31), 24.4% Caucasian (N = 11), and 06.6% unidentified (N = 3). For annual income, 35.6% (N = 16) reported earning less than $10,000, while fewer than 20% earned over $50,000. Further, over 71% of the sample earned less than $30,000. However, when asked to indicate if they received federal assistance, only 29.5% (N = 13) responded affirmatively. Only 9 of the 16 grandparents reporting earnings less than $10,000/year also reported receiving federal assistance. Given the obvious age and period in the developmental life cycle, it was important to determine how many grandparents work, either full- or part-time, or are retired. For this sample, 15.6% (N = 7) reported working full-time; 17.8% (N = 8) part-time; 44.4% (N = 20) retired; and 20% (N = 9) unidentified. The number of children being parented by grandparents included: 42.2% (N = 2) with one child; 35.6% (N = 19) with 2 children; 13.3% (N = 16) with 3 children; and 4.4% (N = 2) with 4 children. Other demographic characteristics of this sample included: marital status (single, N = 1, married, N = 31, divorced, N = 3); and education (Mexican, N = 24, American, N = 17, “Dual-citizen, N = 1)

Procedures

Interviews were conducted using a questionnaire protocol developed through class discussion. Interviewers asked participants 16 open-ended questions about their crossing experiences. The interview
protocol is attached in Appendix A. Follow-up questions were also permissible, allowing interviewers an opportunity to explore answers in greater detail. Finally, interviews were conducted in a manner that insured privacy and confidentiality. Interviewers informed participants of their rights, gained written consent and demographic information. The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. If conducted in Spanish, then the interview was transcribed first into Spanish and then into English. Those students who conducted interviews in Spanish were required to: (a) be fluent in Spanish themselves, and (b) double-check interpretations with one other Spanish speaker from the course. (3 of the 45 interviews were originally conducted in Spanish, then translated into English.)

Analysis of Data

The interviews resulted in 214 single-spaced pages of transcribed interview data. The data analysis of the interview transcripts involved applying some features of the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The interviews were coded manually using colored tabs. The colored tabs indicated common points of experiences, code words, and feelings for each participant. The results explore the text analyzed during the coding process of this investigation. The commonalities were organized into themes with examples given under each heading. A concerted effort was made to not duplicate findings discussed in past research projects. The themes selected for this investigation may not be the most common or consistently mentioned by all interviewees, but they do represent a different outlook on the experiences of these individuals. The themes questioned or confirmed the grandparents’ roles in the lives of their grandchildren. Often, these grandparents looked for affirmation in their role as grandparents and parents. As a result of perceived patterns of communication, role theory was elected as the framework for discussing the findings of this study.

Results

During the interviews the grandparents expressed a wide variety of emotional responses to parenting their grandchildren. Overall, the emotions articulated by grandparents included: happiness, joy, overwhelming love for their grandchildren, and gratitude for having the opportunity to raise their grandchildren. Many grandparents believed that caring for their grandchildren kept them young or even
kept them from becoming an “old grouch.” Most grandparents believed that parenting their grandchildren was easier than parenting their own children because they were “older and wiser.” One grandparent commented about her past mistakes at parenting how she has now rectified them. According to a 63 year-old Hispanic grandmother, parenting two grandchildren, her past mistakes were that she gave, “Too much trust and not a lot of time.”

At times grandparents expressed negative emotions such as sadness at the loss of their child (grandchild’s parent), fear at the thought of losing custody to an irresponsible parent, resignation about their current situation, and frustration with the difficulty of raising their grandchild (especially teenagers). Many grandparents commented about the difficulty of keeping up with their grandchild because of their age and/or health problems. Other grandparents wished that the estranged male parent kept better contact with the grandchildren. One male participant spoke extensively at the satisfaction he felt as a financial provider for his grandson. This emotion was not expressed by any of the female respondents; their comments about money usually involved themes of saving money for the future, being frugal, being taken advantage of financially, or having financial hardships. A few grandparents talked about how they wished they could partake in adult activities such as going on a cruise, having time for them, or enjoying their retirement. Several of the researchers commented that the grandparents were extremely loquacious and spoke beyond the time recorded in the interview. It seemed that grandparents appreciated the opportunity to talk about their caregiving experience.

Themes

Various themes came forward during the grandparent interviews. These themes provide a structure to the complex ideas, feelings, and concerns of the grandparents interviewed for this research project. The themes are closely related to the roles that grandparents take on as the caretakers of these children. Theme 1: Feelings for absent parent and Theme 2: Grandparent or parent? Role Conflicts and compromise frame the roles of parent and grandparent. The role of the parent is brought into question by the grandparent who must acknowledge the breakdown in the expected order of life. Theme 3: No help from others and Theme 4: Validation from others explores grandparents’ expectations of societies and
indirectly address society’s role in the lives of grandparent caregivers. Finally, Theme 5: Grandparents at play points to grandparents’ ability to bend traditional roles and gain new freedom from an experience many would think is oppressing.

Theme 1: Feelings for absent parent. Many grandparents articulated personal turmoil when children expressed love for their parents or a desire to live with their parents. Whenever the grandparents mentioned the love felt by the grandchildren for their parent, the negative actions of the parent were often linked to the same statement. As a 63-year-old Caucasian grandmother with two grandchildren stated:

He loves his mother dearly. His love for her is just like my love for her also, [which] is totally unconditional. And this is why we’ve always tried to deal with truth with him, cause that’s all you can do. That’s how you build a trusting relationship. That’s the only kind of relationship you have where it can work. But he’s getting older, you know, he really misses her and it’s hard for me to know what to say when he knows where she is, which is jail, then to a rehab, that’s where she is right now.

These difficult challenges and conflicting feelings are often compounded by the desire to be truthful with the children despite the terrible situations that must be described. Many grandparents talked about how they did not lie to their grandchildren despite the complicated subject matter, but often they used vocabulary that was age appropriate in order to express themselves.

Grandparents often indirectly expressed feelings of rejection for the parent because of the desire of grandchildren to be with their parent. For example, a 76-year-old Hispanic grandfather with one grandchild said:

That is why the judge granted custody of the grandchild to my wife. Of course she doesn’t want him to be raised in that situation. Then right now he loves her [the grandchild’s biological mother], “Oh my mama.” [said in a sarcastic tone] He recognizes. And sometimes we don’t want to take him, he start crying. It’s hard for us when this…comes from a judge.
The expression of negative feelings for the parent is frequently followed by statements that justify the current family situation. During an interview, a 66 year-old Hispanic grandmother directly asked the researcher if she agreed that a judge would grant her custody if the mother returned to fight for custody of her daughter. Even though most of the grandparents had legal custody of their grandchildren, there was a great deal of uncertainty surrounding the “true” feelings of the children for their parents.

In one vivid example of the challenges associated with parenting grandchildren, a 54 year-old Hispanic grandmother with one grandchild, an issue of sexual abuse was raised. The grandmother explained that even though the child had been sexually abused, she was seen as the reason why the child was taken away from the parent

    And they gave me that excuse or fact, but they told me that, “Because of the love she had back then, she thought it was love, a child that age, she also seeks that love [the inappropriate love/abuse of a parent] because they would reward her. And you kept her away from that love, so she blames you, for taking away the only love she has had, or that she ever had.”

The grandparent was convinced that the grandchild’s negative behaviors towards her were based on resentment for taking her away from her parents. Throughout the interview the grandmother mentioned these negative behaviors and perceived feelings several times which demonstrated the centrality of the issue for her life.

    Because grandchildren often moved in with their grandparents due to conflict, trauma, or unforeseen circumstances, it would not be surprising if the grandparents’ expressed feelings of disappointment or anger toward their adult children. What must be noted is the delicate balance many of these grandparents strike between speaking the truth and expressing their feelings. Many try not to cross the line of disrespect by only stating the circumstances by which they became grandparents leaving judgment up to us rather than expressing their opinions about their children.

    **Theme 2: Grandparent or parent? Role conflicts and compromise.** In the vast majority of the interviews, the grandparents mentioned the child’s decision or attempts to call the grandparent “mom” or
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“dad”. It was often a source of pride that the grandchild chose to designate them as a parent instead of a grandparent. For example, a 48 year-old Hispanic grandmother with two grandchildren commented:

“They wait for me everyday just uhh, they say, ‘Grandma!’ And now they say, ‘Mommy, mommy, mommy,’ waiting for me!” In many cases it seemed that the grandchildren chose to call the grandparent “mom” or “dad” without any prompting from the grandparent.

In other instances there was internal conflict on the part of the grandchild in the decision of what to call the grandparent. A 65 year-old Caucasian grandmother with two grandchildren related the following conversation between her and her grandson,

Billy calls me mom. John, when he first came, he asked, “Can I call you Mama?” I said, “You can call me anything you’d like, it’s up to you.” But he calls me Gram, and then he gets angry and he doesn’t call me anything at all.

The younger the grandchild, the more likely they were to call or attempt to call the grandparent “mom” or “dad”. There seems to be a need for the children to acknowledge the “difference” in the role that the grandparent has. Also, this behavior may be an attempt for the child to comfort themselves through this difficult period in their lives. A 54 year-old Hispanic grandmother with two grandchildren offered the following insight:

They call me mommy, they call me grandmother, but more mommy. . . Well, I guess I am their mother to them. Because I want them to feel good with me, not that I am their grandmother. Because, for example, they do not have the endorsements from their mother or their father. Therefore, I don’t want them to feel abandoned. I want to be just as a mother to them. *Quiero que yo estoy así como su mama.* [I want to be there for them like a mother.] I don’t want them saying, “my grandma is not like, what am I to do? No. They arrive and, “mommy, I need. . . mommy, I am.” I feel like their mother.

Need is reciprocated between the grandchildren and the grandparent. The grandchild needs the security of the parent label even though their parents abandoned them. The grandparent needs to express that they are willing to make sacrifices above and beyond those expected of most
grandparents. These special needs reshape the traditional roles of grandparents and grandchildren and externalize the everyday struggles of families.

In several instances, grandparents chose to stop their grandchildren from calling them “mom.” A 56 year-old African-American grandmother with four grandchildren explained:

Well, she wants to call me mom, but I don’t let her, because I am her grandmother. And periodically her mom will call, you know, and ask could she see her. And I let her.

Because after all that is her mother. You know, but – No, all them have to ask if they can call me mom, and I’m their grandmother, so you know, it’s not right for me to step in and be their mom, when I am their grandmother. But I primarily do everything for them.

Despite having all the responsibilities of a parent and the grandchild expressing the need to label her as a parent, this grandparent chose to differentiate herself as a grandparent. This grandparent does not connect the role of the parent with the word “mom”.

Even though the following example does not concern the use of the word “mom,” it illustrates one reason why grandparents may forgo being called a parent despite their grandchild’s desires. A 50 year-old Caucasian grandmother showed great ambiguity about her parental role towards her three grandchildren.

Well, the big one, he’s just like my, mine because I’ve always had him, the ten year old.

The five year old, I’m very close to her too. The little one, I love him, but I try to separate myself from him cause I don’t want to have to raise him.

Accepting the label of a parent means also accepting the overwhelming responsibilities associated with parenting. Even though the grandparent may be aware of the extent of their responsibility as the caregiver for their grandchildren, not being called “mom” or “dad” may be their way of protecting themselves from the finality of their situation. Being called grandma or grandfather may be their way of connecting to reality and not letting themselves get overtaken by this new persona.

Overall, the roles of “mom” and “grandma/pa” were very distinct in the minds of the grandparents interviewed. Most of them devoted some of their dialogue to explain their role and role
name in their particular situation. The perceived role of parent or grandparent did not affect the type of care they rendered to their grandchild because most of them acted as parents whether or not they accepted the label.

**Theme 3: No help from others.** The questionnaire read to the respondents contained one question that asked if they would like to receive help from others. Most grandparents said that they did not get help, or at least the type of help they wanted. For the most part, grandparents wanted help with babysitting or having playmates for their grandchild. A 66 year-old Hispanic grandmother with one grandchild replied to the question of who helps them with the care of their grandchild,

> Nobody, nobody. My husband has a lot of relatives that they live here in [name of city].

> You know like, for them to come over and say, you know, ah, we’ll take Sandra to the movie or to, you know, with their kids. No, no, no.

Often, there was a conflict between role expectations by the grandparents and family members. None of the participants spoke of playgroups or motherhood circles where they could meet other parents and possibly connect with others for support and resources. At the same time, family members were probably unaware of the needs of these grandparents whose traditional role is to lend assistance to others for child rearing. The grandparents perceived their need for help due to their age, but the fact that they cared for a child or children did not allow others to make the connection and offer help. In one instance the grandmother received help from the godparents of her granddaughter, but the godparents were fulfilling duties that are generally accepted for this group.

> Often, the question was answered not with a direct response of what type of help people wanted, but with further examples of the sacrifices made by the grandparent. A 68 year-old Hispanic grandmother whose grandchildren had just recently left the home, illustrates the point with her response to the question:

> No. All on my own. Just my husband and myself, and mostly myself, because my husband was working. He would come late. And I would, like I said, go work, go pick up my grandson from the day care, and come over here and start fixing support for my
husband and the kids. And you know, like run, run, run, run. Then, bathe them at night
and put them to bed and you know. Getting ready for the following day.

It is difficult to discern if participants answered this question in this manner because they had no
examples of other people or organizations helping, or if they simply wanted to over emphasize their
sacrifices as opposed to those made by any other person or organization. Grandparents had a tremendous
need to express the types of sacrifices made for their grandchildren. These interviews gave them the
opportunity to convey to others outside of their immediate circle how big a sacrifice was made for the
sake of their grandchildren.

Theme 4: Validation from others. Grandparents often referred to comments made by friends and
family in order to validate their role as a caregiver to their grandchild. A 66 year-old Hispanic
grandmother stated:

I think we have done a good job raising her. I think so. Everybody tells us, you know and
they tell her. My friends come over and visit and they tell her, “Sandra, do you know how
lucky you are to have a grandma and a grandpa like these old people? And she says, “I
know, they’re the best.”

Even though the grandparents expressed love and gratitude from the children, it was not uncommon to
hear complements made by other adults. A 45 year-old Hispanic grandmother with two grandchildren
commented:

Well sometimes, you want the support of their family. Not your family because you know
that I have, but the support from friends…the attention….There was one person, she was
very, very sweet, very nice, and she would encourage me like you were great to be doing
this at your age, and your grandchildren are blessed to have you and those words were
very touching because that is something…that is um, I got flattered by that because it
feels good for somebody to think that you know that you’re doing something good.

The grandparents’ efforts to highlight complements from other adults may also have been an attempt to
reassure the interviewer that “all the positive comments given by the grandparents are also validated by
people not directly involved in the care of the grandchild.” This self-conscious act illustrates how insecure individuals may be about their publicly perceived role as caregiver to their grandchild. Grandparents are stepping beyond their traditional roles of mere babysitters to that of center figures shaping the lives of these vulnerable children. From this theme one can see that society is not doing enough to validate this common act of sincere devotion.

Theme 5: Grandparents at play. Some grandparents expressed the desire to be free of their responsibility as a parent and do things that were normally age appropriate for a retired individual. When the 76 year-old Hispanic grandfather was asked if raising his grandchild changed his life, he responded with the following comments:

[He gives a big smile and laughs] Yes, cause I like to going to go to dance Friday, Saturday, Sunday. And now forget it. Now Saturday instead of going dancing we go to Chuck E. Cheese, for kids….When he has to go to sleep, if we want to go to the movies when he says it’s time to go mimis [sleep] we cannot go, forget it. He’s the boss.

In essence, several grandparents spoke of the changes in their lives as an act of “surrendering” their own desires for those of their grandchildren. These comments were not completely negative in tone, but they did express a longing for their situation to be different, at least temporarily. A 72 year-old grandmother [ethnicity withheld] with one grandchild explained:

We go to all the games at [local university], the football games, the basketball games and ummm that’s been a challenge with my husband and I, you know, trying to do all the things, the activities. And it’s been very good and we enjoy it.

Even though participating in these activities was difficult for many individuals, they seemed to enjoy being out of their usual element.

Most grandparents said that they enjoyed partaking in activities with their grandchildren even if they were not considered “appropriate” for their age. A 65 year-old Caucasian grandmother said:
Well it was rewarding in many ways because we used to take him camping and fishing
and teaching him how to do things was very rewarding because like I said all our kids
were grown at [the] time so it was nice having a kid in the house again.

The grandchild becomes the catalyst for participating in new activities that would otherwise be out of
their normal scope. Many grandparents believed that their grandchildren helped them to “stay young” and
gave them a “new life”.

The circumstance of caring for their grandchild affords these people the opportunity to “play”
despite their age and status. Often, grandparents expressed a self-consciousness or keen awareness that
others questioned their role. As a grandparent caregiver they have no choice but to defy their traditional
role of grandparent and accompany their grandchildren on various “adventures.” Grandparent’s defiance
of traditional roles was a liberating experience for most of the grandparents surveyed.

For one particular grandparent “playing” was the fulfillment of her own childhood desire. A 68
year-old Hispanic grandmother joyfully stated:

Well, we were poor people you know. I remember my mother, you know, so strict with
us, too. She wouldn’t let us go swimming, because it was indecent to be wearing a
bathing suit. She didn’t let us go to the movies, because I mean, we would see what we
weren’t suppose to see in the movies. So I was raised like that, and when I had those kids
you know, “grandma, I want to go see this movie.” “Okay, I’ll take you.” Cartoon
movies, those Disney movies. And they enjoy that very much. The circus, I would take
them to the circus to anything they want. The petting zoo, I would take them everywhere.

It is difficult to discern where the wants of the child end and the wishes of the grandparent begin. Not
only do grandparents play with the roles of parents and grandparents, but sometimes the role of children
as well. Despite the extreme sacrifices and difficulties, grandparents attain a new mutable role that frees
them from the typical constraints of advancing age and a respected status. Grandparents do not lose any
attributes from their traditional role; they gain new abilities and utilize both at their own discretion.
Discussion

The study revealed a consistent pattern of grandparents struggling to define their role to their grandchildren, society, and themselves. At times grandparents indirectly resented absent parents who had abandoned their children through their negative behaviors or lack of desire to parent. Yet, some grandparents felt threatened by the absent parent and the unconditional love expressed by the children for them. Other grandparents accepted their adult children despite their flaws and attempted to connect their grandchildren to their parents at every opportunity. From these findings one must conclude that grandparents need help coping with their feelings for the absent parent. Boundaries must be set that are comfortable to the grandparent, yet fair to the grandchild.

The act of being called “mother” by the grandchildren was very important even if the grandparent refused to accept the new title. Some grandparents embraced being called “mom” or “dad” and were proud that the child recognized how “special” their relationship was. Other grandparents rejected their grandchildren’s attempts to call them “mom” or “dad” in an effort to hold on to their past identity despite the drastic change in roles. For some, accepting the title of “mom” was the finalizing step that closed the door to other personal possibilities, but some grandparents enjoyed the security of knowing that their grandchildren’s loyalties lied with them. This topic requires further study in order to surmise when it is healthy to be called “mom” or “dad” and when it is not. The feelings behind the desire to be considered a parent or not must be explored by the grandparent. Many grandparents may need to “grieve” the loss of their old identity through counseling or support groups. Whether or not the grandparent accepted the title of “parent,” all the participants in this research study believed themselves to be fulfilling the role of a parent.

Although many participants stated that they had sufficient help, many grandparents felt abandoned and isolated in their role as parents. These grandparents were unable to access traditional circles of support because they belonged to an older age group. At the same time, extended family members failed to recognize the elderly individual’s desire for help in this unconventional role as parent
and not grandparent. Family members must be trained to be sensitive to the needs of the grandparents as well as the children who may be isolated as a result of this conflict in roles.

Many grandparents sought validation from other adults through compliments that were overtly expressed to the researcher even though the question was never asked. Society as a whole has been slow to recognize this new generation of caregivers. Most representations of grandparents in the media portray them as supporters instead of primary care providers for children. Healthcare providers, schools, and other public institutions need to provide programs and services that are specific to the needs of these caregivers in order to insure adequate support and appreciation.

Finally, although some grandparents mourned the loss of their independence, most welcomed the role of reparenting. This new (old) role freed them to partake in different activities that traditionally are not afforded to them. Despite their age and stage in life, parenting grandparents can “play” and enjoy “young” activities with little self-consciousness. In a world with few social rewards for the elderly and retired, parenting provides many incentives for staying active both physically and mentally.

Conclusion

The ever-increasing number of grandparents raising their grandchildren has reached a critical stage in our society. Through public programs and personal awareness, much can be done to improve the lives of these grandparents and their grandchildren. The findings in this study indicate several conflicts faced by grandparents attempting to define their role in their household and society. Despite choosing different titles, grandparents did not waiver from their ultimate responsibility as parents. The process of redefining roles can be limiting or freeing depending on each individual’s attitude. It is imperative to learn more about how grandparents adjust to this alternate life stage that has become so common in the United States.
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APPENDIX A

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. How did you become the primary caregiver of your grandchildren?

2. Describe your relationship with your grandchildren.

3. What are your biggest challenges?

4. Do you have any conflicts with your grandchildren?
   a. If yes, describe what those conflicts are like.

5. What do you like most about raising your grandchildren?

6. What do you like least about raising your grandchildren?

7. Has raising your grandchildren changed your life?
   a. If yes, in what ways has it changed your life?
   b. What kind of adjustments have you had to make?

8. Are there any differences between raising your grandchildren and raising your own children?

9. Are there any similarities between raising your grandchildren and raising your own children?

10. Do you receive help with your grandchildren from other people?

11. What if any help would you like to receive from others with your grandchildren that you don’t receive now?

12. What are the kinds of things that you talk about with your grandchildren?

13. How would you characterize the quality of communication between you and your grandchildren?

   Please explain.