

Grandmothers Caring

Lori Hill*

Lyle S Hallman Faculty of Social Work, Canada

*Corresponding author: Lori Hill, Lyle S Hallman Faculty of Social Work, 120 Duke St W, Kitchener, Ontario N2H 6P6, Canada, Tel: +1519-884-1970; E-mail: lohill@wlu.ca

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Abstract

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to understand the reasons for aboriginal grandmothers caring for their grandchildren on a full-time basis. Fifteen Haudenosaunee grandmothers who were from the six nations territory participated in the study. The results demonstrate that there was a complex process that led them to assuming the caregiving role. While they cared for their grandchildren due to a combination of factors, ultimately, they cared for them as a means of "protecting them from the state" and avoiding child welfare involvement due to the colonialism that is embedded within it. These women served vital matriarchal, leadership roles for healing in aboriginal families and communities.

Keywords: Aboriginal grandmothers; First nations grandmothers; Caring; Grandchildren; Custodial grandparents; Grandparents; Caregivers

Introduction

Recent statistics demonstrate that Aboriginal grandparents in Canada are disproportionately caring for their grandchildren compared to their non-aboriginal caregiver peers. The 2011 National Household Survey demonstrates that approximately 10,525 aboriginal children aged 14 and under (2.7%) lived in what was defined as "skipped generation families" (i.e., with one or both grandparents where no parents were present), while this was the case for only 0.4% of non-aboriginal children in this age group [1]. Although the literature has reported a variety of reasons for grandparents assuming the caregiving role, it has largely remained one-dimensional, describing specific circumstances under which they care for their grandchildren. Nonetheless, becoming a custodial grandparent is often reflected by an uneven process occurring over a time span [2] and involves complex, interlocking factors, particularly for the aboriginal caregivers who live within the context of colonialism and structural oppression [3]. This qualitative study explores the multi-faceted reasons and processes in which Haudenosaunee grandmothers from the six nations territory assumed the full-time the caregiving role for their grandchildren.

Case Report

Through a snowball sampling technique, 15 Haudenosaunee grandmothers were recruited to participate in the study who were Six Nations community members (average age of 55). Twelve of them lived in the six nations community while three of them lived in nearby urban areas. A grounded theory method of inquiry was used to collect data [4,5]. There were three major themes that were associated with how they enacted the caregiving role: 1) assuming the caregiving role over time; 2) protecting grandchildren from harm; and 3) being accustomed to caregiving.

First, when the grandmothers were queried about how they came to be full-time caregivers, they explained that they periodically cared for their grandchildren prior to their current caregiving situation due to parents' multiple challenges (e.g., mental health issues, substance misuse, family violence). During these intermittent periods, the grandmothers financially supported their grandchildren and families as an attempt to prevent family breakdown. They often reframed from requesting or accessing social assistance to avoid being under the auspice of the child welfare system.

Second, when parents were unable to care for their children, the grandmothers automatically stepped in, expressing a deep-seated desire to prevent them from going into the child welfare system. Importantly, they cared for their children as a means of protecting them from the structural oppression within the child welfare system, reflected in a grandmother's statement, "I won't have nothing to do with them (child protective services) ... That name is really hurtful. Because they've done things to our families... There's no reason why they should upheave these children ... They could be living on dirt floors and still be loved..." Similarly, another grandmother who had previously worked with children and families in the community shared, "...they called me the 'pit bull' (community) ... I fought hard to keep our kids out of care. We've lost too many of our kids to the system and it's not right ... That's why it wasn't a second thought to take my grandkids."

Third, in combination with protecting grandchildren, the grandmothers were accustomed to extended family caring as nearly all of them were cared for by their grandmothers or great-grandmothers. Many of them indicated that they were socialized to care for extended family as evidenced in one grandmother's comment, "That's our belief (Haudenosaunee), that we look after kids if our family can't ... That's the way we were brought up..."

Discussion

A particularly relevant finding was that nearly all the grandmothers had cared for their grandchildren on one or more occasions prior to assuming their full-time caregiving role. During these times, they did

not request social assistance to aid them in caring as they fiercely attempted to keep the “state’s hand off” their grandchildren. This desire to safeguard grandchildren from the state is found in other studies with non-aboriginal grandparents [2,6]. However, given the context of colonialism wherein aboriginal children are vastly overrepresented in the child welfare system as compared to non-aboriginal children, the Haudenosaunee grandmothers’ fears are particularly warranted. Despite recent child welfare reforms, the 2011 national household survey results reveal that almost half (48.1%) of all children aged 14 and under in foster care were aboriginal [1], leading many researchers and child welfare advocates to describe this vast overrepresentation of aboriginal children in the child welfare system due to colonialism and structural oppression as the millennium scoop [7,8].

The results of this study have implications for service provision to aboriginal grandparents. Social service providers need to have cultural competency in working with aboriginal people, comprehending the ways that systematic oppression has historically and continues to impact child welfare. Importantly, service providers need to advocate for ways in which to assist aboriginal grandparent caregivers; they cannot necessarily assume that the caregivers do not require social assistance in the absence of them requesting it. Furthermore, service providers must comprehend the pivotal role that aboriginal grandmothers possess in caring, viewing them as integral sources of healing and strength within aboriginal families and communities; they must not view their intermittent, dynamic type of care they provide as dysfunctional, but rather as a valuable way of upholding the family structure. On a broader level, this study demonstrates the dire need for continued child welfare reforms. The Haudenosaunee grandmothers articulated that they were caring for their grandchildren due to multiple issues that impacted parents’ ability to adequately care for their children. Aboriginal children are vastly overrepresented in child welfare due to neglect, fueled by systematic level issues and risks such as poverty, inadequate housing, and substance misuse [9]. However, the child welfare system provides marginal supports to address these issues, intervening at the individual level of caregiving [10]. Furthermore, more funding must be allocated to reserve-based social services to fill the service gaps that exist for aboriginal children and their families living on reservations [10].

This study provides some insight into the complex reasons and processes that aboriginal grandmothers assume the full-time caregiving role for their grandchildren. It also highlights the vital matriarchal, leadership role that they serve in healing within aboriginal families and communities.

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