



Volume: 2, Issue: 8, 108-112  
Aug 2015  
www.allsubjectjournal.com  
e-ISSN: 2349-4182  
p-ISSN: 2349-5979  
Impact Factor: 3.762

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## Grandparents as child Carers: The Case of Zambian Grandmothers

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### Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate grandmaternal involvement in childcare in Zambia. Grandparental involvement and gender differences in childcare were explored using a survey instrument. The study involved 80 grandmothers drawn from Ng'ombe and Chazanga townships in Lusaka, Zambia. The mean age of grandmothers was 52.59 years,  $SD = 7.40$ , with minimum grandmother age of 40 years and maximum age 81 years respectively. It was hypothesized that grandparental involvement in childcare is existent. It was also hypothesized that grandparents from the maternal side performed more childcare than the paternal side. The results revealed that grandparents are involved in the care of their grandchildren. Results also showed that grandparents from the maternal side were more involved in childcare compared to paternal grandparents. Based on the findings, it is concluded that grandparents are important in providing complimentary childcare in Zambia.

**Keywords:** Childcare, grandparents, grandchildren, activities.

### 1. Introduction

In Zambia, as in many non - Western countries, childcare is shared among kin relations such as aunts, uncles, siblings and grandparents. Grandparents are an important part of kin relationships with an influential role in childcare (Euler & Michalski, 2015) <sup>[6]</sup>. Though the last two decades have witnessed a significant rise in grandparental research, very few studies have examined grandparental involvement in childcare among African families. Thus, the aim of the current paper was to investigate grandmother involvement in childcare in Zambia.

The majority of prior studies that examined child care by grandparents in worldwide focused more on grandparental stress (Landry-Meyer, Gerard, & Guzell <sup>[15]</sup>, 2005; Oburu & Palmerus <sup>[20]</sup>, 2005; Taylor, Washington, Artinian, & Lichtenberg <sup>[25]</sup>, 2007). Others studies have studied grandparenting from a crisis situation (Burton <sup>[4]</sup>, 1992; Foster <sup>[8]</sup>, 2000; Ruiz <sup>[22]</sup>, 2002). This situation has created a void in knowledge on the involvement of grandparents in complimentary childcare given that the majority of studies are on replacement childcare by grandparents. For example, in Zambia and elsewhere within Africa, the little available research, has been studied in the context of the HIV and AIDS (Foster <sup>[8]</sup>, 2000; Kangethe <sup>[13]</sup>, 2010; Nampanya-Serpell <sup>[18]</sup>, 2002). This is largely because the HIV and AIDS pandemic has predisposed many children to the risks of orphanhood. The HIV and AIDS pandemic has contributed to a significant increase in mortality rates of parents and led to more orphans. Thus most of the research that has been done to date attributes grandparental involvement in childcare to the weakened extended family system as AIDS pandemic becomes severer (Foster <sup>[8]</sup>, 2000; Kangethe <sup>[13]</sup>, 2010; Malinga & Ntshwarang <sup>[16]</sup>, 2011; Reijer <sup>[21]</sup>, 2013). Thus, the impression created by available literature is that grandparents are only a social safety net in times of challenges such as HIV and AIDS pandemic. Yet, traditionally grandparents have always played a pivotal role in child care in Zambia even when parents are present (Falola <sup>[7]</sup>, 2004).

Zambia represents an interdependent context where extended family ties are important in child care. The adage that "in traditional African wisdom a child belongs to the community" supports this common belief (Foster <sup>[9]</sup>, 2005; Mkhize <sup>[17]</sup>, 2004). Grandparents occupy an influential position in Zambia not only in childcare (Falola <sup>[7]</sup>, 2004) but also in transmitting familial processes and socialization of parenting values. Falola (2004) <sup>[7]</sup> observes that grandparents in Zambia are expected to play important roles not just in their children's lives but also to their grandchildren. However, in spite of empirical evidence that context is important in shaping parenting (Bornstein, Putnick, & Lansford <sup>[3]</sup>, 2011; Keller & Harwood <sup>[14]</sup>, 2009), most of the research on grandparenting have been based on Western samples. Thus, findings generated in these studies cannot be automatically used to understand grandparenting in non-Western

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contexts such as Zambia, where childcare typically is shared with relatives such as grandparents.

### 1.1. The Present Study

The present study represents one of the systematic attempts to investigate grandmothers' involvement in childcare in Zambia. The study attempted to answer the following specific objectives

1. To examine grandmother involvement in childcare in Zambia.
2. To explore the care activities that grandmothers perform while caring for their grandchildren.
3. To find out gender differences in grandparental involvement in childcare

### 1.2. Hypothesis

In line with these objectives it was hypothesized that

1. Grandmother involvement in childcare is existent and is associated with more investment in childcare.
2. Grandmothers performed care in many childcare domains.
3. Maternal grandparents provided more care compared to their paternal counterparts.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Sample

The sample was recruited in the context of a study on multi-generational caregiving of young children in Zambia, and was based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) mother has a biological child aged between 12 months and 16 months at first enrolment; (2) mother's biological mother (infant's grandmother) participates in caregiving towards the target child; (3) neither mother nor child have a severe mental or physical disability. The study sample consisted of 80 grandmothers drawn from drawn from low-income areas of Ng'ombe and Chazanga townships in Lusaka, Zambia. The mean grandparental age was 52.59 years, SD 7.40. The minimum age was 40 and maximum age 81. The educational level of mothers was distributed as follows no education (11.3%), primary education (68.8%) and secondary education accounted for 20%.

### 2.2. Procedure

Community leaders in the Community centers in Lusaka (the capital city of Zambia) were contacted to help in the recruitment of the participants. Brochures with information about the study and eligibility criteria were distributed to all the recruiters. The researchers also organized meetings with all recruiters to answer questions they had about the study and its procedures. Zambia is a multi-lingual society in which an individual will normally speak more than one language fluently, mostly including English (Benson <sup>[2]</sup>, 2014; Serpell <sup>[24]</sup>, 2014). All the research assistants were fluent in English and at least two local languages including Bemba and Nyanja – two of the languages that are widely spoken within the local context. Mothers and grandmothers could speak at least one of the languages fluently and in most times spoke more than one language fluently.

Because we anticipated that some participants would be illiterate, research assistants helped with completing the questionnaires for every participant, regardless of their literacy level. These assistants were thoroughly trained by the researcher, prior to the data collection, in anticipation of any questions and field challenges. The data collection process was piloted in Kalingalinga a community similar to the target community and the outcomes of a process evaluation proved satisfactory.

The study procedure comprised of three home visits. During the first visit to the participants' homes, families were screened for eligibility by the researchers. If the family met the inclusion criteria, families were informed about the study procedures and asked to participate and written consent was obtained from all mothers and grandmothers. During this visit, mothers and grandmothers filled in questionnaires with the help of research assistants about background variables and family characteristics (e.g. age, education, ethnicity etc.). During the second visit to the home, the Maternal Behavior Q-Sort was administered. The third visit involved 10 minutes video recording of grandmother- infant interactions to assess quality of grandmother-infant interactions. This data was collected as part of larger PhD study. For the purposes of this paper, only grandmother questionnaire results are presented.

### 2.3. Measures

Grandmothers completed the questionnaires, assessing demographic and care-giving activities that they performed in the course of childcare.

### 2.4. Demographic and socio-economic characteristics:

Grandmothers self-reported on background variables like age, ethnicity and number of children that they have. Grandmother and mothers' educational level was assessed on a 4-point scale from 0 to 3: *none* (0); *Primary school* (1); *Secondary school* (2); and *Tertiary education* (3).

Grandparent care-giving was assessed using the Grandparent-Care Checklist (GCC). The checklist asked participants whether or not they participated in a range of child-caregiving activities including *feeding, playing with, bathing, comforting, transporting, carrying the baby, toilet training, protection, setting limits and discipline*. A total care-giving scale was developed from the items of the scale. The coefficient alpha reliability was Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.74$ .

### 2.5. Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards as approved by the University of Zambia, School of Humanities Research Ethics committee. The ethical approval number IBR 00006464 and IORG: 000376 respectively. Consent forms, approved by the School of Humanities Research Ethics committee were signed by participants prior to participation. The purpose and benefits of the study were explained to respondents.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Preliminary analyses

Preliminary analysis of data involved examination of missing data, kurtosis, and skewness. All variables were inspected for possible outliers that were defined as values larger than 3.29 *SD* above or below the mean. Simple descriptive statistics were computed on background variables. In terms of ethnicity the sample consisted of Bemba's (23.8%), Chewa's (18.1%), Ngoni, (10.5%) Nsanga (10.5%), Tumbuka (4.8%), Tonga (7.6%), Soli (3.8%), Lamba (1%) and Lozi, Mambwe, Namwanga (each 1.9%). Almost all grandmothers saw their grandchildren at least 4 times a week. Of the 80 grandmothers 64 (80%) reported meeting with their grandchildren 4 times a week while 10 (12.5%) reported meeting their grandchildren 3 times a week and 6 reported meeting their grandchildren at least once a week.

### 3.2. Grandparental involvement in childcare

In order to examine grandmother involvement in childcare in Zambia, preliminary analyses were performed using grandparental care activities as a measure. All the participants reported that they provided care to their grandchildren. Of the 80 grandmothers, 98 % reported that they participated in child care.

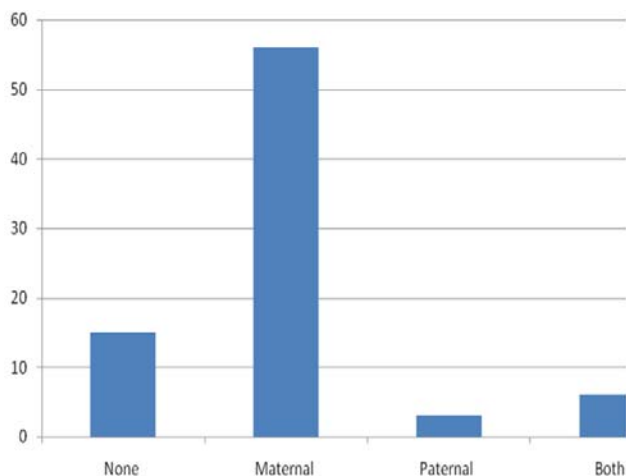
To provide a detailed descriptive account of the childcare activities that are generally performed by grandmothers in our sample, we explored the results of the grandparental care measures. The care-giving activity performed included *playing, bathing, transporting baby, toilet training, protection from accidents, discipline and setting limits*.

**Table 1:** Percentage distribution of grandparental childcare Activities

Care domain	N Yes	%
Playing	79	98.8
Dressing	80	100
Bathing	78	97.5
Feeding	80	100
Care during illness	78	97.5
Comforting when distress	80	100
Toilet training	79	98.8
Holiday care	72	90
Protection	74	93.7
Setting limits	62	77.5

As can be noted from the descriptive table above, the childcare activities performed by almost all grandparents included *playing, feeding, dressing, bathing, toilet training, disciplining, and protection from accidents, holiday care and comforting* their grandchild when distressed. However, grandmothers reported less of limit setting 77.5%.

**Bar Graph Showing Comparison of Grandparental Involvement in Childcare**



In order to examine which of the grandparents were more involved in childcare during the time when grandmothers themselves were mothers, descriptives were computed. Out of the 80 grandmothers, 56 (70%) reported that maternal grandparents were mostly involved in childcare while 3 (3.8%) reported that paternal grandparents were the mostly involved. However, 6 (7.5%) grandmothers reported that both maternal and paternal grandparents were involved in childcare and 15 reported that none of the grandparents were involved in childcare at the time when themselves were mothers.

**4. Discussion**

The present study examined the involvement of grandmothers in childcare in Zambia. As predicted, the study found that grandmothers were heavily involved in care of their grandchildren. The study also revealed that grandmothers performed childcare activities such as feeding, bathing, holiday care, caring during illness, and toilet training. Lastly, the study revealed that grandparents from the maternal side were more involved in childcare than the paternal side.

With respect to the first objective, this study found that the grandparental involvement in childcare is existent in Zambia. The majority of the grandmothers reported taking care of their grandchildren. An explanation for this finding is that childcare in Zambia is embedded in social cultural values in which a child does not only belong to the nuclear family but is part of the larger extended family. Thus, it could well be that sense of family, cultural patterns and beliefs on child rearing can account for grandmother’s involvement in child care in Zambia. Literature observes that the responsibility for childcare in Africa largely resides with women especially mothers and grandmothers (De Villiers [5], 2011), thus it is not surprising that the majority of grandmothers in our study participated in childcare.

In relation to childcare activities, this study revealed that the majority of grandmothers performed childcare activities in all care domains. Childcare activities performed were feeding, bathing, holiday care, caring during illness, toilet training, protection and limit setting. This finding suggests that grandmothers perform parenting functions. The results are consistent with previous research that found that grandparents play an important part in child care (Gattai, & Musatti [10], 1999; Gibson, & Mace [11], 2005). The finding that grandparents performed tasks such as holidays is consistent with the Zambian cultural attitudes that promote participation of grandparents in childcare. As noted by Falola (2004) [7] Zambian parents pressurize their children to visit their grandparents hence this helps maintain important connections to Zambian traditions, local language, culture and family heritage (p.292). However, this study found few item level differences with some activities performed more than others. For example, feeding, bathing, holiday care, and caring during illness were performed more while an activity such as limit setting was performed less.

The third objective of this study investigated the involvement of both paternal and maternal grandparents in childcare. In line with the objective it was hypothesized that maternal grandparents provided more care to their grandchildren than paternal grandparents. This study found that maternal grandparents were most involved in childcare compared to paternal grandparents. As evident from the results, 70% of grandmothers reported that grandparents from the maternal side were most involved during their time as parents against 3.8% who reported that paternal were most involved. However, 7.5 % of the grandmothers reported that both maternal and paternal were equally involved in the care of their children. A possible explanation for this finding is that childcare in Zambia follows the maternal line hence this might explain why maternal grandparents are more involved. The findings are consistent with previous studies that have reported that maternal grandparents were most likely to provide childcare than paternal grandparents. This finding also supports evolutionary theory which argues that maternal grandparents are mostly likely to be involved in the care of their grandchildren because of genetic certainty as opposed to paternal grandparents (Hank & Buber, 2009) [12]. However, this finding is contrary to the finding in Northern Malawi where

paternal grandparents were found to perform a more powerful role in childcare (Sear & Coall, 2011) [23].

In summary, this study revealed that grandparental involvement in childcare is existent and very prominent in Zambia. The study also found that grandparents performed a variety care activities which included feeding, playing, carrying baby on the back and care during illness. Thus, the findings of this study add to previous research findings on the involvement of grandparents childcare provision (Nixon, 2007) [19]. The finding also highlights the role of grandparents in offering complimentary childcare. The study also provides strong evidence that maternal grandparents are most involved in childcare than paternal grandparents in Zambia.

### 5. Limitations

Despite the interesting insights regarding grandmothers' involvement in childcare, some limitations of this study should be noted. The first is that the influence of socio-economic status on grandmother's involvement in childcare was not tested in this study, thus future should test this in order to provide a better understanding of grandparenting. Secondly, this study used grandmothers drawn from a low socio-economic setting. Thus, the findings of the study might not be generalizable to grandmothers in the middle class or higher socio-economic status. However, in order to find out grandmother involvement in childcare, it was felt that only grandmothers were better positioned to report on the type of care they provided.

Third limitations is that this study did not collect data from mothers. Thus, future research should include mothers in order to investigate their perception and attitudes on grandmother's involvement in childcare.

### 6. Implications

Despite these limitations, the present study, has unique potential practical applications. Research on complementary childcare by grandmothers should be taken more seriously in order to understand parenting and the contribution of grandmothers to child development globally.

### 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study makes a number of important contributions to our understanding of grandparenting and confirms that grandmothers are an important part of childcare in Zambia. Secondly, the current study is unique as it provides insight on grandparenting in a developing country, that represents a region and cultural group that is very much underrepresented in grandparent literature. Thus, the study recommends that future studies should differentiate replacement care from supplementary care.

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