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# **The Social Construction of Success for Grandchildren by African American Grandmothers**

*This article describes results from a qualitative study on African American grandmothers' experience of raising their grandchildren. One of the major findings is how these grandmothers socially construct their ideas of success for their grandchildren, which emerged into four themes: (a) acquiring knowledge, (b) developing self-esteem, (c) preparation for the future, and (d) disconnecting money from success.*

*I am praying to God to forgive me if I have made mistakes and given them (grandsons) something that they ought not to have or leading them in a direction that they should not have been in. Hopefully, God will have mercy on them and give them a chance to be successful. (Grandmother Steel)*

African American grandmothers who accept the role of primary caregiver to their grandchildren encounter the difficult task of raising these children to not only avoid the social problems that plagued their biological parents, but also to raise their grandchildren to achieve successful, productive adulthood. How these grandmothers think about successful outcomes for their grandchildren is lacking in the literature yet is significant for many reasons. Nationally, 2.1 million grandchildren are being cared for by their grandmothers (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Disproportionately, African American grandmothers accept this role (Mason & Link, 2002). Despite the numbers, the contexts of grandmother caregiving and African American culture have been translated into negative stigmatization that precludes successful outcomes. One reason for this may be the lack of understanding about African American families in kinship care (Harris, 2004). The purpose of this article is to report how African American grandmother caregivers construct their ideas of successful outcomes for their grandchildren.

Grandmothers' role as caregivers can be described as a socio-political act. The phrase socio-political describes the factors in one's environment that have an impact on a person's life. Harriet McAdoo (2001) suggests racism as one such factor. From this perspective, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1994) notes that Black children who are being raised in adverse conditions require parenting that must comprise survival skills and values that move them beyond their proscribed place. As caregivers, these grandmothers act to preserve their grandchildren's family and cultural connections. Therefore the context of grandmother caregiving is viewed as a protective factor (Scannapieco & Jackson, 1996) and strength of African American families (Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993).

### **Parenting African American children in kinship care**

Kinship care is described as the caregiving of a young relative when the biological parents are unwilling or unable to provide care or are absent. African American grandmothers raising grandchildren is a complex phenomenon, which differs drastically from the traditional role of grandmother. Traditional grandmothing is a role contingent on directions from the biological parents who decide the level and intensity of interactions between the grandmother and the grandchild. Grandmother caregiving, however, is an intergenerational parenting role with two social functions, that of primary caregiver and grandmother. This places the decision-making responsibilities for interaction between the grandchildren and their biological parents within the domain of the grandmother. Although the child is a blood relative whom the grandmother has likely known since birth, it is not a mother/child relationship.

Grandmother caregivers face obstacles not encountered by biological parents (Generations United, 2005). Some of these obstacles are associated with basic necessities such as the lack of access to health care because of grandmothers' inability to place children on their health insurance policies and school attendance due to the problems of enrolling children in school. Others are related to emotions, for example, dealing with feelings of loss experienced by both grandmother and grandchildren due to the absence of the middle generation. The grandmother has lost the dream of a productive adult child; the child has lost a parent.

Irving Leon (2002) notes that the self-selected parenting role is highly motivating, despite the obstacles encountered. It has been well documented that caregiving of grandchildren in this context is rewarding (Gibson, 1996; Smith, 2000) as well as stressful (Dowdell, 1995). Unlike some legal adoptive parents who experience a challenge to their sense of parental entitlement (Leon, 2002), African American grandmother caregivers, because of their relational connection to their grandchildren, feel a sense of obligation, which may be intensified because of the social problems of the biological parents. Becoming the primary caregivers generally occurs because the grandmothers' adult children, the biological parents of their grandchildren, have succumbed to

social problems such as AIDS, domestic violence, drug abuse, and incarceration (Minkler & Roe, 1993).

Grandmothers are not always aware of how demanding their role will become when parenting their grandchildren. African American children are overwhelmingly represented in areas that traditionally are viewed as indicators of problems and barriers to success, compounded by being African American in an urban environment. African American youths are more likely to be suspended from school, interact with the juvenile justice system, and have a negative encounter with law enforcement than are their peers from other racial/ethnic groups. These negative social interactions in society have resulted in labels that are pathological (Wright & Anderson, 1998).

Caregiving in the context of kinship care is viewed as an act of resistance toward the child welfare system. When assuming the role of primary caregivers, grandmothers remove their grandchildren from the possibility of going into the foster care system where strangers would care for them. This is a significant act because nationwide, African American children are disproportionately represented in out-of-home placement in the foster care system. Urban areas are experiencing the colorization of the child welfare (Berrick, Barth & Needell, 1994) and juvenile justice systems (Butterfield, 1995), as well as an increase in the numbers of grandmothers caring for grandchildren (American Association of Retired Persons, 1999).

### **Research on successful parenting of African American children**

Research on parenting successful African American children has generally ignored parenting in alternative family forms such as grandmother caregiving and has focused on parenting by biological parents. There is research on parenting abilities of biological mothers (Strom *et al.*, 2002; Woody & Woody, 2003), factors influencing successful foster parenting (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003), and aspects that contribute to resilience in African American children in kinship care (Johnson-Garner & Meyers, 2003; Gibson, 2005).

There is limited research on the parenting experience of alternative caregivers; three exceptions will be discussed here. Cheryl Buehler, Mary Cox and Gary Cuddeback (2003) examined foster parents' perceptions of familial and parental factors that promote or inhibit successful parenting. Findings indicated that the main family factors conducive to successful child outcomes in the context of foster care were a deep, heartfelt concern for children's welfare, faith/church support, an open-mind, and tolerance and acceptance of the child's differences. Monique Johnson-Garner and Steve Meyers (2003) found that positive results occurred when kinship caregivers accepted their new roles, were seen by the children as their parents, and were supported by extended family. Priscilla Gibson (2005) found that grandmother caregivers incorporated seven parenting strengths: (a) maintaining effective communication, (b) taking a strong role in the education of their grandchildren, (c) providing socio-

emotional support, (d) involving extended family, (e) involving grandchildren in selective community activities, (f) acknowledging and working with the vulnerabilities of grandchildren, and (g) working with the absence of the biological parent(s).

In summary, parenting African American grandchildren by grandmothers is a difficult task due to the socio-political factors in their lives resulting from racism and discrimination. Being cared for by a grandmother also carries negative stigma due to the social problems of the biological parents, prior maltreatment, and being parented by someone who is not the child's biological parent. Grandmothers' parenting is viewed as strength, but it is also inherently stressful for the caregiver. What remains unexplored is grandmothers' conceptualization of success for their grandchildren. How does the unique context of African American grandmothers as caregivers with its inherent influences guide older, intergenerational caregivers' social construction of success for their grandchildren? It would be beneficial to social scientists to know how grandmothers define success for their grandchildren.

### **Critical theory framework**

Critical theory was used to frame this study and can inform the socio-political context of grandmother caregiving in African American culture. Research conducted in this context seeks to provide an understanding of the experiences of oppressed groups, educate them about the social conditions under which they live, and encourage them to reflect on actions necessary for social change. The process of interviewing grandmothers allowed the participants to create their own conceptualization of successful parenting, which is congruent with Sadye Logan (1990) who stressed the importance of Black women's self-definition. The interviews allowed the grandmothers to share their ideas about the context of intergenerational parenting of grandchildren whose biological parents are absent. The result is knowledge similar to Logan's description of African American women's role as the "healing force within Black families and communities" (1990: 194).

### **Methods**

Capturing the parenting experience of grandmothers is an emerging area of research on relative caring or kinship care. This article reports findings from a larger research project entitled, "Raising a Vulnerable Generation: African American Grandmother Caregivers Preparing their Grandchildren to Succeed in the Twenty-First Century," which was conducted by the first author from March 31, 2001, to January 7, 2003 in the Midwest.

This qualitative study was used to capture the uniqueness, diversity, and complexity of issues with populations contextually and from their own perspectives. It was also used to develop a social construction of intergenerational parenting by African American grandmothers guided by their voices. The lack of information in this area makes it a natural fit for qualitative methods.

### ***Informants***

Eligibility criteria included being (a) African American (b) grandmother, great-grandmother, or great-aunt, and (c) primary caregiver for children (ages 5-18) with non-residential parents. Each participant was given a \$25.00 gift certificate as compensation. Participants consisted of 17 African American grandmothers, who ranged in age from 49 to 73, with an average age of 59.8. The majority of grandmothers (14) were without spouses. They were highly educated with ten participants having some college education and one with a college degree. Most (10) were employed; four had disabilities and three were retired. Their time as caregivers ranged from 16 months to 16 years. There were a total of 41 grandchildren in their care. The children ranged in age from five months to 18 years.

### ***Procedures***

Participants were recruited from two social service agencies that provided services to grandparents as caregivers. Informants were instructed to call the first author and were screened for eligibility to participate in the study. After each interview, grandmothers were asked to refer other grandmothers in similar situations interested in participating in the study to the researcher.

### ***Interview guide***

The semi-structured interview guide consisted of a grand tour research question (Crewell, 1994), "What are your experiences preparing your grandchild to reach successful and productive adulthood" and 20 sub-questions. The sub-questions inquired into areas such as (a) defining success for grandchildren; (b) barriers to parenting; (c) factors to enhance parenting; and (d) interactions with absent biological parent(s). An information sheet obtained demographic data on grandmothers and the grandchildren in their care. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in the homes of informants and generally lasted less than two hours. Interviews were audiotape recorded and resulting transcripts formed the basis for data analysis.

### ***Data Analysis***

The comparative method approach of data analysis was used in which data were analyzed for themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The first author read each transcription while listening to the respective audiotape to become familiar with the data. Secondly, individual transcripts were read a second time and coded for theme, a process called open coding. Third, themes were reduced across transcripts and merged into categories. To add rigor to the study, findings were presented to two groups of grandmother caregivers as a form of member checking. No new themes were added by these groups.

### ***Findings***

Grandmothers' social construction of success consisted of four themes,

which described actions and behaviors their grandchildren need to either engage in or perform. Themes are discussed below along with quotes from the grandmothers.

### *Acquiring knowledge*

Grandmothers wanted their grandchildren to learn not only by making their school work a priority but also by acquiring knowledge in many other areas. Grandmother Copper shared that she has discussions with her grandson regarding success. She stated, "I just try the best I can to make sure that he is successful." She is convinced that he will achieve success:

*He is going to be successful. See, sometimes some people can see what you can't see. He loves soccer; he loves any kind of sport, I'd take him to the park, I am the one who taught him the bat and the ball. I can't run like him but I try to play soccer with him. D. (grandson) and I had a conversation and he knows we have to buckle down on his reading.*

She cautioned him about barriers that would hinder his success:

*I just tell him don't mess up with that stuff [drugs], it will make you do things and say things that you really don't mean. I want to live and see you successful and maybe one day you will marry a nice lady and you might have a little great grandchild one day.*

Grandmother Bronze was concerned that her granddaughter would allow an interest in boys and her dislike of school to defer her learning:

*What I think of is her graduating from high school. G. [granddaughter] does not like high school. It is hard for me to keep her head in books and mind on school. She is typically a teenage girl, who talks about boys. I understand that, it is part of life and growing up. And she is of that age. But she can put education in there too. It is very important to graduate with a diploma in order to go on with life and take care of yourself. Success to me will mean to get her an education and her diploma. I will push her to go to college and get her diploma that is one step. If I get to do that I will feel awfully good.*

Learning and obtaining an education was also emphasized by Grandmother Cobalt who talked to her grandson about acquiring skills in all areas of his life:

*He is young, I explain to him about education, 'I want you to learn, and I want you to be able to take care of yourself.' I try to teach him to clean up and wash dishes. I teach him how to iron his clothes, I am teaching him cooking*

*and I am watching him. I know he is only 8 years old but I'm just taking my time and going slow with him so that he can understand. But I also tell him about the important things in life, I ask him 'what you want to be?' He tells me he wants to be a football player and whatever. We talk one-on-one and he wants to be successful.*

Grandmothers wanted their grandchildren to learn from the mistakes of their biological parents. Grandmother Iron reflected on wanting her grandsons to have a different outcome than that of her son, their father:

*I think about my son and compare them [grandsons and their father]. I want them [grandsons] to succeed better than what he did. I want them to be—like when they are between 20 and 23—that they can stand on their own feet without depending on me or on my husband. That would be success to me. To be independent and to take care of themselves.*

### ***Developing self-esteem***

Several grandmothers stressed the value of grandchildren loving themselves as an important factor in success. Grandmother Silver combined self-esteem with social support:

*One thing about it [success] the way I feel, they [grandchildren] have to feel good about themselves. They have to like themselves, if a person or child don't like themselves or have a low self-esteem, they are not going to make it in this world. And you got to like yourself to make it in this world. If you make up your mind what you want to do, you can do it. With the support of the family they can make it, they can be a success. But they got to go to school. And nowadays kids can take the babies to school with them, so they got all the opportunity in the world to go to school and be a success.*

Whereas Grandmother Gold coupled self-esteem with respect. She noted:

*Success in the future is gaining respect from others and loving you enough. So when you love yourself, you should respect yourself; other people will see that and will give you back respect. Success as far as your job, that's a whole lot of success. Success is the way you conduct yourself, that's my way of thinking.*

Grandmother Zinc explained the difference between success and respect: “My daughter owns a shop and they [grandchildren] see her as a success. They know doctors and lawyers in the church but they don't look up to them as successful role models. They look at them as a respectable person.” Grandmother Zinc continued by saying that years ago, highly educated people were sometimes referred to as “college educated fools.”

### ***Preparation for the future***

Preparing for the future seemed like an essential component of success. This preparation required action on the part of the grandchildren. Two of the grandmothers were very succinct in their descriptions. Grandmother Aluminum said, “He got the strength. I know he can do it, but success will be doing it.” Grandmother Platinum added the importance of focus: “If he keeps his mind on what he is suppose to do and not what everybody is saying about him, and does his work, that would be success to me.”

Grandmother Nickel included the importance of responsibility. She listed six “musts” for her grandson to be a productive adult: “learning responsibility, choosing the right associates, completing his education, not being a follower but a leader, planning at a young age, and setting goals at a young age.” She concluded by acknowledging her expectations for his future, “That’s what I see for him.”

Grandmother Magnesium also stressed responsibility: “Being responsible. Like if you have a job that you are supposed to do, somebody shouldn’t have to remind you that, that is your job that you are supposed to do it.”

Grandmother Steel advised her grandsons to make attaining success a priority:

*You don't have to get married or have girlfriends and have children. Become successful first become responsible and recognize your faults and make the best of them. Make decisions and discern which are the rights and wrongs and pick up the rights. There is always school and when you have the opportunity you should take advantage of it. I just try to encourage them to be successful and respectful and always respect women. Give them their space and if you don't like the way they do or act you get away from them and never put your hands on them.*

### ***Disconnecting money from success***

Many grandmothers seemed to be concerned that their grandchildren would focus on money as the only measure of success. They overwhelmingly wanted to discourage this idea. While no questions were asked about income or money in relation to their definition of success, the following quotes support the importance of it in the parenting of their grandchildren. Grandmother Nickel stated: “I lay down the rules that let him know that money’s not everything. Success is not based on how much money you have. Success is based on what you think is success.”

Grandmother Titanium wanted her grandchildren to combine material goods with positive personal qualities:

*It is hard to put a success rate on jobs and material things because it is just that. We have a society, which looks at having a home, buying a home, or having a nice vehicle as success. That is right and good to have. But also*

*being a decent human being, honest, and truthful. You can repeat what you have said and not be ashamed of who you are, where you are from and what you are doing.*

Other grandmothers also emphasized positive personal qualities. Grandmother Tungsten talked to her grandchildren about being a good human being and the choices they make:

*I think success is not in materialistic things, but in your success as a human being, in education, and being the best person you can possibly be. Choosing the best choices to make so that you can be successful in this world today and meeting different people.*

She went on to explain that her view of success is complex:

*Succeeding is a lot of things to me and it's not just about materialistic things. So I want them (grandchildren) to succeed as human beings to be able to make the right choices.*

Grandmother Tantalum said:

*I do not preach to them [grandchildren] that money is the way to success. But there are people who have a lot of money who are not successful. So to me to be successful is to be independent. And if there is a positive direction they want to go, we would support them in that.*

Grandmother Zinc distinguished success from money:

*I think a lot of time people have a lot of money but they are poor in friendship. You can still have money but you have nothing else. Success as Oprah [entertainer], she has money but something about her I don't feel good about it. I want people to feel good about my kids.*

### **Discussion and implications**

The purpose of this study was to learn how African American grandmothers raise their grandchildren to be successful. Findings were merged into four interrelated themes: (a) acquiring knowledge, (b) developing self-esteem, (c) preparation for the future, and (d) disconnecting money from success. These findings provide steps toward building knowledge about intergenerational parenting of grandchildren by African American grandmothers. Grandmothers wanting their grandchildren to succeed is not new, what is enlightening is the identification of the four themes, which provide insight into grandmothers' conceptualization of success, identifies the influential factors in success, and depicts the level of awareness that grandmothers possess regarding success.

Each theme contributed a unique quality to the grandmothers' conceptualization of success. Under the acquiring knowledge theme, grandmothers disclosed that attaining success required liking school, being focused, and achieving beyond that of their biological parents. One grandmother introduced the importance of independence. In the developing self-esteem theme, grandmothers noted that grandchildren had to see themselves in a positive light. This theme is congruent with Carmen Moten (2004) who noted that children's opinions of their abilities directly influence their success. An accompanying quality was respect for self and others. Under the preparation for the future theme, grandmothers expressed a view that their grandchildren possess the necessary capacity to achieve a successful outcome. The final theme, disconnecting money from successful outcomes, was surprising. Under this theme, grandmothers seemed to place a higher priority on attaining humanitarian qualities. They wanted their grandchildren to have integrity and be a good human being.

In analyzing the data, it became apparent that grandmothers had reflected on how to help their grandchildren achieve success. They used phrases such as "I want," "very important," and "make sure." Some stressed the importance of preparing the grandchildren early for success. Other factors mentioned were independence and effective decision-making. These findings show grandmothers have high expectations of their grandchildren. Moten listed parental expectations of African American parents as "commitment to education, self-help, service to others, and a strong religious and spiritual orientation" (2004: 145). Expectations of children were found to be higher with kinship caregivers than in other out-of-home living arrangements (Berrick, Barth & Needell, 1994).

Viewed within a socio-political framework, grandmothers seem to be very aware of the many influences in the lives of their grandchildren that would act as barriers to their achieving success. They identified factors such as dropping out of school, consuming drugs, making undesirable choices, and engaging in premature sexual activities. They talked to their grandchildren about working to achieve success and were supporting their efforts if they were positive. They also cautioned their grandchildren about placing money and income above personal qualities.

Concomitantly, grandmothers were knowledgeable about the thoughts and actions their grandchildren needed that could translate into achieving success, such as valuing education, acquiring life skills, and acting in a humanitarian manner. The absence of the grandchildren's biological parents did not seem to lessen the grandmothers' expectations of their grandchildren. Further, none of the 17 grandmothers stated that their grandchildren were unable to be successful in life, thus promoting a view of them as capable.

These findings are from 17 African American grandmother caregivers and are not generalizable, but may be used for application with this group. Social scientists should consider two implications from this study. First, grandmother

caregiving is very different from grandmothering. The contemporary experience of this caregiving situation adds a layer of complexity. When assuming the role of caregivers, grandmothers are indeed taking on a different kind of parenting. Regardless of the problems of their grandchildren's parents, grandmothers continue to persevere in their attempts to help another generation achieve successful outcomes. Supporting their endeavours to achieve success will result in increasing their grandchildren's possibilities of attaining positive and successful outcomes.

Second, while African American grandmother caregivers are raising a generation that is viewed by society as vulnerable, these grandchildren are seen and treated by grandmothers as possessing the strengths and skills required to attain successful, productive outcomes. The grandmothers are very knowledgeable about the plights of their grandchildren and their accompanying needs. They are indeed the experts of their grandchildren's situations. Social service workers, researchers, and policy-makers need to acknowledge that grandmothers are not only very knowledgeable about their grandchildren but can also be important resources. Approaching grandmothers with that attitude in mind may facilitate a collaborative working relationship, thus increasing access to these caregivers and the children in their care. The African American grandmothers in this study revealed that they want their grandchildren to achieve success, they talk to them about it, and think that their grandchildren have the capacity to earn it.

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