



Published in final edited form as:

J Women Aging. 2022 ; 34(6): 757–772. doi:10.1080/08952841.2021.1951114.

Grandmothers raising grandchildren: Managing, balancing and maintaining family relationships

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Abstract

Most grandparents raising grandchildren are embedded in a network of family members who either help them carry out the caregiving task or complicate that role. This study examined how grandmothers described family relationships, that is, with the grandchild's parents, grandmother's spouses/partners, and other relatives.

Data were drawn from 457 weekly journal entries submitted by 129 grandmother caregivers. Using thematic analysis, a three-person team coded using NVIVO 12.

Grandmothers described three overarching relationship themes: managing conflicted relationships with the grandchild's parents, balancing relationships with their spouse/partner, and maintaining relationships with other relatives. Implications for practice are provided.

Keywords

grandmothers; family relationships; journals; thematic analysis

Background

According to the most recently available census data, grandparents live together with grandchildren in 4.7 million households in the United States (United States Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2019: Table S0901). About 8.5 percent of all children in the U.S. live in grandparent headed households; for 2.7 million children, a grandparent is the primary caregiver (United States Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2019: Table B10002). Including multigenerational households where the grandparent is not the

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Conflicts of Interest

Authors declare no conflicts of interest.

householder, this percentage rises about 10%. (Pikauskas et al. 2020). Given the current legal preference for kinship care over foster care, the number of children being raised by a grandparent is expected to rise (Ellis & Simmons, 2014). Grandparents raising their grandchildren often enter caregiving under crisis circumstances such as the death of a parent, substance use or mental disorders, neglect or abuse of the grandchild, or parental incarceration (Kelley et al., 2013). Over the last 15 years, the proportion of grandfamilies formed due to parental drug use, court intervention or violence in the home have increased significantly (Wallace et al, 2019). Taking on a caregiving role out of necessity, in addition to uncertainty about the length of time the grandchild will remain with the grandparents, creates additional stress that can have lasting effects on the mental and physical health of the family (Kelley et al., 2013).

Research conducted with grandmother caregivers has shown that they experience high levels of stress and depressive symptoms, worse physical health, adverse family functioning and financial strain (Musil et al., 2010; Musil et al, 2019; Smith et al., 2008). Additionally, the grandchildren and other members of the family can experience distress due to the disruption in traditional family roles (Dolbin-MacNab, Stucki & Natwick, 2019). Research has documented emotional and behavioral problems that grandchildren often have when they are taken under care due to parental neglect or abuse which adds additional burdens for grandmothers in a caregiving role (Kelley et al., 2013). Children who come under the auspices of the child welfare system are 5 times more likely to have problems with anxiety, depression and/or behavioral problems and over half have had 4 or more adverse life events (ACEs) (Generations United, 2017). The main sources of grandmother's stress are related to grandchildren's behavioral and emotional problems, challenges relating to the grandchild's parents, financial stress, concerns for the grandchild's future health issues, worries about the wellbeing of their adult children, social isolation, and navigating complex judicial systems (Sampson & Hererline, 2015).

Studies of grandmothers raising grandchildren have primarily examined the stressors inherent in raising grandchildren and the subsequent effect of those stressors on the grandmother's mental and physical health (Kelley et al., 2013). Less attention has been paid to relationships beyond that between the grandparent and grandchild (Hayslip et al, 2019). The relationship with the grandchild's parents are often identified as a particular source of stress – especially as custodial grandmothers must often arrange for visitation – and often handle disruptive grandchild behavior after a visit (Noriega, 2018), calling for more contextual studies of the effects on family relationships and dynamics. Grandparent headed households are best examined in the context of the broader family system given their responsibilities to spouses/partners, other adult children, other grandchildren, and other extended family relatives. Tompkins and Vander Linden (2020) refer to the changing and conflicting relationships, situations and emotions surrounding grandparents raising grandchildren as compounding complexity, meaning that grandparents must navigate and negotiate many relationships at the same time.

Some grandparents assume sole care of the grandchild, as primary caregivers. Multigenerational families, where the parent or parents of the grandchild(ren) are also living in the household, present a family structure where managing multiple family relationships

(generations) may be challenging for grandparents raising grandchildren. The number of Americans living in multigenerational households has been on the rise. (Rieger, 2017) These families are less likely to form due to negative personal circumstances, and are more common among minority or immigrant communities (Rieger, 2017) Grandmother caregiver status, primary versus caregiving in a multigenerational household, has been studied in relation to grandmother resourcefulness, family strain and depressive symptoms (Musil et al, 2013). Role theory, and its concepts of overlapping roles and role conflict, has been used to conceptualize family relationships of grandparents raising grandchildren, particularly those in multi-generational households where grandmothers are simultaneously parents and grandparents (Dolbin-MacNab, 2020). Few studies however, have considered how household status might impact family relationships, such as those with the adult children, spouse/partner, or other relatives outside the household. Therefore, this study examined and compared specific family relationships in both multigenerational and primary households.

Aim of the study

Our aim was to analyze 457 online journals written over a four week period by grandmothers raising grandchildren with respect to their experience of relationships between the grandmothers and the grandchild's parents, spouses/partners, and other relatives (i.e. the grandmother's parents, siblings, in laws and other grandchildren and adult children). Journals had been written by a total of 129 grandmothers, including 103 grandmothers primarily responsible for raising grandchildren 18 years old or younger, whose parents were not living in the home (primary caregivers), as well as 26 grandmothers primarily responsible for raising grandchildren living in households that included the grandchildren's biological parent(s) (mutigenerational). Therefore, in this study, we also compared grandmothers who were primary caregivers for grandchildren versus those raising grandchildren in a multigenerational household to determine if there were differences in journal codes.

Method

Research Design and Sampling

Data for this analysis were drawn from a larger ongoing national study (N=349) testing two methods to reduce stress among grandmothers living with and primarily responsible for raising grandchildren. Excluded were grandmothers not residing with grandchildren and those providing occasional babysitting. A national convenience sample was recruited of grandmothers raising/living with grandchildren by partnering with national grandparent organizations and grandparent support groups. After completing a telephone eligibility screening and confirming interest in participation, participants in the larger study submitted an electronic consent form via Qualtrics. The larger national study was approved by Case Western Reserve University's Institutional Review Board (Protocol 2014-725).

Grandmothers raising grandchildren in the larger study had to have reliable access to the internet and be willing to complete four online questionnaires administered for quantitative data. They were also asked to complete four weeks of daily online journaling. The journal data are the focus of this study.

For this study analysis, a subsample of 129 grandmothers from the larger study of grandmothers raising grandchildren was selected based on the inclusion criteria of those grandmothers who had completed any amount of journaling from the start of data collection August 1, 2017 to June 1, 2018, at which time the hosting of the portal changed for submitting journals. Therefore, all participants in this sample experienced the same portal experience for journaling.

Procedures: Journal prompts

Grandmothers completed daily prompted on-line journals for four weeks. The portal for submitting on line journals allowed grandmothers to write as much as they wanted. The first journal prompt sought to engage the grandmothers in writing about their relationships with the grandchildren they were raising as well as other family members, along with any challenges presented and how they coped with or handled these challenges. This first journal prompt specifically asked the grandmothers to describe “challenges or difficulties you faced today with your grandchildren or other family members and how you handled them”. The second prompt was more open ended and asked about “anything else you’d like to tell us about your day”. Eighty percent of the 129 grandmothers (n=102) submitted all four weeks of journals; 13 grandmothers submitted 1 week, 9 submitted 2 weeks and 3 submitted 3 weeks, respectively. On average, the grandmothers in this study completed 3.5 weeks of journals. Journals were completed daily and submitted electronically on a weekly basis.

Participants

The 129 grandmothers in this study ranged in age from 36 –76 years (M=54.6, SD = 7.9). Over three fourths of the sample (n=93, 78.3%) identified as White. Other racial categories included: African American (n=27, 21.7%), Asian (n=1, .78%), Native American (n=1, .78%), and Bi/Multiracial (n=8, 6.9%). Overall, eleven percent (n=12, 10.9%) described their ethnic background as Hispanic or Latina. A little over half the sample (n=68, 52.7%) were married or living with a partner. About half (n=64, 49.3%) were employed full or part time while they were raising their grandchildren. In terms of the educational status of the grandmothers, 39.6% (n=51) had completed an associate’s, bachelor’s, or graduate school degree and 38% (n=49) 1–3 years of college or post high school training. Most (n=103, 79.8%) of the grandmothers were primary caregivers, meaning that the biological parent(s) did not live with the grandmother; 26 (20%) of the grandmothers were raising grandchildren in a multi-generational household, where the biological parent(s) lived with the grandmother. In the aggregate, the 129 grandmothers in this sample were raising a total of 231 grandchildren. About half (49.6%) were living with/raising just one grandchild; 29.5% were caring for two grandchildren and 21% had three or more grandchildren. Table 1 presents the sample characteristics in full.

Data Analysis

We used a thematic analysis approach following steps identified by Braun and Clarke (2006). All coding was completed using NVIVO 12 (NVIVO,2018). To begin the analysis, two team members read through journal entries from 11 grandmothers (308 weekly journals) in order to become familiar with the data and make notes for coding. These two team members then developed a preliminary codebook, definitions for, and examples of codes.

The development of a codebook was based on coding categories drawn from our literature review (e.g. grandchild's behavior, parental substance use or mental health disorders) as well as open coding from reading the journals (e.g. time to be together with spouse/partner, view of mother's or father's parenting). After codebook development, the same two team members tested the codebook with 6 additional participants (168 weekly journal entries), coding all the journals from those participants, and then met to compare their codes. Coding categories were then sorted into relationship themes for grandchild's parents, grandmother's spouse/partner, and grandmothers other relatives as these were the "other family members" grandmothers wrote about in their prompted journals. When these two team members had reached 85% agreement in coding, a third team member was trained on use of the final codebook. At about this time, no further codes or revisions to code definitions were made. Two of the three team members acted as primary coders for the analysis in this study. The third reviewer coded 7 days (one week) of each grandmother's journals, as an accuracy check. Each coder read all journal entries in their entirety and coded for the presence of text relating to family relationships, among other codes of interest to the overall larger study. A total of 457 weekly journals were read and coded. The research team met regularly to discuss and compare coding; when there was a discrepancy in coding, the three team members decided together what the appropriate code should be and then changed the selected text to that code in their datasets. When the two primary coders merged their datasets, a coding comparison run within NVIVO showed 99.7% agreement across the two coders and a Kappa statistic (McHugh, 2012) of .956. A list of themes and sub-theme codes, including code counts, percent of grandmothers endorsing each code, and frequency of occurrence is found in Table 2.

To address the second aim of this study, comparing grandmother primary caregivers versus those raising grandchildren in a multigenerational household, the following additional steps were completed. First, case classifications were created within NVIVO and each grandmother was manually assigned to either the "primary" or "multigenerational" condition for household type, using information for the larger study, where household type had already been identified for each case. Next, a matrix coding query was run within NVIVO to compare what grandmothers in these two household types said about relationships with the grandchild's parents, spouses/partners, and other relatives (e.g. grandmother's parents, siblings, other adult children, in laws, etc). We compared total word count and average number of words devoted to these relationships for grandmothers across both types of households. Even though most grandmothers had completed the same number of journals, comparing average number of words allowed us to handle any overrepresentation that might have occurred from comparing grandmothers who completed many journal entries versus only a few journal entries.

Results

Managing relationships with the grandchild's parents

A prominent overarching theme expressed by the grandmothers was managing relationships with their grandchild's mother and father, while at the same time raising the grandchild(ren) (See Table 2). Grandmothers described a number of situations in which they had to negotiate

troubling parental behaviors that impacted their relationship with the parent as well as how they cared for the grandchild.

Relationship with grandchild's mother: A frequently occurring code endorsed by 33 (n=42) percent of the grandmothers within this theme was the grandmother's evaluation of the mother's parenting, often concluding that the mother was incapable of parenting, as these two grandmothers express in their journal entries: *"It is unfathomable. It's hard to explain that some parents just can't parent"*; and *"The realization that my grown 34 year old daughter would never be capable of raising her son."* Some grandmothers could not accept, were incredulous, that a mother was not able to parent their child:

"I love my grandson and pray that he will be saved before it is too late....Instead of helping to provide for them she chose to move just out of state and not ever share where she lives. Never gave a thing to them.....---what kind of mother does that".

Grandmothers wrote about the impact of the mother's inability to parent and how heartbreaking this was for them to explain to the grandchildren: *"I have also come out plain and simple and said that mommy is not able to take care of you right now, which is the truth I suppose"*. When the grandchild's mother was irresponsible or not willing to help with child care, this left more work for the grandmothers and impacted relationships between grandmothers and the grandchild's mother. Grandmothers complained that mothers did not grasp the full responsibility of parenting, wanting only the fun parts, not the hard work and time involved, as this grandmother describes: *"She is getting all excited about buying her a Halloween costume. That's what she feels parenting is all about, pony rides and Halloween costumes."*

Grandmothers often wrote about the realization that their adult child was not able to parent in the context of how difficult it had been for them to parent that child:

"It so hard to get my adult child, motivated for anything, any time She doesn't set a very good example for her girls. She is more like a big sister you don't want the younger girls emulating. She alone was as much of a challenge for us as raising these other three all together. I feel like I am still fighting that fight, a continuation of her upbringing."

In such situations, grandmothers often criticized themselves for, in their words, creating the circumstances that led to their assuming the role of raising grandchildren. Grandmothers described the difficulties they faced in trying to help the mother be a better parent and the dilemma that this often posed for them, as in this quote:

"Our daughter is not acting in a responsible manner and we are afraid we may have to file for custody of our granddaughter.....Her welfare is the most important thing but I shudder to think about the damage it will do to our relationship with our daughter. I know she is creating her own problems but at the end of the day she is still my baby and I am afraid we will lose her in this".

In cases where the mother had supervised visits, handling such visits was often a delicate balance for the grandmother, who often felt that the mother was not prepared to respond to the child appropriately during visit time. On the one hand, grandmothers wanted the

grandchild to see their mother but on the other hand they feared for the grandchild's safety, as in this case: *"How sad is it that I have to protect him from the person who should love him the most?"* Visitation was often described as a source of disappointment, as it provided just more evidence to the grandmother of how ill-equipped the mother was in parenting skills due to mental health or substance use disorders, as illustrated by this journal entry: *"My daughter hasn't seen her kids for over a year and 4 months due to a meth addiction. Every time she would beg me to let her see the kids and I would finally agree, she would sabotage herself and place the blame on me"*. Visits often did not meet the grandmother's expectations as to how the mother should interact with the grandchild: *"[GC] said all his mom does when they are with her is play on her phone. Doesn't spend any time with them"*. Handling the grandchild's reaction to missed visits or "no shows" often fell to the grandmothers:

"She was scheduled to be with her mother for the weekend, but her mother has not turned in her court ordered drug test..... We do not tell [GC] until the last minute that she will be going to avoid her being disappointed when her mother does not show".

Many grandmothers also stated that they were often put in the position of being the "bad guy" when they acted as the grown up in the room and enforced rules for the safety of the grandchild:

"The boy[']s mommy. Wanted to take them to her house. She[']s not allowed to have them unsupervised. The boys want to go with her and they don[']t understand. Makes the boys hate me. Makes me the bad person in their eyes because I[']m refusing to let them go. She uses heroin and they don[']t need to be around her.....".

Relationships with the grandchild's mother as depicted in the journals were also frequently characterized (n=47, 36%) by anger/tension. Conflict between grandmothers and the grandchild's mother often arose over differences of opinion on how to set expectations for the grandchild and handle discipline problems. Sometimes grandmothers reported that the mother had unrealistic expectations of the child due to their lack of experience and skill in parenting:

"I ended up in an argument with my daughter after I suggested that she stop expecting perfection from a four year old child. It got really nasty I was crying, my grandson was crying, my daughter was screaming and blasting off on me...."

The grandmothers often felt that given their previous experience of child rearing, they had a better understanding of child development, as this grandmother-mother conflict shows:

She complains that we spoil him and that he gets away with whatever he wants. She doesn't understand that he isn't even 2 yet and that he is developing a mind of his own. She wants to be able to control him and inside I laugh as I know you don't control a 2 year old.

Sometimes, the conflict stemmed from the grandmother having a preferred way of dealing with children that did not match with the mother's view, as in entries from these two grandmothers:

“My daughter has not instilled in her sons the importance of neatness. This has been very hard for me in my adjustment to living with them. I do think that making one’s bed and keeping rooms neat is very important”; “It’s ridiculous that parents these days DO NOT discipline. I live with a 3 year old who stills breastfeeds and is treated like a 3 month old!!!”

Some of the most poignant journals were those where the grandmother wrote about incidents where the grandmother was very angry and disappointed about the choice the grandchild’s mother was making and fearful for the future impact, as in this situation:

“...my daughter called to let me know she is pregnant again..... How am I suppose to raise another child? is she crazy, she doesn’t even have a place to stay we don’t have a choice but to take this child also if it come to it and I really think it will come to that.... We had plans, we have an RV we can’t even use right now because of all the dreams we have had had to be put on hold. Why is this ok?”

Much of the anger and tension had been present for years, severely damaging the grandmother’s relationship with the grandchild’s mother: *“I am sure somewhere deep inside I love my daughter, but there has been so much damage I don’t really know anymore.”*

At the same time, there was worry and concern expressed in the journals by 22 percent of the grandmothers (n=28), for both the grandchild and the mother. Grandmothers were worried that the mother’s behavior or absence would hurt their grandchildren emotionally: *“just wonder how long she will keep her interest in them.. worry for them when she stops coming,, she never sees them for long.. and then just stops. and they are hurt..”*

Grandmothers were also concerned about the impact that the mother’s mental health or substance use problem would have on the grandchildren: *Grandchild needs help. He’s developing behaviors of children with addicted parents. He is very protective of her. He will say that mommy is sick. He doesn’t know any better..... My life is a mess, her life is a mess and his life has potential. How can I help?”* Ever present was a worry for what the future would bring both for the grandchild’s mother as well as for the grandmother’s relationship with the grandchild:

“She believe[s] I want her kids, what I want is for her to move on and be independent of me. She is too dependent upon her dad and me, and I am still afraid that she cannot make it, I believe she is unstable, but I really do not know what to do about it”.

Some of the most poignant journals were those where the grandmother wrote about incidents where the grandmother was very worried about the choice the grandchild’s mother was making and fearful for the future impact on their relationship with the mother, as in this situation:

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Relationship with grandchild's father: Relationships with the grandchild's father were less frequently described in the journals as compared with the number of journal entries relating to mother (See Table 2). Grandmothers' view of the father's parenting as described by 19 grandmothers (15%) were similar to their view of the mother's parenting; they often saw the father as ill-equipped to deal with parenting, as expressed here: *"I did get irritated with the kids dad. He was acting like a spoiled brat today. I just told him to act his age and a dad instead of a kid."* However, when fathers were mentioned, grandmothers described the father as a distant figure, inconsistent and absent. Grandmothers were rarely presented the opportunity to rely on the father as a consistent source of parental support in raising their children, as this journal entry illustrates:

"I decided to reach out to the children's father about providing support for his children and he laughed at me. He blatantly told me to get lost He says he do what and when he wants";

Visits with fathers were less frequently described but were often as problematic as visits with mother, more often due to the father's absence, as described here:

"I have only begun to let him visit about 6 weeks ago because of his drug addiction. He is clean right now (6 months) and I hope he stays that way - they love and miss their Daddy and I have truly missed my son, none of us had seen him in 3 years!"

While anger and tension was present in the relationship between grandmothers and the grandchild's father, it did not appear as frequently in the journals (n=16, 12%) as compared with the grandchild's mother (See Table 2).

Balancing relationships with spouses/partners

A second major theme depicted in the grandmother's journals was that of balancing the relationship with a spouse or partner, that is, how to raise grandchildren and still have a relationship with a spouse or partner. There were a number of factors, described in this section, that required juggling on the part of the grandmother to meet her responsibilities to raising the grandchild while balancing time and tasks with a spouse or partner. Spousal/partner relationships were most frequently marked by issues in sharing of the grandparenting role as expressed by 34 grandmothers (26%). Some grandmothers lacking spousal assistance were on their own when it came to raising and taking care of the grandchildren: *"I really feel alone in this. my husband is the tiniest of help"; "Hubby just sits there and watches....doesn't intervene, doesn't interact with [GC] to give me a break"*. Grandmothers also complained about the unevenness of how the work around the house was shared:

"My husband and I have been arguing all day as he feels he's over worked around the house. So not the case. All he had to do was the garbage today.....I'm truly frustrated as I have so much on my plate and deal with my granddaughter health appointments alone every week, take care of bills, take care of my mom with Alzheimer's and my own issues, etc. asking him for a simple task every now and then just kills him. It's so hard to cope".

Sometimes spouses/partners seemed jealous of the time taken up with grandchildren: *"He does get upset without having any time for himself/us because of the kids"*. Most

grandmothers, however, enjoyed help and support from their spouses/partners who shared in the daily care of the grandchildren: *“With both my husband and I teaming we got all 5 fed, totally dressed and down to the bus stop, just as the bus pulled up”*. Grandmothers praised spouses/partners who understood how much effort went into grandparenting as this quote illustrates:

“I think my husband is finally realizing how much time I spend taking care of our gs..... Hubby actually gave me some time to go for a run yesterday evening!..... I haven't been exercising or going to the gym like I use[d] to for over a year. I think getting out more to run will help my stress”.

Grandmothers frequently commented in their journals on daily help from spouses and partners with child care, household chores and transportation: *“I rely on my husband for emotional support and helping with [granddaughter]. Because I teach at night, he wakes up early in the morning and gets [her] ready for school (including braiding hair!)”*

A source of friction in sharing the grandparent role was when there were differences of opinion on discipline, expectations or how to respond to the grandchild's behavior, as this quote reveals:

“Husband and I are having disagreement about letting the 15 year old go to football games with friends and us not being there. I look at giving her the chance to make choices. I think he is afraid she will turn out like her mother, Pregnant at 16”;

Such differences of opinion between the grandparents could lead to marital stress (11 grandmothers, 9%), as illustrated in this journal: *He always threatens to leave because he can't deal with [grandchild's] outbur[st]s and her talking back to us all the time*. Another source of friction was when the spouse or partner had difficulty in adjusting to assuming the grandparent role:

“It took him three or four years to get over the trauma of having kids. He felt...and still does that we should be retired, he enjoys his boat.....and who has time for a boat?At first he was depressed, bitter, and resentful..... Now he has settled in to the routine and will occasionally get upset”.

Disagreements or stress often occurred when the grandchildren were from the grandmother's previous relationship. For a spouse/partner who had not had children previously, this could be quite an adjustment, taking its toll on the relationship and time to resolve, as for this grandmother: *“[My husband] and I seem to be reconnecting and finding a way to balance parenting and being a couple. It's been a rough couple months. He's never had kids always wanted them just waited to[o] long to find each other. Now he's a father of a 3 and 4 yrs old.”*

Another source of marital stress was from seven grandmothers (5%) who provided caretaking for sick or disabled spouses/partners while at the same time raising their grandchildren. These grandmothers often found themselves overworked, stressed and alone: *“I feel like I'm drowning. I'm struggling to carry everyone and keep up with the kids' school work, extracurricular activities, my husband's doctor appointments, his pill schedule, housework, cooking, laundry, grocery shopping, and now Christmas shopping, and maintain*

my sanity during all of it.” Other challenges faced by spouses described by 19 grandmothers (15%) included loss of work: *“My biggest issue today was that my husband lost another job. I don’t understand what is going on with him. He had been without work for 16 months and so when he got this job I thought he would fit in”* In such situations, grandmothers could not rely on their spouse or partner for assistance.

When seven grandmothers (5%) shared that divorce was likely due to marital stress and the demands of raising grandchildren, they expressed sadness and resolve: *“My husband informed me that he wanted a divorce. Cause he was tired of raising children. . . . ”*; and *“I have a feeling it’s time to end our marriage. I cannot cope with all of this. I have way too much to deal with and he is not supportive anymore. I feel so sad and helpless”*. Grandmothers also expressed the ways in which differences in handling or responding to the grandchild’s behavioral/emotional problems interfered with and threatened the marital relationship: *“My husband is very upset with me and has threatened to take his income and be gone if I allow our adult son back into the house”*; and *“My man and [I] had broken up because he couldn’t handle the disrespect my adult children were giving”*.

Another aspect of the spousal/partner relationship that was frequently expressed by 21 (16%) grandmothers was time to be together, that is, carving out time to do things together as a couple. Grandmothers expressed sadness over what they thought time with their spouse/partner would have been at this point in their lives. For longstanding couples, there was a discrepancy between what they thought their life together would be at this point in their lives and what they actually were experiencing: *“Oh, Friday night. I always thought at my age, my hubby and I would be traveling the country, We had such big plans! But, here I am, the 6 & 8 yo in the bed and waiting on the 15 yo to get home from the high school football game”*. A date night was a precious commodity, sometimes difficult to arrange and unpredictable, as this quote reveals:

“We got the things we had to get done finished, But didn’t get to the movie. Another date night not gotten. Watched some TV and went to sleep”;

Family support was often a critical ingredient to making time together even a possibility; here grandmothers relied on a) other family members: *“GS went with to visit BM and her mother today, so my husband and I just watched TV and relaxed”*; b) friends and neighbors: *“Later in the evening the girls went across the street to watch an outdoor movie with the neighbors. That gave my husband and I some alone time”* and c) community services: *“Had a wonderful evening, my husband set up for the kids to go to the drop in daycare and we went out to dinner and then walked around the mall, I think we all needed a break”*. In whatever way this time to be together occurred, the following quote reflects how much this alone time was valued: *“We went out to eat at my favorite diner. I started to relax and remember what it was like to be a couple again”*.

Maintaining relationships with other relatives

A third major theme revolved around maintaining relationships with other relatives which might be, depending on the grandmother, the grandmother’s parents, in laws, siblings, other adult children and other grandchildren. Grandmother caregivers (n=33, 26%) described how difficult it was to maintain relationships with other relatives when so much of their time and

energy was taken up by caring for the grandchild. Grandmother caregivers often wrote about stress or strain in their relationships with their other adult children because they were caring for one adult child's children, as these journal entries reflect: *"My children don't like the fact that I am still raising children"*; and *"One of my girls is upset because I don't want to keep her kids. Are you serious do they think my situation is easy"*. Similar to the jealousy of a spouse or partner, vying for the grandmother's time and attention, the grandmother's other adult children were described as feeling left out: *"Sometimes I think that my grown children are jealous of my grandchildren"*. Grandmother caregivers also described frustration in maintaining their relationships with their own adult siblings: *My big sister called wanting me to run errands for her. did not want to but did, she makes me feel bad if I don't*"; *"My brother and his wife were complaining about how limited we are due to the fact that I have had the kids."* The siblings did not understand why the grandmother did not have time to be with or do things with them, as she had before assuming caregiving for the grandchild.

Grandmothers wrote about instances where they were challenged with setting boundaries with other relatives both outside and within the household: *"My mom stops by for a visit but I maintain that he has to go to bed by 8PM. and My mom said ok I'll be leaving soon."* Grandmothers often highlighted the challenges they faced with other relatives in setting boundaries but also described feelings of relief when they were successful, as this journal entry illustrates *"I believe I am no longer having problems with some family that I usually do because I now have really good boundaries. That took some time, but it is working"*.

Family support and communication described by 44 grandmothers (n=34%) often provided a safe space for grandmothers to unpack the challenges of grandparenting while also receiving the general emotional support they needed to continue grandparenting effectively as shown here: *"Talked to my mom and oldest sister about my daughters. I feel comforted when I talk to them, so it was helpful"*, and *"I have a great support with my sisters. They remind me of everything I did to help my daughter and continue to do."* Grandparents often communicated with other family members for general support around raising grandchildren in efforts to help them establish child rearing "norms", while also leaning on family for support in times of stress

"My sister has been my shoulder so to speak,she supports me in times of difficulty with the grandchildren when one or the other is acting out or needs something and she know that I need a break, sometimes I don't even have to ask her to help"

"Talked with my oldest daughter this morning and that always helps me to put things into perspective. She has a child that is only two years younger than the grandchild we are raising and it helps to talk to her about the things that are going on with her child and how she handles so of those obstacles."

Multigenerational Families

We turn now to the second aim of this study, comparing the journal entries and codes of primary versus multigenerational grandmothers. When grandmothers were living in multigenerational households, they wrote more content (words) than those in primary households for every code relating to relationship with the grandchild's mother. Anger and

tension often bubbled over due to the living situation and to sharing, or in many cases not sharing, household tasks. Conflicts in the role of parent and grandmother were also evident in these journals. Table 3 shows total words and average number of words devoted to these topics across all journals in primary versus multigenerational households.

Offering living space to a grandchild and mother was often decided upon in a crisis situation, where proper accommodations were makeshift rather than planned ahead of time. One grandmother likened the increase in household size to living in a “commune”. Space and privacy were at a premium in many multigenerational homes: *“Lack of bedroom space is very frustrating. When I moved into this house it was fine for just me, but not for 3 more people. No privacy whatsoever. I got a couple more dresser to store the tons of clothes, however, privacy is still an issue. None of us get proper sleep”*. Household chores and upkeep that were not shared were a common cause for concern. Many grandmothers expected more household help in exchange for offering their homes, and were frustrated when this was not forthcoming:

“I love her and the kids and I would NEVER want them back in the situation they came out of, but it[’s] frustrating. If I were in the same situation living at my mom[’s] with my kids, my mom would never have to cook, clean, shop, etc. I would make it my job and be grateful”.

Some grandmothers set rules accordingly, as described here: *“When I cook I decided that my daughter should pitch in by washing dishes. This is my rule every time. If she cooks, I clean dishes....She doesn’t help do a whole lot unless I ask and ask. Dishes were still out everywhere when I got up this morning. I was not happy”*. While some grandmothers learned to live with a “messy house”, others never quite got used to the chaos and disarray of having children, toys and baby equipment in their homes again and longed for the day when they could regain control of their homes.

Role conflict was also pronounced within multigenerational homes, as this grandmother writes: *“Dealing with my grandchildren’s mother is very hectic especially when she’s here in the home with me and the children and she tells them I am not their boss she is and that they need to do what she says not what I say”*. The basic issue, as described in this journal entry, was who would be the parent, who the grandchild should listen to, and who would have the most influence over the grandchild:

“The biggest problem with the grandchi[l]dren is having the children to listen to me when their mom is out to work and sometime she works late. So, before she gets home I usually give out instructions as to how I want things done, when she come[s] in she has another idea about what should be done, This often causes a big uproar because they are listening to me”.

Grandmothers struggled to come to some terms of agreement with the grandchild’s mother who was living in their home and also struggled with how much responsibility they wanted to assume for the grandchild, as this grandmother reports: *“I have been the disciplinarian and would prefer to just be the fun grandmother”*. These role patterns were not observed in the journal entries that dealt the relationship with the grandchild’s father.

Grandmothers in multigenerational households wrote much less about their spouses/partners than did those grandmothers with primary responsibility for the grandchild (See Table 4 for total words and average words devoted to spousal relationship codes across all journals in primary versus multigenerational households). We saw no mention of caretaking issues and challenges with the spouse or partner, and only one journal mentioned contemplation of divorce. We also did not observe differences in journal entries relating to other relatives.

Discussion

Most grandparents were embedded in a network of family members who either helped them carry out the task of raising their grandchild or complicated that role in some way, consistent with the theoretical framework of compounding complexity formulated by Tompkins and Vander Linden (2020). Our overall findings fit well within that framework as grandmothers described particular issues relating to change and conflict in managing, balancing and maintaining relationships. In terms of family roles, among all of the relationships discussed in this study, relationships between grandmothers and the grandchild's mother had perhaps the most intense role ambiguity and role conflict, particularly for grandmothers living in a multigenerational household. There was a great deal of content expressed in the daily journals concerning managing conflicted relationships between the grandmothers and the mothers of the grandchildren over their overlapping role as "mothers". They had substantial disagreements in how that role should be carried out and in what ways the overlap in the relationship was to be managed. Tompkins and Linden (2020) note that when there are changes in caregivers, power struggles can ensue; we saw evidence of that type of power struggle in these data. In some families, the grandmother had assumed nearly all of the parenting role and lamented the fact that the grandchild's mother was incapable of or inadequate in that role. In other families, the parenting role was being shared, however not without difficulty, distress and/or imbalance. Managing these relationships was important to the grandparents because they most often wanted what was best for the grandchild and did not want to overstep their role.

Spousal and partner relationships were presented in the journals as essential to the ability of the grandmother in carrying out child rearing tasks and responsibilities. The challenge as described by the grandmothers in this study was related to role strain, how to balance a relationship with a spouse or partner when so much time and energy was devoted to caring for the grandchild. Grandmothers described balancing time and caregiving tasks with their spouse or partner. They also described how to find balance in the time they had to devote to the spousal/partner relationship. The grandmothers also expressed in their journals a discrepancy in the role they thought they would have as a grandmother and wife/partner as compared with what they now had; this sense of an off time role is also consistent with previous literature (Landry-Meyer & Newman, 2004)

Grandmothers also had conflicting feelings about maintaining their relationships with other relatives. The challenge here as described in the journals was how to maintain relationships when other relatives were vying for the grandmother's attention, did not understand why the grandchild required so much attention or were jealous of the time the grandmother spent with the grandchild. Some grandmothers were unable to provide as much care for their

other relatives, for example, their own mothers or in laws, because they were busy caring for the grandchild. Consistent with our data, Dolbin-MacNab (2020) describes the struggle grandmothers experience in balancing their caregiving role with other collateral family roles.

As hard as managing, balancing and maintaining these relationships might be, however, grandmothers only expressed disengaging from relationships as a painful, unwanted last resort. Whatever the stress and strain, if the grandchild benefited in the end, it would all be worth it. One grandmother expressed this hope for her grandchildren as follows: “*That one day their life will be better off and they will be healthy adults because we loved them enough to do what[’s] best for them*”.

Limitations and Further Research

While 129 grandmother participants is a large sample size for a qualitative study and a strength of this study, we need to keep in mind that these experiences of grandparenting apply only to this sample. Since the journals were completed daily over a four week period rather than during a single interview or questionnaire, they offer us a slice of the grandmother’s lives and a great deal of detailed information useful to service providers. This analysis also focuses on relationships with other family members and relatives, beyond the grandparent-grandchild relationship; this focus on the family addresses a gap in previous research. The journal prompt used in this study did ask grandmothers to write about daily challenges, and so it might be assumed that what they said might be skewing negative; however, to counter that, the prompt also asked about how they coped with challenging situations and enabled us to learn how they were able to manage, balance and maintain relationships with family members and relatives while at the time raising grandchildren. The fact that grandmothers brought up family relationships shows that family relationships were an important aspect to their daily experience. We used a number of strategies to address any variation in the amount written or the overrepresentation of a few vocal grandmothers. First, we reported how many weeks and days of journaling were completed for the grandmother participants and indeed, the vast majority of grandmothers completed the same amount of journaling. Second, we reported the total number of words devoted to key topics and the average number of words for the two household groups (primary and multigenerational). Finally, we reported how many individual grandmothers endorsed each code.

Because the grandmothers expressed additional role conflict managing family relationships in multi-generational households, future research should explore differences in primary versus multigenerational grandfamilies. The number of grandmothers from multigenerational households was rather small in this analysis, but the differences we observed between multigenerational and primary households, suggest that further exploration could be informative. Additional research could explore if the marital/partner status of the grandmother influences the decision or ability to offer housing for the grandchild’s mother/father in addition to the grandchild. It may well be, as suggested by our findings, that it is less complicated to offer housing and therefore become a multigenerational household when the needs and wishes of another spouse or partner do not need to be taken into consideration. Research on the experiences and perspectives of a more diverse group of grandmothers and grandfathers is also needed to better reflect the

heterogeneity of custodial grandparents. In addition, future research could examine if any changes in codes occur over time, and if there is change, which relationships might be most changed.

Implications for Practice and Policy

This examination suggests implications for policy and practice, taking into account the complex and conflicting family relationships surrounding grandmothers as caregivers. In terms of policy development, there is much that professionals can learn from hearing from grandmothers directly about the complexity of raising grandchildren and the impact on family relationships. Health care and other service providers could be instructed to approach grandparents from a “family context” and be provided population specific training on how to conduct family assessment interventions for grandmothers raising grandchildren taking into account the grandmother’s relationship with their spouse/partner, the grandchild’s parents and other relatives in the family. Similarly, school and child welfare personnel and other helping and healthcare professionals can recognize the behavior management and family communications issues faced by grandmother caregivers. In addition to support for raising grandchildren, grandmother caregivers may need support and assistance in managing a variety of familial relationships. Findings from this study also support identified policy initiatives to make tailored services, sufficient financial support and legal assistance more fully available to grandmothers raising grandchildren (Generations United, 2018). Although much progress is still needed, recent years have seen fruitful bipartisan efforts at the national level to support grandparents raising grandchildren. The Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act, co-sponsored by Senators Susan Collins and Bob Casey, was signed into law by President Trump in 2018. This legislation established a Federal Advisory Council to support grandparents raising grandchildren as well as other kinship caregivers. The Council released its report in October of 2020, noting across the board unmet needs - from financial, social and technological resources, to planning for the care of grandchildren if they themselves become incapacitated (Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (SGRG) Advisory Council, 2020). The Council also notes an urgent need for awareness of the problems faced by grandfamilies and the inclusion of grandfamily voices to inform policy, which reinforces the need for qualitative studies such as ours where grandfamilies needs and experiences can be documented. A hopeful sign of continuing bipartisan attention is the recently passed American Rescue Plan Act (2021), which includes grandfamilies as well as other kinship caregivers in advance child tax credit payments. Parity between kinship caregivers and non-family foster parents has been lagging for years, despite a 2017 ruling that kinship caregivers are entitled to the same monthly reimbursement as other foster parents (*D.O. v. Glisson*, No. 16–5461, 6th Cir. 2017). Ohio and other states continue to improperly pay kinship caregivers a fraction of the payments given to traditional foster parents. The authors hope that the recent attention given to kinship caregivers by the current and most recent administrations continues.

The findings of this study point to other areas for programs and services with grandmothers raising grandchildren. Fortunately, there are a number of evidence based interventions to draw upon for use with grandparents including family therapy approaches, support groups, skills training and parent training (Dolbin-MacNab, 2020). Behavioral parent training

programs might be used to teach grandparents and the grandchild's parents co-parenting skills when those are needed so that grandmothers could work more effectively with less role conflict with the grandchild's parents. Dealing with an adult child's addiction or mental health disorder complicated all family relationships and was viewed by the grandparents as negatively impacting parenting skills. Psychoeducational education and support specific to addiction and grandparenting could be helpful for grandmothers providing care in the context of substance abuse. Another area needing attention, as described by the grandmothers in this study, is tips and techniques for handling visitation between the grandchild and the parent. Intervention needs may also vary widely among grandfamilies of different generations, as today's grandparents range from millennials to baby boomers and beyond. Overall, more clinical practice and research devoted to other family relationships may prove useful in helping grandmothers raise grandchildren.

Funding

This work was supported by National Institute of Nursing Research, National Institute of Health (R01NR015999).

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Table 1

Sample demographics (n=129)

	N	%	Mean (SD)
<u>Grandmother age (range 36–76)</u>			54.6 (7.9)
<u>Race/ ethnicity</u>			
White	93	78.3	
African American	27	21.7	
Asian	1	0.78	
Native American	1	0.78	
Bi/Multiracial	8	6.9	
Hispanic	12	10.9	
<u>Education</u>			
Some high school	3	2.3	
High school complete/ GED	26	20.2	
Post high school business or trade school	11	8.5	
1–3 years of college (no degree)	38	29.5	
Completed Associate's or 2-year program	24	18.6	
Bachelor's degree	14	10.9	
Graduate degree	13	10.1	
<u>Income (USD)</u>			
Under 999	13	10.1	
1,000–2,000	35	27.1	
2,001–3,000	27	20.9	
3,001–4,000	14	10.9	
4,001–5,000	16	12.4	
>5,000	18	14	
<u>Employment</u>			
Full time	46	35.7	
Part time	18	14	
Not working/ unemployed	65	50.4	
<u>Marital Status</u>			
Single (never married)	15	11.6	
Living with partner	4	3.1	
Married	64	49.6	
Divorced/separated	39	30.3	
Widowed	7	5.4	
<u>Number of grandchildren raised (range 1–5)</u>			1.7 (.97)
<u>Caregiving status</u>			
Primary	103	79.8	
Multigenerational	26	20	

Table 2

Themes, Times Used, Percent Grandmothers and Total Coverage

Code	Times Used ^a %	References ^b
<u>Theme 1: Managing relationships with grandchild's parents</u>		
<u>Mother</u>		
Anger or tension	97 (36%)	198
Living situation	15 (7%)	26
Role conflict	8 (5%)	9
Sharing household chores	10(6%)	17
Evaluation of mother's parenting	79(33%)	136
Worries or concern	41 (22%)	49
<u>Father</u>		
Anger or tension	20 (12%)	23
Living situation	2 (2%)	2
Role conflict	0 (0%)	0
Sharing household chores	1(.8%)	1
Evaluation of father's parenting	23 (15%)	30
Worries or concern	8 (5%)	8
<u>Theme 2: Balancing Relationships with Spouse/Partner</u>		
Caretaking	8 (5%)	10
Challenges faced by spouse or partner	36 (15%)	76
Contemplation of divorce	9 (5%)	12
Sharing Grand parenting role	52 (26%)	77
Time to be together	28 (16%)	39
Marital stress	11 (5%)	17
<u>Theme 3: Maintaining relationships with other relatives</u>		
	132 (26%)	227

^aUnique occurrence of each code; total number of journal entries endorsing this code

^bCount of the number of selections within the journals that have been coded to this code and provides a measure of coverage/intensity.

Table 3

Relationship with grandchild's mother: total word count and mean by family type

Theme (Mean)	Primary Number (Mean)		Multigen Number	
Anger or tension	11229	(109)	6731	(258.9)
Living situation	888	(8.62)	1794	(69)
Role conflict	355	(3.44)	163	(6.27)
Sharing household chores	250	(2.43)	1754	(67.46)
View on mother's parenting	7703	(74.78)	3797	(146.0)
Worry or concern	2342	(22.74)	2104	(80.92)

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Table 4

Relationship with spouse: total word count and mean by family type

Theme (Mean)	Primary Number (Mean)		Multigen Number	
Caretaking	367	(3.56)	0	(0)
Challenges faced by spouse/partner	5627	(54.63)	0	(0)
Contemplation of divorce	929	(9.01)	98	(3.76)
Sharing grandparenting role	3548	(34.45)	154	(5.92)
Time to be together	1146	(11.13)	297	(11.42)

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