



The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 35

Issue 2 June

Article 5

2008

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Recommended Citation

Murphy, S. Yvette; Hunter, Andrea G.; and Johnson, Deborah J. (2008) "Transforming Caregiving: African American Custodial Grandmothers and the Child Welfare System," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 35 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol35/iss2/5>

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Transforming Caregiving: African American Custodial Grandmothers and the Child Welfare System

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Growing numbers of African American grandmothers are raising grandchildren under the auspices of the child welfare system; however, little is known about the manner in which child welfare policies and practices impact custodial grandparenting. Based on focus groups with African American grandmothers who are raising grandchildren as formal kinship caregivers, this study explored the ways in which the new formalized relationship between the child welfare system and African American custodial grandmothers is transforming the meanings and practices related to intergenerational caregiving in African American families. Drawing on cultural and historical traditions, grandmothers forge a transformative partnership with child welfare that embodies the inherent tensions in the grandmothers' private-public role as formal kinship caregivers. Implications of an intergenerational approach to child welfare policy and practices are discussed in this paper.

Key words: African American grandmothers, intergenerational caregiving, child welfare policy, kinship care, grandparents as parents

Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare, June 2008, Volume XXXV, Number 2

The persistence of social and economic inequality, shifts in family demography, and family crises (e.g., substance abuse, incarceration, HIV/AIDS) have affected the need for kinship care in African American families in the U.S. This is visible in the steady increase in numbers of African American grandparents, mostly grandmothers, raising grandchildren (Minkler & Fuller-Thomson, 2005). Because of the disproportionate presence of Black children in the U.S. child welfare system (Department of Health & Human Services, 2000) and traditional patterns of kinship care (Roberts, 2002; Stack, 1974), a growing number of African American grandparents are raising grandchildren under the auspices of the child welfare system.

The role of the extended family in providing care and support for members within African American families is well documented (Billingsley, 1992; Dilworth-Anderson, 1992; Hunter & Taylor, 1998; Sudarkasa, 1997). However, little attention has been focused on the implications of greater involvement with the state (via child welfare) on the meanings or practices of intergenerational caregiving among custodial grandparents (Henderson & Cook, 2005; Murphy, 2005). With an interest in the way social policy can impact custodial grandparenting in African American families, this article explores the following: (a) grandmothers' perspective on caregiving within the context of the child welfare system; (b) interpretive practices that inform the grandmothers' perspectives of their emergent "partnership" with the child welfare system and the formalization of kinship care; and (c) how the child welfare system influences the meanings and practices of intergenerational caregiving among grandmothers.

Child Welfare Policy and the (Re)Shaping of Kinship Care: Implications for African American Families

Sociology, gerontology, and social welfare scholars have turned their attention to the roles, experiences, and needs of grandmothers raising grandchildren as a result of the current pressures facing African American families (Burton, 1992; Gibson, 2002; Henderson & Cook, 2005). What has emerged from this work is a clearer description of custodial grandmothers who are committed to their grandchildren and

intergenerational care, but who are also often overburdened with limited economic resources and in need of formal support services. Thus, the patterns of custodial grandparenting (Burton & Dilworth-Anderson, 1991; Hunter & Taylor, 1998) among African American grandmothers cannot be separated from the influences of social location and the tenuous relationship between African Americans and other social institutions—particularly those institutions that are arms of the state (Collins, 2001).

Federal policy and child welfare practices that encourage the placement of children who are in the legal custody of the state to be in the physical custody of relatives, as opposed to group care or institutions, in many ways complement the culturally-based caregiving strategies of African American families (Hill, 1998; Stack, 1974). However, when rules and policies constructed from an etic perspective enter the intimate space of family life, the inherent power of state-based institutions may infringe upon, shape, or transform the experiences at the individual and family levels (Collins, 2001; Giddens, 1984).

A decade ago, Holstein and Gubrium (1995) engaged the issue of the role of the public sphere in the construction of the family and domestic life and suggested that the family is becoming more deprivatized. They suggested that because of the ways in which organizational contexts are increasingly involved in constructing family meanings, what was once thought of as a private function is increasingly governed by public regulations. Within the last decade, there has been a critical shift in the role the child welfare system plays in placing children in the legal custody of their grandparents. This shift has formalized what traditionally has been the informal practice of intergenerational caregiving (Henderson & Cook, 2005; Hill, 2001; Minkler & Fuller-Thomson, 2005). This shift is fueled by transformations in child welfare policy that include: (a) the development of kinship care as a resource for the foster-care component of the child welfare system (Berrick, 1997); (b) a focus on achieving legally permanent placements for children in the custody of the child welfare system within shorter time frames (Adoption and Safe Families Act [ASFA], 1997); and (c) the linking of federal funds to the achievement of such goals (Department of Health & Human Services, 2000).

These shifts have led to the emergence of child welfare policy that both piggybacks on and regulates kinship caregiving.

The concept of kinship care or relative placement is not new (Hegar & Scannapieco, 1995). However, the role, function, and central position of the child welfare system along with its reliance on aging grandparents have changed over time (Roberts, 2002; Scannapieco & Jackson, 1996). Since the incorporation of the Child-Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974, several ideological shifts in child welfare policy and practice have occurred. These shifts range from a focus on long-term foster care as a plan to efforts focused on preserving families, and, most recently, a focus on adoption and creating permanency for children in the child welfare system's custody. Although these policy shifts were developed with the child rather than grandmother caregivers in mind, they have influenced the ways in which the child welfare system views the role of grandmother caregivers.

In response to children remaining in foster care for extended periods of time, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (Public Law 96-272) promoted a shift in thinking about the removal and placement of children. Specifically, this legislation introduced the goals of reasonable efforts to prevent the placement of children out of their homes, permanency planning for children in out-of-home placement, and placement in the least detrimental and restrictive environment for children who warranted out-of-home placement (McGowan & Walsh, 2000). These goals have stimulated the development of kinship care as a resource for the foster-care component of the child-welfare system (Berrick, 1997) that carries rewards and consequences for Black grandmothers. For example, although the formalization of kinship care strengthened the informal safety net of many struggling families by offering limited financial support and services, it increased the state's reliance on African American grandmothers and subsequent intrusion in African American family life (Roberts, 2002).

The increased use of kinship or relative caregiving by the child welfare system was grounded in the view that such arrangements offered benefits in line with PL 96-272. Initially, kinship arrangements were less formal and were thought to keep children that the child welfare system believed

warranted removal from their biological parents in the least restrictive, culturally sensitive family settings to reduce the foster care drift. A focus of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 was to expedite the adoption of children in foster care which has resulted in policies that call for more formalized kinship arrangements. Consequently, ASFA has fostered numerous changes in the child welfare system, especially in the area of foster care with regard to child permanency. One of the most significant changes pertains to the requirement to seriously consider terminating the parental rights of children in the legal custody of the state who are placed in out-of-home care for 15 of the most recent 22 months. The interpretation of ASFA has resulted in policies and practices that present a challenge for many African American grandmothers by confronting them with the dilemma of legally adopting their grandchild or watching him or her be placed outside of the family (Roberts, 2002).

The social welfare system, its policies, practices, and regulations have historically been situated on the permeable boundaries of the public and private spheres. Furthermore, the social welfare system is an important site from which hegemonic interpretations of the family have been re-inscribed for those who are in need of public support (Katz, 1989). Yet, as Holstein and Gubrium (1995) remind us, racial-ethnic and gendered communities, to the extent they represent "socially organized circumstances...[can] supply interpretative options, constraints, and agendas" (p. 899). In this qualitative investigation of African American grandmothers raising grandchildren under the auspices of the child welfare system, we address the following questions:

- 1) How do grandmothers' culturally-based understandings of intergenerational caregiving shape their interpretations of the child welfare system and the formalization of kinship care?
2. In what ways have grandmothers' interactions with the child welfare system shaped or transformed the meanings (or practices) of intergenerational caregiving?

3. What are the sites of contested meanings or fault lines in the emergent caregiving "partnership" between grandmothers and the child welfare system?

Methods

This study is based on data from a larger project (Murphy, 2005) that explored the meanings among African American grandmothers raising a grandchild within the context of the child welfare system. In accordance with a Black feminist epistemological perspective, which emphasizes the importance of group dialogue in the meaning making process of Black women, we used focus groups to collect data (Collins, 1990). The focus groups represented five counties, in both rural and urban areas across North Carolina, and included 22 African American grandmother kinship caregivers. Criteria for study participation included self-report of being an African American grandmother residing in North Carolina who within the last 5 years had physical custody of at least one grandchild who was in the legal custody of the state. A purposive sampling method was used to maximize within-group variation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As a way to seek out diverse experiences and to consider divergent viewpoints (Drisko, 1997), attention was given to recruit participants from both large and small child welfare systems, and both urban and rural areas from counties in North Carolina that participate in different types of child welfare initiatives to enhance outcomes for children and families. Grandmother study participants received a \$20 cash honorarium in appreciation of their time.

Study Participants

Sociodemographic characteristics and caregiving history. Of the 22 participants, 20 completed the questionnaire. The ages of these 20 participants ranged from 41 to 67 years, with a mean of 54.9 ($SD = 7.8$). The educational level of the grandmothers ranged from completing the 6th grade to completing undergraduate college, with 12 of the grandmothers having less than a high school education. The majority of the grandmothers were unmarried and functioning as single parents, with seven being separated, one divorced, five widowed, and three never

married. Eight of the grandmothers were employed full-time or part-time. Four of the grandmothers were retired. Another eight were unemployed, and of those unemployed, three were seeking employment. Although the majority of grandmothers reported receiving some financial assistance from the Department of Social Services, they consistently reported that the assistance was not sufficient to meet the basic needs of their grandchildren.

The grandmothers reported extensive histories of raising grandchildren. The years ranged from 1 to 27, average being 10.6 ($SD = 7.2$). The number of years the grandmothers spent raising a grandchild who was in the custody of the child welfare system was significantly less, with a range of 1 to 15 years, with an average of 3.5 years ($SD = 4.1$). Of the 20 participants, 19 reported neglect as being the main reason for the child welfare system taking custody of the grandchild. In most cases, substance abuse was identified as the underlying basis for child neglect.

Focus Groups

The questions guiding the focus group discussion were as follows: (a) What were the experiences of grandmothers raising grandchildren who are in the legal custody of the child welfare system? (b) What are the meanings the grandmothers attach to these experiences? (c) What are the perceptions of grandmothers of their role as caretakers of grandchildren? (d) What are the perceptions of grandmothers in how the child welfare practitioners perceive a grandmother's role? (e) What are the perceptions of grandmothers of their commitment to their role? (f) What are the perceptions of grandmothers of the cost and rewards of their role as caretakers? and (g) What are the perceptions of grandmothers in how they view the policies and practices of the child welfare system in impacting their caretaker role—is it stressful or helpful? Participants were also encouraged to describe their experiences or raise any issues they wanted to discuss with us as facilitators of the study. At the end of each focus-group session, a brief self-administered demographic questionnaire was distributed, or read to persons with visual or literacy restrictions. The 90-minute focus groups were audiotaped, and transcribed. The lead author, who has a

Master's degree in Social Work (MSW) and 17 years of practice experience in child welfare, facilitated the focus groups. The facilitator kept memo notes to document group dynamics and insights. A review of the memo notes and transcripts of proceeding groups were used to better inform and restructure the successive focus groups, when necessary.

Data Analysis and Qualitative Rigor

Patricia Hill Collins (1990), in her work *Black Feminist Thought*, argued that Black women have a certain level of wisdom or knowing that differs from the Euro-masculinist conceptualizations of knowledge. That is, those believed to be experts are not necessarily those who possess positions of power, titles, or education, but as Collins (1990) stated, "are those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts" (p. 257). Using concrete experience as a criterion of meaning speaks to the ways practical images are used as symbolic vehicles that move the wisdom that comes from day-to-day experiences to a much broader, symbolic, theoretical dimension. The Black epistemology framework, in conjunction with a constructivist perspective, and social work values informed the methods and data analytical strategies used.

This study employed both thematic and interpretive analysis. In terms of thematic analysis, three different readers, all with various levels of child welfare related knowledge and experience, read, coded, and deciphered the emergent themes. This required each of the readers to do the following steps: (a) read the transcripts for a general emergence of themes; (b) reread and color code; (c) group or cluster the emergent themes; (d) label the emergent themes; and (e) prepare a narrative summary report. We then compared and contrasted the reading and coding notes, color-coded transcripts, selected themes, labels, and narrative summaries from each of the readers to capture the emergent themes relative to the research questions and grouped them into categories based upon each of these dimensions. Multiple readers were used, both to enhance interpretative validity and to strengthen reliability of the coding and data analysis.

The next step involved using modeling and diagramming

techniques to collapse and link the categories across a variety of conditions, contexts, and relationships (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The thematic analysis process was concluded by developing major categories around central explanatory categories. Then interpretive analysis was used to compare the themes with the existing literature. The thematic analysis process was concluded by providing a framework for understanding the relationship between the individual and the institution—that is, the interplay of child welfare policy and practice in the lives of African American grandmothers and the meanings that the grandmothers attach to their experiences as “partners” with the child welfare system. To further enhance rigor, the analysis involved triangulation of the data by juxtaposing the focus group discussions alongside observations of systemic occurrences across the focus groups, the theoretical frameworks that underpin the study, and current research literature on the phenomenon.

To confirm the data findings and to ensure its trustworthiness, we conducted follow-up telephone interviews with 4 of the 22 participants. During the interviews, grandmothers were asked the following questions: (a) Do the themes reflect what you discussed or what you heard others discuss during the focus groups? (2) Are the themes stated in such a way that they respect your story and do not minimize your experience? (3) Is there anything that is missing, inaccurate, or is not clear to you?

Findings of the Study

Grandmothers’ interpretative practices and the meanings associated with intergenerational caregiving were embedded in African American cultural and historical traditions. As the child welfare system intersects with these traditions, it encounters socio-cultural meanings that are external to it and engage in family strategies that have grown out of a history of exclusion and oppression. These traditions and history form the interpretative lens through which African American grandmothers critiqued child welfare policy and practices, and, often struggled to resist the imposition of its regulatory guidelines. Despite ways they may have chafed under (and

contested) the policy and practices of the child welfare system, grandmothers did forge a tenuous partnership with them. However, the state's intervention (i.e., termination of parental custody and suggested legal custody of a grandchild) into the private realm of the family placed it as both rivals to and as arbiters of grandmothers and their caregiving practices.

In the sections that follow we highlight first the struggle of grandmothers for the rights and privileges of their position as "more than foster parents." This is a struggle that is mired in contradictions as grandmothers attempt to negotiate the child welfare's expectations and the state's obligations to them and their grandchildren across the public-private divide. We then explored the tensions between culturally-informed intergenerational expectations and obligations and competing constructions of the caregiving role. These tensions are reflected in the transformations occurring in the everyday practices of grandmothers with respect to intergenerational relationships (with grandchild and adult child), and in the ways women come to see themselves as mother, grandmother, or both. Finally, these transformations lead to resistance and meaning making for African American grandmothers that result in the grandmothers developing a sense of agency, voice, and activism.

More than Foster Parents

African American grandmothers, because of their role and position within extended families, are often called upon to provide care to family members (Hunter & Taylor, 1998; Johnson, 1983) and to serve as "other mothers," that is, individuals who assist biological parents with parenting responsibilities (Collins, 1990). Many of the participants expressed pride in this legacy of caregiving. One grandmother stated, "We are raised to be mothers." Framed by a sense of ancestral connection, caregiving is a fulfillment of family obligation. Talking about her decision to raise her grandchild, one grandmother stated, "I did this, [became a kinship caregiver] because of the blood that runs through her [grandchild] veins also runs through mine, too." For another grandmother, it was the right thing to do, "to keep [her] family together." Referring to intergenerational lessons, yet another grandmother stated, "There's

an old saying my mother always told me. 'You never forget the bridges behind you, whether they are good, whether they're bad.'" Indeed, many women saw their caregiving as a familial obligation that linked them both to the past and future generations. As one woman contended, "My grandma would turn over in her grave if I would not keep my grandkids." It is this moral discourse of familial obligation and legacy of caregiving to which the child welfare system appealed, as is indicated by this grandmother's early talks with a child welfare practitioner: "They [child welfare system] say they are all about keeping families together. That was the big thing that was thrown at me. [They said] I'd rather for you to do it than for foster care to do it." However, unlike their foremothers, these grandmothers would be in public terrain as they raised grandchildren who were in the legal custody of the child welfare system.

As grandmothers navigate the inherent tensions in their private and public roles as kinship caregivers within the child welfare system, they see themselves as more than foster parents, and as one grandmother said, "I wish they [child welfare] could see us as grandparents; with a different set of rights [than foster parents]." Indeed, grandmothers have their own expectations of child welfare that is steeped in family meanings (reciprocity, respect, and the valuing of grandmothers) and in the understanding that they are partnering with child welfare to care for their grandchildren. For grandmothers in this study, there are expectations that go unfulfilled. As one grandmother stated with frustration:

When they brought him [grandchild] to me, they [child welfare] said 'you'll get this, we're going to help you with this and that.' You know? Y'all [child welfare] brought him to me and y'all just dropped him off. And it was like, 'Oh, we got him somewhere and now we don't need to worry.' And if I didn't call, you all wouldn't ever come.

The failure of the partnership with child welfare to materialize as expected left many grandmothers frustrated with what they saw as a lack of reciprocity and the devaluing by child welfare of their contributions as kinship providers. The participants felt their sacrifices went unacknowledged by the child

welfare system. As one grandmother contended, "They [child welfare] need to recognize all that I go through and give up to do this. It's a lot, but that's my child and those are my grandchildren." Another stated, "They [child welfare] should show us value" and by not recognizing their contributions, the child welfare system was "taking advantage" of the grandmothers. After all, as one grandmother stated, "We can give things most of them [foster parents] can never give." While the participants felt they were doing their part by giving "all that [they] have to give," they believed the child welfare system did not reciprocate as it should. The grandmothers described their relationship with child welfare as "one-sided" or being "just like a job without the pay." As one grandmother stated, "They want to have us do all the work with none of the credit they give foster parents." Given the limited support from child welfare, many grandmothers chafed under the state's intrusion into their families. In the words of one grandmother, "They want to come in and tell us how to live, how to raise our grandchildren, but they don't want to come in when we need help with things, then it is all on us."

Grandmothers did want to preserve their privileged position as family and as grandmothers, clearly stating that they "don't want to be treated like a foster parent," however, they were also critical of the ways child welfare emphasized family connection and obligation. At issue was the concern that child welfare emphasized family connection in ways that did not acknowledge the grandmothers' public role and contributions as formal caregivers. Furthermore, these grandmothers suspected that the child welfare system focused on family obligation as a rationale to limit their access to the public resources available to foster parents. As one grandmother put it when referring to the child welfare system, "Expecting us to do this with no extra help cause we family." Several grandmothers challenged the notion that Black grandmothers do not need help. One grandmother stated, "We don't have the support they think we do, but they think we [should] because we're in the family."

Family or not, these grandmothers were keenly aware of the services they provide the child welfare system. Echoing appeals made to them by child welfare, the grandmothers described themselves as providing a valuable resource to the

state. They also believed they were “saving the state money,” and as one participant put it, “Doing their [the child welfare system’s] job.” Another grandmother questioned, “If they did not have grandmothers to do it, can you imagine the overload?” Another challenged, “Imagine what they [child welfare] would be spending if us grandparents would stop taking care of our grandkids and just go see them every day to make sure the system is doing their job in taking care of them.” However, what was at issue was not just the money, but the help grandmothers needed and expected to get from child welfare, given that their grandchildren were in the legal custody of the state, as one grandmother explained:

Maybe grandmothers won’t ever be compensated like foster parents—and I don’t even think it is the thing about being compensated but trying to help us and holding up their end. We need help, we are women that are crying out. We are going under and we need help. We are doing it [caring for grandchild] because this is something that if we don’t do something bad will happen to the baby, and like I said, after all we are helping them [child welfare], you know. Because they don’t have to look for foster care, you know. And they are paying foster care more than they are paying us. So, actually, they are really getting over on us.

With resignation about the perceived inequities within the child welfare system, a participant suggested, “Being a Black grandmother in this day and age it’s like a curse, an unfair curse.” As several grandmothers mentioned, “It’s like we’re being punished for being grandmothers helping out.”

Everyday Practices

As grandmothers took on the responsibility of custodial caregiving within the formal context of child welfare, grandmothers’ private constructions of their emergent roles, identities, and practices were now juxtaposed against the public expectations of the child welfare system. In the words of one grandmother: “It was like I lived—me and my husband lived in a goldfish bowl. We had guardian [court advocate]—and

social workers would come to our house at 8 or 9 o'clock in the morning, you know, just to see what was going [on]." Such regulatory practices, coupled with child welfare policy as embodied by ASFA, were vehicles via which grandmothers saw the child welfare system as transforming their everyday lives. All of the grandmothers talked of the shifts required in their roles, identities, and practices to accommodate custodial caregiving within the new formalized setting. Referring to the involvement of child welfare in her life, one grandmother stated, "My whole life has changed."

As the grandmothers attempted to sort out the meaning of their caregiving role and their identities, they also confronted child welfare's constructions of what was appropriate for them. Child welfare's view of grandmothers' appropriate role appeared to be driven by an effort to implement ASFA (via workers' practices and interpretation of policies) and by the apparent goals of the case plan (i.e., reunification or adoption). However, these external conceptions of grandmothers' roles and identity often contradicted what grandmothers may have chosen within the context of informal caregiving. For example, many of the grandmothers talked of how the child welfare system expected them to fully *take-on* the role of mother as opposed to grandmother. For example, one grandmother said, "They actually want me to adopt my grandchild, she [the grandchild] has a momma, I'm grandma." In contrast, other grandmothers were discouraged from fully taking on the role of mother. In the latter case, one grandmother expressed, "They [child welfare] told me to be careful about taking the place of the mother." Speaking about the imposing nature of child welfare in dictating her identity, another grandmother stated, "It's like DSS [the child welfare system] is momma. They [the child welfare system] see you as grandmother but you see yourself as momma."

When asked about ASFA and its subsequent child permanency goals, many of the grandmothers stated they were not aware of such a goal. However, the grandmothers did report that child welfare practitioners discussed adoption of their grandchildren with them. Some of the grandmothers favored adoption and viewed it as a formalization of their role as mother as opposed to grandmother. Other grandmothers saw

adoption as closing down the hope that their adult children would resume parenting roles and thus opposed adoption. One grandmother expressed her hopes in this way:

I don't really think I want to adopt them [the grandchildren] legally because I have to believe the parents might step back in, might want to step back in or get able at some point, be able one day to step back in. And, you know, they're welcome, even though I am mad at them [the adult child] right now, I wouldn't want to take [legally adopt] their kids because you know, I know they love their kids and but they are just young [immature] [but] I'm here.

The grandmothers' traditional family practices and perspectives were often in conflict with the regulatory guidelines of the child welfare system. Thus, another central tension in the everyday practices of the grandmothers was related to their goals of family continuity and the maintenance of family relationships across multiple generations. This tension was most prominent when the goal of the case plan no longer included parent-child reunification. Despite their adult child's current situation, several grandmothers wanted to preserve the family, and hoped that their adult children would resume their roles as parent. In talking about her adult child, one grandmother declared, "I have to believe that she will one day get it together. I don't give in to her, [but] I *am* her mother. If I stop believing [what then]?" As one grandmother expressed in discussing the competing expectations of child welfare and her adult child, "I feel caught in the middle."

Despite the nature of the crisis that led to the grandmothers raising their grandchildren, the grandmothers' continued relationship with adult children was informed by values of forgiveness and reciprocity. As one grandmother stated, "I don't want their parents [the adult child] to hate me, I just want the best for them [the grandchild], just like I wanted the best for my own children."

As formal kinship caregivers, grandmothers felt they were expected to implement and enforce the regulatory guidelines and practices of the state and to monitor their adult children. This dual role, as an extension of the state and as family, placed

grandmothers in a difficult position. The grandmothers talked of how the child welfare system expected them to restrict or deny visitation between the grandchild and the grandchild's parent, who was, more often than not, their adult child. One grandmother posited, "I don't like this much, because I am the one setting [enforcing] their [child welfare's] rules." Another grandmother added that fulfilling the expectations of child welfare often caused both their grandchildren and their adult children to view grandmothers as the barrier to the relationship between the grandchild and the parent, "One time she [the grandchild] took me for the enemy." Another grandmother contended that in her case, "Of course, I wasn't the enemy, I wasn't the one who went into her home and removed them [the grandchildren]." Another grandmother expressed, "You eventually become an eyesore to those grandchildren, because they really think that you don't like their parents." In talking about the challenges associated with working with child welfare and acting in the best interest of their grandchildren, one grandmother said, "It was really hard on me doing that, talking about her in court and telling her she can't come to my house and visit her own children, she [adult child] don't see it, but it was hard."

Regardless of whether they agreed with the necessity of the rules set by child welfare, the grandmothers felt the impact of child welfare policies or expectations on their family relationships:

We was not allowed to meet with his [my grandchild's] mother alone. They had to be supervised visits. And so...there's a lot of scars between my daughter and myself based on something I felt without DSS [child welfare] we might—we maybe could have worked them out in a more amicable manner.

A Response to Anger: Agency, Voice, and Social Activism

The grandmothers told stories of the ways in which their lives were being transformed or renegotiated because of their formalized involvement with the child welfare system.

With language steeped in family meanings, one grandmother poignantly suggested, "What they [child welfare] really need to understand is that we want the same things they want. And we love just like they do....But [what makes us different] are our histories." Angered by the child welfare system's imposition on their informal historical practices and the lack of acknowledgement with regard to the resulting transformations occurring in their everyday lives, the grandmothers engaged a sense of agency, voice, and activism. The grandmothers challenged the lead author, as a co-interpreter, to retell and disseminate the stories of grandmothers in a manner that maintains the truthfulness and integrity of the meanings held by them and to serve as a conduit for grandmothers to access forums that may help others *get it*.

Grandmothers took on the multiple roles associated with raising a grandchild in a formalized context. However, they often found themselves experiencing anger and resentment, coupled with the feelings of obligation and responsibility.

I'm tired in my body. I'm tired in my mind. But I love my grandchildren. But I am like, When is it going to stop? It's just like I mean my whole life is in a whirlwind. But yet I got to [continue doing this].

Thrust into caregiving due to difficult family crises, many grandmothers feel the child welfare system either does not recognize or does not care about their pain. Describing her transition to parenting her grandchildren, one grandmother candidly stated, "I mean I was [mad] for the first month, I was mad at the world, and then people [the child welfare system] acted like they didn't know, or didn't care."

Despite the challenges of raising grandchildren under the auspices of the child welfare system, these grandmothers did attempt to advocate for themselves, to infuse their voices, and to incorporate their interpreted meanings into the child welfare system. One of the grandmothers interviewed makes this appeal:

We are people and we have hurt. We have guilt that we're probably dealing with. I mean bitterness, anger—

I mean we're probably walking time bombs ourselves that somebody really needs to understand how we feel and what we are going through.

Seeking opportunities to serve as advocates for themselves and their families, grandmothers frequently emphasized social justice, social action, and involvement in child welfare policy efforts. "[We] need to start voicing [our] opinion. And it's good that she [speaking of another grandmother] sits on the board [child welfare advisory board]." Patricia Hill Collins (1990) has argued that activism is often in response to the tensions that exist between efforts to mold the institution of Black motherhood to benefit systems of race, gender, and class oppression and efforts by African American women to define and value their own self-definitions. Taking a step toward activism at the conclusion of every focus group, grandmothers gathered to share their experiences and knowledge of resources with one another and to talk about how to become involved and how to get their voices heard.

Summary and Implications

Among African American grandmothers raising grandchildren who are in the legal custody of the child welfare system, the following needs to be given attention: (a) the grandmothers' perspective on caregiving within the context of the child welfare system; (b) the interpretive practices that inform grandmothers' perspectives of their emergent "partnership" with the child welfare system and the formalization of kinship care; and (c) the ways the child welfare system influences the meanings and practices of intergenerational caregiving among grandmothers. While this study is exploratory, the findings suggest that the formalization of kinship caregiving is a deeply contested terrain, and that both grandmothers and the child welfare system are informed by interpretive practices that are often at best a mismatch, and are at worst in opposition.

It was found that African American grandmothers use their cultural traditions and history as the lens through which they interpret, critique, and negotiate their relationship with the child welfare system. African American grandmothers

stake their position that they are more than foster parents, and assert that the child welfare system needs to acknowledge their value as relative or kinship caregivers. The roles, identities, and caregiving practices of grandmothers are to varying degrees influenced by the child welfare system, particularly via its regulatory practices. Yet, these grandmothers struggle for self-definition, even as their roles, everyday practices, and family relationships come under the scrutiny of and are co-determined by the child welfare system. This is most evident in the ways African American grandmothers contest the transformations imposed by the child welfare system and seek to assert their voices via social activism. Furthermore, through processes of voice, resistance, meaning-making, and agency, African American grandmothers inhabit an interpretative position that moves back and forth across the public-private divide.

There is little debate that the child welfare system has a difficult role. In an effort to acknowledge the importance of both child safety and family preservation, most child welfare systems have evolved from a child-only approach to a family-centered approach used by the state represented in this study. The findings suggest the need for a more clearly defined intergenerational approach when working with African American grandmothers who are raising grandchildren under the auspices of the child welfare system.

Confirming other studies (Burton, 1992; Davidson, 1997; Hunter & Taylor, 1998), the findings from this study suggest that African American grandmothers are in need of a variety of support services. Generally, social services are divided into children services and adult services, and traditionally, few combined efforts toward service planning and provision exist between agencies that provide children, adult or aging services. Infusion of an intergenerational approach into child welfare suggests that in their practice, child welfare workers should place just as much emphasis on services and support to grandparents as they do to children to provide a stronger integration of adult and child services. In the words of one grandmother, "They [the child welfare system] should look at us [grandmothers and grandchildren] as a package deal. You know, the child and whoever they are living with. You are a package deal and they should look at you as one."

Using an intergenerational approach to practice would assist the grandmother caregivers in perceiving their partnership with the child welfare system as reciprocal and responsive to their needs as aging caregivers who are parenting both *off-time* and in a new formalized context. Specifically, services such as support groups that focus just as much on the needs of the grandparents as on the needs of the grandchildren and respite care services designed to give grandparents time off are needed.

Anger is widely accepted as a major stage of grief. Thus, what was presented as anger amongst these grandmothers may be a manifestation of grief. Consequently, counseling efforts supported by the child welfare system that acknowledge the grief experiences of the grandmothers and the difficulty of the transitions and transformations that the grandmothers are required to make from being informal to formal caregivers are needed. Additionally, regularly planned efforts by child welfare departments to display appreciation and acknowledge the contributions of grandparent caregivers, such as hosting grandparent caregiver celebrations and publicly acknowledging outstanding grandparent caregivers are examples of value recognition. Finally, efforts that acknowledge the expertise of grandparent caregivers are needed. Such efforts may include engaging grandparent caregivers as paid consultants, co-trainers and peer mentors, or inviting grandparents to have a voice or serve on agency and legislative work groups and policy-making committees and boards.

From the perspective of child welfare policy, taking an intergenerational approach to service delivery should accomplish two tasks. First, it should lead to child welfare policies and practices that favor partnerships with the adult and aging service programs that have the resources to meet the needs of custodial grandparent. Second, it should result in policies that require the broadening of case plans from child-only plans to intergenerational plans that are also concerned with the needs of the grandmother caregivers. Given the consequence of failing to meet the federal directive contained in ASFA to improve the well-being of children *and* their families, the child welfare system has a responsibility to take the lead in developing a stronger partnership with adult and aging service

programs.

Finally, the findings of this study raise the question of whether a re-conceptualization of the notion of permanency is needed when addressing grandparent caregivers. Specifically, should the child welfare system move away from policies that emphasize legal adoption by grandparents towards an emphasis on guardianship or another status that is situated somewhere between life-long and formal adoption and the loose structure of guardianship? To effectively address questions such as this and to inform child welfare policy and practice, culturally relevant, community-based participatory research designs that place the voices of African American grandparents at the center of policy discussions and evidence-based research that explores the effect that policy-driven practices have on the outcomes of children and families are needed.

Acknowledgement: We wish to acknowledge the grandmothers who took the time to participate in this study and trusted enough to tell their stories. The research was funded through the Southern Regional Educational Board Doctoral Scholars Fellowship.

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