
ON-LINE ASSESSMENT OF GRANDMOTHER EXPERIENCE IN RAISING GRANDCHILDREN

Mary R. McGowen
Linda Ladd

Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas, USA

Robert D. Strom

Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, USA

The purpose of this study was to compare the parenting styles of custodial, coresident, and nonresident grandmothers and their perceptions of satisfaction, success, and teaching with their grandparent caregiving role. The 124 subjects were custodial grandmothers (n = 79), coresident grandmothers (n = 21), and nonresident grandmothers (n = 23). Participants completed an online survey that combined quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. Scores on grandparent satisfaction, success, and teaching were derived from the Grandparent Skills and Needs Inventory (GSNI). The findings on the demographic data suggested that the custodial grandmother group was significantly lower than coresident and nonresident groups on the GSNI dimensions "satisfied" and "successful." The qualitative data presented both positive and negative perceptions of grandmothers raising their grandchildren.

Grandparents have historically raised grandchildren in response to family tragedies such as death, divorce, or abandonment. This remains the prevalent pattern, but there are a growing number of families in which parents are physically present yet unable, or unwilling, to provide the care their children need. These parents cannot fulfill the role society expects of them, because of an inability to cope

with the social, emotional, and economic pressures their own parents were able to withstand at the same stage of life. In such cases, the most likely group to assume the difficult task of childrearing is grandparents (Strom & Strom, 2000a).

The first time the government presented questions related to grandparent caregiving was in the national population survey of 2000. Congress directed this action to find out the number of grandparents acting as parents, and to determine whether they saw their circumstance as a temporary or a permanent condition. The U.S. Bureau of the Census (2003) estimates there are 5.5 million grandparents who have grandchildren under the age of 18 living in their home. Insights on how these grandparents see their role—and determining ways to support their success—should be a concern of all communities. The purpose of the study reported here was to compare parenting styles of grandmothers and their perceptions of satisfaction, success, and teaching with the caretaker role.

GRANDPARENT PERSPECTIVES

Social Factors

Many grandparents who believed their parenting tasks were completed have found themselves facing the daunting responsibility of caring for another generation of children. There are broad ranges of social factors that influence this phenomenon including parental substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, AIDS, divorce, single-parent households, mental and physical illness, unemployment, incarceration, and death (Crosnoe & Elder, 2002). The courts and public policy tend to favor kinship over other types of placement arrangements for children. When the grandparents are designated as guardians or assigned custody, communities are spared the greater expense that is associated with temporary placement of the children in nonkin households. There is evidence that more institutions are starting to recognize that collaborating with the grandparents is the way to meet the needs of children (Hayslip & Goldberg-Glen, 2000).

The grandmother role is influenced by demographic, ecological, and ethnic-cultural characteristics of the entire family (Baydar & Brooks-Gunn, 1998). Those with multiple commitments of employment, providing care for the family, and managing the home commonly have difficulty balancing the effort that is required for each of these tasks. They have no leisure time and, consequently, cannot obtain the recovery benefits that periodic relief provides for most other people. Educators, welfare representatives, and workers in

youth organizations should understand the special needs of these grandmothers, and the kinds of assistance and accommodations that are most appropriate to support them (Vaillant, 2003).

Educational Resources

Grandparents who underestimate what it takes to provide suitable guidance are bound to disadvantage their grandchildren. Recommendations that they participate in a grandparent class should not be viewed as an insult. Rather, it is a compliment when people recognize their capacity to grow and desire to be successful. It should be expected that, as understanding about children grows, more appropriate guidance practices would emerge. Indeed, studies of grandparent intervention programs have found that family role performance significantly improves in the estimate of three generations (Strom, Beckert, & Strom, 1996). Grandparents should be oriented to the contemporary goals parents want to pursue as they raise children. These include self-regulation alternatives to use of corporal punishment, norms of behavior for the age group of their grandchildren, and teacher expectations for family cooperation. Grandmothers from all backgrounds who recognize there is a link between their own self-improvement and the well-being of grandchildren are eager to gain the insights and emotional strength required to succeed (Strom, Heeder & Strom, 2005).

A willingness to raise a grandchild and to love the youngster is not the only quality needed to fulfill this complicated role. Success depends on good intentions, but requires also knowing about the predictable difficulties that children experience and ways to help them cope with personal struggles. Children raised by surrogates often suffer from emotional problems. Feelings of rejection and abandonment by parents are likely to trigger depression (Wachtel, 2004). Sometimes, the dominant response is anger toward the people least likely to strike back, i.e., the grandparents. Caretakers sometimes fail to notice when a child needs professional counseling to cope with distress and maladjustment that often accompanies dysfunctional family relationships (Solomon & Marx, 1995).

Grandparent Role Meaning

Satisfaction

Three aspects of the grandparent role are particularly implicated for the current study. First, role satisfaction and the meaning a person derives from their personal function is an influential factor in how

they perceive the quality of their life. People can live with difficult situations and exhibit resilience when they have some satisfactions allowing them to sustain their efforts. The possibilities for grandmother satisfaction are bound to increase if they are willing to learn from grandchildren as well as guide them (Strom, 2002). Satisfaction is also enhanced when the dedication of grandmothers is appreciated by the community, as shown by policies to support them in their task (Hayslip, Shore, Henderson, & Lambert, 1998). The role of caregiver can produce a sense of significance, mastery, and esteem with some situations. In other situations, there is a sense of burden, helplessness, and strain with others (Moen, Robison, & Dempster-McClain, 1995). Rearing grandchildren requires certain lifestyle adjustments by grandparents including an increase in altered routines, physical tiredness, and a decrease in privacy and time for oneself (Jendrek, 1993). Sands and Goldberg-Glen (2000) found in their study that younger (middle-aged) grandparents were more depressed and experienced more psychological anxiety than older grandparents. This was because of their simultaneous conflicting commitments to several generations, as well as demands from the workplace.

Although the responsibility of rearing grandchildren can seem arduous, almost 2/3 of the custodial grandparents reported having a more meaningful life because of having their grandchild in their lives; their grandchildren keep them young, active, and fit (Jendrek, 1993). According to Kivnick (1982), grandparents who embrace and identify with the grandparent role develop an increased sense of well-being and morale.

Success

Grandmothers with significant caregiving responsibilities should not serve as the only judges of their success. The judgments of how other relatives, particularly grandchildren, perceive their family-role performance are also determinants (Strom & Strom 1997a). Role definition and expectations provide a basis for evaluating success. When grandparents do not know what is expected of them and are unaware of their capabilities, then conditions for failure are increased (Kornhaber, 1996). A common concern, especially for Caucasian grandparents, is the desire to succeed without having proper criteria for self-evaluation. Even when established, these criteria must change with each stage of the grandchild's development (Strom & Strom, 2000b). Strom and Ewing (1996) found that some grandparents are concerned that their lack of communication skills, knowledge of parenting goals, and contemporary problems of their grandchildren will prevent them from being successful at parenting. Support groups can

offer valuable short-term emotional and informational support to grandparents in coping with the challenges of raising grandchildren. This peer advice can assist grandparents with various parenting skills such as discipline, homework, nutrition, communication, dating, and sex education (Roe & Minkler, 1998–99).

Teaching

Individuals bring to the role of grandparent a distinctive set of historical and experiential events that shape the ways this role is enacted. The extent and nature of childhood experiences with grandparents are important factors in the current social involvement with their own grandchildren (King & Elder, 1997; Mueller & Elder, 2003). Grandparents share skills and talents, provide advice, and listen to their grandchildren. Some factors influencing grandparents include culture, ethnicity, gender, family traditions, family structure, and personal history (Kornhaber, 1996).

Grandparents can be effective in teaching core beliefs and morality, demonstrating religion by example, and nurturing a sense of right and wrong to grandchildren (Strom & Strom, 1997b). The Davies and Williams Grandparent Study Report (2002) stated that grandparents share the parenting roles of teaching children values, entertaining children, and listening to their problems. They also identified grandparent's role as family historian, sharing stories of the past and imparting family traditions. Grandparents can reinforce hopefulness and optimism in their grandchildren, which will impact grandchildren's lifelong attitudes toward life and relationships (Peterson, 2000; Snyder, 2000).

METHOD

Subjects

Eligible participants were custodial grandmothers who have legal custody of the child; coresident grandmothers who have physical custody of the child without necessarily having received legal custody; and, nonresident grandmothers who provide day care. Most (72%) of the grandmothers (ages 37–73) were younger than 59 years of age. Grandmothers were from 31 states, and every geographic area was represented with the largest areas being the Southwest, the South, and the Midwest. The grandmothers were well educated, with 73% having education beyond the high school level and (32%) having some college. The majority (64%) of grandmothers were married and in the workforce, with 47% employed full time and 11%

part-time. The overwhelming majority (89%) of grandmothers were Caucasian Americans. For purposes of the study, grandmothers identified themselves as Custodial Grandmothers (64%), Nonresident Grandmothers (19%), and Coresident Grandmothers (17%). The 124 participants of this study completed online questionnaires.

Procedure

A secure Internet research Web site was created on Survey Monkey to inform potential participants about the purpose of the study and the criteria for participation. The Internet research Web site's privacy policy states that they will not use any data collected in any way, shape, or form for their own purposes. Servers are kept in a locked cage, and entry requires a passcard and biometric recognition. Digital surveillance equipment is used, and the facility is staffed 24/7. When the researcher deletes information, that information will be purged from the website servers within 30 days. An e-mail address for the researcher and research advisor was included in case respondents had any questions regarding the study—or any difficulty in completing the survey. The participant was given instructional information concerning the surveys and the demographic information form, which were located on the professional survey Web site. The online research method was selected to reach grandparents with multiple commitments, lack of childcare to permit attendance at meetings, and those who might be isolated. The online survey was designed to take approximately 30 to 45 minutes to complete, and could be done in the privacy of the participant's home.

Recruitment

Grandmothers were recruited by posting requests for volunteers on the following national and regional grandparent Web sites: AARP Grandparent Information Center, Grand's Place, Grandparents Talk, Family Matters, Grandparents Again, Grandcare, Grandparents Wanna Talk, Wired Seniors, Christianity Today, and Senior Net. The Senior News Source, a senior newspaper, posted an ad for participants at 1100 locations in Collin, Denton, Dallas, Grayson, Tarrant, Wise, and Cooke counties in Texas. The Web site was also referenced in Steve Blow's column in the *Dallas Morning News*. Finally, volunteers were recruited by flyers at 13 centers including YMCAs, community centers, senior centers, and Jewish centers in the Dallas metroplex. A variety of grandparent sources were used in the attempt to locate a sample that included African-American,

Hispanic, and Caucasian grandmothers representing a range of social and educational level.

Instrumentation

The Grandparent Strengths and Needs Inventory (GSNI) includes three generational versions (Strom & Strom, 1993). The inventory provides a look at strengths and needs including the attitudes and behaviors grandparents should continue, patterns of behavior that need modification, and responses they would be prudent to abandon. The GSNI is composed of 60 Likert-type items that measure six dimensions of behavior. A total of 30 items comprise three subscales (satisfaction, success, and teaching), and contribute to an index called grandparent potentials (Strom & Strom, 1997b; Strom & Ewing, 1996). This study did not use the 30 items that comprise the three remaining subscales (difficulty, frustration, and information needs).

Scoring

All three versions of the GSNI are scored in the same way, by assigning a numerical value of 4, 3, 2, or 1 to each response. Responses most indicative of grandparent strengths are valued at 4, with diminishing values for other responses—based on distance from the best response. After values have been assigned to every response, subtotals are derived for each subscale (Strom & Strom, 1997b; Strom & Ewing, 1996).

Validation

The GSNI was validated using a factor analysis of responses from 2,000 culturally-diverse families. Alpha coefficients between .90 to .94 have been obtained for studies in the United States (Strom & Strom, 1997b; Strom & Ewing, 1996).

Research Design

Analyses included a comparison of custodial, coresident, and nonresident grandmothers' parenting styles with their satisfaction, success, and teaching with their caregiving role. A triangulation-mixed-methods design was used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data at one time (Creswell, 2005). The quantitative data was analyzed using the Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) and regression analyses. Collecting qualitative data enabled this

author to investigate more deeply the thoughts and beliefs of this sample of grandmothers. This author and two coders did coding of the qualitative responses to determine themes. Interrater reliability was gathered, and a Cohen's Kappa established trustworthiness of coding—yielding a 76% intercoder agreement for coder one, and 82% for coder two.

RESULTS

Quantitative Data

MANOVA was performed on the three caregiver groups, with scores on factors satisfaction, success, and teaching as the three dependent variables. Custodial grandmothers had significantly different scores on the satisfaction and success scales of the GSNI than the other two groups. Scheffe posthoc analysis of the multivariate means (centroids) found that the custodial group was significantly lower than the other two groups on the GSNI dimensions satisfied and successful. The findings represent a moderate effect, as evidenced by the canonical correlation between the function scores and group membership (see Table 1).

Demographic Variables

Step-wise multiple regression was performed using each scale of the GSNI as a dependent variable. The predictor set consisted of the participants' ages in years, and binary dummy variables representing memberships in ethnic groups, education levels, marital status

Table 1. MANOVA three grandmother groups on GSNI factors

Scale	Grandmother groups			v	v'	s
	Custodial	Coresident	Nonresident			
Satisfaction	26.37	31.57	30.70	-.004	-.061	-.399
Success	24.35	29.10	29.91	-.206	-2.633	-.488
Teaching	28.09	29.62	29.78	.160	2.368	-.131
Centroid	.63 ^a	1.38 ^b	1.52 ^b			

Note: Centroids that share a superscript are not significantly different.

Pillais $F(6,238) = 3.15$, $p = .005$, $r_c = .38$.

v are raw discriminant function coefficient.

v' are standardized discriminant function coefficient.

s are structure coefficients used in naming the dimensions.

Table 2. Step-wise regression of satisfaction on selected demographic variables

Variable	B	SE	Beta	t	p
Retired	8.173	3.006	.237	2.719	.008
Caucasian	-8.619	3.864	-.195	-2.231	.028
Intercept	33.975	3.656		9.293	.001

Note: $R = 30$, $R^2 = .09$, $\text{Adj-}R^2 = .07$, $SE = 13.59$, $F(2,120) = 5.84$, $p = .004$.

groups, and employment categories. Each scale was significantly predicted by several demographic variables. The relationship is relatively weak as evidenced by the multiple R value.

Satisfaction

A low, though statistically significant, relationship was found with employment category retired and ethnic category Caucasian. Interpretation of the signs of the regression weights suggests that retired non-Caucasians have higher satisfaction scores than all other groups (see Table 2).

Success

A low, though statistically significant, relationship was found with age and ethnic category Caucasian. Interpretation of the signs of the regression weights suggests that older non-Caucasian have lower success scores than all other groups (see Table 3).

Teaching

A low, though statistically significant, relationship was found with employment category retired and education category graduate school. Interpretation of the signs of the regression weights suggests that retired persons holding advanced academic degrees have higher teaching scores than all other groups, while nonretired persons having no advanced academic degrees have lower teaching scores than all other groups (see Table 4).

Table 3. Step-wise regression of success on selected demographic variables

Variable	B	SE	Beta	t	p
Age	.371	.131	.246	2.825	.006
Caucasian	-7.098	3.532	-.175	-2.009	.047
Intercept	12.456	7.723		1.613	.109

Note: $R = 30$, $R^2 = .09$, $\text{Adj-}R^2 = .07$, $SE = 12.43$, $F(2,120) = 5.79$, $p = .004$.

Table 4. Step-wise regression of teaching on selected demographic variables

Variable	B	SE	Beta	t	p
Retired	9.04	3.181	.252	2.844	.005
Grad school	9.846	4.752	.183	2.072	.040
Intercept	25.954	1.526		17.011	.001

Note: $R = .29$, $R^2 = .08$, $\text{Adj-}R^2 = .07$, $SE = 14.23$, $F(2,120) = 5.41$, $p = .006$.

Qualitative Data

Four open-ended questions were included to gather grandmothers' perceptions of their caregiving role. The qualitative data gave life to the voices of the grandmothers. Grandmothers' responses to each question often contained more than one theme. The researcher and two coders identified themes that emerged for each survey question.

Question 1: What Happened in Your Child's Family that Led to Your Providing Care for Your Grandchild/Grandchildren?

This study found that grandmothers had 11 different reasons for having to step in and parent their grandchildren: substance abuse, abandonment/neglect, working parents, immaturity, mental health, domestic violence, divorce, incarceration, financial problems, death, and military service. Grandmothers in this study stated that when neither parent was capable nor willing to be a parent, they stepped in to fill the need. Substance abuse was the major reason for 31% of custodial grandmothers and 24% of nonresident grandmothers to assume care of their grandchildren. Working parents was a major issue for 50% of the coresident grandmothers and 52% of the nonresident grandmothers who needed to provide help. Custodial grandmothers (21%) listed abandonment and neglect and coresident grandmothers (57%) listed domestic violence as a reason for caregiving.

Question 2: What is the Same and What is Different About Parenting Your Grandchild/Grandchildren and Parenting Your Own Child/Children? Have there been any Changes in Your Parenting Over the Two Generations?

In this study, nonresident grandmothers (24%) noted that their parenting experience with their children helped them in raising their grandchildren. All three levels of care (custodial 41%, coresident 64%, nonresident 29%) reported they felt they were more patient and relaxed when parenting their grandchildren than they had been with their children. They felt more relaxed, less angry and frustrated,

and more concerned with the child's needs. Custodial grandmothers (23%) felt they were able to spend more time enjoying the grandchildren and being involved in their activities. When raising their own children their priorities were different, and they did not take the time to enjoy their children—or listen to their needs. Now, they feel the housework can wait—the child is a more important priority.

Question 3: How has Parenting Your Grandchild/Grandchildren Affected Your Quality of Life and Well-Being?

Grandmothers at each level of care (custodial 49%, coresident 29%, nonresident 62%) felt that caring for their grandchild had enriched their life and they were happier. They stated they felt a renewed sense of purpose, more joy in their lives, and the grandchildren kept them more active and feeling younger. In contrast, grandmothers at all levels of care (custodial 28%, coresident 21%, nonresident 24%) felt they had less private time, loss of freedom for themselves and less couple-time with their spouse. Many had been looking forward to an empty nest and retirement dreams, which had to be put aside. Grandmothers also stated they were isolated from peers who were not interested in children's activities.

Question 4: What Else Would You Like to Share About Your Experience with Parenting Your Grandchild/Grandchildren?

Custodial (32%), coresident (23%), and nonresident (45%) grandmothers felt the rewards and blessings of caring for their grandchildren far outweighed any sacrifices they had to make. Coresident (15%) and nonresident (15%) grandmothers stated they wanted to be role models for their grandchildren, and provide stability and security in the child's life. Their own grandparents had been a significant influence in their lives, and they wanted to provide those same qualities to their grandchildren. Custodial grandmothers (11%) regretted the loss of the traditional grandmother role, and resented having to be the primary disciplinarian, caregiver, and provider. Nonresident (15%) grandmothers felt raising their grandchild was tiring or had affected their health. They wished they were in better shape physically. Custodial grandmothers (6%) stated their feelings of satisfaction were impacted by a lack of resources from local, state, and federal agencies. There were also problems with the bioparents constantly petitioning the courts, and upsetting the children at visitations.

Being needed in their grandchild's life contributed to the grandmothers' feelings of success. They also expressed there were many things they did not know about parenting and that some information

was not available to them when they raised their children. Parenting strategies and discipline methods have evolved over time in response to new insights about child development.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The Grandparent Strengths and Needs Inventory (GSNI) (Strom & Strom, 1993) looks at strengths and needs including the attitudes and behaviors grandparents should continue, patterns of behavior that need modification, and responses they would be prudent to abandon. This study utilized the GSNI satisfaction, success, and teaching subscales that determine grandparent potential. The quantitative data from the MANOVA showed that grandmothers with custody had lower satisfaction and success scores than the grandmothers providing daycare or coparenting roles. The step-wise multiple regression data showed that retired non-Caucasians have higher satisfaction scores; and older non-Caucasians have lower success scores than all other groups. Also, retired persons holding advanced academic degrees have higher teaching scores; while nonretired persons with no advanced degrees have lower teaching scores than all other groups.

The qualitative data revealed that grandmothers had a variety of reasons to step in and provide stability for their grandchildren. Triggering events such as substance abuse, abandonment, neglect, working parents, immaturity, mental illness, domestic violence, divorce, incarceration, financial problems, military service and death led to grandmothers assuming responsibility for their grandchildren. Grandmothers stated over and over that when neither parent was capable or willing to be a parent, they were willing to fill the need. Reasons given for caregiving were similar for the different grandmother groups. Among all grandmother groups, drug abuse was a major reason, as it contributed to other problems such as family violence, child abuse, neglect, and incarceration.

Grandmothers in the study stated they tired more easily, as it was more exhausting to parent in their 50s. Their health issues prevented them from engaging in some activities with their grandchildren. They reported changes in routines and relationships, less private time for themselves, and that private time with their spouse had suffered. Managing boundaries with the bioparents was a complicated and often painful task. They had to manage a number of strong feelings, such as loss, grief, guilt, anger, embarrassment, and resentment. In contrast, grandmothers also reported positive, satisfying comments of being more fulfilled, organized, and motivated. They had received an unexpected blessing in their lives. They stated it was exhausting,

yet rewarding, and that the rewards and satisfaction far outweighed any hard times. Some stated that they wanted to keep themselves more fit and were in better shape since taking on a parenting role. It was interesting to note that all levels of grandmothers felt they were more patient and relaxed, and that second time parenting seemed easier to them in many ways. They were grateful to have the opportunity to parent again, and felt they were doing a better job this time. Grandmothers reported they had more time to be involved with activities, and felt this kept them younger in their thinking and up to date on new things. Their priorities have changed over time, and the grandchildren and their needs are their focus—rather than housework and careers.

Grandmothers in this study also mentioned the lack of resources from local, state, or federal agencies, and problems with the bioparents that have impacted their feelings of success. Grandmothers stated they wanted to be role models for their grand children and provide stability and security for their grandchildren. Being needed in their grandchild's life contributed to the grandmothers' feelings of success. Some grandmothers stated they were unaware of information on child rearing goals and discipline alternatives when they were raising their children; and now they have access to information and new methods to utilize with their grandchildren. Kindergarten teachers today are expecting more developmental abilities of children when they start school than they did 20 years ago. Over time, the areas that may have changed or advanced are the developmental norms and educational expectations of the schools.

Limitations of the study were the exclusion of grandchild perceptions of the grandmother performance, and the absence of cultural diversity in the sample. It would be helpful to know how the grandchildren perceived the success of their grandparents in their parenting roles. The use of the online survey is an innovative method that can be effectively used to obtain information from isolated grandparents, and could be a useful tool for others in future research.

CONCLUSIONS

The increase in the grandmother role of caregiver appears to be continuing for the foreseeable future, and has implications for more research by family-science professionals, practitioners, and policy makers. Agencies working with grandparent/grandchild households should view each family as having individual needs. One family might need respite care, while another would benefit from financial information. Still another might request information

on parenting a certain-age child. Areas for further study might include the following:

1. Schools should provide courses for grandmothers about child norms, discipline problems, resources available, and expectations of students and families. One aspect of the orientation can be grandmother interaction about common concerns. Leadership should be external to prevent dysfunctional support groups. Schools should also cultivate teacher awareness of the unique problems grandmothers face raising grandchildren and indicate ways to collaborate with them.
2. Many grandmothers stated they resented the loss of their traditional grandparent role with their grandchildren. They were placed in a position of having to discipline and be responsible for the child's needs instead of fulfilling the role they have with their other grandchildren. Grandparents may need insight on how they can manage to juggle both roles with their grandchildren. Even though they are assuming the role of parent, they can find ways to set aside special time to fulfill the grandparent role as well.
3. Since drug abuse was a primary reason for grandmothers' caregiving, education and resources are needed to help in coping with its effects and how it may impact their grandchildren emotionally and physically. Drug and alcohol abuse is more prevalent among teens and preteens than it was 20 years ago. There are many substances that can be purchased in any drug store as well as a variety of designer drugs that are available. The grandchildren may have physical and mental issues from living with substance-abusing parents, and may also need additional assistance to prevent following in their parents' addictions.
4. Online surveys hold promise as a method for obtaining information from isolated grandparents. The ability to answer questions in the privacy of their home at a convenient time is appealing to many busy grandparents.

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