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Ruth Ann Phillips  
*Sacred Heart University*

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# Grandmothers Raising their Grandchildren

## By Ruthie Phillips

Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Connecticut



### Abstract

While once a phenomenon concentrated to poor families, grandparents co-parenting grandchildren is becoming increasingly common in contemporary American society across class categories. There are ranges of reasons why grandparents are finding themselves in a parenting role including dual earner parents who are working more often, single parents needing extra help, or young parents who are overwhelmed by parenting responsibilities. While there is an increasing body of literature exploring the impacts of grandparent centered kinship care on children, there is comparatively little research focused on the impact of co-parenting on grandparents who transition into helping raise their grandchildren just a few years after having finished raising their own children. Based on 10 in depth semi-structured interviews with grandmothers who are co-parenting their grandchildren, this study addresses the effects on grandmothers who have assumed this additional caregiving role. Findings indicate that, while they face a change in their lives, grandparents co-parenting grandchildren report high levels of happiness and satisfaction with their role. Moreover, the majority of respondents reported an improvement in their health, citing the increased levels of physical and mental activity they engage in while caring for their grandchildren.

### Background

"In 1970, about 3 percent of children lived in grandparent maintained households; about twice that many (6 percent) lived in grandparent-maintained households in 2012." (U.S. Census Bureau, p. 3) "In 2010, about 920,000 children were being raised by grandparents with no parent living in the home." (Scommegna, P. 2012, March). "About 1 in 3 grandparent maintained households had no parent present—17 percent of these households had two grandparents present and 15 percent of households had just a grandmother present." (Ellis, R. R., & Simmons, T. 2014, October 22).

These households include grandparents, their children, and their children's children. These households tend to build together due to "financial difficulties, illness, divorce, adolescent childbearing, and in some instances, out of the grandparents' desire to help their children and grandchildren." (Scommegna, P. 2012, March). Then there is the skipped-generation or custodial grandparent households. This is the common one that has been mentioned in the other articles. The three-generation household isn't as common as the skipped generation household.

There are multiple reasons parents are now parenting again. They could be helping in the household with the parents, co parenting. Parents are working more often, single parent household, young parent needing help, or parents are absent from the home due to numerous reasons.

### Theory

Role identity is defined as the role (or character) people play when holding specific social positions in groups. Identities are self-cognitions tied to roles, and through roles, to positions in organized social relationships; one may speak of the identities of mother, husband, child, doctor, salesman, employee, senator, candidate, priest, tennis player, churchgoer, and so on." (Identity Theory, 2001) It is relational, since people interact with each other via their own role identities. (Burke, 2012) Stryker and Burke's theory on role identity can be used when looking into grandparents raising their grandchildren; analyzing the factors of role identity, self-conception, self-definition, and commitment and identity salience. (Burke, 2000) There is this standard definition of what a grandparent is and what they do.

Role theory proposes the confliction one may have when playing multiple roles. "Role identities are ranked in a hierarchy of salience and 'the higher the salience of an identity relative to other identities incorporated into the self, the greater the probability of behavioral choices in accordance with the expectations attached to that identity'" (Burke, 2000) Grandparents are often told they should not interfere with the lives of their grandchildren because 'they are not raising them'. However, over the years more grandparents are not just grandparents but a caregiver as well in their grandchildren's lives. Due to this change, many factors have changed their lives such as financial problems, physical and emotional health problems, and exhaustion; high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression have been issues in grandparents living under the poverty line.

### Methods

My hypothesis states the custody of grandchildren negatively affects grandmothers' social stress level.

#### The independent variable:

*Years of Custody*- How long they have had their grandchild? Is it a temporary or permanent arrangement?

#### The dependent variable:

*Social life/ Stress*- The dependent variable focused on the grandparent's social life and whether they experience social stress, social isolation, or even change in health.

#### The control variables:

Financial stress, physical and emotional health, and emotional stress.

### Research Methodology

A qualitative design of 5 in-depth, semi structured interviews face-to-face interviews. The interview questions included demographic questions and open-ended questions with follow-up questions. They lasted about 30 minutes to an hour. Interviews were audio recorded and then later transcribed.

### Sample

5 African American Grandmothers from the same Christian Baptist Church in Bridgeport Connecticut.

### Results

#### Findings- Lack of Personal Time

My findings suggest that the participants didn't have much time for themselves to go out and be social with others. A number of participants spoke about why they were always with their grandchild and how this limits their alone time. One participant mentioned how nervous she feels when leaving her granddaughter with her daughter: "On the weekends she often stayed home with T (granddaughter) and would take her out places. This helped a lot because there would be days I wanted to go out or do things alone. I don't have all the free time like I use to have. Sometimes I don't even want to go out because I'm afraid she will try to be her friend versus her mother and forget to be a parent while I'm gone."

#### Findings- Health changes

While my participants were spending so much time with their grandchildren, they were always keeping their health up. They all had really positive health improvements in their ages of 47-60. Specifically one participant stated: "*I am more active, chasing her around the house was a hassle, that girl loved to play hide and seek. It did tire me out a lot, but when you see her face light up you just can't help but play along.*"

#### Findings- Stress

Despite health improvements, stress was a negative implication that each participant talked about. They faced a change in attitude and behaviors resulting in stress build up over time. One grandmother explained that she just didn't expect her retirement raising children again: "*This is not what I had planned for myself. I've been raising everyone since they were babies. What woman raises her kids then wants to raise her kids kids then shortly after her kids kids kids? At some point I would like to not have to stress because everyone will be taken care of.*"

#### Findings-Happiness

Although the grandmothers were slightly stressed, they were over all happy. They loved the arrangement they had with their kids and wouldn't want it to change. They let the positive reasons for co parenting out weigh the negative. One grandmother said: "*The joy and pure happiness that I see in my grandchild eyes, makes everything worth it. Plus I learn a lot with them, like how to text!*"

She was specially happy that as she helped her grandchild learn, they taught her a few tricks as well. Another participant felt right at home co-parenting and gave a heart melting response on why she does what she does: "*I was just blessed to be that close in raising my grandchild and great grandchild. I think it also helps my kids because they know they aren't alone. I was a single parent and it breaks my heart to know they were single moms too but they had me to keep them together. I've been there with them every step of the way. Not because I felt they couldn't do it on their own, but because everyone deserves a little helping hand every now and then.*"

### Conclusions

Other studies suggest that there are negative implications to this parenting arrangement, particularly for the grandparent, but that's not what I found. Previous studies say that these grandparents are to be highly stressed out, financially struggling, and facing a huge decline in health. This isn't the case in my studies, as my participants never implied such lifestyles. Although they experienced stress, it wasn't the unbearable stress that causes anxiety. Their stress could be interpreted as more worrisome over their loved ones. Most grandmothers were worried that their child wouldn't be able to parent without them, while others worried their children wouldn't grown up fast enough to be the parent they should be. Surprisingly all five participants agreed that money and their health were not an issue. Grandmother number 4 stated: "I believe that my health increase. Ever since my grandchild was born there is no junk food in the house and eating healthier became a must in my house." Because of her grandchild, she ate healthier so he/she would too. One grandmother even answered the question on her health jokingly: "Yes nothing has changed. I can still dress myself if that's what you're asking, ha-ha, I'm not that old." Although existing studies say these grandmothers should be tired, broke, and stressed out, my research challenges it all creating a new outlook on co-parenting. The participants portrayed their lives to be content, happy; and based on my last question that they all answered, they all wouldn't mind doing it again.

### Further Studies

Based on the sampling design, because it is non-probability I knew I might not generalize findings. I cannot say my findings can pertain to a larger group no one was apart of a random selection; it was just a small set of people of 5 women, which is not a broad study. This qualitative interview is exploratory and is not designed to rule out extraneous variables and it cannot prove cause and effect. The nature of the interview is not explanatory to prove, rather, it is exploratory to get a rich account of the complexity of the subjects' feelings. I did not expand beyond people outside of my social network. Future studies should strive to include more grandmothers of different races and social status.

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