

GRANDPARENTS, GREAT PARENTS: NEGOTIATING THE ROLE TRANSITION  
TO CUSTODIAL GRANDPARENT

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GRANDPARENTS, GREAT PARENTS: NEGOTIATING THE ROLE TRANSITION  
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A  
THESIS

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By

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### **Abstract**

An ever increasing number of grandparents in the United States are taking on the responsibility for providing primary care for their grandchildren. Focus group interviews conducted in two urban communities in Alaska were the basis of this study examining how grandparents negotiate the role transition as they become custodial grandparents. Role theory was used to inform the analysis of the data. The two major themes which emerged suggested these transitions were effected by role conflict and role timing. The grandparents participating in the study indicated that involvement in peer support groups helped them to more successfully negotiate this difficult role transition.

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## **Introduction**

I have a friend who has been an important part of my life for the past three decades. We laughed and cried together through the ups and downs of parenting, commiserated on the difficulties of finding that perfect mother-of-the-bride dress, and dreamed of the day when we would be transformed into the most delightful of creatures: a grandma.

My own experience as a grandmother began in 2003, when my younger daughter moved back home to give birth to her first child while her husband was deployed to Iraq. We lived together through my son-in-law's subsequent deployment, military discharge, their house and job search, the birth of their second child, and for three years following the death of my husband. I was not the sole primary caregiver for my grandchildren during this time, but I did share in many of those primary caregiver responsibilities with their parents. During this same span of time, my friend and her husband went to court in order to gain full custody of three of their six grandchildren. Their nest had not remained empty for long. They were once again responsible for raising young children to adulthood.

In October 2010, I found myself transitioning into a traditional grandparent role; one in which I enjoy having the grandchildren visit for a day or two and then return home to their parents. This change has altered the way that I see myself and, I believe, the way that my children and grandchildren see me as a grandmother. It was reflecting on the experiences of my friend and my perceptions of my own grandparenting roles

that gave rise to my desire to explore the ways in which grandparents negotiate these role transitions.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Literature Review**

There is a magical place for children to visit: the place where rules are always flexible, cookies are always abundant, and there is always time for one more story before bedtime. If one accepts the traditional stereotypes of Western culture, this decadent domicile is Grandpa and Grandma's house. The role of grandparent is one that many American parents begin to anticipate from the moment they recognize their child is approaching young adulthood. The sense of freedom to lavish attention on grandchildren exists because the grandparents do not expect to bear the day-to-day obligations that they did as parents. They look forward to enjoying an uninhibited relationship with their grandchildren, dissociated from the family authority structure and responsibilities.

#### **1.1 Statement of Problem**

As of 2011, the homes of 2.7 million grandparents in the United States are not delightful havens where grandchildren come to visit. They are the places where the grandchildren live, and the grandparents are the primary caregivers for these children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). In the state of Alaska, there are an estimated 6,380 grandparents currently responsible for the care of their grandchildren (AARP, 2012).

Grandparents find themselves raising their grandchildren when their adult children are unable to do so. The reasons for this are many and varied. Some parents cannot care for their children due to incarceration, alcoholism, drug abuse, physical or

mental illness. Grandparents may take in grandchildren after the death of the parents. In recent years, some grandparents have temporarily assumed the role of primary caregiver to their grandchildren while parents have been deployed in military service. Grandparents of teenage parents may assume the role of primary caregiver for grandchildren, either because of the parent's inability or unwillingness to care for the child. Often in these cases, the grandparents continue to bear the responsibility for their own adolescent child while also assuming responsibility for the grandchild (Dannison & Smith, 2003; Edwards & Daire, 2006; Edwards & Ray, 2008; Smith, Dannison, & Vach-Hasse, 1998; Weber & Waldrop, 2000).

Some grandparents become primary caregivers formally, through a legal decision. A court may grant the grandparents temporary custody, guardianship, or full custody. This gives the grandparents physical custody of the grandchild, as well as the legal authority to make decisions regarding the child's education, medical care, and discipline. Social services agencies often seek to place children with close family members when they are removed from homes in response to investigations of child abuse or neglect; often the grandparents are the only ones who are willing to assume this responsibility. In these situations, grandparents frequently provide a stable home that is preferable to placement in foster care (Dannison & Smith, 2003).

In other cases, the grandparents themselves seek to remove the grandchildren from the parents' care. When the parents agree to the transfer of custody, this process can be fairly uneventful. The parents may sign a power of attorney, giving the

grandparents authority to act on behalf of the grandchildren. However, when the action is contested by the parents, grandparents often must enter into a court battle to prove their own children are unfit parents. This can result in bitter exchanges and lingering animosity (Jendrick, 1993).

Some grandparents raise their grandchildren, assuming responsibility for their daily care, but are not authorized to make important decisions because they do not have legal custody. These decisions remain the right and responsibility of the parents, which can create problems for the grandparents if the parents are not able or available to make the decisions. Without the authority of legal custody, grandparents may find themselves unable to obtain medical care for the grandchild, or to enroll the grandchild in school. They may also face concerns about parents returning to reclaim the grandchildren, once again placing the children in unsafe living conditions (Jendrick, 1993). In this study, all grandparents who are the primary caregivers for their grandchildren will be called *custodial grandparents*. When it is necessary to differentiate between those who have a legal relationship with their grandchildren and those who do not, grandparents who have obtained formal legal custody of their grandchildren will be identified as *de jure* custodial grandparents and those who have not will be identified as *de facto* custodial grandparents.

Regardless of how or why grandparents become their grandchildren's primary caregivers, few anticipate trading the *spoil them and send them home* approach for one

that includes the responsibility of raising, disciplining and providing for their grandchildren on a daily basis. Beyond the disruption of their own lives, custodial grandparents also face the challenge of dealing with the disruption to the grandchildren's lives. Children raised by grandparents can display health and behavioral problems, and often have difficulty succeeding academically (Edwards & Daire, 2006).

## **1.2 The Grandparent**

According to Ashforth (2001), a role "is defined simply as a position in a social structure", but the meaning of a role is a negotiated shared understanding (p. 4). We define a grandparent as the parent of one's parent. What it means to be a grandparent, however, is constructed through interaction. Ochiltree (2006) contends that the grandparent role is "not simply a relationship between grandparents and their grandchildren but is imbedded within the family system and relationships within and between the generations" (p. 14). Grandparents find meaning in their role as a valued elder or resource, passing down traditions to their grandchildren. The role gives them a sense of immortality through the future generations, and a connection to their past as they relate to memories of their own grandparents. Another aspect identified with role meaning to grandparents is an attitude of indulgence and lenience toward their grandchildren (Kivnick, 1983; Ochiltree, 2006).

There is a continuum of grandparenting roles which are all considered normative behavior in Western cultures, ranging from involved and active to remote and distant.

Grandparents enacting any of these roles are influenced and constrained by social structures and norms for a grandparent. Neugarten and Weinstein (1964) identified several styles of grandparenting which are still germane today. *Formal* grandparents indulge their grandchildren and occasionally babysit them, but “maintain clearly demarcated lines between parenting and grandparenting, and they leave parenting strictly to the parent” (p. 202). *Funseeker* grandparents seek a relationship with the grandchild that provides mutual satisfaction through informality and playfulness. *The Reservoir of Family Wisdom* are grandparents who pass along skills, resources, and family values. *Distant Figure* grandparents have infrequent contact, usually on special occasions such as holidays and birthdays. *Surrogate Parent* grandparents assume the caretaking responsibility while the mother is at work.

### **1.3 The Role Transition**

When a grandparent must exchange a currently enacted or an anticipated grandparent role for the role of custodial grandparent, he or she must negotiate a role transition. A role transition is the process of moving from one role to another. Ashforth (2001) posits that “the attributes of a role transition affect the difficulty of making the transition” (p. 106). Predictable, voluntary, and socially desirable transitions are usually considered less difficult to make. Going from the role of grandparent to custodial grandparent is more likely to be regarded as unpredictable, involuntary, and socially undesirable, and therefore is thought to be a particularly difficult role transition.

## 1.4 The Custodial Grandparent

When grandparents assume the responsibility of providing primary care for grandchildren, they are no longer enacting the normative grandparent role. Neugarten and Weinstein's (1964) *surrogate parent* grandparenting style comes closest to describing the role of the custodial grandparent. However, they state that this style occurs only for grandmothers, is initiated by the parents, and results when the mother is employed in the workforce (p. 202).

Custodial grandparents must construct new meanings for the grandparent role. This role is affected by three constructs: (a) role ambiguity, (b) role conflict, and (c) role timing.

**1.4.1 Role ambiguity.** Although there are an array of roles for grandparents, Landry-Meyer and Newman (2004) suggest there are no socially prescribed norms for a custodial grandparent. The custodial grandparent struggles to construct a meaning for his or her role because of the lack of clear guidelines in the social structure. Because of this struggle, Landry-Meyer and Newman suggest that “the grandparent caregiver role can be characterized as ambiguous” (p. 1008).

**1.4.2 Role conflict.** Role conflict can arise when an individual occupies multiple roles with expectations that are incongruent to each other and lacks the ability to resolve those incompatible expectations (Pomaki, Supeli, & Verhoeven, 2007). Conflict also occurs when the role being enacted is not the role anticipated based on societal norms (Landry-Meyer & Newman, 2004). Custodial grandparents who must engage in

parenting behaviors may experience role conflict as they “struggle to reconcile their desire to be indulgent grandparents with their perception that their grandchildren need firm parenting” (Dolbin-MacNab, 2006, p. 566).

**1.4.3 Role timing.** We anticipate a sequence and timing of our life’s roles based on societal expectations and norms. Our satisfaction with a role is not only affected by our present situation, but also by how we view it in the context of past experiences and future expectations (Ashforth, 2001). Custodial grandparents take on parental responsibilities at a time in their lives when they expect to enjoy the freedom of an empty nest. Because custodial grandparents are often unable to engage in activities normally associated with this stage of life, this off-time role can create a sense of loss and increase stress levels (Landry-Meyer and Newman, 2004, Weber & Waldrop, 2000).

Another source of stress resulting from the timing of the custodial grandparent role is the absence of a support network. Custodial grandparents face problems and needs that are different than those of their peers who are no longer raising children. They can no longer count on their existing support networks because friends and family are not enacting similar roles (Jendrek, 1993; Waldrop & Weber, 2001).

## **1.5 Rationale for Study**

According to Goodman and Silverstein (2001), “grandparents who serve as parents to their grandchildren fill family roles that are not well understood” (p. 559). In

spite of the ever increasing number of custodial grandparents in our society, little research has been done about how grandparents negotiate the transition from a grandparent role to that of a primary caregiver (Landry-Meyer & Newman, 2004). The research question posed by this study is: How do grandparents negotiate the transition to custodial grandparent? It is the purpose of this study to explore this phenomenon, with a goal of providing a better understanding to those offering support services to custodial grandparents.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Methodology**

#### **2.1 Ontology and Epistemology**

As a researcher, I bring to my research basic assumptions regarding reality and knowledge. I ground my research in realism, which is described by Crotty (1998) as “an ontological notion asserting that realities exist outside the mind” (p. 10). The epistemological framework supporting my research is constructionism. The constructionist viewpoint assumes that even if realities do exist separate from consciousness, meaning does not exist in those realities waiting to be discovered. Instead, it is “constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (p. 43). The world and the objects within it have the potential for meaning, but that meaning does not emerge until the human consciousness interacts with them.

#### **2.2 Theoretical Perspective**

Symbolic interactionism, a theoretical perspective based in constructionism, is the viewpoint from which I chose to address my research question. Symbolic interactionism explains meaning as the product of interaction between people, thus establishing communication as “the core of human experience” (Littlejohn, 1996, p. 180). The foundation for this theory is the work of Mead, whose ideas were published posthumously by his students at the University of Chicago. One of these students, Blumer, continued to develop his ideas and is credited with coining the label *symbolic*

*interactionism* to identify the theory. Blumer (1969) categorizes objects into three types: a) physical, or *things*, b) social, or *people*, and c) abstract or *ideas*. All objects acquire meaning through symbolic interaction. He posits that people act toward objects based on the meanings they bring to those objects. That meaning, which arises from human communication, is modified through an interpretive process. Blumer explains this as an internal conversation through which “the actor selects, checks, suspends, regroups, and transforms the meanings in light of the situation in which he [*sic*] is placed and the direction of his [*sic*] actions” (p. 5). This process takes place in the context of the individual’s own unique history of interactions with the object whose meaning is being interpreted. Symbolic interactionism assumes that the person’s culture will influence which behaviors and attitudes are valued in his or her self-concept and that social structures and norms will influence and constrain individual behavior.

### **2.3 Methodology**

There are two schools of thought regarding symbolic interactionism; the Iowa School and Chicago School. Both build on Mead’s ideas, but diverge on the choice of methodology. The School of Iowa, led by Kuhn, has adopted a quantitative approach. Their work operationalizes the concepts of symbolic interactionism and develops ways to test them. The Chicago School argues that people should not be studied in the same way as things. Researchers here advocate for the use of qualitative research (Littlejohn, 1996; West & Turner, 2010). While there are merits to both forms of inquiry, I believe that my question would be best addressed using qualitative research interviews. Kvale

and Brinkmann (2009) describe interviews as an effort “to understand the world from the subjects’ points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations” (p. 1).

## **2.4 Methods**

I chose to use focus group interviews as my research method. The aim of a focus group is to explore diverse perspectives of group participants on a given topic (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Lindlof and Taylor suggest that it is also a useful method for studying “the collaborative process of meaning construction” (p. 183). Focus groups allow insight into group norms and meanings by providing an opportunity for participants to express the normative assumptions of the group that are usually unarticulated (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001).

According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), the *group effect* is a cogent reason for using the focus group method. The dynamic that occurs between participants who “draw upon a shared fund of experiences (p. 183)” reveals insights that may not occur without the group interaction. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) observed that “the lively collective interaction may bring forth more spontaneous expressive and emotional views (p. 151)” than one might obtain in individual interviews.

## **2.5 Participants**

The focus groups were selected through purposive sampling. A purposive sample is nonrandomly selected sample deliberately chosen to meet predetermined criteria (Wrench, Thomas-Maddox, Richmond & McCroskey, 2008). I employed

purposive sampling because of the specific characteristics of the population addressed by my research question.

The individuals who participated in this study were grandparents living in urban areas of Alaska who are currently the primary caregivers for one or more of their grandchildren. Participants for two focus groups were recruited from pre-existing Grandfamilies Support Groups, one of which meets in Anchorage, Alaska and the other in Fairbanks, Alaska. These peer-support groups are organized by the Grandfamilies Network Project under the auspices of Volunteers of America – Alaska (VOAAK). Bloor et al. (2001) suggest an advantage to using pre-existing groups is the opportunity to “tap into interaction which approximates to ‘naturally occurring’ data” (p. 22). By interviewing focus groups comprised of members of a pre-existing group, I was able to observe some of the ways in which their shared history of interaction influenced their views on their roles as primary caregivers to their grandchildren. A third focus group was conducted with participants recruited through personal contact and referrals. These co-researchers were not currently nor had ever been a part of any peer support group.

The number of participants in a focus group is an important consideration in facilitating a “lively, collective interaction” (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 150). Groups that are too small pose several potential problems. A focus group with too few participants may result in limited discussion, with exchanges more like that of a

question and answer interview than the desired interaction between group members. In addition, the absence of only one or two of the expected participants in a smaller group may result in the cancellation of the group. Larger groups also have the potential to be problematic. A large focus group may be difficult to moderate, and less outspoken participants may feel that their voices were not heard. Individual group members may feel that there was not adequate time for everyone to contribute to the discussion. The optimum size of a focus group depends on a number of factors, including the characteristics of the participants and the nature of the topic to be discussed (Bloor et al., 2001; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). For the purposes of this study, I chose to interview focus groups comprised of five to seven participants.

In accordance with University of Alaska Fairbanks Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols, I obtained informed consent from all participants. Participants were aware of their right to withdraw from the study at anytime during or after the interview and were informed of the procedures that would be taken to insure the confidentiality of data collected during the study. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms were given to all participants and all other names were eliminated from transcriptions.

## **2.6 Data Analysis**

Rabiee (2004) describes qualitative data analysis as a process which “aims to bring meaning to a situation” (p. 657). I began this process by transcribing the audio

recordings of the focus group interviews. It was necessary to listen to the recordings several times to insure that my transcription was accurate, which allowed me opportunity to familiarize myself with the data. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), the degree of precision necessary for transcription is “only the level of detail we are likely to analyze” (p. 204). With this in mind, I did not transcribe conversations that occurred between co-researchers during interruptions by grandchildren. The conversations between co-researchers and grandchildren were not transcribed because parental permission and assent was not obtained for inclusion of the children in the study. I did note the omissions with observational statements such as *[child entered the room to bring his grandmother a picture he had drawn for her]*. There were also several occasions when a co-researcher would ask that something he or she had just said or was about to say be considered “off the record”. These comments were also eliminated from the transcription, but were noted by *[statements off record]*.

Once the transcription was completed, I began to identify emergent themes using the criteria set forth by Keyton (2006): recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Recurrence is focused on salient meaning rather than on exact wording, while repetition is the reiteration of key words, phrases, or sentences. Forcefulness is described as the use of tone of voice, volume or dramatic pauses to emphasize certain utterances. These criteria are useful to demonstrate what issues are salient and the degree to which they are salient for the co-researchers (p. 296). I used these themes to create a thematic network. Attride-Stirling (2001) describes thematic networks as an analytic tool that

organizes themes and graphically presents them as web-like nets, thereby eliminating the perception of a hierarchy and underscoring the interconnectivity of the themes (p. 389).

## **2.7 Researcher as Research Tool**

It is important to recognize that I am the research instrument that I used to collect the data for this study. My own experiences and emotions cannot be simply dismissed, but must be acknowledged for the ways in which they might inform my research. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) contend that a researcher must be “reflexive about one’s own contributions as a researcher to the production of knowledge”, and should write about them whenever it seems appropriate to do so (p. 242).

As I indicated in the Introduction, I am a grandmother who fulfilled a primary caregiver role for my grandchildren, and who now fills the more traditional role expected by grandparents in Western culture. I have already constructed meanings for the role of grandparent/primary caregiver and traditional grandparent, as well as for the experience of transitioning between the two roles. My enactment of the grandparent role differs from that of my co-researchers in one important way; I did not replace the parents as primary caregiver in my grandchildren’s lives, but rather acted in a co-parenting role. My personal experiences may have affected the interaction between myself and my co-researchers by causing me to appear either more or less trustworthy to them, thereby impacting the data from the interviews.

## Chapter 3

### Results

Transcripts of the focus group interviews were analyzed for emergent themes. Two major themes were identified. These themes are presented as a context for recognizing some of the ways grandparents negotiate the transition to a custodial grandparent role.

#### 3.1 Theme One: Choices

As the grandparents discussed their entry into the role of custodial grandparents, the most frequently recurring theme addressed the issue of choices. Had there been a choice? If so, had they made the right one?

*“You do what you gotta do.” –Belle*

Most of the grandparents perceived their transition into a custodial grandparent role as necessary and unavoidable, not as a choice they were asked to make. Multiple times throughout both focus group discussions phrases like “I had to”, “my responsibility”, and “I needed to” were used to indicate that they saw no choice to be made; no other option available.

Ariel, of all the co-researchers, has been a custodial grandmother the longest. She shared that she had raised her granddaughter, who is now 32 years old, “and I am now raising her daughter, who is my great granddaughter. And she is 13, and I have had her since she was 6 months old”. Her eyes focused on the half-eaten muffin on the

napkin in front of her as she explained, “I didn’t do a good job with their mother so now I have to do it over a good job”.

Grace remembers her reaction when OCS (Office of Children’s Services) removed her grandchildren from her daughter’s care. In a fierce voice, she recounts informing someone in the OCS office “You’re not taking them. I’m not going to have them put into no foster home. I will take them”.

Belle’s daughter became pregnant with her first child at the age of fifteen. “So naturally,” Belle stated in a matter-of-fact tone, “I ended up bringing him home from the hospital”. This grandson is now 28-years-old. He and his 18-year old sibling are no longer in her home but Belle continues to care for two more siblings, ages 12 and 10. Referring to her daughter, Belle stated “she has been in and out of the home the whole time but I’ve basically had all four of her children since birth”.

*“I just cannot do this.” - Ariel*

For some grandparents, there are times when the only option is to say no to taking on the custodial role. Grace became a custodial grandparent thirteen years ago. She has adopted four of her grandchildren, who now range in age from eight to eighteen. She began to cry as she told me about two more grandchildren. “Then I had two other grandsons that I couldn’t take care of,” she said, “I couldn’t. No more. I – I – it just be too hard.” One of these boys has already been adopted by a family in Girdwood, and the other will be adopted by another family soon. “It’s hard to give

them up. It is. . . . They're your life and they live with you, and you - you take care of them. And then you find out that you can't," she sobbed.

Ariel told a similar story. When her great granddaughter was six months old, Ariel became the child's custodial grandparent. Two years later, her granddaughter gave birth to another baby girl. The granddaughter was facing imprisonment for drug-related charges, and Ariel was given the chance to take custody of the second child. Because of her age and her poor health, she didn't feel capable of caring for two babies at once. "Sometimes I regret not having been able to do it, but I couldn't do it," she explained, "I told them, 'I just cannot do this'."

*"It was tough . . . to abandon your daughter over your granddaughter" - Bev*

Two sets of grandparents made a choice to go before a judge seeking to terminate their daughters' parental rights. They expressed conflict over feeling the need to choose between their parent and grandparent roles. Six years ago, Bill and Ruth hired a lawyer to fight their daughter for custody of her three children, aged one, three, and eight years at the time. Ruth shared her emotional experience:

One of the things that was so extremely hard for me going through that process is there was still a part of me that still wanted to protect my daughter, as a parent . . . so you had to crush that – that feeling, because you look at the grandkids. And you know what you are going to do is hurt your relationship with your child. But you have to do that because your child is an adult and the children

cannot keep themselves safe. . . . So to do that was excruciatingly painful, but you had to because you can't stand by and let the innocent child be harmed. Bill indicated the choice had been a little more straight-forward for him. He stated, "I think that is harder for a mother. I think that is a maternal thing. . . . A man is more practical". He used the metaphor of rescuing the grandchildren in a lifeboat. If the parents risk sinking the boat, he insists "you say 'You can swim or hang on to the side of the lifeboat, but if you try to get in I'm going to clobber you with the oars.' A father can do that".

John and Bev raised his granddaughter off and on beginning around the time of her first birthday. By the time that she was in Kindergarten, things had reached the point that they took their case to their Tribal Court and were named her guardians. After that, John's daughter cut off all contact with them. They saw her again last summer for the first time in four years; a chance encounter at the Tanana Valley State Fair. John's face revealed more pain than his words did as he said, "[The daughter] was mad at us for us bringing the tribal court into the thing. But we had to do it. Because [the granddaughter] was in danger, you know." Bev agreed, "She's so angry. She's not going to get over that."

*"Did I do the right thing?" - John*

Some of the grandparents have moments when they question the choices they made. They voiced concerns as to whether their decisions were the ones that truly resulted in the best possible outcome for the grandchildren now in their care.

Crystal's oldest grandson was placed by OCS with foster parents, who had been told they would be able to adopt him. When he was 18 months old, Crystal petitioned the courts to block that adoption. She was first granted custody of the child and later allowed to adopt him herself. This decision was made more difficult for her because the foster parents had been kind to her, permitting her to see her grandson on a daily basis in spite of the OCS caseworker's objections. Today, nearly five years later, she still questions whether she made the right choice. "Nobody really knows. That's the thing. I don't think we'll really know for a long time in my case", she said, adding "but I think that foster family would have made a great family".

John also wonders whether he and his wife made the right choice. He looked around the table at each one there as he asked, "Like I said, I second guessed myself so many times looking at that little girl. Did I do the right thing?"

Bill, on the other hand, has no doubts. His final comment as the interview drew to a close was to declare "I've made two major decisions in my life; one of them was when I was sixteen, and one of them was these kids. Going to court and getting custody of these kids was the RIGHT thing to do".

### **3.2 Theme Two: What's next?**

Each of the grandparents in this study had become a custodial grandparent. Some had permanent custody of their grandchildren; for others, the duration of their custodial role was uncertain. One area of great concern expressed by my co-researchers

was the part that the parents will play in the lives of their grandchildren as they move toward the future.

*“I want to protect them from further harm” - Ruth*

De facto custodial grandparents are never quite sure when things might change. There are times when they must accept decisions made regarding their grandchildren which go against their own better judgment. Cindy is raising her thirteen-year-old twin grandsons. Her sixteen-year-old granddaughter had also been with her until she took the children to Washington to visit their parents last summer. While they were there, the granddaughter decided she wanted to stay and the parents did not object. Cindy had to return to Alaska without the granddaughter, but with a heavy heart. She worries that she left her granddaughter in an unsafe situation.

Belle is also a de facto custodial grandparent, but she is adamant about not returning the grandchildren to their mother. “There is no way in hell I’m gonna give ‘em to her,” she declared. She maintains the status quo by not pushing her daughter too hard, stating “She lets me have the kids while she is doing her thing . . . You know, that doesn’t bother her. But don’t say you want custody, because then she will be fighting mad.” Ultimately, however, Belle recognizes that she would not legally be able to stop her daughter if she insisted on taking the children back.

De jure custodial grandparents do have input into decisions affecting parental involvement in the lives of their grandchildren. The degree of influence depends on

whether they have adopted the children, are appointed guardians, or have been granted full or temporary custody.

Bill and Ruth were granted full custody of their grandchildren by the court system, but they were court-mandated to maintain regular contact between their daughter and the grandchildren, which included weekly visitation. Ruth describes how difficult this was in the beginning, because “she was just barely a recovering alcoholic; no car, no job, just not really functioning at all”. In the six years since they took custody of the grandchildren, their daughter has made changes to improve her life situation. She is employed, maintaining her sobriety, and in a steady relationship. Now they must now decide how to respond to her expressed interest in regaining custody of her children.

This situation can create a dilemma for custodial grandparents; they must weigh the benefits of reuniting the family against the risk that the parent will not maintain this healthy lifestyle once the grandchildren are back in the home. Bill and Ruth are not certain what they will do. Bill stated “The only reason we are considering this is because [the daughter] is in a healthy relationship, she is not using, they are making positive strides”. He and Ruth recently began developing a plan that would gradually transfer the children back into her custody over a span of two or three years. Ruth explained why they believe this incremental shift is necessary. When they were granted custody, all the grandchildren had ever known was an unstable, emotionally and

physically abusive home. “These kids are very stable now. They are happy,” she went on to say, “and we don’t want to put them back in an unstable environment”.

Dora is also a de jure custodial grandparent who has full custody of her seven-year-old granddaughter. Dora explained that she had not brought her granddaughter along because her daughter “is working on trying to get her back and so I let her have her on the weekends”. “But,” she said, “I really don’t want to let go”. Dora has her reasons: after remaining clean and sober for eighteen months, the daughter had been arrested for driving while intoxicated in December. “It is really hard to rebuild that trust. Two years down the road is she going to be drinking again?” she wonders.

John will remain his granddaughter’s legal guardian until she is eighteen. His daughter has expressed absolutely no interest in reunification, and has not even made any effort to contact the granddaughter. If she were to change her mind and seek to gain visitation rights, John is adamant that he would oppose it. “She’s mine now!” he insists he would tell his daughter, “You can’t have her!”

Crystal has legally adopted her oldest grandson, but she is actively encouraging a relationship between him and her daughter. The three of them often spend time together. The child calls her “Mama”, and her daughter “Mommy”. In spite of warnings from OCS, Crystal continues to believe that reunification is “best for the child, best for the parents, best for everybody”.

*“What am I going to be like as a 78 year old parent of a teenager?” - Crystal*

Custodial grandparents are often very aware of the issue of their age. They can find it challenging to relate to the parents of their grandchildren’s peers. Cindy shared that she used to make friends with other mothers at school functions when she was raising her own children. She still gets involved with activities at her grandchildren’s school, but says that she always feels “like I just don’t fit in”. Dora says, “I chose not to try to fit in because like I said the kids [the granddaughter’s] age have parents with body piercings and tattoos and you know they are just into all this rap music and it’s like a totally different world”. Ruth is making an effort to fit in. “I lost 60 pounds and I’m coloring my hair and I learned to ski. I’m in the role of mother again, somehow I’ve got to perform and look a little more like it!” she revealed.

Decreased energy and age related health issues were also concerns of these custodial grandparents. At the end of a busy day with her five-year-old grandson, Crystal wonders how she is going to keep up once he is a teenager. Ariel recently suffered a slight stroke. Her great granddaughter was the only one around when it happened, and was the one who called for help. The next day, the great granddaughter threatened suicide while at school. She is currently being treated in Charter North Behavioral Hospital where, according to Ariel, she cries all day. Ariel believes that it is because “she’s worried about me – about something happening to me”. When Belle had cataract surgery, her grandson told her “Grama, when you have to do things like

this, I don't feel safe". Belle said that it hurt to hear him so afraid that something would happen to her and he would be left alone.

Some of the custodial grandparents acknowledged that they need to be more aware themselves about the possibility of experiencing serious illness or death, and the impact this would have on their grandchildren. Crystal suggested that to protect their grandchildren, "we gotta come up with wills, and we gotta come up with a plan if something happens to us".

## **Chapter 4**

### **Discussion**

#### **4.1 Findings**

The interview data for this study came from two focus groups. The first group was comprised of five members of the Anchorage Grand Families No Empty Nest, a peer support group for custodial grandparents. Four participants were single grandmothers and one was a single great grandmother. The second group was six members of the Fairbanks Grand Families No Empty Nest; two grandparent couples and two single grandmothers.

The third focus group included two grandparent couples and a married grandmother. The participants were from the Fairbanks and North Pole area, and had never been a part of any custodial grandparent peer support group. Three weeks following the focus group interview, one couple asked to be withdrawn from the study. With the elimination of their input, I deemed the remaining data from this discussion insufficient to be useable.

Focus group interviews allowed me to observe how the interaction between individuals and the social structure created by the peer support group influenced how meanings were created and modified by grandparents transitioning to a custodial grandparent role. Although the demographics of the two groups were different, the same themes emerged in both interviews.

In analyzing the emergent themes of this study, I noted the effect of role conflict on my co-researchers' transition to a custodial grandparent role. One facet of role conflict comes from the dissonance between the role being enacted and the socially normative role one anticipates fulfilling (Landry-Meyer & Newman, 2004). Some of my co-researchers had chosen to take legal action to obtain custody of their grandchildren, while others felt that becoming a custodial grandparent was not an option available to them. Regardless of whether or not they felt they had a choice to make this role transition, none of them explicitly verbalized any conflict resulting from enacting the custodial grandparent role instead of the anticipated grandparent role.

A second facet of role conflict occurs when individuals must enact multiple incongruent roles simultaneously, resulting in an inability to resolve the incompatible expectations of those roles (Pomaki, et al., 2007). All of my co-researchers, to one degree or another, described experiencing this facet of role conflict between their roles as parent to their child, grandparent to their grandchild, and custodial grandparent to their grandchild. Ruth spoke of being torn between the desire to protect her daughter as a parent and the need to protect her grandchildren from abuse. John and Bev told how being custodial grandparents had led to their estrangement from his daughter. Cindy explained that she struggled between wanting to enact a parenting role with her granddaughter, but not being able to do so because as a de facto custodial grandparent she had no legal authority to make certain decisions. Dora related the conflict she felt

as she tried to reconcile her responsibilities as a custodial grandparent and her desires as a retired adult wanting to pursue her own interests.

While role conflict was seen most clearly in the first emergent theme, the effect of role timing was evident in both themes. Each society constructs an expected order of life roles. When an individual transitions into a role that is out of sequence, that role is viewed as being off-time. The discrepancy between the role enactment and the social norms can be problematic for the individual attempting to perform the off-time role (Landry-Meyer & Newman, 2004). Grace and Ariel experienced the limitations of age and declining health as they enacted the role of custodial grandparent late in life, at a time when they had not expected to be caring for young children. They both shared how these limitations had left them no choice but to decline to take responsibility for additional grandchildren who were siblings of the children they were raising. Crystal, in her mid-sixties, feels strong and fit enough to chase her young grandson around. She worries about having the energy to keep up with him when she is “a 78-year-old parent of a teenager”.

Another difficulty of the off-time parenting role enacted by custodial grandparents is the lack of a peer network. Dora explained it this way:

But that's one of the problems, because I can't go visit any of my friends, because I have a very busy, busy child that can't keep her hands off of things. Like we said, they get into things and they don't mean to, well [the granddaughter] doesn't usually mean to destroy things but a lot of things do get

destroyed. . . . People my age don't have childproof houses, they have nice houses with crystal all over the place and they don't end visits at 8 o'clock at night because the kids have to go to bed, you know. And they'll go places in the evenings, and you know – I need to be home by 8:00.

This need for peers can be met through participation in a peer support group like the one created by the Grand Families Network. The following exchange from the Anchorage focus group demonstrates the way that my co-researchers created support networks through the peer support group:

Grace: There's different ways we get to keep our children. Different places to go.

Belle: And boy, we learn them all.

Grace: And we learn them all fast!

Belle: And what one doesn't know . . .

Cindy: Somebody else...

Grace: The others do,

Cindy: We share with each other.

Grace: We learn. We learn from helping each other. And thank goodness for this group here. Because we all learn. We do that so that the new ones can know.

A similar appreciation for the social network created by the peer support group was expressed in the Fairbanks focus group by John. He said, "One thing that has helped

me a lot, and that is a group like this here”. He explained that the other group members gave him the reassurance he needed to believe in his ability to enact this off-time role in spite of his age. “Man, I am sane! I am doing okay! I’m doing good! Like I should, you know!” John exclaimed with a grin. He was met with an approving chorus echoing his sentiment. Crystal summed it up by saying, “None of this really knew in the beginning what this would end up being... After all, some groups you go one time and you think uuuuuuuuhhhhh, you know. But we evolved. We just evolved”.

#### **4.2 Practical Implications**

There are an increasing number of grandchildren in the United States who are being raised by custodial grandparents enrolled in the public school system. Many of these children struggle academically, emotionally, and/ or socially (Edwards & Daire, 2006). Teachers, administrators, and others in the field of education must be able work together with their caregivers. Research which provides new insight into the ways in which the custodial grandparents construct their roles can be very useful in promoting communication between the schools and the grandparents.

There is also growing need for various ways to provide assistance to custodial grandparents. This study indicates that peer support groups are one effective source of by making new social networks available to them. Because many custodial grandparents have at least one grandchild enrolled in the public school system, local school districts may find it advantageous to facilitate custodial grandparent peer support groups, or to endorse existing groups such as the Grand Families No Empty Nest group.

### **4.3 Limitations**

Because of the established relationships preexisting between members of the focus group, some results of this study cannot be generalized to the larger population of custodial grandparents. The physical distance separating the communities of Anchorage and Fairbanks and the existence of one support group in each location made it unfeasible to create focus groups that integrated co-researchers from more than one support group.

Although focus group interviews were useful in observing how interaction with a social structure modified meanings created by the individual, it may have been useful to also have done conversational interviews with individual co-researchers to better understand how they created those meanings through interaction with the new role. I conducted a third focus group interview comprised of custodial grandparents who had not been a part of any peer support group to explore what differences, if any, existed in the way that custodial grandparents who were members of support groups and those who were not constructed meanings of their new roles. Two of the five participants withdrew from the study. Because of the small group size and the limited amount of data gathered at the time of the interview, I deemed the remaining data insufficient to be useful.

### **4.4 Implications for Future Research**

While conducting these focus group interviews, I noticed differences in the ways that my co-researchers enacted their custodial grandparent role. Just as Neugarten and

Weinstein (1964) were able to identify five basic styles of grandparenting, further research is indicated to distinguish the continuum of different custodial grandparenting roles. Understanding of these roles would serve to reduce role ambiguity for custodial grandparents.

I believe future research which includes interviews with custodial grandparents who have not been a part of a peer support group would provide useful insight into the usefulness of these social networks. Studies could be conducted to explore whether custodial grandparents who have not associated themselves with peer support groups find the role transition more difficult than those who are members of a peer support group.

Further understanding of the custodial grandparent role could also be explored from the perspective of Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) relational dialectics theory, or RDT, which focused attention on "the communicative enactment" of relationships (p. 4). The original treatment of RDT was applied to romantic relationships, but the two emergent themes of this study closely parallel two of Baxter and Montgomery's dialectical tensions. Connection-autonomy can be seen in the first theme, *Choices*. Custodial grandparents struggle between feelings of connectedness to the grandchildren and feelings of autonomy as grandparents expecting to be free of the day-to-day responsibilities of raising children. The second emergent theme, *What's next?*, corresponds to the dialectic of certainty-uncertainty. Custodial grandparents experience

tensions regarding “predictability with the state of the relationship” (p. 124) that they have with their children and with their grandchildren.

Baxter (2011) posits that relationship transitions are a phenomenon that highlights dialectic tensions. The role transition to custodial grandparent constitutes a transition in the relationship between grandparent and grandchild; a turning point in the relationship which can be identified as “a site for gathering communication texts” (p. 154). According to Baxter (2004), RDT is useful as a sensitizing theory because of “its ability to be heuristic, enabling us to see relating in a new light” (p. 17).

#### **4.3 Conclusion**

The increasing number of American grandparents raising their grandchildren is a trend that shows no sign of abating. These custodial grandparents can no longer bend the rules; they set and enforce them. They no longer sneak the grandchildren cookies before dinnertime; they make sure the grandchildren eat their vegetables at dinner. They nurture, support, and discipline their grandchildren when the parents are unable to do so. Through a greater understanding of the meanings they bring to their custodial grandparent roles, we can be better prepared to assist them with the challenges of making this difficult role transition.

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## Appendix A

# Grandparents

## Becoming Great Parents



Are you a grandparent who is raising your grandchildren? Would you be willing to discuss the changes this has made in your life and how you have adjusted to these changes? I am looking for grandparents willing to participate in a focus group interview for my Master's thesis on this subject. It will be date, time at location.

For information contact:

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## Appendix B

### Focus Group Prompt Questions

| Question   | Purpose   | Est. Time      |
|--|---|----------------|
| Introduce myself, my research topic, and explain the purpose and structure of the focus group                                | Instructions  | Approx. 3 min  |
| Opening Question:<br><br>1. Tell us who you are, the ages of your grandchildren, and how long you have been caring for them. | To help participants feel comfortable talking in this context           | Approx. 5 min  |
| Key Questions:<br><br>2. How do you describe your role as a grandparent who is parenting grandchildren?                      | How have they constructed their role as grandparent primary caregivers? | Approx 20 min  |
| 3. How did you make the changes from being a grandparent role to the role you have just described?                           | How do they understand the role transition?                             | Approx 20 min  |
| 4. What are the challenges of your new role?   | What are their lived experiences?                                       | Approx. 30 min |
| Ending Question:<br><br>5. Is there anything that you wanted to say but didn't get a chance?                                 |   | Approx. 10 min |
| Conclusion:<br><br>Thank participants.   |   | Approx 2 min   |

## Appendix C

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR FOCUS GROUP

#### Grandparents, Great Parents: Negotiating the Transitions to Primary Caregiver

➤ **PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND**

You are invited to take part in a research study about grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. The goal of the study is to better understand how grandparents adjust to the changes in their lives when this happens. You are being asked to take part in this study because you are currently caring for one or more of your grandchildren. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you agree to be in the study.

➤ **PROCEDURES**

You will be one of a group of 5 to 7 people meeting together to share your experiences raising grandchildren. I will ask a few open-ended questions to help guide our discussion. The discussion will last approximately 90 minutes. It will be recorded for transcription.

➤ **RISKS AND BENEFITS**

There are minimal risks to participating in this study. . You may stop your participation at any time. If the focus group discussion emotional discomfort, the following counseling services are available in your area. These providers accept insurance payments. They also offer sliding scale and/or reduced fees for those who demonstrate financial need.

Fairbanks:

Clearwater Counseling  
600 3<sup>rd</sup> Street Suite 200  
Fairbanks, AK 99701  
907-457-6002

Hope Counseling  
926 Aspen Street  
Fairbanks, AK 99701  
907-451-8208

Anchorage:

Transitional Counseling  
207 E. Northern Lights Suite 208  
Anchorage, AK 99503  
907-240-1465

Tezlyn Clark  
2550 Denali Street Suite 1606  
Anchorage, AK 99503  
907-278-9355

There is no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. The information gathered from this focus group may help others to better understand how to provide better support for grandparents who are raising grandchildren.

➤ **EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY**

Only my thesis advisor, Dr. Karen Taylor, and I will have access to any research records

containing your name. All information will be kept in secure storage files. We will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data. However, the nature of focus groups prevents us from guaranteeing confidentiality. We would like to remind you to respect the privacy of the other focus group members. Please do not repeat what is said during the focus group to others.

➤ **PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY**

Your decision to take part in this study is voluntary. If you choose to be in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time without consequences of any kind.

➤ **QUESTIONS AND CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have any questions at this time, please feel free to ask. If you have questions later, you may contact me at (907) 474-6591 or via email at [laburnett@alaska.edu](mailto:laburnett@alaska.edu).

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the UAF Research Coordinator in the Office of Research Integrity at 474-7800 (Fairbanks area) or 1-866-876-7800 (toll-free outside the Fairbanks area) or [fyirb@uaf.edu](mailto:fyirb@uaf.edu).

➤ **DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT**

I understand the procedures described in this form. Its general purposes, the nature of my involvement and possible risks have been explained to me. I have decided that I will participate in the project. I understand I can withdraw at any time. I have received a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Printed Name** of Study Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature** of Study Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature** of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**