

Custodial Step-grandparenting: An Autoethnography

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### Introduction

“I’m signing papers that say that we are committing to raising the kids until they are 18 if needed,” my husband said. My brain reeled and then imploded. What in the world!?!?

Two hours before, I had called to remind Carl I wouldn't be available while running my regularly scheduled faculty meeting that Wednesday afternoon, February 3, 2023. Sounding rushed and distracted, he answered: “I was about to call you—there’s something going on with the grandkids and I've got to go over there.”

“Over there” was about 30 minutes from home, but it might as well have been three or four hours: because we seldom saw the kids, and it had been Christmas since we had last glimpsed them. I had assumed we might need to take the kids a night or two while some problem was getting straightened out—we had kept them overnight once before almost a year ago for a similar reason. But this?! My mind couldn't wrap itself around what was happening.

Two hours later, my step-grandchildren, two-and-a-half year Austin and three-and-a-half-year-old Peyton, came through the door escorted by a social worker, each holding a little Walmart bag filled with clothes and wearing a tiny backpack with a few toys.

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Two and a half have passed since that unforgettable day. Since then, the children have turned five and six. Their baby brother Christian, who unknown to me was on the way and who I have raised since he was two days old, turned two the same day the older of my two birth daughters turned 32. The grandparenting experiences my husband and I have had during this intervening time include phenomena researched and reported on in other grandparents. We have gone through serious marital strain and were challenged with finding resources and establishing support systems, something that was additionally complicated by the Covid 19 pandemic. With a

full-fledged demanding career already in place, which I felt I had to maintain despite the children dropping like a bomb into my life, I in particular as the primary parenting figure have experienced major stress and an almost complete loss of both personal time and space.

Our grandparenting experience has also included phenomena for which there is limited research but doubtlessly not unique to us. First, being a step-grandparent almost guarantees additional complexity, such as having to navigate emotional investment/attachment and divorce/blended family dynamics (Buchanan, Rotkirch, 2018; Giarrusso, Silverstein, and Bengtson, 1996; Pashos, Schwarz, and Bjorklund, 2016; Steinbach and Silverstein, 2020). In my case, the family dynamic has included having the biological grandmother—as in, my husband's ex-wife—coming to live with us when we were given the choice of either taking two-day-old Christian or letting him go into regular standard foster care, most likely to be placed with strangers (the older two were placed with us through the Kinship Care program). This unusual family arrangement with its successes and complications, its benefits and drawbacks, will be the

Additionally, I have multiple sclerosis and that has presented serious challenges for me and had a negative impact on the progression of the disease. Nevertheless, the vital role faith has played in my day-to-day life and children's boundless energy and vibrance have had some positive effects on my overall health.

Finally, my step-grandparenting and complicated family dynamics along with managing multiple sclerosis have played out against a backdrop of my personal history of having grown up in true isolation due to religious extremism and my decades' long struggle to overcome the social, ideological, and spiritual effects of my upbringing.

This autoethnographic study will intentionally explore some of these more unique dynamics along with other experiences commonly reported on. In developing the study, four

approaches will be employed: using systematic introspection and emotional recall; reviewing journal entries, photographs, and videos; interviewing associates and friends; and participating in interviewer interviews.

Systematic introspection involves engaging in introspection and creating fieldnotes from recollections (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). These will be categorized and potentially used to frame the basic experience narrative. Emotional recall—placing one’s self mentally and emotionally back in the experience of the past by becoming immersed in the details of the circumstance until it is being relived in the mind (Ellis and Bochner, 2000)—will be used to craft narrative accounts of key experiences.

Duncan (2004), a conservative autoethnographer, along with others (Sparkes 1996; Ettore 2005; Murad 2005), recommends using “hard” evidence to support “soft” impressions, and considers personal documents as a form of such evidence. My journal entries and the hundreds of pictures and videos that I have taken over the past nearly three years will comprise that hard evidence and also provide an as-it-happened perspective.

Acquaintance interviews will sought from individuals who have observed or have in one way or another been part of my journey. This will allow me to compare their feedback with my recollections and perceptions and collectively provide new, possibly more objective perspectives on my inherently subjective experience.

Finally, to create an additional layer of perspective and potential for insight, I will use a variation of what Chenail (2011) refers to as “interviewing the investigator.” This will involve having at least three experienced individuals conduct in-depth interviews with me regarding my experience for the purpose of drawing out of me insights and perspectives that otherwise might not surface.

Though this autoethnographic study will only be one of many on this subject of grandparenting, my goal is to bring attention to less explored areas and invite more research. I also hope to engage the reader in my lived experience in such a way as to promote deeper insights and increase understanding and appreciation of the experiences of grandparents in general, and step grandparents in particular, in trying to raise their custodial grandchildren.

A healthy body of literature exists on grandparenting—the phenomena of grandparents raising custodial grandchildren. Researchers have explored subject from various angles and standpoints including mental health wellbeing and parenting stress (Kelly et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2020), marital quality (Clark et al., 2022; Wang, 2018; Wang and Mutchler, 2020), and finding resources and support systems (Gerard, Landry-Mayer, and Roe, 2006; Landry-Meyer, Gerard, and Guzell, 2005). Furthermore, there is a healthy body of literature on African Americans raising grandchildren (a demographic I share), including work done by Minkler and Fuller-Thomson (2005), Tang, Jang, and Carr Copeland (2015), Peterson (2015), and Haglund (2000). Researchers have also used a variety of approaches to study the subject, one being to simply focus on the experiences of grandparents, attempting to see them for what they are from the standpoint of those who are doing it (Clement, Harding, and Watson, 2023; Fauziningtyas, 2023; Haglund, 2000; Hansen et al., 2022; Lee, 2022; Lewis et al., 2018; Sampson and Hertlein, 2015).

The current study seeks to add to the existing body of work that focuses on the experiences of grandparents raising custodial grandchildren and will use autoethnography to do so. Patton (2002) defines autoethnography as the study of “one’s own culture and oneself as part of that culture” (p. 85). It is an approach that can provide rich insights into life that are not possible through other descriptive methods of research (Neumann, 1996) because

autoethnography accesses the world of the knower through the mind and eyes of the knower  
(Williams, 2007).

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