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Salvaging Children's Lives: Understanding the Experiences of Black Aunts Who Serve as Kinship Care Providers within Black Families

by

REGINA LOUISE DAVIS-SOWERS

Under the Direction of Ralph E. LaRossa

ABSTRACT

Previous research on grandparents as kinship care providers demonstrated that grandparents are confronted with both challenges and rewards. Using qualitative research methods, I examined the lives of 35 black aunts who served as kinship care providers for nieces and nephews. I found that grandparents and aunts experienced increased time demands, financial burdens, and family stress. However, this study demonstrated that aunts' experiences differ from grandparents', due to the younger age of aunts and the fact that aunts are of the same generation as the biological parents. Moreover, I found that aunting, or the care and nurture of children by aunts and great-aunts, is gendered and invisible work that, at the most basic level, salvages children's lives. Salvaging children's lives involved three non-linear stages: making the decision to become a kinship care provider, transitioning from aunting to parenting, and parenting nieces and nephews. I utilized a synthesis of symbolic interactionism and black feminist thought as a theoretical framework that examines how the meanings that black women attach to family influence their definitions of self and affect their decisions to act on behalf of family members. These findings extend the research on black women's lives and on kinship care within black families. I used a narrative style that allows the respondents' voices to be heard, as

these are their stories. I offer suggestions for future research, as well as outline a number of policy and theoretical implications. This research is important because black children are disproportionately represented within the child welfare system. If interventions and policies are to influence other black women or black men to accept responsibility for many of the most at-risk children in their families and neighborhoods, research must explore and report the challenges, sacrifices, costs, and rewards of becoming kinship care providers within black families.

INDEX WORDS: Black aunts, Kinship care provider, Kinwork, Black families, Black women, Salvaging children's lives

SALVAGING CHILDREN'S LIVES: UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK AUNTS WHO SERVE AS KINSHIP CARE PROVIDERS WITHIN BLACK FAMILIES

by

REGINA LOUISE DAVIS-SOWERS

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2006

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2006

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Recent research has documented the increasing numbers of black children living in the homes of kinship care providers (Altshuler 1999; Cuddeback 2004; Dressel and Barnhill 1994; Gibson 2002a; Karp 1996; Schwartz 2002). This situation is still particularly prevalent among blacks in urban areas. HIV/AIDS, addiction to crack cocaine, and the increasing rates of incarceration of black men and black women have taken a toll on inner-city families, rendering kinship care a crucial aspect of black families (Altshuler 1999; Dressel, Porterfield, and Barnhill 1998; Gibson 2002a; Hegar and Scannapieco 1995; Iglehart 2004). Gibson (2002a: 341) defines kinship care as caring of children by non-parent relatives when parents are absent, unwilling, or unable to effectively parent them. Additionally, Hegar and Scannapieco (1995) stated, "Kinship care may be defined as the full-time nurturing and protection of children who must be separated from their parents by relatives, members of their tribes or clans, godparents, stepparents, or other adults who have a kinship bond with a child" (p. 200).

Dressel and Clark (1990) noted that when family care is measured in terms of who does it, the large majority of kinship care providers are women, and that women turn out to be better at it and to devote more time to it. Research has shown that black women, including grandmothers, great-grandmothers, aunts, great-aunts, sisters, and female friends, are involved in an often complex configuration of female-kin networks that are

responsible for child care in black families (Bunting 2001; Hunter and Ensminger 1992; Johnson-Garner and Meyers 2003; Scott and Black 1991; Stack 1974). Scott and Black (1991) asserted that black single mothers depend on female-centered networks to provide essential services such as food, shelter, transportation, money, clothing, and child care at "one time or another" (p. 203). Furthermore, in their study of the factors that contribute to the resilience of black children in kinship care, Johnson-Garner and Meyers (2003) found 19 grandmothers, seven aunts, three great-aunts, and one uncle serving as surrogate parents in 30 families. Nevertheless, the majority of the studies on kinship care providers have examined grandparents, particularly grandmothers.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The roles of grandparents, especially grandmothers, as kinship care providers have been well documented over the last decade (Burnette 1997; Burton and Devries 1992; Dressel and Barnhill 1994; Karp 1996; Minkler and Roe 1996). Consistently, studies demonstrated that there are both rewards and challenges of serving as kinship care providers for grandchildren whose biological parents are unable to care for them (Burton and Devries 1992; Dressel and Barnhill 1994; Fuller-Thomson and Minkler 2000; Gibson 2002a; Minkler and Roe 1996). Minkler and Roe (1996) listed several problems experienced by grandparents serving as kinship care providers, including health problems, economic difficulties, lack of governmental support, and social isolation.

However, studies also showed that, even in the face of many challenges, most grandparents report that serving as kinship care providers for grandchildren has its rewards, such as the chance to nurture a legacy and the companionship and love that

children bring into the lives of caregivers (Burton and Devries 1992). Dressel and Barnhill (1994) asserted that caregiving can produce psychosocial rewards for grandmothers, such as satisfaction from grandchildren's accomplishments, their growth, or their mere presence in their lives. The reasons that grandmothers agreed to serve as kinship care providers for grandchildren included kin obligations (Stack 1974); as a mechanism for family survival (Burton and Devries 1992); and the provision of a safe haven for children who have been abused or neglected by their parents (Minkler and Roe 1996).

Previous research on the challenges and rewards of becoming kinship care providers for grandparents underscored the need to understand how the lives of other female extended family members are impacted by serving as kinship care providers to children who are not biologically their own. Studies showed that often families take an active, initiating role that shapes kinship ties, by requesting that extended family members act as mother surrogates or by deciding that particular family members will serve as kinship care providers for children within the family (Doniger 2001; Reiss and Oliveri 1983; Stack 1974; Stack and Burton 1998). Whether the agreement to serve as kinship care providers is voluntary or involuntary, previous research has shown that the lives of kinship care providers for children change in significant ways, not the least being changes in their everyday lives (Gibson 2002b).

Another shortcoming of prior research on kinship care providers is that few studies on kinship care have addressed the childrearing practices of grandparents and other kinship care providers. A notable exception is Gibson's 2005 study of parenting

strategies of grandmothers as kinship care providers. Childrearing practices include discipline, inculcation of values and cultural beliefs, and the provision of material, emotional, and social sustenance that prepares children for adulthood. Landry-Meyer and Newman (2004) noted that the transition from grandparent to kinship care provider results in internal conflicts as grandparents must accept that they are the disciplinarian, provider, and authority figure in a parent-child relationship. Much of the conflict derives from the fact that in many families, grandparents and other relatives have no inherent legal responsibility to provide for children (Landry-Meyer and Newman 2004; Waldrop and Weber 2001).

While other relatives have no legal responsibility to provide for non-biological children, there are expectations that adult family members will utilize parenting practices that will help black children grow into productive and contributing members of their communities. Johnson and Staples (2005:215) asserted that since slavery, black parents have been preparing black children to become “somebody” in a white world that continues to treat them in various ways as “nobody.” These threats to the self-esteem, self-concept, and aspirations of black children are greater within families with fewer financial and social resources, but represent real obstacles to all black children. Black parents must utilize parenting practices that maximize the potential of black children, while transmitting to their children the realities of “living in a society that is hostile to black aspirations” (Johnson and Staples 2005:220). Historically, black aunts have also raised nieces and nephews to adulthood. Therefore, it is important to understand the parenting practices that they used to help children grow into productive citizens.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AS A KINSHIP CARE PROVIDER

Because of my own experiences as a kinship care provider for my nieces and nephews, I wanted to discover how the lives of other black women were changed when they became surrogate parents for their nieces and nephews. However, when I attempted to find information regarding the lives of black aunts who serve as kinship care providers, I was unable to find any research on this population. I knew that, historically, black aunts had played major roles in the lives of their nieces and nephews. My own family history includes three generations of nieces and nephews raised by black aunts. Both of my mother's parents died before my mother was eleven-years-old. She was raised by her father's sister. When I was nine-years-old, my mother went to New York to live, and she left my sister and me in the care of our great-aunt, the woman who had raised her. After one year, the stress of having two more children in my great-aunt's home resulted in my sister and my aunt, my mother's youngest sister, having a serious confrontation. The night of their "fight," my sister and I were sent to live with another great-aunt, my father's aunt.

MaDear had eight children, with five of them still at home when she accepted responsibility for two more children. It was a difficult transition for her children and for us. They were older and they felt that their territory, meaning their time with their mother, was invaded. My sister and I left there after a year, because my aunt could no longer afford to take care of us with no financial assistance from either of our parents. I was glad to go, as my cousins exacted their frustration and anger at our being in their "space" through physical violence.

Our last home before being reunited with our mother was with another aunt, my father's only sister. By this time, I was afraid of all great-aunts, aunts, and cousins. After a search among family members, my Aunt Ann, who had three children of her own and lived in a three-room apartment, agreed to take us in. It was here that I learned that aunts knew how to love and care for nieces. My aunt worked and was, for all intents and purposes, a single mother. Her husband had deserted her and her children. But she took care of all of us. She treated my sister and me the same as she did her children. She used corporal punishment as discipline. Today, she is my second mother, and I love her dearly. There is nothing I would not provide for her comfort. She taught me how to love and how to parent, lessons I would need later in my life.

At the age of 23, my sister died unexpectedly and left four children, two girls and two boys, ages two to six. The night of her death, I explained to my nieces and nephews that their mother was in Heaven with God and would not be back home. My four-year-old niece asked me, "Who's going to be our mommy now?" Without any hesitation, I answered that I would be her new mommy, and from that night until today, they have been my "babies." I went from newly married and no children to newly married and the mother of four children within 24 hours. I never discussed the issue with my husband, because the children were hurting and they were my priority. Three years later, he could not continue to "take care of other people's children." But, as their mother, I could not see them go to another home, so the marriage ended and I became a single mother of five, as I had given birth to a son. I have never drawn a distinction between my nieces and nephews and the son I bore. As far as I am concerned, they are all my children. They

grew up as sisters and brothers, and they continue to be sisters and brothers. My children call me Gina, the name they called me before their mother died. It is a constant reminder that they have had two mothers who loved them.

Becoming a kinship care provider for my children was the best decision of my life, because I had to change my life, set goals, and dream big to get my children out of the “projects” and off the welfare. I came to Atlanta, found a job at the telephone company, and worked to provide for my family. If not for my oldest four children, I would not be pursuing my doctorate. I never was encouraged to dream big, even as I read books like I was drinking water. Books were my salvation. My dream of one day earning a Ph.D. never left me. Through caring for my children, I learned that I was a powerful woman who could do anything that I truly wanted to do. I love my children, and I am truly thankful that I learned that it is possible to love children that do not come from one’s own body from the example of my Aunt Ann.

PRINCIPAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Today, there are countless Aunt Ann’s and Gina’s taking care of their nieces and nephews within black families, but there are no research studies that have examined their lives. As increasing numbers of black children are placed in foster care, it is imperative that we determine how to motivate individuals within their families or within their communities to take them into their homes. We need to understand the challenges and the rewards of aunts raising their nieces and nephews today, or who have done so in the past, so that interventions and policies can be implemented that will encourage other women

and men to do the same for a child. Although, I am examining the lives of black women, this is not just a black issue. White families are also experiencing problems, and white children also need homes, especially older white children and white children with special needs. When I was looking for a sample, a white man shared with me that his mother had raised his cousin and suggested I include her in the sample, but I explained that I did not want to have to determine race effects, so I was only interviewing black women.

Utilizing a qualitative research approach, this study sought to close the knowledge gap by giving voice to black aunts and great-aunts who serve as kinship care providers for their nieces and nephews. Four basic research questions guided the project:

1. How do black families make decisions regarding who will take responsibility for black children within families whose biological parents are unable to care for them? What part does a sense of kinship obligation play in these decisions?
2. What are the challenges and/or rewards for black aunts who serve as kinship care providers for nieces and nephews?
3. How are the lives of black aunts changed by the decision to become kinship care providers?
4. What are the childrearing practices of black aunts who serve as kinship care providers, and how are these practices learned?

SUMMARY

In this chapter, I have explained that my research explores the experiences of black aunts who serve as kinship care providers within black families. I am interested in how decisions are made to become kinship care providers, the factors that affect those

decisions, the challenges and rewards of becoming kinship care providers, the parenting practices that aunts as kinship care providers utilize, and how black aunts as kinship care providers learn parenting practices within black families.

In Chapter 2, I present a review of relevant literature. This review includes an examination of past and present research and theories on black families; the extended family and its role in the informal and formal adoption among black families, including research on grandparents as kinship care providers; a summary of the research on black children within the social welfare system; and a review of the research on parenting practices in black families.

Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methods, including data collection methods, sample recruitment, data analysis, and theoretical framework. I describe how a synthesis of black feminist theory and symbolic interactionism are important to my research design and interpretation of the data. I discuss the relevance of integrating black feminist themes into a qualitative data analysis of black women's experiences. I provide the aims of the study and their significance to studies of black women's lives within black families.

In Chapters 4 through 6, I report my major findings. I utilize extensive quotes from respondents to allow their stories to be told in their own voices, as recommended by black feminist theorists. In Chapter 4, I examine the factors that affect decisions to become kinship care providers. Chapter 5 describes the challenges of transitioning from non-parent to parent. In Chapter 6, I discuss the trials, strategies, sacrifices, and rewards of parenting nieces and nephews.

In Chapter 7, I summarize my findings on the experiences of black aunts who serve as kinship care providers within black families. I also present the theoretical implications of my findings and suggestions for future research. Implications for policy makers are also noted, including policy ideas that I believe would help kinship care providers.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The goal of this chapter is to provide a historical examination of the unique experiences of kinship care within black families. Kinship care provided by extended family members is an enduring quality in black families and is viewed as one of their strengths (Hill 1999). Female-centered kin networks have played a major role in the raising of children in black families, as children are viewed to be of major importance within black families. However, previous studies on black families have focused more on the pathology of black families, particularly when compared to the imagined norm of white middle-class nuclear families.

The strengths of black families have often been overlooked, including the willingness of blacks to adopt black children, informally or formally, who are in need of nurturance and stability in their young lives. Theoretical frameworks applied to the study of black families have often advanced a belief in a monolithic black family, not taking in account the diversity of family structures among black families. For these reasons, this background chapter includes an examination of: (1) past and present research and theories on black families; (2) black extended families and their role in informal and formal adoption; (3) black children within the social welfare system; and (4) black grandparents serving as kinship care providers.

PAST AND PRESENT RESEARCH AND THEORIES ON BLACK FAMILIES

Research on black family life has a long history, from the studies of W. E. B. DuBois in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century and continuing into the twentieth-first century (Barnes 2001; Billingsley 1968, 1992; DuBois [1903] 1989; Frazier 1939; Gibson 2005; Hill 1999; Moynihan 1965; Staples 1971; Sudakasa 1996). Much of the past literature studied black families using white, middle-class nuclear families as the norm for defining healthy, stable, and well-functioning families (Allen 1978; Freeman and Logan 2004; Hill 1999; Sudarkasa 1996). Freeman and Logan (2004) stated that "much of the past and current literature on black families… uses a Eurocentric lens and related standards to frame discussions and make decisions about the life opportunities, health, viability, and well-being of African Americans" (p. xi). Moreover, Sudarkasa (1996) noted, "The Black family is seldom described, understood, or accepted on its own terms. For more than a century, it has been portrayed as 'disorganized' and 'unstable' because it has not conformed to the white American idealized model of what a family should be" (p.13).

Early research concluded that black families were disorganized and dysfunctional (Frazier 1932, 1939; Hays and Mindel 1973; Moynihan 1965). Frazier (1939) argued that slavery, emancipation, the migration of blacks from the rural South to the urban North, and racism and economic deprivation destabilized black families, especially in regards to gender roles. He viewed black families as having a matriarchal character, with black men as marginal, ineffective, and subordinate to black women due to the weak economic and social position of black men (1939). Frazier's theory of a black matriarchy was based on

the higher incidence of female-headed households and more egalitarian relationships in decision-making in black families than was present in white families. Frazier (1932) stated, “A striking fact about these 32 (free black) families (in Augusta, Georgia in 1830) was that a woman was the head in 20 (or 62% of the) cases” (p. 25).

Frazier’s hypothesis of a black matriarchy was echoed by Daniel Patrick Moynihan in the 1965 publication, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*. Moynihan referred to low-income black families as a “tangle of pathology” (p. 5), and he argued that these families were disorganized and dysfunctional due to their matriarchal structure. Moynihan did acknowledge the existence of a black middle class with many white characteristics and values, but he believed that the black middle class was “constantly exposed to the pathology of the disturbed group and constantly in danger of being drawn into it” (p. 141). He stated that “at the center of the tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure” (p. 5). Moynihan saw the deviance of black families as the cause of “inadequate and antisocial behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate, the cycle of poverty and deprivation” (p. 5). He did not fully address the social, political, and economic isolation among blacks that impacted their ability to advance in American society. Nevertheless, Moynihan’s findings impacted public policy decisions regarding black families, especially because he shifted the responsibility of black deprivation onto black families rather than the social structure of the United States (Staples 1991).

The publication of Moynihan’s report resulted in a flurry of research on black families that was meant to disprove his hypotheses and to expose his failure to recognize

the strengths that facilitated endurance and some measure of economic success (Allen 1978; Billingsley 1968, 1992; Gutman 1976; Hill 1972, 1999; Ladner 1971; Stack 1974). Researchers also began to publish studies that highlighted the class divisions among black families (Billingsley 1968; Ladner 1971; Willie 1985).

Research conducted in the emergent model suggested that the foundation of black family life was rooted, not in America, but in Africa (Nobles 1974; Barnes 2001). Nobles (1974) argued

> Furthermore, the black family, we contend, can only be understood as a unit or system deriving its primary characteristics, form, and definition from its African nature…expressed by black families in primarily the sense of Africanity or being in tune with or responsive to an African world-view or sense of the universe. (p. 10)

Barnes (2001) asserted that proponents of the emergent model in black family research suggest that greater value be placed on socioemotional factors such as support, caring, loyalty, religion, spirituality, and less focus placed on socioeconomic indices to assess family stability. Indeed, recent research has focused on the strengths of black families that derived from African, particularly West African, familial ideals (Billingsley 1992; Freeman and Logan 2004; Nobles 1974; Sudarkasa 1996). Freeman and Logan (2004) asserted that an important understanding of black families must be derived from equally important knowledge areas regarding their core African culture, values, and traditions, and their varied experiences and responses to a history of racism and oppression since the African Diaspora.

Another aspect of this theoretical approach to studying black families was the argument that there was not a matriarchal character to black families (Hill 1972; Ladner

1971; Littlejohn-Blake and Darling 1993; Stack 1974). Ladner (1971) called for researchers to examine black families from a non-deviant perspective and to consider women-centered networks as one of the strengths that have enabled blacks to adapt to poverty and discrimination. Hill (1972) listed the five strengths of black families as strong kinship bonds, strong work orientation, adaptability of family roles, strong achievement orientation, and strong religious orientation. Hill (1999) defined family strengths as “those traits that facilitate the ability of the family to meet the needs of its members and the demands made upon it by systems outside the family unit” (p. 42).

In the 1980s and 1990s, research sought to understand increasing rates of single-parent, female-headed homes among black families. Of special note were studies that examined the factors that contributed to higher rates of single-mother homes among black families than among white families (Corcoran 1995; Mayfield 1994; Oliver 1989; Tucker 1995; Wilson 1987). Three theories were advanced to explain the rates of black single parenting: the welfare dependency model, the social isolation model, and black feminist thought. This debate is offered here as a testimony to the disparate ways that social theories have been used to construct black families as deviant rather than as adaptive and enduring.

The welfare dependency model posited that black men are unwilling to marry black women who, because of dependence on welfare, do not force black men to act responsibly. Consequently, illegitimacy results from the incentives generated by welfare, which generally supports families only if they are fatherless and non-working (Corcoran 1995; Moore, Morrison, and Glei 1995; Murray 1984; Testa, Astone, Krogh, and

Neckerman 1989). Incentives include money, food stamps, housing subsidies, and Medicaid. The receipt of these incentives encouraged black women to have more babies that are cared for at government expense (Solinger 1994:300). In Losing Ground, Charles Murray stated, “Many of them [welfare recipients] had not even been married. Worst of all, they didn’t stop having babies after the first lapse. The most flagrantly unrepentant seemed to be mostly black, too” (1984:18). In Beyond Entitlement, Lawrence Mead suggested that to counter the growth of illegitimacy, welfare benefits should be decreased “very low, too low” to live on (1986:84). He asserted that the receipt of welfare fosters the growth of illegitimacy in three ways: (1) welfare dependency results in disincentives to work; (2) welfare dependency reflects a different set of cultural values and mores than found in mainstream America; and (3) the choice to accept welfare over marriage represents a “rational” decision.

Social scientists cited the lack of a work ethic in black men as the result of either being raised by a black woman who was a welfare recipient or being released from responsibility for a child because the child’s mother received welfare (Corcoran and Adams 1995; Sanders 1990). Mead (1986) noted that welfare receipt leads to unemployment and nonwork among welfare mothers. Furthermore, recipients would not seek work unless “government first provides training, transportation, child care, and, above all, acceptable positions” (Mead 1986:80).

Proponents of the welfare dependency model viewed the attitudes of lower-class blacks regarding work as evidence of a different set of values than were found in mainstream America, including the tendency to harbor negative attitudes toward work

and education as means to upward mobility (Mead 1994; Sanders 1990). There existed a belief in an intergenerational transmission of values, wherein non-employment and welfare use among lower-class blacks leads to multigenerational illegitimate births (Edin and Lein 1997; Iversen and Farber 1996).

These beliefs persisted, even as studies demonstrated that no correlation existed between fertility rates and welfare benefit levels (Kaus 1992; Moore, Morrison, and Glei 1995; Wilson 1987; Zimmerman 1989). Regarding the lack of a work ethic among lower-class black men and women, Sanders (1990) noted that the poor are found to have a strong work ethic. Elliott and Packham (1998) found that almost three times as many single mothers on public assistance said that they were looking for work as did single mothers not on public assistance.

Research disputed the contention that lower-class blacks make a rational choice not to marry. Instead, studies show that black men would marry the mothers of their children if unmarried fathers could find decent jobs (Corcoran and Adams 1995; McGary 1992; Testa et al. 1989; Wilson 1987). McGary (1992) asserted, “One thing is certainly clear, Blacks in the underclass are not turning down good-paying, safe, non-dead-end jobs” (p. 62). Therefore, the welfare dependency model failed to consider the structural factors that contribute to the formation of black families. In contrast, Wilson’s social isolation theory underscored the structural *and* cultural aspects of illegitimacy, positing that black men are *unable* to marry and/or support the mothers of their children because of economic and social disadvantages.

Social isolation theory posited that illegitimacy results from the inability of black men to earn enough income to appeal to black women as suitable marriage partners (Dickson 1993; Lichter 1988; Wilson 1987, 1996). Two determinants of adverse employment status for urban black men are the relocation of manufacturing industries to the suburbs and the out-migration of higher-income blacks from impoverished urban areas (Wilson 1987, 1991).

The relocation of manufacturing industries to the suburbs resulted in a spatial mismatch between jobs and the residence of urban black men (Wilson 1987, 1991). Jobs that are normally filled by urban blacks relocate to the suburbs, where a lack of dependable transportation prevents inner-city blacks from pursuing the jobs, leading to weak labor-force attachment. Spatial mismatch leads to unemployment, underemployment, and low incomes (Corcoran and Adams 1995; Lichter 1988; Wilson 1987, 1991). Employment problems also stemmed from employers' racist attitudes toward urban black men (Steinberg 1989; Wilson 1987, 1991; Turner 1997). Discriminatory practices led to the hiring of black women instead of black men. Wilson (1996) noted that there was a perception by suburban employers of black women as being more responsible and determined or of having better attitudes and a better work ethic than black men. Consequently, black women who were able to earn self-sustaining wages did not view lower-earning black men as potential mates. Another drawback to employment opportunities for black men was the lack of black male role models, as successful middle-class black males moved out of inner-city communities (Anderson 1990).

Wilson (1991) noted that the declining presence of working- and middle-class males denied young black men the opportunity to see consistent work patterns. Elijah Anderson (1990) referred to the older role models for young black men as “old heads.” He stated, “The old head’s acknowledged role was to teach, support, encourage, and in effect socialize young men to meet their responsibilities with regard to the work ethic, family life, the law and decency.” With the loss of the “old heads,” young black men lacked a “guidance counselor and a moral cheerleader” (1990:69). Consequently, inner-city black youths, many of whom live in single-mother homes, failed to learn responsible behavior towards the mothers of their children. The lack of political involvement in affairs of the city that guaranteed quality schools, job networks, and the infrastructure needed for businesses to locate and prosper in the inner city represented problems for urban areas when middle-class blacks moved away. Feelings of low self-efficacy reflect what Wilson (1991) called “concentration effects,” the effects created by living in impoverished areas with few opportunities and many constraints (p.11).

Notwithstanding Wilson’s arguments, other researchers discounted the notion that social isolation theory explained the reluctance of black men to marry the mothers of their children. Blackley (1990) found that the spatial mismatch hypothesis only pertained to black women’s reluctance to marry black men without good employment prospects. Moreover, Mead (1994) posited that the marriage prospects for “prime-age Black men—who are Wilson’s main focus—has not changed enough to explain the sharp increase in female-headed families among Blacks in recent decades” (p. 325). He also asserted that

unemployment rates have little connection to a man's decision to become a father or husband.

Black feminist theory evolved out of the necessity for black women to have their presence acknowledged and their voices heard in the feminist movement (Collins 1986; hooks 1984). Believing that white feminist theory limited itself to only sexist issues relevant to middle-class white women, black feminist theorists asserted that white feminists failed to acknowledge their own racist attitudes (Collins 1998; hooks 1984). Black feminist theory highlighted the lived experiences of black women, who suffered "multiple jeopardy." King (1995) stated, "[M]ultiple refers not only to several, simultaneous oppressions but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well. In other words, the equivalent formulation is racism multiplied by sexism multiplied by classism" (p. 297). Black feminist theory underscored the historical roots of the oppression suffered by black women. Black feminist theory consists of five basic dimensions: (1) the "rape" of black women during slavery; (2) black male-black female relationships; (3) race, gender and class inequality of black women; (4) black women's identity crisis; and (5) black women and social theory.

Black feminists wrote of the "historical oppression" of black women resulting from the use of black women to increase the "stock" of slaves. During slavery, white masters raped black women with impunity (Murray 1995). Omolade (1995) stated, "Natural increase meant that the black woman was encouraged and sometimes forced to have sex frequently in order to have babies whether by black men or white men…." (p. 362). History tells of the lynching of black men, but "not the systematic rape of black

women. Yet it is in the many shades of blackness that history is told—it is impossible to hide it" (Hine 1995:384). For black feminist theorists, it was the sexual abuse of black women by white males that caused a rupture in black male-black female relationships.

During slavery, the African woman suffered horrible abuse from white men. Brutalized and emasculated, black men could not act as protectors of their womenfolk. Ashamed that they could not protect their wives, mothers, and sisters, black men found it easier to keep their own sense of self by believing that black women were aiding in their emasculation. Beale (1995) asserted, "Certain black men are maintaining that they have been castrated by society but that black women somehow escaped this persecution and even contributed to this emasculation"
(p. 148). Therefore, rather than coming together as one after slavery, black men and black women found themselves on opposite sides of a divide.

Research showed that black women are among the lowest-paid groups in America. In many cases, black women do not earn enough to sustain themselves and their children. Beale (1995:149) stated, "The economic system of capitalism finds it expedient to reduce women to a state of enslavement." Black women also are the only group that does not have someone to oppress; black women are on the bottom, oppressed and exploited by black men, white women, and white men (hooks 1984). The oppression of black women by black men represented an attempt by black men to reconnect to the patriarchy of white society; a society in which their manhood is often measured by their relationship with black women and their ability to care for their family. In effect, black women have been used by capitalist society to further oppress black men (Beale 1995).

This debate underscores the need for theories of black families that examine all possible factors that impinge on the ability of black families to survive economically and socially in America. To do real justice to studies of black families, syntheses of theoretical frameworks offer a better understanding of the interactions among persons within black families. Allen (1978) argued that previous theories on black families have not been applicable, and, therefore, much is still unknown about black family life, primarily because much of the research on black families has used a single theoretical framework. He stated, “There can not, and indeed should not, be a single theory of black family life—the diversity of these families and differences in researcher orientation forbid it” (p. 126). I argue that much of the research on black families still utilizes comparisons with white families; views black families, particularly the black lower-income family, as deviant; and often fails to consider the impact of racism and discrimination (Anderson 1990; Bowman and Sanders 1998; Grant et al. 2000; Jayakody and Kalil 2002; Rodney and Mupier 1999; Wilson 1987, 1996).

Hill (1999) wrote that twenty-five years after the publication of *The Strengths of Black Families*, the typical portrayal of black families still focuses on the pathology of black families rather than the strengths of black families. He further argued for more research on the values and strengths of black families that are part of an African heritage, such as consanguinity versus conjugality, egalitarian male and female roles within families, the importance of children, informal adoption, the importance of extended family, and bicultural socialization. The tendency for black families to work together in the best interests of black children has been well documented (Billingsley and

Giovannoni 1972; Brown, Cohon, and Wheeler 2002; Richardson 1993. In the next section, I will examine black extended families and their sense of community.

BLACK EXTENDED FAMILIES AND THEIR ROLE IN INFORMAL AND FORMAL ADOPTION

Informal adoption by extended family members is viewed as one of the strengths of black families (Billingsley and Giovannoni 1972; Brown, Cohon, and Wheeler 2002; Freeman and Logan 2004; Hill 1999; Richardson 1993; Sandven and Resnick 1990; Scannapieco and Jackson 1996; Yoest 1990). According to Sandven and Resnick (1990), informal adoption includes the absorption of children into the immediate family, as well as the practice of giving such a child to a member of the extended family to parent for an indeterminate period, to ameliorate severe economic or emotional strain upon the immediate family.

The standard for informal adoption by extended family members derived from kinship structures within African cultures, and its use as a form of family preservation among blacks is an enduring legacy of slavery (Foster 1983; Hollingsworth 1999; Jackson-White and Dozier 1997; Logan 2001; Sudarkasa 1981; Taylor, Chatters, and Mays 1988). Hollingsworth (1999) asserted that the concepts of informal adoption and extended family are “influenced by the interaction of African and African American people in the life of the ethnic group” (p. 447). Logan (2001: 9-10) argued that scholars have identified several African family patterns among black families that survived the “slavery holocaust,” including extended family orientation, the precedence of blood ties

over conjugal ties, childrearing practices, reciprocity, and shared responsibility for the well-being of others.

Extended family members are expected to work together to provide for one another. Hays and Mindel (1973) defined extended families as a

> Supportive structure which acts as a source of aid and comfort in what externally can be characterized as a somewhat hostile environment. [T]his structure represents a meaningful and pragmatic choice as determined by the black individual's life situation. (pp. 55-56)

Historically, the helping tradition of extended families has sustained blacks in America from slavery through emancipation to migration from the rural South to the urban North (Gutman 1976; Hill 1999; Hollingsworth 1999; Jackson-White and Dozier 1997; Logan 2001; Richardson 1993). Gutman (1976) asserted that ex-slave siblings and aunts and uncles often harbored enslaved kin as runaways, protecting them from abuse and hardship when separated from their immediate families, and purchased their freedom.

Dependence on extended family members has been a continuing aspect of black families (Dill 1998; Foster 1983; Gibson 2002; Hayes and Mindel 1973; Hegar and Scannapieco 1995; Stack 1974; Taylor 1990). Hayes and Mindel (1973) argued that the situation that black individuals find themselves in as a consequence of the historical and continuing state of minority group status resulted in reliance upon family as a source of material, social, and emotional support. Brown, Cohon, and Wheeler (2002) asserted that black families have responded to adversity caused by economic, social, and political inequality with an increased reliance on kin, or mutualism.

Many researchers have studied this form of informal adoption in black families (Foster 1983; Hill 1972, 1999; Jackson and Brissett-Chapman 1999; Richardson 1993;

Stack 1974; Taylor, Chatters, and Mays 1988; Yoest 1990). Historically, black children were informally adopted to preserve a sense of racial identity and belonging. Hill (1972) described how elderly relatives who served as a major source of stability and fortitude for many black families raised thousands of children of slave parents. Jackson and Brissett-Chapman (1999) asserted that the "African proverb, 'It takes a whole village to raise a child,' speaks to the collective role and sense of group responsibility held by the African community" (p. 33).

Children were highly valued in traditional African culture and the concept of illegitimacy did not exist because all children were viewed as belonging to the whole community (Crosbie-Burnett and Lewis 1993; Foster 1983; Hollingsworth 1999; Jackson-White and Dozier 1997; Sudarkasa 1996). Crosbie-Burnett and Lewis (1993) stated that blacks created a pedi-focal family system that defined family as everyone involved in the nurturance and support of an identified child, regardless of household membership. In a pedi-focal system, children are prized, and being a part of their rearing is "a privilege, not a burden" (Crosbie-Burnett and Lewis 1993: 244).

The boundaries of black families are still very flexible, with children of the same generation considering themselves as brothers and sisters, without division into cousins. Moreover, Sandven and Resnick (1990) argued that in similar manners, aunts and uncles assume responsibility for nieces and nephews as well as for their own offspring. Yoest (1990:8) stated that the tradition of "taking care of our own" by taking in needy children is so prevalent in the black community that it is a distinctive part of its culture.

Scott and Black (1991) asserted that the majority of black families are best viewed from a kin network perspective that considers both blood kin and non-blood kin as a helping network that meets the daily material and socioemotional needs of all members of black extended families. They argued that blacks survive because of their ties to families; however, even blood relatives have a social choice of assuming or not assuming their ascribed roles. They also asserted that kinship rights are social rights that "grow out of the willingness to assume obligations" (p. 205).

Black women have assumed the role of mothers to their own children and the children of other women within the extended family network. These practices provided a safety net for children, and, in many black communities, women-centered networks of community-based childcare have extended beyond the boundaries of biologically-related individuals to include "fictive kin" (Collins 2000:179). Fictive kin are friends who are willing to be obligated as "kin," namely as play fathers, play mothers, play grandmothers, play grandfathers, play uncles, play aunts, play sisters, play brothers, and play cousins (Collins 2000; Scott and Black 1991; Stack 1974). Stack (1974) asserted, "Kin and friends in domestic networks establish mutual ties of obligation as they bestow rights and responsibilities upon one another…Simultaneously, women acquire reciprocal obligations toward one another's children and rights in them" (p. 87). Taylor, Chatters, and Mays (1988) stated, "Non-kin who are active in the informal support network are frequently designated as fictive kin or pseudokin…to denote their high degree of network integration" (p. 25). Both kin and non-kin have acted as sources for the informal adoption of children in black families (Jackson and Brissett-Chapman 1999). Not only are children

informally adopted in black communities, but formal adoption has been viewed as an element in the formation and perpetuation of black families. Consequently, formal adoption is highly valued and frequently practiced among black people (Billingsley 1992).

Jackson-White and Dozier (1997) argued that the use of formal adoption services is relatively recent for blacks, and is reflective of the tradition of self-help in black communities. For the most part, blacks have not considered formal, or legal, adoption as an option, mainly because of the tendency toward informal adoption of children. Adoption was viewed as a way to care for white children. Thus, it has been less utilized in black communities (Cahn 2002). However, a myth existed that black families were either not available to adopt or were not interested in adopting, both of which have been shown to be incorrect. According to Smith-McKeever and McRoy (2005), studies indicate that the majority (70 percent) of blacks indicate a desire to give a black child a permanent home.

Historically, public or private adoption agencies have not given approval for blacks because of a societal belief in the pathology of black families (Bradley and Hawkins-Leon 2002; McRoy and Oglesby 1997; Roberts 2002). Rodriguez and Meyer (1990), in a comparative study of minority adoptive applicants and adoptive parents, found that agencies that were successful at accepting black families as adoptive parents demonstrated increased coordination and communication among agencies, personalized presentations of children, a culturally sensitive staff, use of adoption subsidies, use of single parents as adoptive resources, and educated minority communities about adoption.

McRoy and Oglesby (1997) asserted that the increase in the rate of adoption in black families was largely due to the development of culturally sensitive approaches to recruitment and retention, such as flexible agency office hours, educating rather than investigating families, public service announcements on black radio and television, and church-based activities such as adoption Sundays. Informal adoption and formal adoption are important today, because black children are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system (Billingsley and Giovannoni 1972; Jackson and Brissett-Chapman 1999; McRoy and Oglesby 1997; Morton 1999; Roberts 2002; Scannapieco and Jackson 1996). Below is a brief exploration of black children's lives within the social welfare system.

BLACK CHILDREN WITHIN THE SOCIAL WELFARE SYSTEM

Child welfare is defined as a limited array of services overwhelmingly focused on the placement of children away from their parents and administered largely through social agencies by professional workers (Billingsley and Giovannani 1972: 4). Roberts (2002) argued that the child welfare system in America has systematically dismantled black families. She stated the goal of her book, *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare*, was "to call the child welfare system what it is: a state-run program that disrupts, restructures, and polices black families" (p. viii). Roberts' accusation is understandable because research shows that although black children constituted only 15 percent of the U. S. child population in 1995, they accounted for more than three times that proportion of the child welfare population (McRoy and Oglesby 1997; Morton 1999;

Smith and Devore 2004). McRoy and Oglesby (1997) asserted that in major urban areas like New York and Detroit, about 80 percent of children needing adoptive placements are black.

Factors that contribute to greater numbers of black children in the child welfare system include parental drug use, poverty, and increased reporting of abuse and neglect. Also, a lack of understanding on the part of child welfare workers of childrearing practices among blacks sometimes results in black children being separated from their families and placed in out-of-home care (Danzy and Jackson 1999; Lawrence-Webb 1999; McRoy and Oglesby 1997; Morton 1999; Smith and Devore 2004). This situation is particularly prevalent among blacks in urban areas, with variation according to class. Danzy and Jackson (1999) argued that the emergence of crack cocaine, a cheap, smokable, highly addictive form of cocaine, has become a dominant factor in black children out-of-home placement. They argued that crack became a favored drug of black women, and tended to consume the users' interest and made women less sensitive, responsive, and accessible to their children (pp. 35-36).

Research demonstrated that black children are not only over-represented in the child welfare system, but black children remain in the welfare system longer and are less likely to be formally adopted (McRoy and Oglesby 1997; Scannpieco and Hegar 1999). Because of the increasing number of children in care and a declining pool of traditional foster families, along with the emphasis in the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 on placing children in the most family-like setting, there is a growing use of kinship care and kinship foster care (Scannapieco and Hegar 1999). Altshuler (1999)

posited that, due to a historical reliance upon informal kinship networks to protect and nurture children and families, the majority of children in the child welfare system living in kinship care are children of color.

Research has shown an increasing number of children living in the homes of kinship care providers (Cuddeback 2004; Dressel and Barnhill 1994; Gibson 2002, 2005). Kinship care refers to the formal placement of children with relatives. In 1980, two million children lived with a grandparent or other relative. In 1990, the number of children living with a grandparent or other relative was 3.2 million, and in 2000, it was six million (United States Census Bureau 2000). Whether by choice or default, grandparents, particularly grandmothers, are most likely to serve as kinship care providers, followed by aunts (Burnette 1997; Landry-Meyer and Newman 2004).

BLACK GRANDPARENTS SERVING AS KINSHIP CARE PROVIDERS

Studies on grandparents as kinship care providers have centered on the increasing number of black grandmothers raising their grandchildren (Brown et al., 2000; Dressel and Barnhill 1994; Fuller-Thomson and Minkler 2000; Gibson 2005; Roe, Minkler, Saunders, and Thomson 1996). The prevalence of grandparents as kinship care providers is probably higher than presented in the official records because many older caregivers do not apply for public assistance programs in which they would be counted as guardians. However, Poindexter and Linsk (1999) estimate that twelve percent of black grandparents serve as kinship care providers, compared to four percent of white grandparents. A number of factors contribute to the increase in black grandparents serving as kinship care

providers for grandchildren, including unemployment, parental substance abuse, teen pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and incarceration (Brown et al. 2000; Dressel and Barnhill 1994; Burnette 1997; Goldberg-Glen, Sands, Cole, and Cristofalo 1998). More recent research underscored legal and policy changes that favor kinship care over other placement arrangements as contributing factors in grandparents as kinship care providers (Altshuler 1999).

Gibson (2002) stated that kinship care--the caring of children by non-parent relatives when parents are absent, unwilling, or unable to effectively parent--is a culturally congruent practice in black families because it fits the group's commitment to assisting family members by providing a safety net. Gibson refers to the grandparent-grandchild family structures as "skipped generation" families. Skipped generation families are disproportionately represented among blacks who are significantly poorer, less likely to have a high-school education, generally single, and more likely to be older than non-kin foster parent (Dressel and Barnhill 1994; Gibson 2002; Jendrek 1993; Minkler and Roe 1993).

Dressel and Barnhill (1994) noted five dimensions of grandparent caregiving that are important. First, the large majority of everyday care provision is done by women. Research indicated that the majority of grandparent caregivers are grandmothers (Collins 2000). Second, the added caregiving responsibilities can negatively impact caregivers' employment. Third, new or expanded responsibilities can produce a host of caregiver stresses. Fourth, caregiving can also produce psychosocial rewards for caregivers. Fifth, it is possible to talk about caregiver "careers," for caregiver grandmothers. Serving as

kinship care providers for grandchildren has both challenges and costs for black grandparents serving as kinship care providers.

Some of the challenges noted in studies included role overload, role confusion, role ambiguity, and social isolation from age peers and non-custodial grandchildren (Hayslip and Kaminski 2005; Jendrek 1993). Jendrek (1993) noted that other costs to becoming kinship care providers for grandchildren involved less privacy, less time for self or one's spouse, greater financial burdens, and fewer incidents of fun and recreation. However, studies consistently demonstrate that, despite the costs and challenges of being a kinship care provider to grandchildren, grandparents also experienced rewards and benefits (Gibson 2002; Jendrek 1993; Johnson-Garner and Meyers 2003). Jendrek (1993) reported that almost two-thirds of custodial grandparents reported having more of a purpose in life, staying young and active, and continuity of family's identity. Hayslip and Kaminiski (2005) noted that 90 percent of grandparent caregivers in their sample stated that, despite the challenges, they would do it again. Still, there are grandparent caregivers who feel guilt, anger, resentment, and loss (Gibson 2002).

Black grandparents who serve as kinship care providers are heterogeneous. They differ according to social class, reasons for caregiving, age, marital status, relationship with biological parents, legal guardian status, and numbers of grandchildren they are rearing. One similarity in the articles reviewed was feelings of disjuncture between playing the anticipated role of grandparent and the reality of full-time caregiving. Although black grandparents care for grandchildren, often they lack the legal recognition

that allows them to make medical and academic decisions (Gibson 2002, Karp 1996; Williams, Dilworth-Anderson, and Goodwin 2002).

Williams, Dilworth-Anderson, and Goodwin (2002) reported that, while black women are often documented as strong and resilient in caregiving literature and popular culture, many black grandmothers serving as kinship care providers are over-represented in populations with diabetes, heart disease, strokes, lupus, and other chronic diseases. Moreover, Goodman, Potts, Pasztor, and Scorzo (2004) stated that the child welfare system places black children with relatives often without providing services or reimbursement for their kinship-headed families. While becoming a kinship-care provider for grandchildren can place black women at further disadvantage, the tendency of grandparents serving as kinship care providers is viewed as one of the strengths of black families (Gibson 2002).

Past and current research on black families has utilized disparate theories to describe and explain black families. Still, today, new theoretical frameworks are sought to explain phenomena experienced in black families. One of the most important is black feminist theory. Combining black feminist theory with another theoretical framework, such as symbolic interactionism, and the culturally emergent perspective on black families, gives black feminist theory greater explanatory value. Black feminist theory afforded black women the opportunity to resist the stereotyping of Black women's identities. Collins (1998) writes

> After all, African-American women have been depicted as being stupid; having an "essential" animal-like sexuality, a natural willingness to serve, and an "innate" ability to cook; demonstrating a seemingly endless "strength" in the face of racism and sexism,

> cheerfulness in situations of profound poverty, and a willingness to put anyone and everyone always before ourselves; and being generally "bitchy" and disagreeable. (p. 8)

Black feminist theorists write about the lives of real people and in such a way that the socio-historical context of people's lives are not lost, but become the means of explaining present oppression, granting empowerment to black women. Patricia Hill Collins refers to this method as the "outsider within" approach (Collins 1986, 1998). The present study seeks to portray the lives of black families in real ways, but with an emphasis on adaptation and strength, remembering the request of one respondent who so eloquently noted her hopes for the project: *I think it's admirable that you're doing this and I hope it presents the black community in a better light* (A20).

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN

GUIDING THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two theories were central to understanding the analysis: symbolic interactionism and black feminist thought. Symbolic interactionism was indispensable for understanding black aunts' self-identities, how their self-identities were formed within their families and communities, and the ways in which their self-identities affect their choices to become kinship care providers within black families. Black feminist thought posited a unique and distinct black female consciousness that affects black women's self-identities. Interactions among black women across many generations facilitate the construction of this black female consciousness that differs from the consciousness of white women and of men. A synthesis of symbolic interactionism and black feminist thought allowed for a fuller understanding of the data than either perspective alone.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is based on the assumption that human beings actively construct their own realities through interaction with members of social groups. LaRossa and Reitzes (1993) argued that the unique contribution of symbolic interactionism to family studies is, first, the emphasis it gives to the proposition that families are social groups and, second, its assertion that individuals develop a concept of self and their identities through social interaction." Moreover, Berger and Luckman (1966) asserted

that identities are formed by social processes and are maintained, modified, and reshaped by social relations.

Klein and White (1996) stated that symbolic interactionism, more than other family theories, calls for paying attention to how events and things are interpreted by actors. It assumes that a culture is composed of commonly shared signs and symbols from which actors construct the meanings found in the culture. They argue that we cannot understand a behavioral response unless we know what meaning the situations and the stimuli have for the actor. Symbolic interactionism represents a diverse set of theories; therefore, only a few assumptions of symbolic interactionism apply to the study of black aunts who serve as kinship care providers within black families, and those assumptions are noted below.

What humans define as real has real consequences. Also known as the Thomas Theorem after W. I. Thomas, this assumption highlights the fact that whether a situation required black aunts to intervene in the lives of their nieces and nephews depended on how black aunts conceptualized the situations. Various people can view the same situation or event differently, leading to diverse responses to the situations or events.

Individuals have minds, meaning that there is an individual self that perceives, reasons, senses, and imagines. This notion of mind includes memory and willing actions as retrospective and prospective operations. Black aunts utilized the memories of times with their own aunts in deciding how to play the role of aunts to their nieces and nephews. Self-concepts, once developed, provide an important motive for behavior. The ways in which black aunts viewed themselves affected their decision-making.

Families share in the "public" dimension of the common everyday world, but they generate their own "private" understandings. The private understandings constructed by family members are based on their shared history, perspectives, and interpretation of the events in their lives. In every case, the respondent, another family member, or the nieces and nephews defined a situation as critical enough to need intervention by black aunts. What constituted critical events in one black family may not be viewed the same in other black families, as black families are heterogeneous entities.

Black Feminist Thought

Black feminist theory recognizes that black women construct social realities that are significantly different from whites as well as black men, and that the realities of black women often center on the needs and concerns of family, rather than the needs of black women (hooks 1984; Collins 1986, 2000). Collins (2000) states,

> U. S. Black women as a group live in a different world from that of people who are not Black and female. For individual women, the particular experiences that accrue to living as a Black woman in the United States can stimulate a distinctive consciousness concerning our own experiences and society overall. (pp. 23-24)

Stanfield (1998) asserted that the experiences of white women cannot be imposed on black women; the racialized ethnic differences between white women and black women must be taken into consideration. To understand the processes by which black women become kinship care providers within black families and how their choices to become kinship care providers affect their self-identities, several assumptions of black feminist thought listed by Collins (2000) were integrated into the analysis as sensitizing ideas.

Oppression describes any unjust situation, where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society. Race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, and ethnicity among others constitute major forms of oppression in the United States. The fact that black aunts systematically receive fewer benefits than non-relative foster caregivers constitutes a form of oppression that increases the financial burden on black aunts.

Black women have long been included in the organizational structure of black organizations, including black families. Black women do not experience patriarchy in black families in the same ways that white women experience patriarchy in white families. While black women are not matriarchs within black families, in the sense of white males as patriarchs with authority and power over scarce resources, black women have historically displayed strength and courage in protecting their families and creating stability and continuity within black families.

Social theories emerging from and/or on behalf of U. S. black women and other oppressed groups aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice. Social theories reflect women's efforts to come to terms with lived experiences within intersecting oppressions. The ways that black aunts defined their lived experiences as kinship care providers underscored the affect of history on biography.

Despite the common challenges confronting black women as a group, individual black women neither have identical experiences nor interpret experiences in a similar fashion. The heterogeneity of this sample of black women highlights the variation among

black women, but also the commonalities of some of their experiences demonstrate the persistence of racism and discrimination.

Black feminist thought must both be tied to black women's lived experiences and aim to better those experiences in some fashion. One of the study's goals was to generate information that would allow for the creation of interventions to assist black aunts in their role as kinship care providers.

Through the process of rearticulation, black feminist thought can offer black women a different view of themselves and our world. This study recognized and celebrated the courage and strength of the 35 women in this sample who made/make tremendous sacrifices to ensure the stability and continuity of black families by serving as kinship care providers for their nieces and nephews.

Synthesis of Symbolic Interactionism and Black Feminist Thought

A synthesis of symbolic interactionism and black feminist thought enriched an understanding of how the identities of black women are often derived from their definitions of family. Definitions of family include who are considered to be the members of family, what are member's obligations to each other, and when as well as how those obligations should be met. Black women who acted as kinship care providers may have different definitions of the situation about responsibilities to children within their families who need assistance. Their construction of the social realities of this need may have impacted their decisions to become kinship care providers. As black women who are oppressed within this society, they know the risks that black children experience by just

being born black in America. Statistics on the lack of academic achievement for black children, incarceration rates for blacks, HIV/AIDS in black communities, police brutality, and incidents of black-on-black crime attest to the need for black women to take responsibility for black children.

RESEARCH AIMS

The main goal of this research study was to examine the lives of aunts who serve as kinship care providers for nieces, nephews, or great-nieces and great-nephews. Most of the studies on kinship care providers have examined grandparents, especially grandmothers, using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. This was a qualitative study of black women that allowed aunts a voice in the continuing dialogue on kinship care provision for black children. Specifically the aims of the study were:

1. To investigate the role of family members in decisions regarding children in the extended family network.
2. To examine factors that contribute to choosing who within extended family networks will take primary responsibility for childcare and childrearing.
3. To extend the research on kinship care provision to other groups, such as aunts, who play significant roles in the lives of black children.
4. To understand how the lives of black women are impacted by becoming kinship care providers within black families, particularly their life course trajectories.
5. To explore childrearing practices among black aunts, including how childrearing practices are impacted by the non-biological parental status of aunts.

A pilot interview was conducted to help generate research questions for the interview schedule (see Appendix A). The pilot interview was transcribed and analyzed for variables to be studied. The richness of the data from the pilot interview demonstrated that the phenomenon of black aunts as surrogate parents occurs on both micro- and macro-levels of analysis, and includes issues regarding the meanings attached to familial obligations within black families, as well as meanings attached to being black women within black families. Variables to investigate included the processes by which black women become kinship care providers, such as making a personal decision or being chosen; their definition of family, including who are considered family members and the obligations to different members of families; and the criteria for determining the costs and rewards of accepting kinship care responsibilities.

This was an exploratory study, due to the limited knowledge about black aunts who serve as kinship care providers for nieces and nephews. The unit of analysis was the individual black woman. Qualitative research methods were used to collect the richest data possible. Qualitative research allowed respondents to speak of their experiences, giving them a voice in the research process. Jayaratne and Stewart (1991) asserted that qualitative methods permit women to express their experience fully and in their own voices. Consequently, an interview guide was used, with open-ended questions that focused on life experiences. The interview schedule was tentative, and questions were amended, added, or deleted according to data received during the interview process. This study was guided by four basic research questions:

1. How do black families make decisions regarding who will take responsibility for black children within families whose biological parents are unable to care for them? What part does a sense of family obligation play in these decisions?
2. What are the challenges and/or rewards for black aunts of becoming kinship care providers for nieces and nephews?
3. How are the lives of black aunts changed by the decision to become kinship care providers?
4. What are the childrearing practices of black aunts who serve as kinship care providers, and how are these practices learned?

SAMPLING

A total of 35 women were interviewed. In the beginning, I believed that I would need to rely on a larger sample, but given the depth of the data received especially in the last twenty-five interviews, an N of 35 turned out to be sufficient---a middle ground between “too much” and “too little.”

Past research experience taught this researcher that qualitative data add up fast, leading to problems in storing and analyzing the data; therefore, sample size is always problematic in qualitative research. Moreover, Sandelowski (1995) asserted that there are no computations that can be done in qualitative research to determine, a priori, the minimum number and kinds of sampling units required. She noted that in qualitative research, sample size may refer to numbers of persons, but also to numbers of interviews and observations conducted or numbers of events sampled.

Respondents had to be black women over the age of 18 who have raised a nephew or niece, or great-nephew or great-niece, for at least one year. The aunts did not have to be blood kin; they could be fictive kin. However, only one black aunt was not biologically related to the children she was raising.

To select the women, I utilized a non-probability, purposive sampling procedure. Non-probability samples are used when no list is available of the population to be studied that would facilitate a probability sample (Babbie 1998). Snowball or chain referral sampling was one method used to recruit eligible respondents. Snowball sampling was conducted as I collected data on a few members of the target population and then asked those respondents if they knew anyone else who would qualify for the study. Only five respondents were found through snowball sampling.

One other reason for snowball sampling pertained to the problems often encountered in the recruitment of African Americans for research. Because of the low response rate of African Americans in past clinical and behavioral research, organizations such as the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Human Capital Initiative now mandate that every grant submitted for funding be reviewed for the inclusion of women and minorities as research participants. However, according to Hatchett, Holmes, Duran, and Davis 2000), there still remains a low response rate of African Americans willing to participate in scientific research. They posit that it may be the recruitment process that is the problem.

Historically, research projects, such as The Tuskegee study, may have negatively affected the participation rates of African Americans. As a result, many African

Americans may not trust researchers or how research findings will be used. Therefore, Hatchett et al. (2000) conducted research on how to improve the response rates for African Americans. They found that the recruitment process had an effect on the number of African Americans agreeing to participate in research studies. They offered five recommendations for successful recruitment of African American respondents. First, offer a meaningful monetary incentive to create interests. Second, target African American community centers for presentations because word of mouth has been found to be a very productive means of increasing awareness. Third, go beyond past research findings related to black research participation. Do not be discouraged by past failures to recruit black participants. Fourth, identify areas where women and the elderly congregate to increase the possibility of recruitment and retention of these groups as research participants. Fifth, use the lay worker concept and select people in the community or local organizations to serve in an advisory or liaison capacity. Make a list of key community members and organizations, to serve as valuable resources and provide a link between the black community and academia. It is important that these are people respected and recognized as leaders in the black community.

Flyers (see Appendix B) announcing the research and the intent of the research were placed in or sent to predominantly black churches, black businesses, daycare centers, shopping malls, college organizations that catered to black students, college bookstores, classrooms at historically black colleges and universities in the sampling area, and assisted living facilities for older blacks. Also, the research was publicized in *The Atlanta Daily World* for three weekends in a row. The most productive of these

placements was the flyers placed in assisted living facilities, as respondents called who had raised nieces and nephews in the past and/or referred daughters, nieces, or granddaughters who were doing so at the time the interviews were being conducted.

DATA COLLECTION

In-depth interviewing is a "face-to-face conversation" designed to gather information (LaRossa 1989:227). I began all interviews by asking respondents to describe how they came to take responsibility for their nieces and nephews. Subsequent questions depended on the answers given to the first question. The interviewer utilized probes for further understanding when answers were short and vague, or where it seemed respondents were confused by the questions asked.

The interviews were conducted within a 125-mile radius of Atlanta, Georgia, due to budgetary limitations. Also, because face-to-face interviewing was a crucial aspect of the research design, I did not want to interview through long-distance telephone calls. Interviews lasted from 40 minutes to three hours. Each respondent was interviewed only once. Where additional information was needed or questions omitted in error, respondents agreed that they could be called for greater detail, and this process was used twice.

The interviews were conducted in various places that were accessible to both interviewer and respondent, keeping in mind issues of respondents' and the researcher's safety and the confidentiality of respondents. The majority of interviews (n=31) were conducted in respondents' homes, at their requests. One interview took place at a local

eatery, as that was the most convenient place for both the respondent and the researcher. Two interviews were conducted in the researcher's office. One interview was conducted at the respondent's workplace, at her request.

All participants were asked to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix C), which included the right to end any interview or to withdraw from interviews at any time without any problems and possible risks. Also, the informed consent forms advised respondents of the steps to be taken to ensure confidentiality. I paid $25 for all interviews after the fifth interview. The pilot interviewee was not paid. I paid for the interviews from the monies received from a Georgia State University Dissertation Grant of $1000.

All interviews were audio-taped. Tapes were numbered, to avoid placing personal identifiers on the tapes that could have breeched respondents' confidentiality. Also, field notes, written as soon possible, described any non-verbal communication of respondents, such as facial and/or hand gestures, and my own feelings and perceptions of each interview. I also compared my own experiences as a kinship care provider to two nieces and two nephews with the experiences of the respondents. Thus, my research, like that of other qualitative researchers, was a *participant informed* investigation (e. g., see Dressel and Clark 1990; LaRossa and LaRossa 1981). Field notes were analyzed as part of the data.

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

At the time they became kinship care providers, respondents ranged in age from 11 to 43. They had been caregiving for a period of 1 year through 35 years; the 35 years

results from continuous care for nieces and nephews and some of their children. The majority (*n*=23) were unmarried at the time they began caring for their nieces and nephews (see Table 1, Appendix D). Thirteen were childless, although three became parents after becoming kinship care providers for their nieces and nephews. Of those who had children, ten had one child; eight had two children; and four had three children.

A total of 73 children were in their care. Thirteen aunts took in one child; fourteen took in two children; three took in three children; two took in four children; and three took in five children. Often, aunts took in children at different times across their life course. Thirty of the children were brothers' children; twenty-five were sisters' children; one child was a nephew's child; and seventeen were nieces' children. Fourteen respondents were still caring for their nieces and nephews at the time of the interviews.

Children ranged in age from newborn to 16. The reasons children came to live with their aunts or great-aunts included parents' drug addiction; mother and/or father's death; abandonment; neglect; family violence, including domestic violence and child abuse; incarceration of one or both parents, and parents' divorce or separation (see Table 2, Appendix E). Children's contact with biological parents ranged from none at all to occasional weekend visits. In one case, at the time of the interview, a respondent had been advised by the courts to return three great-nephews to the care of their biological mother who had abandoned them in the great-aunt's home.

An overwhelming majority (*n*=32) worked part-time or full-time jobs when they became primary care-givers to nieces and nephews, two were in college or high school, and one was unemployed. Three aunts did not finish high school; six were high school

graduates; 16 had some college attendance; eight were college graduates; and two had graduate degrees. Two of the aunts who did not finish high school stopped their schooling to care for family members. Eight aunts had annual incomes of less than $10,000; eleven aunts had annual incomes from $10,000-$29,999; ten had annual incomes from $30,000-$49,999; five had annual incomes from $50,000-$69,999; and one aunt had an annual income greater than $70,000.

DATA ANALYSIS

For my analysis, I employed grounded theory methods. Grounded theory methods (GTM) were originally devised by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss as a systematic way to conduct qualitative research. GTM were designed especially for generating and tprovisionally verifying theory (Glaser 1978, 1992; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1990; 1998). The roots of GTM involve the creation of theories in intimate relationship with the data, by developing concepts and linkages that capture variation (Strauss 1987:6-7). Equally important to GTM is the use of the researcher's experiences as experiential data, meaning that the researcher's biography and social science knowledge not only give added theoretical sensitivity but also provide suggestions for making comparisons (Strauss 1987:17). Indeed, data are constructed from the many events observed or read about or heard about, constructed on a highly selective series of actions, and recast from respondents' words in new and analytic terms (Strauss and Corbin 1997:64).

GTM are a cornucopia of research techniques, including coding, constant comparative analysis, development of theoretical concepts and statements, building

analytic categories, memoing, theoretical sampling, generating theory, and writing. For Glaser and Strauss, GTM were guidelines, not rules, which researchers should study, use, but also modify to fit the researcher's needs.

LaRossa (2005) offers a methodologically condensed by still comprehensive interpretation of GTM that is meant to "reduce GTM to a set of essentials" (p. 838). His version builds on the following five principles to interpret the three major phases of GTM coding (open, axial, and selective):

> (a) Language is central to social life. Thus, the microanalysis of written texts, the heart of a grounded theoretical analysis, is a worthwhile enterprise. (b) Words are the indicators upon which GTM-derived theories are formed. The connection between the words on a page and the theories in one's mind, however, is more reciprocal than is sometimes realized. (c) Coding and explanation are built upon a series of empirical and conceptual comparisons. The construction of variables (*categories* in the GTM lexicon) depends on classifying concepts and infusing dimensionality into the theorizing process. (d) From a grounded theoretical perspective, theories are sets of interrelated propositions, whereas propositions state how variables are related… (e) There is value in choosing one variable from among the many variables that a grounded theoretical analysis may generate and making that variable central when engaged in theoretical writing. It will serve as the backbone of a researcher's "story." [italics in original] (p.838)

Although these five principles were central to my analysis, I did not utilize GTM methods to the fullest, as I did not generate a formal or generic theory; instead, as noted by Glaser and Strauss (1967), I adapted the methods to meet the requirements of my study. For instance, in data collection, I did not utilize theoretical sampling, in which subsequent interviewees would have been chosen according to the analysis of the previous data, to flesh out concepts. I did use the three phases of coding that are common

to GTM and the three stages that LaRossa recommends (open, axial, and selective). I also used the concept-indicator model that Glaser (1978) first described and LaRossa (2005) endeavored to refine. The concept-indicator model utilizes the constant comparison of indicators. That is, each indicator for a concept is compared with previous indicators for that concept.

Open coding refers to a "procedure by which empirical data are conceptualized… through examining minutely every line, sentence and paragraph. The conceptual labels are analyzed and compared and subsequently a list of conceptual categories is created" (Honecki 1997:144). I began open coding after the first five interviews were completed. I did a line by line analysis of each answer to questions. After the first conceptual labels were created for the first five interviews, I assigned each concept a color, and color-coded all indicators the same that were believed to be indicators of the same concepts. Each subsequent interview was analyzed utilizing the same color scheme. When new concepts were created in later interviews, they were assigned a different color, and for verification purposes, all interviews before were re-analyzed for the new concept(s). I constantly compared indicators, particularly indicators that were of the same concept, asking generative questions regarding what each line represented. For example, respondents frequently talked of friends as family. I placed their comments under the concept of "definition of family." When two interviewees stated friends could not be family, I placed their answers as indicators of the same concept. I noted on a memo that there are criteria for friends as family members and wrote down how these two respondents differed from all other respondents in their answer to the question. I continued to link

indicators to concepts until there was no significant new information to be entered about the concept. In GTM, this means a concept is theoretically saturated.

Also, during open coding, I placed the color-coded indicators into conceptual folders, with all the indicators for one concept together in one Word file. Afterwards, I analyzed indicators answer by answer, constantly comparing the indicators once more, as I sought to dimensionalize concepts. With the concept of willingness to help, I wanted to understand the dimensions of willingness to help, such as high willingness to act or low willingness to help, duration of willingness to help, and range of actions individuals were willing to perform. In effect, I was employing the variable-concept-indicator model that LaRossa (2005), drawing on Glaser (1978), proposed.

In the original GTM lexicon, categories would be created, but LaRossa suggested that *variable* be substituted for *category* because it makes it clear that a category is essentially meant to capture not only similitude but also dimensionality among a set of concepts. Some variables were developed from the analysis of the conceptual labels, utilizing my conceptual framework as sensitizing concepts as well as in vivo codes, which are respondents' words in the data used to name concepts or variables. Other variables were suggested by the previous research on black grandmothers as kinship care providers.

In axial coding, the relationship between variables or among variables is examined. I used the five elements of Strauss and Corbin's (1998) model to make connections within and between variables. The five elements of Strauss and Corbin's paradigm model are causal conditions, intervening conditions, contextual conditions,

actions and strategies, and consequences. Causal conditions usually represent sets of events or happenings that influence phenomena. Intervening conditions are those that mitigate or otherwise alter the impact of causal conditions on phenomena. Actions and strategies refer to strategic or routine tactics that people use to handle situations, problems, or issues. These are deliberate acts that are taken to resolve a problem that shape the phenomena in some way, such as a black aunt deciding to take responsibility for a niece or nephew because the family felt the child was in danger. Consequences are actual or potential outcomes of actions taken. There are ranges of consequences, some intended and some unintended.

It is at this phase, according to LaRossa (2005), at which GTM research begins to fulfill its theoretical promise (p. 849). Questions such as why, where, when, who, how, and with what consequences are asked of a focal variable. Each variable is temporarily placed in the forefront of the analysis, and the questions applied to each variable helps to code for process. During axial coding, I placed each variable in a separate Word file, to determine the relationships between and among variables. I separated variables according to whether black aunts were married or single, parent or non-parent when becoming a kinship care provider, and presently caring for nieces and nephews or had done so in the past. This strategy helped me more fully examine conditions/contingencies, strategies, actions, and consequences across time.

For the variable, making the choice to become a kinship care provider, I studied which of the other variables impacted decisions and under what conditions/contingencies were decisions made. I also examined the consequences of making the decision, again

relating variables to each other, ensuring that each variable was theoretically saturated. Since all of my respondents were black, there was one question—having to do with context—that I could not answer directly, but only could speculate about, and that is, how would my results be different if I had studied white aunts or aunts in other racial and ethnic minority groups? In this stage, I was still writing memos regarding the overall story being told by the black aunts, and I believed that there were two stories with considerable linkages in the data: salvaging children's lives and family maintenance. It was in the next stage of coding, selective coding, that I resolved this dilemma.

In selective coding, a core variable is identified. The core variable is the one variable among all the variables generated during coding that, in addition to other qualities, is theoretically saturated and centrally relevant. The core variable, as noted earlier, serves as the backbone of the researcher's "story" (LaRossa 2005). Several of the criteria that Glaser (1978) and later Strauss (1987) advocated for choosing the core variable include that it must appear frequently in the data, relate easily to other variables, and allow for building the maximum variation in the analysis. During selective coding, I examined two possible core variables, and I ultimately decided that salvaging children's lives was the core variable.

Although I did not develop a generic or formal theory about salvaging, I did pose some generic questions in the course of my analysis. I asked myself, for example, what else is salvaged and who does salvaging, as well as who or what is routinely salvaged. I decided that volunteerism is a form of salvaging lives, and that individuals who volunteer are salvagers with distinct characteristics. Moreover, salvaging junk could be a way of

saving the planet and junk salvagers may be different from individuals who don't worry about the planet. As I reread the Word files and compared answers, I continually saw references to saving nieces and nephews, helping them remain healthy and protecting their childhood, raising them to be productive citizens, and ensuring they were not lost in the system. Consequently, the story of black aunts raising their nieces and nephews is best told in terms of salvaging children's lives. As in other instances of salvaging, decisions must be made that a need for salvaging exists, then individuals must decide if they are willing to do the salvaging. Once the decision is made to become a salvager, lives are changed, as the salvagers transition from their old lives to new lives. Lastly, there are consequences, challenges, and/or rewards for the salvagers. This is the story of salvaging children's lives, as presented in the next three chapters. In the presentation, all names of persons and places have been changed to numbers or pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the respondents.

I combined black feminist strategies and grounded theory methods for knowledge validation. Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett (2003) suggested utilizing black feminist strategies and grounded theory methods together to analyze the meanings, social roles, values, and motives that govern the actions of black women in specific contexts (p. 206). They argued that by integrating black feminist themes into qualitative research designs in family studies, "we allow Black women to be directly involved in the research process through the sharing of analyses and through frankly discussing their experiences" (p. 207). They suggest multiple techniques for research with black women, four of which I incorporated into the analyses.

First, I educated myself on the history and culture of kinship care provision, meaning I did not take for granted that I possessed an insider status. Second, I saw myself and the respondents as equals who had made similar decisions to care for non-biological children. I worked hard to minimize the hierarchical stance of researcher and researched, by asking all respondents if there were aspects of their experiences I failed to cover in the questions. Their suggestions were added to the interview guide and asked of subsequent respondents. Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett (2003) stated, "Those of us who are privileged to be the conduits of Black women's experiences—not necessarily the authors of such experience—and who are accountable to Black communities, are also responsible for debunking racist and sexist stereotypes of Black women while being careful not to perpetuate multiple oppressions in their own words" (p. 210). Third, I monitored language throughout the interview process, to avoid driving a wedge between researcher and informant. Language is a social status marker that, used properly, can validate the experiences of informants. In the quotes, I use the language as spoken by the respondents, as a act of validation. Fourth, I utilized multiple strategies to assist the informant in uncovering and confronting unarticulated meanings or subjugated knowledge, including asking the same question in multiple ways.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The research design for this project posed several challenges. Finding the desired number of respondents who were willing to participate in in-depth, face-to-face interviews was difficult, due to the nature of the inquiry. Many people consider family

situations as private, and, therefore, do not wish to discuss issues regarding their personal relationships with a virtual stranger. I received at least five negative answers to requests for interviews. Ethical issues also can arise regarding the discomfort and anxiety caused by the revelation of intimate secrets, as well as information given regarding family members who have not consented to having their lives examined (LaRossa, Bennett, and Gelles 1981).

Respondents were asked to relate information pertaining to childhood memories. Due to the phenomenon of selective memory, participants' accounts may not be entirely accurate. Additionally, being audio-taped may have unnerved some respondents. There were some respondents who asked for the tape to be turned off at certain points, and valuable information was not recorded. These "off the record" comments were not utilized in the analysis of the data or reported in any way in the finished report.

As the study progressed, questions were added or deleted, as deemed appropriate by the researcher, meaning that not all questions were asked of all respondents. Those that were asked were also not asked in identical ways. This is nearly always the case in semi-structured interviewing, wherein respondents are encouraged to talk on issues of importance to them, up to a point (LaRossa 1989). No two respondents may find the same experiences important or different respondents may attach different meanings to the same experiences, raising questions of validity. However, Collins (2000) advocates a black feminist epistemology that includes methods of knowledge validation that focus on whether the interpretation of data is credible to the participants as well as to other black women; one in which researchers utilizing black feminist theory are held accountable for

their knowledge claims. The new method of validation underscores the inability of Eurocentric knowledge validation processes to judge the knowledge claims of black women. One way that black women validate knowledge claims is through lived experience. Certainly, these black aunts were experts in their own lives, and I recognized them in that position.

Lastly, I understood that my being a black woman may hinder efforts to understand issues regarding racial norms, because respondents may not comment on issues they assume the researcher already understands. Consequently, being an insider may not yield as valuable information as that gathered by an outsider. However, being a black woman who has raised four nieces and nephews as my own children may lead to richer data, as respondents come to know that I can empathize because I have "traveled the same road."

It is important to acknowledge, too, that black women are not a monolithic group, and that differences in class and skin color can engender misunderstandings (Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett 2003; Johnson-Bailey 1999). Johnson-Bailey (1999) noted that often in interviews between a black female researcher and black female respondents, educational level and perceived class status can set the researcher apart as different, making it difficult to achieve the acceptance and understanding I envision. Therefore, I had to be particularly vigilant in not appearing as the "expert" black female researcher. Moreover, the face-to-face interviews were conducted with feminist themes in mind.

Feminist researchers seek to break down the power relationship between researcher and researchers, by being willing to share their own life experiences with

respondents in an open and honest way (Acker, Barry, and Esseveld 1991; Johnson-Bailey 1999; Reinharz 1992). Therefore, I allowed the respondents to ask me questions regarding my experiences. As a black female researcher, I am committed to working to counter the opinions in previous research that appears to blame black women for the all of the social ills found in black families and communities (Devault 1996). The goal of feminist research is to improve the lives of women and to give voice to women's experiences, understandings, emotions and actions (Devault 1996; Jayaratne and Stewart 1991; Reinharz 1992). Therefore, this study sought to relate "the other side of the story," in hopes that the information gathered can be used to improve the lives of black women and black children, present and future.

CHAPTER 4

THE CHOICE TO BECOME A KINSHIP CARE PROVIDER

Synthesizing black feminist thought and symbolic interactionism, I found that black aunts believed that black families and the ways that roles are enacted in black families were very different from that of whites. These feelings of uniqueness were created through the meanings attached to roles as enacted by earlier generations of black women. Black aunts learned from other black women the meanings, or shared understandings of the definitions of situations and events, of mothering within black families. These lessons were learned directly through face-to-face interactions with mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and female cousins in women-centered networks. Collins (2000) stated that the institution of black motherhood consists of a series of constantly renegotiated relationships that black women have with one another, with black children, with the larger black community, and with self. It is out of these negotiated relationships that meanings arise, as black women interact with each other.

However, black aunts also learned these lessons indirectly, through familial stories that emphasized the role of black women in family maintenance and the care of black children born in a racist society. Collins (2000) noted that organized, resilient, women-centered networks of grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins took responsibility for one another's children. It was within these women-centered networks that familial roles were created and intergenerationally transmitted. Familial roles within black families are well articulated and represent a common language within black families. St.

John and Feagin (1998) averred that keeping alive memories of kinship experiences links members of black families and contributes to a common language that facilitates family cohesion and longevity. When decisions were made to serve as kinship care providers within black families, black aunts utilized the cultural scripts handed down to them from legions of black aunts serving as kinship care providers before them.

The use of cultural scripts that prescribe that black aunts should take responsibility for nieces and nephews when the biological parents are absent does not imply that black aunts did not possess human agency, for as noted by Gecas (2003), while we are products of social and physical forces, we are also causal agents whose decisions shape the course of our lives. Instead, cultural scripts denote that once individuals have decided to take on a historical and well-articulated role, they are expected to utilize cultural scripts or risk being sanctioned. Sanctions can include stigmatization and/or harsh judgments regarding one's abilities to perform in the role. The use of cultural scripts also does not mean that there is one monolithic model for being a black aunt; instead, the way that individual black aunts enact the role depends on how the role is defined in their individual family histories.

The black aunts had expectations of themselves and others in the role of black aunt within black families and were critical of aunts who failed to meet the expectations of this role. The decisions to become a kinship care provider demonstrated human agency, meaning the ability to make one's own choices, even though the decisions were based on cultural understandings of black aunts. Black aunts did not react passively to cultural scripts, but used their minds to make conscious, active decisions regarding

becoming a kinship care provider. In this chapter, I define the core variable of the analysis, salvaging children's lives, and present the stages of salvaging child's lives. Also, I list and examine the five factors that impacted black aunts' willingness to salvage children's lives.

Black aunts are a heterogeneous group representing a variety of family-centered networks that support the stability and continuity of individual kin-groupings (Hill 1972, 1999; Logan 2001; Johnson and Staples 2005). Among this sample of black aunts, family networks differed according to social class, definitions of family and familial membership, notions of family obligations, parenting practices, and parenting philosophies. What the women had in common was the willingness to accept primary responsibility for their nieces and nephews. A number of conditions led to these aunts becoming primary caregivers to their nieces and nephews, including parents' drug addiction; death of primary caregivers; abandonment; neglect; domestic violence and child physical abuse; parental physical and mental illness; incarceration of one or both parents; teenage parents; and parents' divorce or separation.

In keeping with black feminist thought, these black aunts viewed taking care of their nieces and nephews as a familial responsibility shared by all adult members in black families. For some of them, the care of children was not just the responsibility of the extended family, but also the responsibility of black communities as a whole.

> *I do believe how people will say sometimes how it takes a whole community to raise a child. Well, for me, still, it definitely takes a whole family to raise a child, especially in black communities, definitely in black communities, with so many people missing fathers.* (A1)

> *It takes the village, and the village is the family.* (A19)
>
> *I really believe that it's our responsibility. There's no reason that there should be children unwanted and orphaned.* (A18)

One of the major findings in this study was that more than one-third of the children (*n*=17) represented in the study were related to the aunts or great-aunts through their fathers.

> *He [brother] was in the military and he and a young lady got pregnant. And he found out about it, and being in the military, he decided, they got in touch with him and wanted him to sign adoption papers. And he didn't want to do that…. And I just happened to go home one weekend, and his mom, who was my step-mother, informed me that he had a baby. And I said, you tell Jerry to call me, and tell him I'll take this baby and I'll raise him. He'll know he is his father but he'll be my child. And of course, he called me, and went through the motions and paper work and we went… and we got him, two weeks before he was six months old.* (A13)

Previous research has centered on women-centered networks in which female relatives take care of each other's children (Collins 2000). However, this research demonstrated that it is not only the children of other women but also the children of men within families who become the responsibility of Black aunts. This finding highlighted the fact that gender ties are not as significant as they appear when it comes to taking responsibility for a child in need, because, for whatever reason, the children were not with their maternal relatives, as previous research would suggests. Future research on black aunts should include questions regarding whether nieces and nephews are related through female or male relatives, and if feelings regarding nieces and nephews differ according to the gender of the biological or adoptive parents.

Black aunts also reported that men in their families requested that their sisters, mothers, grandmothers, or other female relatives take responsibility for children, as the men felt that they were not equipped to raise the children. The following story highlights the gendered aspect of salvaging children's lives.

> *So, of course, the grandfather, says, "Hey, I don't have, I can't watch the kids." But he did not call me, he called the paternal grandfather, and the paternal grandfather said, " Bring the kids, it's not a problem." He brought the kids to the paternal grandfather. So my father-in-law said to me, "Look, I can't really take care of the kids. I don't have skills at this point, nor the age, or anything." So we told him to, send the kids to us by plane. We would take care of them… The children's paternal grandfather got in touch with the father and made him sign custodial papers for my, for his brother to take care of his children, and that's how we came to have them.* (A2)

The fact that neither grandfather felt capable of taking care of the children and sent them to a female who was not biologically related to the kids confirmed that black women are the ones in families that are delegated to salvaging children's lives.

Therefore, seeing to the needs of their nieces and nephews helped support familial stability and continuity. In this way, *aunting*, conceptualized as the labor or tasks undertaken by black aunts to preserve families, is a form of kinwork.[1] Stack and Burton (1998) define kinwork as the collective labor expected of family-centered networks across households and within them. They asserted that kinwork regenerates families, maintains life-time continuities, sustains intergenerational responsibility, and reinforces shared values. Kinwork includes the intergenerational care of children or dependents and

[1] The term, *aunting*, was inspired by the use of *uncling* to define the process of caring for nephews by Milardo (2005:1229).

maintaining family traditions. Research consistently indicated that women are relegated as primary caregivers for children and as the keeper of family traditions in black families (Collins 2000; Dressel and Clark 1990). Therefore, aunting is gendered work, carried out by black women within black families.

While most people have aunts, whether through blood, adoption, marriage, or appropriation, research that examines aunting as kinwork is scarce. Lambora and Nguyen (2004) considered aunts as one part of the extended family that helps support members of families. In her research on surviving and coping with emotional abuse in childhood, Doyle (2001) found aunts to be the most important figure for eight of the fourteen adults interviewed. Aunts gave support, served as role models by showing love to their own children, helped to provide positive experiences, and made the child feel valued (p. 393). In doing so, aunts helped to save the lives of their nieces and nephews. In this study, black aunts performed many of the same functions; therefore, I refer to this work as salvaging children's lives.

Salvaging refers to saving from loss or destruction and retrieving from disaster. Each aunt recognized that someone, preferably family members, must be willing to care for children when their biological parents are unable or unwilling to care for them properly. These black aunts considered these situations as potentially damaging to Black children's ability to grow into well-adjusted and productive citizens of society.

> *I'm not allowing anybody to disrupt their lives or let them feel unsafe or unloved, or let them grow up where they don't know how to trust. Because they won't grow up to be whatever well-adjusted means, if they don't have that, and I'm not about to allow her or anybody else to destroy the stability that God has allowed me to play in their lives.* (A31)

These thoughts are confirmed by studies that show that black children spend longer times in foster care and are less likely to be adopted. Moreover, Brown, Cohon, and Wheeler (2002) argued that kinship care minimizes the disruption youth feel when removed from their parents' care, due to the familiarity with kin caregivers whom children know as family. Consequently, aunting strengthens families, keeping black children within their families and, thereby, preserving another generation and maintaining the resiliency of black families.

Salvaging children's lives happens in three basic stages. First, the decision is made to intervene in the children's lives. Second, the transition from aunt to primary caregiver occurs. Third, aunts formulate parenting practices and philosophies that help salvage children's lives. These stages do not necessarily occur in a linear fashion, nor were they experienced by black aunts in the same progression. However, for analysis sake, I will present them in an orderly manner.

The decision to intervene in children's lives depended on the willingness of individuals to accept responsibility for children who are not biologically their own. The greater the willingness to act on behalf of nieces and nephews, the easier it was to make the decision to become primary caregiver to nieces and nephews. LaRossa and Reitzes (1993) noted that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. They state that "symbolic interactionists posit an intervening 'loop' of conscious thought and cognitive meaning between stimulus and response and/or between feelings and actions" (p. 143). Therefore, willingness to salvage children's lives depends on the meanings that aunts attached to the events in the children's lives and the

feelings that are evoked upon hearing of children in various situations. Their motives for acting on behalf of their nieces and nephews originated with aunts' definitions of the situations that nieces and nephews were in.

C. Wright Mills (1940) defines motives as accepted justifications for present, future, or past acts. He argued that individuals choose from different alternative acts on the basis of the consequences they anticipate, whether the consequences are real or imagined, and raising questions that generate motives (p. 905). In this study, black aunts decided to intervene in the lives of their nieces and nephews, as they asked the question, what would happen to these children if their aunts did not take them?

> *I always say like, you know, like, what would his life be without me? Because he's learned so much and he's grown so much just being with us from when we first had him. And I wonder how his life would be without me?* (A17)

Six factors impacted aunts' motives and their willingness to salvage children's lives: perception of a crisis, family consciousness, a black helping tradition, the importance of faith, personal identities, and the role of aunt.

PERCEPTION OF A CRISIS

For these aunts, the decision to salvage children's lives usually began with the perception of a crisis that impeded children's physical, emotional, or mental development. How crises are defined depends on the meanings that individuals attach to the events in their lives (Aberg, Sidenvall, Hepworth, O'Reilly, and Lithell 2004). The meanings attached to the events, or the definitions of the situations of nieces and

nephews, were shaped in a climate of racial hostility and discrimination that all blacks experience during some parts of their lives.

The perception of a crisis represents an interpretation of the situations of children's lives. Therefore, every situation is open to multiple definitions. Aberg et al. (2004) argue that the definition of a situation is dependent on the person from whose point of view the situation is interpreted. Therefore, if no perception of crisis existed or individuals within the family believed that a situation was not so critical that action needed to be taken, then no actions were taken. In one case, the father of three children did not perceive a crisis, so he did not act until he was made to perceive the situation as critical.

> *And it was one of the times she [biological mother] left that one of my older sisters convinced my brother to go take the kids.* (A1)

In contrast, one of the children's aunts perceived that a crisis existed for her nephews and niece, and she took action accordingly. In the study, crises were defined by family members, the aunts, the children themselves, and state child protective services. Perceptions of crises resulted from the belief in the helplessness of children; unhealthy living conditions; and state intervention.

Helplessness of Children

Aunts expressed their beliefs in the helplessness of children by referring to children as innocent victims, the inability of children to care for themselves, and to children's need for adult supervision. One aunt stated, "Children are very needy" (A20). The more individuals think of children as helpless, the greater the perception of a crisis in the children's lives which needs resolution, and the greater the likelihood that aunts will decide to act on behalf of nieces and nephews.

> *Yes. I mean, because, they're not responsible for what goes on with the adults. It's not their fault. So, we can't put it on them or blame them, or take it out on them. We need to lead and show them direction. Show them that there is a better way to do this or to do that.* (A34)

In nearly all (*n*=33) cases, aunts did not feel as though they made a decision per se, because the alternative to leave the child in a situation perceived as bad was not an option.

> *Well, for me, any time it involves a child, to me, you don't get a choice of what you will do or what you don't do or can't or will not do, because children cannot raise themselves. They can't…. It's just, you know, kind of anytime that it involves a child and that child needs an adult, then, it's not a choice of whether it will be done or it will not be done. It has to be done.* (A1)

> *There were no decisions. I mean, what else was I going to do? I wasn't going to turn them out. That thought never crossed my mind. There was no decision. I didn't know how I was going to do it. I didn't know why. I said a prayer.* (A20)

One black aunt compared making the decision to the decisions regarding buying a car or whether to have a boy or a girl baby.

> *Yes, it just kind of like falls in your hands. You know it's something, you know, that you don't have time to say, well,*

> *I wonder if I want the red car or the blue car, or you know? It's like you don't make the decision on if I'm going to have a boy or a girl. You just get whatever God gives you. This is about the same way. You don't make the decision on, well, I guess, I guess I'll take my nephews and raise them. No, a friendly weekend turns into a lifetime.* (A26)

Unhealthy Living Conditions

For the aunts in this study, for children to grow and mature, they have certain rights and needs. Chief among these rights are the need for stable homes; the need for parents who love them and are there for them; a right to a violence-free atmosphere; and a right to a home-life conducive to black children learning how to live in two cultures. All the aunts in this study made decisions to take children into their homes after it was found that one or more of the needs and/or rights of children was not being met. For aunts, this situation constituted a crisis, and they set out to see that what the children lacked was provided in their aunts' homes. Lack of parenting skills, parents' lifestyles and instability, and children not being wanted were some of the unhealthy living conditions aunts mentioned.

Parents' lifestyles and instability added to the perception of children in unhealthy living conditions.

> *She was in rehab last November, and it's been one thing after another since she's been in there. She wasn't, she doesn't get the fact that it's not about what you want. It's about number one, what's best for the children. And it's about stopping this, Lady.* (A6)

> *I said, "I'm fixing to go through court. You won't get them back." I said, "These children need a normal life, a stable life." …And I'm like, I'm not really able, but I say, I know that God is*

> *going to make me able. You know, I have a stable home…. Whatever she wants, she going to be a CHILD, instead of trying to be grown.* (A25)

State Intervention

One consistent aspect of this sample was a distrust of child protective services. When the state intervened by removing a child from the parents' custody, aunts found themselves either being asked by child protective services to take the children or volunteering to do so after learning by themselves or from another family member that the children were in state care.

> *Because his mother is not around. And he was put in a foster home. And I got him out of the foster home, and I'm going to court to get legal, to get legal custody of him* [10-year- old great-nephew]. (A16)

Aunts disapproved of children being placed in foster homes, mainly because of the beliefs among this sample that foster care is hazardous to children, especially to black children. They expressed fears of the molestation of children, of children being lost in the system, and of foster parents who care for children only out of greed, not out of a true caring spirit. The perception of a crisis increased when the state intervened because of the belief that situations must be really dire for the state to be involved. One aunt said, "Because when they bring children to DFACS, that's the last resort" (A20).

More than a third (*n*=14) of the aunts in this study had dealings with child protective services, and none of them had anything positive to say about the experiences. All other aunts stated that they took the children to keep them "out of the system." They expressed beliefs that once children enter state custody, they get lost, siblings are

separated, children change foster homes frequently, and children do not get to know their family or, in the case of siblings, each other. Aunts who had no direct dealing with state child protective services made statements similar to this one:

> *They're either going to go into foster care, and you don't know who'll have them. And most of them are going to wind up injured, dead, or on the street.* (A11)

However, one aunt who had intense dealings with state child protective services and who had been ordered to return the children to the custody of their mother was very disparaging of state child protective services and politicians.

> *There are 700 children in Georgia that they cannot find in the juvenile care system. They can't find them. They don't know what happened to them. They slipped through the cracks…. They could be dead. They could be gone. They could be in another country. They could have been sold into white slavery as they call it. Children die all the time. The one thing that I think is important, and I will say this is that the child advocacy system is abysmal.* (A19)

FAMILY CONSCIOUSNESS

I conceptualized family consciousness as the recognition of "we-ness," or the sense that individuals belong to a unique group of individuals. In this sample, aunts spoke of close families and not-so-close families, but all viewed families as important and obligations to families as paramount to any other type of obligations. This is especially true when it comes to children in their families.

> *I mean it was really, I mean, if they weren't related to me, I would tell them, come and get these kids. Because they were free to be adopted.* (A35)

Aunts expressed family consciousness in their definitions of family, a sense of family obligations, and in family rituals.

Defining Family

The way that these aunts defined family impacted decisions to salvage children's lives. The stronger the belief in family supporting each other, the greater the likelihood that these aunts would do whatever was necessary to salvage the lives of the youngest members of the family.

> *You know, it takes a nation to raise a child. You know it probably wouldn't hurt to be with the children. But it depends…And I said I didn't want any more children, but I'm sure if it comes down to it and something happens, yes, I would take the children in.* (A11)

This sample of aunts defined family very broadly, more like kin-groups than family as defined by the Census Bureau. Billingsley (1992) noted that the definition of family within the black tradition utilizes a wholistic approach, which is somewhat broader, more inclusive, and more flexible than the usual definition of family. These aunts defined family as a collectivity of different persons, not residing together or even living in the same state, who consider themselves to be an entity separate from other people. They included close friends, church members, and co-workers as family members. Their definitions of family encompassed the ideas of financial, emotional, and psychological support.

> *It might sound crazy, but a member of your family does not have to be a blood person. I think a member of the family is anyone that cares about you, anyone that's willing to share your life with you, your responsibilities with you. To me, it*

> *doesn't have to be a husband. At first I thought it was a husband, a wife and a child, and the white picket fence. But now, I see a family as anybody who's willing to get together and help you to be successful in life and to reach your goals in life. That's how I see a family now.* (A17)

Definitions of family included ideas regarding individuals struggling together for the good of the whole.

> *Oh, yeah. I consider them like sisters. I have a girlfriend I've known for at least ten years, over ten years. And she has been coming over my house for fifteen years. And she is from out of state, and she is like my sister. And… if I ever got in trouble, I know I would call her….It's just that they've always been there. You can count on them. They, no judging, none of that. You know, they have your best interests.* (A3)

Two aunts stated that friends and family differ. For both, family takes precedence over friends, and anyone not blood related are not considered family. One interesting difference between these two aunts and the other aunts in the sample was the lack of friends they could trust.

> *So, for me, it would be probably blood and if there were adopted kids, and also through marriage. I wouldn't really say friends, how some people look at friends, because I really never had friends I was that close to. I didn't have much of a childhood either, and I was going to say that, but I never really had friends that I could really just depend on.* (A1)

When asked if friends can be considered part of your family, one respondent answered as follows:

> *Hmm, no, I don't think so. It's more like, okay, they're friends. They're friends, you know?* (A12)

Where friends were supportive and caring, they were often considered family by the great majority of this sample. No matter how family is defined, there was a definite

sense of insiders and outsiders, with persons considered as family members supported and helped before any assistance is given to outsiders.

> *Family means everything to me. I mean, my family is what makes me do what I do. I mean, that's the most important thing to me is my family. I mean, I look at family like this: I come home to my family and everything's fine. Everything outside the world doesn't really matter. So, that's my heart, my being, is my family….[I]t's where when everything else outside is on you, you should be able to go to your family, and it's okay.* (A15)

To involve outsiders in family matters was not acceptable, because family members should be able to deal directly with each other to work out problems between them.

> *We're family. You call me. Don't have this thing from the court. What is this? You call me and say, you know, I'm back in and I think I'm ready to get my child. Don't have the court informing me. You know it's sad like that.* (A34)

Family Obligations

Family obligations represent a form of normative family solidarity. Normative family solidarity refers to the strength of commitment to performance of familial roles and to meeting familial obligations (Bengtson and Roberts 1991). Normative family solidarity addresses the subjective feelings of responsibility and obligations for the welfare of other family members (Lawton, Silverstein, and Bengtson 1994). In this sample, a majority of aunts believed that we have obligations to family members, but a couple of aunts stated that we do not have obligations to family members. The difference in beliefs regarding family obligations stemmed from the fact that some of the aunts believed that there are times when one must say no to family members and other aunts did not differentiate types of difficulties in which to help. Therefore, normative family

solidarity represents individuals' subjective feelings toward family responsibilities and obligations.

For the most part, making the decision to salvage children's lives is a way to meet family obligations. This study extended the research on family solidarity, by examining the feelings of responsibility and obligations that aunts felt for nieces and nephews. These feelings signify the intergenerational nature of family solidarity, which examines both the bonds of obligation and expectations between generations in the family (Lawton, Silverstein, and Bengtson 1994). Obligations to family included providing emotional, physical, financial, and psychological support. Also, family obligations included loving each other, being there for each other, and being willing to help. Family should be "unselfish, willing to sacrifice and do for others" (A1).

When asked if she considered taking her niece as a means of fulfilling family obligations, one aunt stated the following:

> *This is what I'm supposed to do. I mean, what else am I supposed to do?... I come from a family that does not believe in the state takes over. We weren't raised that when times got hard, you go to the state. We didn't do that. That means you go get another job, you go work harder….* (A15)

For the majority of aunts (*n*=33), family obligations are different when children are involved. Where children are involved, there is no choice but to help them, but with adults there are conditions attached to help requests. For many of the aunts, requests from adults are filtered through subjective definitions of wants and needs. Moreover, aunts would not extend help that would jeopardize a family member's health, such as fund a drug habit; lead to incarceration; or result in physical or emotional abuse.

> *And, for me, and just any other family decision, is how important is it? If it is more of need or necessity or is it just something you want? Is it somebody who's selfish and just wants everything for self, or is it actually something that's really beneficial that's going to really impact or affect people's lives?* (A1)

> *I don't think we have any obligations, other than to maybe keep in contact and encourage them. I think obligations are thrown upon us because of the weaknesses of certain family members.* (A8)

There are consequences to meeting family obligations. Consequences reported by this sample of aunts included lack of personal resources, a desire to move away from family, resentment from family members, and feelings of being used. When asked if there are family obligations that must be met, one respondent answered as follows:

> *Yes, yes I do. Very much so. That's why I'll never have anything. I'll never be rich. Every niece and nephew that I've taken care of, they all have houses. Where do I live? I live in an apartment. I've taken care of everyone of them having beautiful homes. I mean beautiful homes. I live in an apartment.* (A4)

Another respondent spoke of the resentment that family members harbor, even when you are supporting and helping them.

> *It should be just love and respect and all that kind of stuff. Unfortunately, it doesn't happen that way. And your family duties sometimes become the same kind of duties as the parental duties. Now, I don't even believe to myself right now that my daughter should be responsible for me, if I need a nursing home….They resent you for it. For some reason, they, and I'm learning it from my family, from my experience, and then I'm learning and M.* [her biological daughter] *is sort of learning it, but not enough yet for it to hit her in the face.* (A8)

Family Rituals

Fiese et al. (2002) define family rituals as patterned group interactions that fluctuate across the life course that are related to individual well-being in families. They posit that family rituals may be unique to each family, are highly symbolic, and have a strong affective component. Rituals involve symbolic communication and convey "this is who we are" (p. 381). Rituals provide continuity in meaning across generations with the anticipation for repeat performance that, if disrupted, threatens family cohesion (p. 382).

One family ritual aunts reported was the tendency for family members to help each other, particularly in raising children. Many of the aunts witnessed family members taking care of non-biological children, including parents, aunts, great-aunts, grandparents, and fictive kin. Expectations that family will care for each other is transmitted intergenerationally, and, therefore, become somewhat of a family ritual.

> *Right, I definitely don't think there should be a time when any person outside the family should step in. Now, I don't really get how children are in foster homes….They don't have family members? You know, because of my definition of family, I just don't think there should ever be a time where a kid is left in an orphanage or, you know, foster home or whatever, because I know that kid has relatives….That's your responsibility. Like, for me, you were born into that responsibility.* (A1)

Family history plays an important part in family rituals, meaning that children are socialized in their family of origin to understand and, ultimately, accept familial obligations, as noted by the following respondent.

> *Growing up, my family has a history of taking care of your own. Children's children, you take care. Your mother dies, you have no mother or father, then other uncles, grandma, or whoever is*

> *there, take care of your children….We believed in taking care of our own. And that has always…that grew up with us. You take care of your own. I don't remember any foster home, or anybody, having to take care of anybody in my family.* (A4)

Family rituals resulted in cultural expectations, because family rituals dictated behavior across generations, so much so that family members who would not become primary caregivers were viewed in negative ways. Respondents referred to sisters who would not take in their nieces and nephews as "selfish" and "not brought up that way." They "did not understand" refusals to help family. They felt that their sisters and brothers had failed the family or failed to represent the family in a positive way. In doing so, black aunts reminded family members of the familial expectations that go back generations.

> *We're not like that, and that's the glory of it. That's why I don't understand how my brother just drifted away from his children like he did. I don't understand it because we're not like that.* (A26)

> *It's still hard for me to understand why my sister could not take her grandchild in, whenever it was just her and her husband and one child. Why you couldn't you take that one child in with you? And so sometimes I would say to myself that that is the reason why you have so many problems with your daughter. It's because you turned your back on these other ones over here.* (A17)

Stack and Burton (1993) found that individuals who refused to do kin-work were ostracized and viewed negatively by other family members and understood that they may not be able to receive support if needed.

A BLACK HELPING TRADITION

Respondents attributed their willingness to help their nieces and nephews to an awareness of a helping tradition among blacks. They spoke of a historical precedent of

blacks caring for their own kin as well as non-kin. The extended family among blacks formed a community wherein persons felt connected to each other in a sense of being in the struggle together. When it came to children, someone in the extended family, generally an aunt, grandmother, or sister, would take them in when their biological parents could not or would not care for them. The whole community raised children, disciplining children who were not related to them, knowing that there were no repercussions from parents or caregivers.

> *I say yes, at that time, neighbors, aunts, and everybody raised the children. You know, if you got put out of school, and you walked home and this neighbor was standing out there. "What are you doing out of school?" Don't tell them that you got put out, 'cause they would whip you. You'd be crying and you walk on up, and somebody else be, "Why you crying?" "So and so whipped me." "Why they whip you?" "'Cause I got put out of school." You got whipped again…* (A11)

Research on black families has documented that extended family support is a flexible and adaptable form of family preservation that represents an African cultural heritage among blacks (Bonecutter and Gleeson 1997; Brown, Cohon, and Wheeler 2002; Hays and Mindel 1973; Hill, 1972, 1997; Lamborn and Nguyen 2004; Rasheed and Rasheed 2003; Scannapieco and Jackson 1996; Stack 1974; Staples and Johnson 1993).

These respondents considered caregiving by the extended family as a cultural strength that could be traced back to biblical times. Also, extended family support was viewed as a vestige of blacks' African heritage. They asserted that black people accepted responsibility for each others' children and for non-kin children. They believed that black people did not put their children up for adoption. Any black person who allowed a black child to be placed for adoption was considered deviant.

> *I think it has a lot to do with people don't take on the responsibility, because we've forgotten where we come from. I'm going to be honest. Our whole makeup, all through the ages, taking up all the way back to Africa, because really it goes back to the Bible….I mean, I can think of just, not even going all the way back to the African days, but just days of old. My grandparents, you would take them in, it was never a thought. Adoption? Black people didn't put their kids into adoption. You were mocked, ridiculed, you were shunned.* (A18)

Proponents of the strengths perspective for studying black families argued that extended family support and strong kinship bonds are two strengths of black families (Bonecutter and Gleeson 1997; Hill 1972, 1997; Staples and Johnson 2005). Bonecutter and Gleeson (1997) stated, "African-Americans, for example, have relied on extended family and other informal systems of care not only because these informal systems are cultural strengths, but because African American children for many years were excluded from public and private sector child welfare programs" (p. 100).

Respondents understood that the extended family filled in wherever there was a deficit, providing financial, emotional, and childcare support, where needed. Respondents remembered being raised in households that included neighbors, kin, and/or their children. They spoke of aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins and neighbors who lived with them, often free of charge, and children accepted it without complaint. Children were taught to share with others in need. Black children often were sent to live with childless relatives to help them, especially elderly members of extended families.

> *When I was young, I lived with an aunt on weekends. She, they had a funeral home and dry cleaners, and I would go down on weekends and help them work…. And then, she would pay me like 10 or 15 dollars a week to help her work in the cleaners or funeral or whatever.* (A11)

One aunt spoke of the historical precedent of black women operating as a sisterhood. She defined sisterhood as othermothering or co-mothering. She stated that, historically, all black children belonged to all black women. Therefore, black women, whether kin or non-kin, felt an obligation to take care of black children's whose biological or adoptive mothers could not take care of them properly. Therefore, for this respondent, motherhood for black women was not about biology.

> *It's co-mothering. And if you regard all black women as your sisters, until they prove otherwise, then you are going to regard the children of other black women as your children. And I think that when you find a black woman who doesn't feel that way about other black women, she might not also feel obligated or moved to take care of their children when they can't do it…. We've been thrown into situations where our biological mothers are not present, and so, to me, any woman who looks like me and who has the ability to nurture, has the potential to be my mother.* (A7)

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins (2000) documented this belief in the tradition of black women viewing all black children as their own. She writes that organized, resilient women-centered networks of grandmothers, aunts, sisters, and cousins acting as othermothers took on the child-care responsibilities for one another's children. She stated, "Historically, when needed, temporary child-care arrangements often turned into long-term care or informal adoption" (p. 178). Moreover, these women-centered networks have expanded to include fictive kin, as some other member of the community would accept responsibility for the feeding, clothing, and educating of other women's children. In this way, the black community as a whole took responsibility for each Black child (p. 179).

Respondents remembered that children raised by extended family members were treated exactly the same as the othermothers' biological children, so much so that often people thought the children were the biological children of the kinship care provider. For many children, their caregivers were not related to them by blood, but by affinity. Moreover, extended family support was free of charge, regardless of the financial hardship that caregivers experienced while taking care of non-biological children.

> *Because I can remember when I was growing up that we would think that these people were related, and then find out later on that this woman had taken these children in but they weren't even related to her, you know. So it was commonplace to have people taking other people's children in. Like people who lived in the country, maybe they wanted their child to attend a school in the city, and they just came and stayed with a family and it wouldn't be any charge, you understand what I'm saying?* (A35)

Nevertheless, when asked if blacks still have a helping tradition, many said no. They believed that blacks today have lost a spirit of family caregiving. They asserted that integration destroyed much of the black cultural heritage of extended family support. As blacks attempted to assimilate into white society, a sense of their heritage has been lost.

> *See, so, we didn't do those kinds of things. If we had a retarded child, it was that we didn't accept that it was retarded or it's a special child….So, I think that might have had some effect in terms of us becoming the acceptance in the culture of white society. We have been integrated with the rest of it. We get the good. We get the rest of it….We didn't give our children away. Nobody would allow a black child, mostly, to go into any kind of… An aunt would take them in. Anybody would take them in, a neighbor, a god-mama. Somebody would take them before then. But, I think we've become as modern or separate or whatever it is that the other class or race is.* (A8)

One black aunt compared the unwillingness of many blacks to help each other to blue crabs which keep each other from succeeding.

> *You can visualize. You can see them [blue crabs] pulling each other back down into the bucket, you know. Yeah, so we just need to start, as a race of people, start doing better on a lot of things*. (A21)

They also reported that too many blacks depend on the government, or state aid, rather than take care of their own.

> *You pick up wherever there's a deficit. The family filled in. And now, we're looking for government. We're looking for somebody else to do it. We talk about how sad it is, but we do nothing about it.* (A18)

Recent studies confirmed that the helping tradition of extended family among blacks is changing (Collins 2000; Roschelle 1997). Collins (2000) argued that the very fabric of the black community eroded "when crack cocaine flooded the streets" (p. 181), leaving black children and youth as casualties, and increasing the numbers of black children in foster care. Moreover, she posits that racial desegregation and the emergence of class-stratified black neighborhoods altered the fabric of black civil society. She asserted that in "some fundamental ways, moving into the middle class means adopting the values and lifestyles of White middle-class families" (p. 182).

In her study of family support, Roschelle (1997) found that non-Hispanic white women were more likely to participate in family support networks, when compared to black women. She stated that extended networks are no longer as prevalent among minority groups as they were in the past. The reasons for the change in extended family support among blacks are increasing unemployment resulting from deindustrialization of urban cities, a "tremendous" influx of drugs such as crack cocaine, and the social isolation caused by the migration of the middle class out of the inner cities (p. 149).

Despite the research, some respondents believed that the loss of extended family support among blacks results from a younger generation suffering from what I refer to as cultural amnesia, meaning that they have forgotten earlier traditions. There were some generational differences between aunts in this belief, as it was voiced more by respondents over age 50. Older black aunts stated that today's generation of young blacks do not feel the same sense of responsibility or obligation found in past generations of blacks to offer support to other, less fortunate blacks, including those in their own families. Older black aunts attributed this lack of a familial responsibility to a lack of socialization in families of origin. Because these young blacks do not acquiesce to cultural coercion, older black aunts viewed them as deviant and spoke of the selfishness of blacks today, as compared to the past.

> *Well, if some of the families would take responsibility of taking care of their own, they wouldn't have to go into foster care. I feel that way about it….I think that people are selfish.* (A4)

> *There's no reason that there should be children unwanted and orphaned. I mean, I don't really care what the culture is really, but blacks no matter, because that was not how we were raised. I think it has a lot to do with younger parents, too. The younger the parents are, the smaller the memory.* (A18)

Yet, the fact that there are young black aunts who provide extended family care, as demonstrated by the women in this study, indicates the resiliency of extended family support. Collins (2000) stated, "The resiliency of women-centered family networks and their willingness to take responsibility for Black children illustrates how African-influenced understandings of family have continually been reworked to help African-Americans as a collective cope with and resist oppression" (p. 183). Part of that resilience

stems from the strong religious beliefs that, historically, have been another cultural strength among blacks (Alston and Turner 1994; Hill 1972, 1997; Taylor, Lincoln, and Chatters 2005).

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAITH

Faith was an important variable in respondents' willingness to become kinship care providers. In this study, faith is conceptualized as the meanings attached to beliefs in a higher power as well as the impact of those beliefs on the attitudes, motivations, and behaviors of individual and group actors. Faith encompasses religion, religiosity, and spirituality. Johnson (2000:259) defines religion sociologically as a social arrangement designed to provide a shared, collective way of dealing with the unknown and the un-knowable aspects of human life, particularly the distinction between the sacred and the profane elements of human life. Religiosity describes an individual's or group's intensity of commitment to a religious belief system (Renzetti and Curran 2003:329). Religiosity includes attendance at religious organizations, prayer, belief in a religious doctrine, and active participation in religious organization. Spirituality entails reflecting on the meaning of one's life honestly and candidly, and it is more concerned with inner connectedness, meaning, and purpose in life (Starks and Hughey 2003:143). It is important to differentiate these terms, because women reported different manifestations of their faith. Whereas some attended church, others did not. Yet, they all report faith in God.

> *Well I was not a Christian when I took him, and I didn't claim to be…. I mean I just knew that there was God, because lots of time that was the only person I could talk to and He helped me in overcoming a lot of my own insecurities.* (A12)

So faith in God is important to the empowerment of these black women. This view is in keeping with previous research on black families. Gibson (2002) asserts that many black families believe that faith in a higher power may improve conditions for them. Furthermore, Hill (1999) argues that the two attributes that were most often cited as common strengths by blacks, regardless of family structure, were family unity and religious orientation. Faith in God impacted willingness to become kinship care providers in three aspects: family history, religious practice, and personal beliefs.

Family History

Hill (1999) asserted that religion is one of the most pervasive cultural strengths of blacks, as religion tends to play a greater role in the lives of blacks than whites. Consequently, it is understandable that faith is a powerful and positive variable for these respondents. Respondents reported a family history in believing in God, attending religious organizations, and active participation in religious activities. They spoke of parents and extended family members who attended religious services and socialized respondents to do the same. They reported being sent to church, growing up in the church, and being taken to church.

> *No. I mean, I used to go. My grandfather used to take me to church, and I used to not like church because we used to go there at 11 and get out at 5.* (A34)

Through the intergenerational transmission of religious values, these women learned the importance of attending religious services as a means of gaining strength to cope with challenges in life as well as the receipt of blessings. Though they are adults, they reported that they are still expected to attend religious services and be active participants, and they are reminded by other family members when they fail to do so. When asked if she had a church home, one aunt answered

> *No, but it's my own fault. My daughter keeps saying, because she does go to church. And she keeps saying, "Mom, you got to get in church." My parents say, "You got to get in church." And I, it's just one of those kinds of things I'm putting off. But I know it, because it's a big part of me, and I feel like, my regret with myself is I know I'm supposed to be…. and I say, "Mama, I pray twenty-four seven. I say I can be looking at you and I'm praying."* (A15)

Respondents also spoke of spiritual teachers, mainly mothers, grandparents, and aunts, who taught them to trust in God, read the Bible, the power of prayer, and caring for others as a sign of faith. Starks and Hughey (2000) found in their study of the relationship of spirituality and life satisfaction for Black women in midlife that black women, without prompting, said that their mothers and grandmothers were spiritual mentors who passed along lessons of survival and success. Moreover, Collins (2000:213) stated that black women have long had the support of the Black Church, an institution with deep roots in the African past and a philosophy that encourages expressiveness and an ethic of caring. One black aunt, when asked to describe in one word what church means to her, answered. "comfort" (A34).

> *And believing that I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me, and believing that and trusting in God, you know, say okay, He's going to make, if I give to, if I give,*

> *he's going to give back to me. And if I'm selfish, he's going to say, Why, how do you expect to be blessed if you being so selfish? And I've always said that I would like to save the world.* (A19)

Moreover, two respondents combined family and church, as they viewed their church as their family. Both lacked attachment to their relatives, and at church, they felt loved, accepted, a sense of belonging, and a lack of being judged. This is consistent with previous research that shows that, in some cases, the personal networks and relationships found in the church were "veritable substitutes" for individual family members or an entire system of family relationships that are unavailable to respondents experiencing geographical or family estrangement (Taylor, Lincoln, and Chatters 2005: 503).

> *[T]hey've become that family, you know, that extended family, the people that you spend your time with…you just think, who are the first people that you want to call when something good happened, or even something bad happened. You know, that's your family. (A14)*

Religious Practice

Forms of religious practice included Bible reading, prayer, church attendance, and active participation in religious services. The ways respondents use prayer demonstrate that prayer can be an intervening variable in the decision-making process, and also a coping strategy once the decision has been made.

> *Well, it plays a role…that I pray on a lot of things. I try to pray on everything, but I don't always do that. But I pray on a lot of things before I do them….Like, Lord, please guide me to do the right thing. Lord, don't let me mess this child's life up. Okay, Lord, this is more than I can handle, what do you want me to do with it?* (A21)

Prayer is offered as advice to anyone thinking of becoming a kinship care provider for their nieces and nephews.

> *The advice I think that I would give them would be first and foremost, pray. Talk to God first. That would be the first thing, because taking on the responsibility, it is a very, very, high stressful job, because you have to provide for those children. You have to set examples for those children. And not only that, you have to, you have to be willing to be there. And my first advice would be anyone that's thinking of taking on this responsibility, put God first in your life. Pray and talk to the Lord about it. Let God lead you, because it's not an easy job.* (A26)

The Bible was used as an instructional tool on how to respond to the request to take responsibility for children as well as a means of knowing that becoming a kinship care provider is the right and moral thing to do.

> *We got to do, the Bible. I tell them it is a will, you know, a will like where wealthy people pass away and they leave things like this. Well, that's what that Bible is, it's a will. Look at it as a will. Whenever you go through, you read it, and you see what God has left back here for you, what Jesus has left back here for you. All this, all this is right here. And it's an instruction book. It'll tell you how to do things. If you question what you're doing, you may want to think about it. You may want to go to him and ask him, "What do you think I should do?"* (A19)

Respondents reported that being active in the church increased their beliefs in caring and sharing with others. This is consistent with previous research that shows that people who view religion as an integral part of their identity and are religiously active tend to have a holistic view of life, one which fosters a sense that one's faith is intimately related to everything else one does (Davidson and Caddell 1994).

Personal Beliefs

Several respondents reported that they were not Christians and did not attend church, but they viewed themselves as spiritual because of their personal beliefs. Those personal beliefs impacted their willingness to become kinship care providers. One respondent reported that believing in God gave purpose to her life and made her happy.

> *Well, you know I think faith brings happiness in your life. It gives you purpose. I mean, in this day and times, there's so much junk out there. There's so much going on, and if I don't have Him, then where else can I, what else can I do? I mean, who else can I talk to? Who else could help me through what I'm going through? You know, nobody, nobody, so that's why I believe.* (A9)

Three respondents viewed taking responsibility to raise their nieces and nephews as God's will, as a part of God's plan, and as a move of God. Logan (1996) referred to this notion of "knowing" God's will as religious consciousness, defined as the deliberate attempt by blacks to live according to those religious beliefs that call for acts of charity and brotherliness and neighborliness toward one another as a means of coming closer to God and carrying out God's will.

> *I honestly believe that I couldn't have done it, if it wasn't. I look back and wonder. I know it had to be God, because I wouldn't have been thinking about going to find any more children either. I mean, it's amazing, we laugh because my husband and I had agreed earlier in our marriage to have three, and I miscarried once I moved here, and he brought us K…And, but as far as my faith in it, I really believe that it had to be a move of God…. The whole process, he's such a God of patterns.* (A18)

> *So I think God was basically saying, "Well here's something for you to do." (Laughs). He said, "You ain't doing anything and I got something. And you know, you certainly won't be bored when you take up this one…"* (A12)

So, these respondents demonstrate that faith is still valuable as a cultural strength for blacks and that it is a powerful and positive intervening variable that helps to facilitate decisions made regarding becoming a kinship care provider. Their spiritual beliefs also served as a coping mechanism as they acted to save the lives of their nieces and nephews, and in some cases, the children and grandchildren of their nieces and nephews. Moreover, as the next section will show, faith also helped shape the self-meanings of these women.

PERSONAL IDENTITIES

Respondents' personal identities exerted a powerful and positive affect on their willingness to become kinship care providers. An assumption of symbolic interactionism is that self concepts, once developed, provide an important motive for behavior (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993). Bird and Schnurman-Crook (2005) define personal identities as self-conceptions gained from enacting social roles within the context of "enduring, normative, and reciprocal relationships with other people" (p. 146). It is in the reciprocal relationships that respondents have with family members and strangers that these self-definitions form and influence respondents' perceptions and actions.

The personal identities of these black aunts also represented a strong sense of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to people's assessment of their effectiveness, competence, and causal agency (Gecas 1989). Persons with high self-efficacy think of themselves as competent, effective, able, having control over one's circumstances, and being able to carry out actions that produce intended effects (Gecas 2003). These black aunts portrayed personal identities that underscored their belief that they can make a difference in the

lives of nieces and nephews. Personal identities included a helping spirit and the kinkeeper role.

A Helping Spirit

Respondents reported possessing a helping spirit. They described themselves as caring, loving, giving, and unselfish. The values that respondents report helped to construct their personal identities and, therefore, affected their willingness to help their nieces and nephews. Hitlin (2003:119) stated that values operate within situations in two important ways: (1) they operate within situations by affecting judgments and perceptions; (2) they influence decisions about which situations we find most desirable. Therefore, respondents' values underscored their beliefs that they had obligations not just to their families, but to the "community" (A4). They reported incidences wherein family members referred friends and co-workers to respondents to help with problems.

> *One girl, I didn't even know her. I knew her through one of my nieces. J.'s aunt was living up here also and she works with a twin sister, so when the other twin moved here from Alabama, she needed a job…. So, I talked, you know, to the people….and they gave her the job.* (A19)

In one instance, the son/nephew advised a young friend of the helping spirit of his mother/aunt.

> *He'd go around telling them if they had a little problem, my mama will help you. And I'm standing one day in the kitchen listening like this. I go to the store and one little boy's mama had sent him to the washer and he'd lost the money, twenty-five cents or something. And he'd told him my mother'll help you, you tell her. Fortunately, you know, I had the twenty-five cents with me. I told you my mama would help you*. (A13)

Several respondents reported feelings of obligation to humanity. They felt that individuals in a society have responsibilities to all people, especially for members of the society who cannot provide for themselves.

> *I think you have, not only to nieces and nephews, I think we have an obligation to everybody we can come in contact with. I'm even obligated to you. I am because you are supposed to reach out to whoever. You know when Christ asked who is your neighbor, not just the person who lives next door to you, but whoever needs you.* (A10)

Some of them (*n*=4) viewed themselves as peacemakers as well as caring people.

> *I've always had a helping spirit and caring from a young age. That's what I did even in the office to keep the morale. That's why I became a [professional] clown because I've always dressed up in costume, every holiday. I can show you [lots] of pictures. To keep morale going, I would just go pass out candy or something, so I've always been a caring person and peacemaker.* (A22)

Respondents' helping spirits affected their construction of their personal identities, which impacted how they reacted to requests for help and may have influenced their definitions of the situation. These identities of helper, savior, and rescuer were salient to these respondents and therefore, increased the likelihood that they would be willing to take on responsibility for nieces and nephews whom they perceive need their help.

> *Well, I think we have obligations to humanity. And that we often forget that that is in fact our family. I think we are obligated to be the best, most decent people that we can be, so that we can live in the best, most decent society that we can have…I also feel that, yeah, I have a responsibility to my family. If it was one of my cousin's children or my god-children who are, any of them, and they say, I just can't*

> *do this, I would say, send them on and I would try, because we have a responsibility to take care of things for them.* (A20)

This helping identity was constructed by comparing and contrasting their actions and behaviors with those of significant others and strangers. When asked why other people will not accept responsibility for their nieces and nephews, as they have, respondents reported that people were selfish; they only thought of things, not people; and they lacked compassion.

> *Selfishness, just wanting to, you know, just being selfish. I just wanted to be me. I don't want to be responsible for nobody else. And this is going to cut out my life, or, you know, put a hold on my life.* (A17)

By comparing their values to the values of others who were not willing to help, respondents solidified their personal identities as helpers. Hitlin (2003) asserted that by understanding values as the core of the self, sociologists can understand patterns in perception, self-conception, and action across members of particular social groups while also allowing room for individual agency and action. In knowing respondents' values, it comes as no surprise that the majority of respondents were self-designated kin-keepers in their families.

The Role of Kinkeeper

Roditti (2005:) stated that kinkeepers are the most dependable, respected members of families. Moreover, Rosenthal (1985) asserted that in contemporary society, most people identify one person as fulfilling the role of kinkeeper. Consistently,

respondents reported that they were the “stable,” “dependable,” “responsible,” “courageous,” and “strong” person in their families, the individuals on whom everyone else depended for social support. Forms of social support included financial help, emotional support, advice and counseling on financial, employment, and relationship issues, as well as caregiving for nieces and nephews. Self-conceptions as family kinkeepers increased the willingness of respondents to become kinship care providers, as they were the persons in families who worked toward family solidarity and continuity.

In keeping with cultural expectations, kin-keepers are generally women, as men and women assign kinkeeping to women (Rosenthal 1985). The majority (*n*=33) of these black aunts assigned themselves to the role, rather than being assigned by other family members. This finding extends the idea of kinscription that Stack and Burton advanced, as they posited that families recruit individuals (1993). Considering their values and helping spirit, it is not surprising these black aunts take on this role. Reitzes and Mutran (2002) argued that people invest roles with self-meanings and motives for action and organize their roles into self-concepts.

Respondents reported taking care of everything and everybody within their families, being called on continuously any time someone was in trouble, and being the base of the family. An assumption of symbolic interactionism is that individuals are not born with a sense of self but develop self concepts through social interaction. Family members, through their repeated requests for help from black aunts, helped to define their personal identities. Family dinners, holiday get-togethers, and acting as go-between

among non-communicative family members are all examples of kinkeeping reported by respondents in this study.

> *And, as far as our mother's other kids, I'm the most stable one. I'm the…more level-headed one, because I'm the peacemaker of the family. Everybody else feuds, and when I come around, it's peace. I bring peace. I'm the peacemaker, and they know that Auntie can fix it. If it can be fixed, Auntie can fix it, because I want everybody to be happy. I want everybody to, you know, to get along.* (A19)

Respondents reported being tired from kinkeeping duties, but stated that once labeled, you cannot get out.

> *Always. Always. Yes, you're labeled. You never get out. I'm not out now. I'm not out now….I am tired. I do not want to be anybody's mama. I don't want to be anybody's grandmamma.* (A8)

They described being frustrated, resented, used, and unappreciated for the work that they did for their families, including becoming kinship care providers for nieces and nephews.

> *Sometimes it's tiring, sometimes it's frustrating, sometimes I want to say, "Just do that yourself," but I rarely do that, you know. And I also try my best not to criticize. I don't always make it but I try. I try not to say, "Now, you're not so dumb that you can't do that yourself," cause in the process of me doing it, I sometimes learn things myself.* (A21)

One respondent warned her daughter not to take on the role of kinkeeper, because of the demands on time and the unappreciated nature of the role.

> *I always warn my daughter, "Don't let this happen to you." But my daughter is now starting to pay for the niece so that she can participate in things….So I tell her, "Be careful, don't fall into the trap of always being the one who can do these things." She says, "Well, I don't mind for my nieces"….But, it is an ugly pattern.* (A8)

Nevertheless, kinkeeping does not appear to be a role that is easily dropped; instead, as people are labeled in the role, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Fox and Bruce (2001) asserted that the network of expectations of those external to individuals are critical in helping to shape not only people's behaviors in the role, but also one's very definition of self. Certainly, expectations of family members that respondents will respond on their behalf results in continued kinkeeping duties.

THE ROLE OF AUNT

Becoming an aunt is not a developmental expectation or an anticipated life course event, as is becoming a grandmother (Waldrop and Weber 2001). When siblings--whether biological, adoptive, by marriage, or fictive kin--become parents, women acquire the new role of aunt. Becoming an aunt involves a role acquisition. Role acquisition refers to the process of achieving social statuses (Yellin 1999:236). Through role acquisition, individuals encounter, learn, and enact the behaviors, attitudes, and skills or knowledge expected by a person occupying a particular social status (Yellin 1999:238). Consequently, becoming an aunt requires women to learn and to enact the role expectations and obligations attached to the new role.

Whereas previous research has not demonstrated any formal or institutional expectations that define the role obligations of aunts or nieces/nephews, these black women learned familial and communal expectations of aunts through interactions with their own aunts. They also witnessed other women in their communities enacting the role of aunts, including their mothers, grandmothers, and community othermothers. Allen and

Pickett (1987) stated that being cared for by women in times of family hardship is a lesson that women learn early in life. They also argued that women carry these lessons of family commitment and caregiving into their adult lives when they become caretakers of aging parents, siblings, nieces and nephews, husbands, children, and grandchildren (p. 521).

Having learned aunting through their interactions and observations with their own aunts and othermothers, the black aunts in the present study had very real expectations of their roles as aunts; expectations that differed from those of primary caregivers to nieces and nephews. These lessons are the basis of cultural expectancy, as they contain both prescriptions and proscriptions regarding what are the acceptable ways to enact the role of black aunt. Each family defines the role of black aunt, as the role of aunt, unlike that of parent, is a roleless role with no social prescriptions. Therefore, the role of black aunt is a social construction, meaning that aunting is learned behavior, not an instinct or other type of biologically-determined entity.

Role enactments within families represent symbols of expected behaviors in a role, and individuals seldom deviate from the norms within families. In one case, having been raised by an aunt affected respondent's beliefs regarding expectations of herself in the role of black aunt to her nieces and nephews, resulting in this aunt repeating the pattern of family caregiving by aunts to nieces and nephews. She stated the following:

> *But her other sister, because my mother was the baby and then she had a sister in the middle. She raised us like a mother. Because what my mother did was, my mother was in ____, and there wasn't a lot of work or opportunity, employment opportunities were not good….And her sister had five children of her own, and then she was taking care of my mother's four. So,*

> *there were nine of us that my aunt was taking care of and a lot of people who didn't know us really very well thought that all of us belonged to my aunt.* (A35)

Furthermore, these respondents' ideas regarding the role of aunts, as learned through interaction, affected their willingness to become kinship care providers. Through cultural expectations, they learned that aunts are someone who "stands in the gap," making sure that children have the love and support which parents may not be able to give to them.

> *It's kind of standing in the gap and being whatever. Every child needs something different. You, when you don't have to be around them all the time, you can see who they are and give them what they need and what they want.* (A20)

Respondents reported aunts as the same as mothers, second mothers, and extensions of the parents.

> *What is an aunt? I honestly believe that an aunt's the same as a mother. An aunt doesn't have to be because I have a sister and brother who have children. An aunt is someone who stands in the gap and sometimes has to play the role of Mama, sometimes have to be the disciplinarian, and sometimes they just…have to be the big cheerleader. I think an aunt has the best position of all, because you can sit back and see what, where the holes are and fill the holes.* (A18)

> *Second mother! Second, if not first! You've got to be there good times or bad, when they're sick, when they well. Put a little Band-aid on their bruises.* (A34)

Respondents also referred to aunts as supporters and as someone who loves nieces and nephews unconditionally.

> *Ideally, to me, the role of aunt, again is, the supporter. Almost, the godparent. They're a part of the extended family, to help in co-raising the child from a distance.* (A14)

> *…[A]n aunt to me is a wonderful substitute for a mother. She is close enough to act as a mother and distant enough to love you without the knowledge of why she might not like you. Mothers know everything, and they know enough not to like you sometimes. And I think an aunt may not be privy to certain of those unattractive qualities, and she is one person who unconditionally loves you despite yourself.* (A7)

Therefore, these aunts came to see the role of aunt as an extension of the parenting role. The way that they defined the role impacted their actions. Playing the role of black aunt was important to them, and, therefore, when nieces and nephews needed help, these black aunts stood in the gap and provided the parenting that was needed.

CHAPTER 5

CHALLENGES TO THE TRANSITION FROM AUNTING TO PARENTING

Research on grandmothers as kinship care providers consistently indicated that there are challenges to becoming surrogate parents to their grandchildren (Hayslip and Kaminski 2005; Jendrek 1993; Weber and Waldrop 2000). I found that there are also challenges for aunts who become kinship care providers to salvage the lives of their nieces and nephews.

Some challenges appear the same for aunts and grandparents, such as time constraints, legal and financial issues, and the parenting of non-biological children. However, challenges for grandparents and aunts differ in significant ways. First, whereas grandparents are of a different generation than the biological parents, most of the black aunts were of the same generation as the biological parents. In their study of the diversity and fluidity in black children's living arrangements, Hunter and Ensminger (1992) found that children not living with either parent were more likely to share households with their parents' siblings (e.g., aunts) and/or their children. Great-aunts may be the exception, as they are of the grandparents' generation; however, most of the great-aunts in the present study were under the age of 40 when they accepted responsibility for their children. Second, while grandparents are parenting again, many of these black aunts and great-aunts were still in their initial parenting career. In fact, one-third of the respondents in this study did not have any biological or adoptive kids at the time that they became kinship care providers. Two black aunts adopted newborns who became their only

children. Third, grandparents are usually at the end of their work lives, whereas many times black aunts were just beginning their work lives or in the middle of their work lives. Four black aunts were in high school or college when they began caring for nieces and nephews. Finally, many grandparents serving as surrogate parents report chronic health problems (Musil and Standing 2005); however, no black aunts in the present study reported similar health issues.

Brinich (1989) found that the assumption of care for the children in his study was usually costly for the primary caregivers, and in every case it required major shifts in personal commitments and substantial financial sacrifices for the primary caregivers. A major area of challenge for black aunts that contributed to other challenges was the transition from aunting to parenting. In this chapter, the transition to parenting will be discussed as well as the challenges associated with this transition as black aunts attempted to do *"what [they] needed to do"* (A2).

Due to cultural expectations, all black aunts understood that, as aunts, their role was to act as second mothers to nieces and nephews. Collins (2000) noted that historically, in black communities, all children must be fed, clothed, and educated, and if their biological mother could not discharge these obligations, then some other female member of the community should accept that responsibility. Black aunts grew up hearing that black families take care of their own and witnessing their own aunts fulfilling this role; therefore, transitioning from aunts to parents to nieces and nephews was a natural progression for them.

All the black aunts, except black aunts who took responsibility for newborns, reported previous social interactions with nieces and nephews. In a study of grandmothers and aunts who became caretakers for children whose mothers have died, Brinich (1989) found that most of the caretakers were involved in the lives of the children for years before the death of their mothers. Also, Brown, Cohon, and Wheeler (2002) stated that youth who are placed in kinship care have "extensive experience living with kin prior to their formal placement" (p. 53). Previous contacts between nieces and nephews and their black aunts reported in the present study included seeing each other at occasional family dinners or family reunions; nieces and nephews spending weekends or summer vacations with black aunts' and/or black aunts' families; and living in extended family arrangements that included nieces and nephews with and without the presence of their biological parents.

These previous interactions with nieces and nephews were mostly short-lived and did not require the black aunts to take full responsibility for raising nieces and nephews. One black aunt reported that aunts were able to "give children back to their parents" at the end of the day or visit (A26). However, when black aunts became primary caregivers for nieces and nephews, they could no longer give children back to their parents at the end of the day. Instead, as black aunts sought to salvage the lives of their nieces and nephews, they became their de facto parents.

Hurd, Moore, and Rogers (1995:436) define the role of parents as adults who currently have primary responsibility for the care and development of one or more children and with whom the child or children reside. Therefore, becoming a primary

caregiver for nieces and nephews represented a transition from aunting to parenting. Even for black aunts who were already parents, taking responsibility for one or more nieces and nephews represented transitioning into the new role of parent to nonbiological children, which includes adopted children, foster children, stepchildren, and orphaned or abandoned young relatives such as nieces, nephews, or grandchildren (Schwartz 1994:195). The challenges to the transition from aunting to parenting included role ambiguity, alterations in everyday lives, family stress, and changed lives.

ROLE AMBIGUITY

Despite having learned the role of aunting from previous generations, some role ambiguity existed among the aunts. Role ambiguity refers to a lack of clear guidelines or socially agreed on behaviors regarding a role (Landry-Meyer and Newman 2004:1008). Role ambiguity can be seen in the confusion experienced by aunts and nieces and nephews regarding how aunts were to be addressed and by the lack of acceptance of black aunts in the parental role by nieces and nephews, as well as by other family members and friends. This ambiguity exists in spite of cultural expectation because of the lack of socialization regarding naming this new role. Historically, black aunts have been called by a variety of names (Collins 2000). When nieces and nephews came to live with their aunts, often they were confused regarding what to call this new parental figure. Among the women in this sample, aunts were referred to as Auntie, Aunt plus name (e.g., Aunt Ann), Mama, their given name, or by a family nickname. In some cases, aunts were referred to by different names, according to the children's motivations.

> *You know it's funny, sometimes he calls me Sarah, and when* he needs something or wants to talk, it's Mom. It's Mom. I ask, What do you want? What do you need? I know you need something? What happened? *(A1)*

Another aunt allowed children to call her whatever they were comfortable with, because of her own ambiguous feelings toward them.

> *When I speak of them, I think of them as my children, even though I know they are my niece and nephew. But we, but it is funny, the girl said when they first came: "Can we call you Mommy?" And I said, "You can call me Auntie Jane, you can call me Mom, but whatever you feel comfortable with is what you can call me." And I think they got very comfortable with Mom and Dad. And Mommy is a little, to me, it is very warm and close…. Sometimes when they get mad at me, they call me Auntie Jane, Auntie Jane, but that was during the, earlier in the 14 years that they had been with us. So, after a while, it was Mom. Mom, Mom, Mom! Mom and Dad! (A2)*

Other aunts were not comfortable with being called Mom or any derivative of the name. These aunts felt that the children knew that they were their nieces and nephews, and, therefore, they did not want to confuse the children. Also, where the possibility existed that children would be reunited with their biological parents, aunts did not want to appear to have usurped the parents' position in the children's lives.

> *No, no, because I knew they were my nieces and nephews, you know….You never did want them not to know their mama, because that was their mama, no matter what she did in life, that's still they mama, you know? And I still wanted them to respect her as being they mama and stuff. So I never tried to take her rights away from her or nothing like that.* (A16)

One great-aunt whose nephew called her Auntie did not want him to call her Mother because of the possibility of the mother regaining custody.

> *He's my heart. He's my boy, you know, he's my boy. But, I don't really necessarily think of him as mine. The baby probably more so because I have had her since she was a very, very, since she was an infant. And, because their mom has always been in the picture at some point, I never really, I don't really think of them that way. I don't want to put that in his mind, no.* (A6)

When asked if she would allow her nephew to call her Mother if that was comfortable for him, this same great-aunt replied:

> *At this point, no. I just feel that my niece is young enough where, even if it's five years from now, he would only be about nine, you know. And I don't want him to ever think that I took him away from his mom. I was trying to take him away from his mom…. I think that's too complicated for him to think about…. Yeah, it's funny though, he considers this [her daughter] his sister, but I'm still Auntie. You know, Auntie has this. So, I don't know, whatever works for them.* (A6)

One aunt who was raising a niece for the second time was uncomfortable being called Mama because she had always been Auntie.

> *She calls me Mama* (Respondent whispers it in awe). *She calls my husband Daddy. I've been Auntie for all these years, to everybody. I'm Auntie, you know?...When she was here the first time it, you know, I was okay. She was younger, and but now, it makes me feel a little uncomfortable, uncomfortable…. I don't know. I don't know if I, if it's that I feel that they will take her again. I don't know if that's what it is. Then, I'm not sure. I really don't know.* (A19)

When asked if her husband was also uncomfortable being called Daddy, this same aunt answered:

> *No, that's his little girl. That's his little chocolate girl. No, honestly, he doesn't say anything.* (A19)

When the mother was allowed to be in the child's life, it was hard for children to know how to refer to aunts, even when the children were legally adopted and the parents'

parental rights had been terminated. The adopted mother of a seven-year-old son/nephew stated the following:

> *He calls me Mommy now. He'll go between Mommy and Tee-Tee, you know?.... But then, I would let him talk with his mom lately, you know, they're communicating. So his mom would say, "Okay, I'm your real mother" and all that. So now he's, so he'll ask, he's asked and everything…. And so "yep, she was the one who carried you in her stomach and that is your mommy. I'm your auntie." So I wanted him to call me Mama Tee (Laughs). He couldn't get that one together.* (A12)

In short, a lack of family culture regarding the naming of aunts as parents and the involvement of the biological parents contribute to role ambiguity. The ambiguity that is felt when enacting the role of parents to nieces and nephews leaves many black aunts and their nieces and nephews without clear guidelines regarding how black aunts are to be addressed as they move from the periphery of children's lives to becoming custodial parents.

Role ambiguity also occurred when nieces and nephews as well as other family members and friends refused to accept the new role for the aunts. Therefore, some aunts could not transition fully to the parental identity and come to view the children as their own. Klein and White (1996) stated that without clear expectations shared by both the actor and others, it is impossible for the actor to perform the role or for others to know how their behavior articulates with that of the actor. Moreover, Fox and Bruce (2001) argued that the network of expectations of others external to the self is seen as critical in shaping not only one's behaviors in the role, but one's very definition of self.

In the case of the black aunt who formally adopted her nephew, her sister's continued interference in the child's life, such as making requests to get her child back, did not allow this black aunt to claim the parental identity to which she was entitled.

> *Nah, I don't think that I have totally, totally accepted him, because at some point, I do think that he won't be there. Either he wants to go live with his mom or whatever he's going to do. I'll leave that up to him. But, no, I don't really accept that he's my own, but he's not. I already got somebody pulling at me, reminding me all the time…..* (A12)

This adoption, because of the relationship between the biological parent and the adoptive parent, was an open adoption. An open adoption occurs when the biological parent is allowed to know facts regarding the adoptive parent. Therefore, in open adoptions, the biological parent knows how to contact the adoptive parents and insinuate themselves into the child's life, whether the adoptive parents agree or do not agree. Schwartz (1994) stated that for the adoptive parents, the presence of the biological parent(s) may be perceived as a threat to their parental authority, and, as time goes on, the child may become confused and develop conflicting loyalties.

Family members also confused the issue, by reminding these black aunts that children are not their "real" children.

> *You know it's like, even my ex-husband would say, you know, "She needs to go home. You know you got your own two kids." Yeah, that did happen.* (A15)

> *Well, the youngest started calling me Mama, along with the other one, and of course it made my children, you know, "That ain't your mama, that's my mama, and you call her Aunt Jackie" (laughter).* (A11)

One other way family interfered with the transition from aunting to parenting was by suggesting black aunts allow children to be adopted rather than take the children themselves, which constituted a reminder that these blacks aunts were not the biological parents.

> *And then my uncle, which is my dad's brother, who was living out in Washington told me not to do it. Yeah, he said, "You're young, you know you just moved out here. You have a career. You know, let him get adopted by somebody else. You know, there's some good families out there." Like, Woo, okay, let me think about that one, but it was like, you know I don't feel comfortable with that.* (A12)

Friends and boyfriends also failed to appreciate the transition from aunting to parenting, making black aunts painfully aware that they were not the children's biological parents.

> And people didn't understand it. "What do you mean? Those are not your children!" When I was asked to go somewhere, I couldn't go. Because I had to take care of my kids, and that was always the case. …It was just hard for people to get used to. Not just boyfriends, but even just friends. Period. "I can't believe it. These are not even your kids!" *(A1)*

When nieces and nephews refused to acknowledge aunts as parental figures, it was even harder for aunts to transition from the role of aunt to the role of parent.

> *The girls I didn't have much problems out of them. The oldest girl, depending on what week it was, but the boy, he was the one who would always tell me I'm not, "You're not my mom. You can't tell me what to do."* (A29)

> *But, still they know you ain't they parents. Sometimes they try to throw that little word in there, "You ain't my Mama." But I put him in his place, you know? "I might not be your Mama, but you better act like I am."* (A16)

LaRossa and Reitzes (1993) noted that, according to symbolic interactionist theory, roles can be understood only in relation to complementary or counter-roles. Therefore, for aunts to have role clarity in regards to the transition from aunting to parenting, nieces and nephews must come to accept their new role as children of these women. In other words, the role of mother only becomes meaningful in relation to the role of child of the mother.

For many of these black aunts, the absence of legal custody also contributed to role ambiguity, because many of them had no legal authority to make decisions for the children. Landry-Meyer and Newman (2004) stated that relatives without a legal relationship lack the legal authority to enact the parental role.

> *I did not have legal custody of them, so what really made me regret it was that, even though I was playing Mommy, decisions that I made for those children, that I was having to hear, "These are not your kids!" You know, nobody really appreciated what I gave up, not even the parents, you know.* (A1)

In their study of grandparent caregivers, Waldrop and Weber (2001) found that grandparents sought legal custody to solidify their role in the children's lives and reduce ambiguity.

Of the 35 aunts interviewed, only two had legally adopted their nieces and nephews. Nearly half (*n*=17) of black aunts had legal guardianship or temporary legal guardianship. However, more than a third (*n*=16) did not have any legal authority through the courts, although two of the black aunts had written agreements that were notarized to give consent for medical care. This form of informal adoption has roots in the black community. Hill (1999) stated that the informal adoption of black children

represents the African heritage of blacks, and he argues that the informal adoption of black children represents one of the strengths of black families.

Nevertheless, in spite of the lack of legal authority, some black aunts viewed the children as their own children, especially in cases where aunts and nieces and nephews bonded and the aunts were never viewed as anything but mothers. Generally, a situation occurred that resulted in black aunts beginning to view the children as their own, such as sickness, an accident, or being out to play with children. When black aunts were able to claim the mother identity, there was also a commitment to see the child as their "baby." Fox and Bruce (2001) stated the commitment is demonstrated by decisions to engage in behaviors associated with the identity.

As the following story illustrates, one black aunt who informally adopted her nephew came to see him as her child after he was hurt in an accident.

> *And on the way back, Matt went running in front of us and he ran up to the door of the hospital and got his arm caught in the sliding door. Look like something grabbed me in my chest and would not let go and I was yelling at my aunt….She ran all the way around the hospital, look like something said, "Karen, you need to get yourself in control here." And I walked up, and the more you walked up it, the further it went up his arm, so I kind of like went around and you know, of course he's crying. And I said, "Matt, do like Mommy," 'cause he had his little fist about balled up. I said, "Matt do like Mommy." You know and I did like that, opening and closing my hand. And 'bout that time the doctors came running from inside the hospital, he opened his hand and the door slid off him…. That's when, it was the first time I looked at myself and said, "I didn't give birth to that child, but that's my child. That's my baby."* (A13)

Just as important, her son/nephew thought of this black aunt as his mother, although she had always let him know that she was not his natural mother. For birthdays, he would

write her poems. What follows is a poem that the respondent read to me that was written by her son/nephew when he was age 15:

> *Happy birthday, Mom. It's not every day that we're happy about birth, but it is every day that we are tested for our worth. To me, you are worth more than more life itself, I feel I don't need anyone as long as you're on my shelf. I am thankful that the decision was made with you. I know you didn't birth me But as you, I feel that way, too. They haven't made words to express how much I care, and I don't need confidence, if I know you'll be there. I am glad that you stand by me and show me so much love, from telling me no when it doesn't feel right to giving me a big hug. I wish that there was a way that I could give you everything from every wish to every dream. You see me every day, I'm the one you always miss. I wrote this letter so when I'm not home, this is my kiss.* (A13)

One aunt received Mother's Day flowers while being interviewed, and when I asked if she felt like a mother to her two nieces informally adopted, she answered that she felt like she had been a parent and hadn't missed having her own children. The flowers were a validation of her role as a parent, which allowed her to take on the identity gladly. Therefore, role ambiguity can be lessened by the acknowledgment of family members, friends, nieces and nephews, the legal system, and the black aunts themselves that a transition to parenting has taken place with new responsibilities and expectations that differ from those pertaining to aunting.

ALTERATIONS ON EVERYDAY LIVES

In making the transition from aunting to parenting, the women's everyday lives were altered from the very first day of parenting their nieces and nephews. Kramer and Lambert (1999:659) define transitions as life changes and long-term processes that

influence both the external (e.g., changes in behavior, role arrangements, social and interpersonal relationships) and internal (e.g., shifts in perception) aspects of one's life. Alterations in everyday lives occurred as black aunts sought to salvage children's lives and provide the children with the stability and structure that many failed to get in the homes of their biological or adoptive parents. Black aunts had to find adequate day-care for small children, prepare children for school, do hair, cook meals for larger numbers of people, and they had more social obligation, such as attending PTA meetings and school activities, and arranging after-school activities.

In one case, a black great-aunt became a kinship care provider for a 4-year-old great-nephew and an infant great-niece, while already caring for a 5-year-old daughter. When I asked how her day changed, she answered in the following manner:

> *I usually get up around 6:00. I get their things ready. Usually their clothes are laid out for them. I get everything in one place. They can go to the bathroom and get dressed. That makes things quicker. I start breakfast. I get up the older one at 6:30 and get her dressed. She starts to move around a little on her own. He* [her great-nephew] *is about the hardest. I get him up next. I get their hair done and all those kinds of things. He has long hair unfortunately, and it's time for a cut. The baby is usually last, you know. I can dress her and she'll go on back to sleep. Then we usually do breakfast, and by the time they finish breakfast, the baby is up. I have to feed her breakfast. Really, we get up so early because we have such a long commute….* (A6)

A black aunt who took in three young great-nieces had a 20-year-old daughter; consequently, parenting her great-nieces meant parenting all over again. When asked if taking the children changed her life, she stated the following:

> *Oh, tremendously. I was living in a two-bedroom apartment, me and my daughter, who was then around 20. And to take on three additional children in a little apartment was difficult, very*

> *difficult….'Cause I, you know, my daughter's twenty. I'm not used to going to school, taking to school, go visit them at school, go pick them up at school. I'm not used to that. So that was a big change in my life, a big change.* (A9)

Another aunt reported major alterations in cooking, as she took in two great-nieces and a great-nephew, with one of her own three biological children still at home.

> *They finally come to me, "Aunt Ginny, we're tired of sandwiches. We want some real food." (laughter) So I had to learn to cook, and it made me feel good, because they enjoyed eating. So, they ate beans and collards, you know, the good stuff. So, but I had to cook like four times what I was used to, because these children really ate.* (A11)

In answering the question regarding alterations in her daily life, one black single aunt who took responsibility for two nephews and a niece before she gave birth to her daughter highlighted the gendered nature of caregiving.

> *But also, outside of that, because it was just always me there, I did all the things guys had do, too. I had to fix stuff. I had to mow the grass. I mean I had to do everything. So, it was kinda like, you know, being a mom and a dad all at the same time. And it could also be, you know, I kinda grew up a tomboy. I was closer to my brothers than I was to my sisters. So, I just pretty much did everything. It wasn't just the cooking and the cleaning, you know, the women's things, I had to do everything.* (A1)

Another black aunt adopted her nephew and, as a single female who had just gained full-time employment, taking responsibility for an infant certainly altered her everyday life, even before he came to live with her. When I asked how her life changed from a single working woman one day to a single parent the next day, she answered in the following manner:

> *He was in two different foster homes before he came to me, because they wanted to investigate, clear me and do all of that. And I had to get, you know, I had to find a day care,*

> *had to get car seats and cribs and all that kind of stuff, before they would consider me.* (A12)

One black great-aunt reported no life changes when she became legal guardian of two great-nephews ages 4 and 2, but she discussed a major change at the same time

.

> *My baby is now 13. I had a life. I've taken two cruises. I went to Alaska by myself. I went and spent two weeks on vacation…I now have no more vacations by myself. So, I've given up my vacations. But that's the only part of my life that's really changed. Because I've always been a homebody, so there was nothing to give up. I've never been a club person. I don't drink. I don't smoke. My life has always been, you know, work, church, and family. So, there was no change.* (A28)

It is evident that the alterations in the everyday lives of black aunts created major issues for these black aunts. They referred to parenting their nieces and nephews with many different words: a job, a responsibility, a great strain, a challenge, a burden, a duty, and as hard work. Moreover, these respondents reported being tired, frustrated, and sometimes feeling overwhelmed in their new role. Three factors contributed to the stress of transitioning to the new parental role: increased time demands, work-family conflicts, and financial issues. Each factor will be discussed, along with the coping strategies utilized to minimize the effect of the factor on aunts' lives.

Black aunts utilized various coping strategies to adapt to their new role as kinship care providers. Waldrop and Weber (2001:468) define coping strategies as specific responses to stressful situations that are developed from personal and family resources. They asserted that coping strategies include cognitive and behavioral attempts to manage stressful situations and diminish the effects of overwhelming anxiety and emotions (p. 468). Judge (1998) noted that coping strategies can be problem-focused or emotion

focused. Problem-focused coping strategies involve efforts to alter the cause of the stress, and include seeking support (p. 263). Emotion-focused coping strategies involve efforts to regulate emotional responses to stressors, and include controlling one's feelings, wishing the problem would go away, and blaming oneself for the situation (p. 263). Black aunts utilized both types of strategies in dealing with the challenges to transitioning from aunting to parenting. Whereas cultural coercion would seem to dictate specific ways to cope with the alterations in everyday lives, the manner in which alterations are handled are historically based. Collins (2000) stated understandings of family, or the how roles are enacted in families, are continually reworked to help blacks cope with and resist oppression.

Increased Time Demands

All black aunts reported increased demands on their time. Oesterle, Johnson, and Mortimer (2004) stated that parenthood is a particularly demanding role in its initial phases. Increased demands on time reported by these black aunts included time allocated to seeing to the physical and emotional needs of children, giving children quality time, attending and being active in children's school or after-school activities, taking children to school or after-school activities, preparing meals, and helping with homework.

A black aunt who was in college, worked part-time, and was caring for two nephews who were ages four and two stated the following regarding increased time demands.

> *So, it's like I am more of a time manager than I thought I was before. But now I am more of a time manager, being at the*

> *library, then going home, helping with homework projects, and whatnot. Eating, telling them bedtime stories. Then, I am back on doing what I have to do.* (A3)

When asked if they missed having time for themselves, two black aunts responded by saying that they didn't have any personal time. After becoming a kinship care provider to their nephews, personal time disappeared, as nearly all of their time is dedicated to seeing to the needs of their nephews.

The impact of increased time demands in altering the everyday lives of black aunts depended on the numbers of nieces and nephews in the care of black aunts, the ages of nieces and nephews, the physical and mental capabilities of the children, the amount of trauma experienced by children prior to coming to live with aunts, numbers of other children in residence, the existence of support system, and other work, familial and social obligations. Also, increased time demands were greater for single aunts, because of the lack of others to help with the constant care needs of infants. Sanik and Mauldin (1986) stated that in the single parent family, the possibilities for reallocation of time are reduced.

Two black aunts who worked full-time jobs and took responsibility for newborn nephews experienced the increased time demands that accompany the birth of an infant, including sleep deprivation from the constant daily needs of an infant, taking the child to day-care, and seeing to a sick child.

> *Yeah, so it changed from you know having not very much to do to taking care of another life….Yeah. Finding day cares, waking up in the middle of the night, going through the whole sick, the kid being sick, you know. I was, "Man what is going on with that?"* (A12)

So, the increased demands on her time were felt, especially in light of the fact that she had just started a new job. In their study of new parents, LaRossa and LaRossa (1981) noted that as individuals transition to parenthood, free time becomes scarce. They also asserted that free time, or down time from children, meant time to pursue a career and time to participate in a variety of leisure activities.

When the same black aunt was asked if she had any help, she stated that her boyfriend considered that he helped, but that, in actuality, he did very little to minimize the time demands on her.

> *So he was in the baby's life for I'll say for a year and a half. Then he started getting used to it. First, he wasn't doing anything at first, like wasn't changing diapers. Then he wanted the baby to start calling him Daddy. It was like, okay, now, you got to do little bit more. You got to do a little bit more than that, you know. If I have to take him to daycare when he's sick, then he cannot call you Daddy you know. So, we went back and forth on that and he still, he still to this day considers that he did good job. And I'm like, "No, you're not. I don't know what you were thinking."* (A12)

The lack of help increased the free time the boyfriend had for himself, even as the respondent's time demands increased. However, because the child was not biologically related to the boyfriend, she did not push for greater assistance, meaning she felt it was a legitimate arrangement. Legitimacy is the extent to which the couple believes the arrangement is valid, good, desirable, or moral.

Although single parents reported greater time demand issues, all black aunts were confronted with time issues, because of the unexpectedness of increased childcare issues. In her study of grandparents who parent their grandchildren, Jendrek (1993) found that many of her respondents reported lack of time for oneself as problematic. In the present

study, a black aunt who took in a nine-year-old niece and a six-year-old nephew, in addition to already caring for a four-year-old son and an eleven-year-old daughter, explained the increased demands on her time.

> *It was a little difficult to say the least. But, I think the first year was the toughest, until we kinda got used to the kids, got used to having a large family, and got used to all the things we had to do. Instead of one head of hair, I had to do two. I had to get clothing ready for four kids, as opposed to two. I had to make dinners, meals, for four kids. I had to make sure I had everything that I could,…. Sundays, was my cooking day, and I would cook for the week….Fridays, we would always go out. And that was the one: I am not cooking on Fridays. So we went out, and it was their choice where we would go. (A2)*

The black great-aunt who had a five-year-old daughter and became a kinship care provider to her four-year-old great-nephew and infant great-niece reported having to find time for all three children.

> *Both of my niece and nephew kind of have special needs…and I have to help give him at least thirty or twenty-five minutes of one-on-one time, and there's really not enough hours in the day for me to do that, so we'll have to make it up somewhere else. Sometimes it's just a matter of me picking him up from day care thirty minutes earlier…Usually I have about a two hours lapse between commuting to work and well class right now…so I usually use that time each day to pick up one of them earlier than the rest of them.* (A6)

Another black aunt reported feeling stressed because of the time demands of her niece, especially as she had a husband, two biological children, and the brother of the niece to care for, as well as work obligations.

> *I had one that was very verbal and very clingy and very feed me, feed me, feed me, and it was almost like a bottomless pit….She could never get enough praise. She could never get enough stimulation. She could never get enough, and that was a bit much for me.* (A2)

Coping strategies reported by black aunts to mediate the effects of increased time demands included asking family and friends to take the children and give aunts a break; finding time for themselves while at work; taking five minutes here and there during the day, just to rest and clear their minds; and taking the children for outings, such as to parks and movies, and considering that a time of freedom. These are forms of problem-focused coping strategies. A black single aunt taking care of a one-year-old nephew reported the following coping strategies:

> *When he was sleep, you know, I just have to read a good book just to get away. That's my time, just reading a book…. And when I felt like I was stressed, I had to put him somewhere safe, so he don't fall and just get in the bathtub and try to think things out.* (A34)

Where there was a strong support network, black aunts were able to cope with the increase in time demands. A black aunt raising a seven-year-old nephew and a six-year-old biological son, had the support of her ex-husband and a good friend who took the kids some weekends, and this much-needed support gave her some personal time.

> *And sometimes my ex helps me out a lot, even though we're divorced. He still comes and he'll take them to the park or take them to the circus or whatever. Things he knows that I don't like to do.* (A17)

Therefore, a strong support system is needed, in which family and friends assist black aunts by carrying some of the load, such as taking responsibility for children. For the majority of these black aunts (n=22), no such help was reported. Black aunts reported thinking they would get more help from family, only to have their expectations unfilled. In their study on women caregivers, Neufeld and Harrison (1999) found that unmet expectations were the most pervasive difficulty faced by caregivers, including unmet

expectations for social interaction. For too many of these Black aunts, increased time demands are not reduced through the help of family and friends.

> *I thought it was going to be easier, because I really thought that I was going to have the support of my mother more. But she didn't need to do it, you know? But still. I still felt like that because in the background, she kept saying, "We're doing this together, we're doing this together," but I had them.* (A9)

Work-Family Conflicts

As stated earlier, one of the differences between grandparents and aunts who serve as primary caregivers is the fact that aunts are generally young enough to be in the early stages of their work careers. For these black aunts, caregiving obligations, such as doctors' appointments, school appointments, taking children to daycare or picking up children from daycare, often interfered with work obligations. Dressel and Barnhill (1994) posited that factors that fostered role strain resulted from time demands, both in the workplace and in the home; consequently, hours worked per week was the most important variable in explaining work-family conflicts.

Drobnic, Blossfield, and Rohwer (1999) asserted that household work and the presence of young children require extensive input of time that is difficult to combine with full-time employment. In this study, black aunts in jobs with flexible hours appeared less likely to feel the effects of increased time demands at home.

> *So, we had a very good system going, where our lives were only involved with the children and working. He had a job where he could kind of work, and had more flexible hours. Here, where I am working, I had somewhat flexible hours, but it really wasn't. I could come in at eight and leave at four. I could come in a little*

> *early and leave a little early, but it was somewhat flexible. And then, I had the weekend offs, so we had to arrange for after- school day care and baby-sitting arrangements for my youngest that was, he might have been pre-school age. (A2)*

When supervisors understood and sympathized with Black aunts, work-family conflict was also lessened.

> *Yeah, I had just got a full-time job and was getting settled in…. So, yeah, so I had to go from being able to be at work all the time, you know, to taking off and doing all that…I was like that for about a year, but I guess they, they liked me enough because I've been working. I stayed with them the whole time…. So, yeah, I had some really good people out there. Yeah, so, God was working.* (A12)

However, when supervisors were not supportive and empathetic, many Black aunts found themselves having to choose between family needs and employment demands. In two cases, black aunts were threatened with termination of their jobs, as they took time off to deal with behavior problems in schools or to take care of a sick child. For aunts who have always been available to work and now must curtail their hours, work-family conflict was a major issue.

> *The easiest part was just get him up and get him ready to go to daycare, because that made it easier for me to go to work and not really have to worry about him. But the hardest part was when my job wasn't working with me having a child. Because before I didn't have one and I was available any time. So at that point to where I was about to get fired just because of that, but I was ready to go to court when they changed their minds.* (A34)

The following anecdote reveals the depth of the difficulties black aunts face when they must choose between the needs of children and the demands of work. A black aunt

was in danger of losing her job, as she had to take many days off to take her nephew for counseling or to go to the school because of his behavioral problems.

> *It changed a lot as far because he had special needs, me having to take off my job a lot and the job not being understanding…. Almost lost it, still have complications with it every now and then…They did let me start working from 6 to 2:45, so that I can take him to the doctor in the afternoon. And that worked out. But then when I got a new supervisor, she don't want me to work from 6 to 2:45, so I had to go through that again…. So, we had to get to the point where I had to start taking him to a doctor, because they were calling me so much and my job was like, "You know one thing, if you leave again, you're going to lose your job."* (A17)

Black aunts had to find ways to complement family needs and work obligations. Black aunts with children in daycare had to leave work right on time to get to the daycare before being charged late fees. This meant that these black aunts could not work overtime, which may have lessened their chances for promotions.

> *Well, I used to work until six o'clock, and that was difficult when they get out of school at three, two-thirty. So I had to find after-school care for them which I found at the school. But by me getting off at six and the day care closing at, uh, six-thirty, every day was a mad rush for me to get there. I mean, I'd have my foot all the way down on that peddle trying to get there. You know, they charge you if you're late. And I think that was a lot of stress, just a lot of stress, going through that every day.* (A9)

Work-family conflicts were particularly acute for black women, because traditionally black children have been valued in black families and taking care of children took precedence over work responsibilities. Symbolic interactionists posited that individuals create a salience hierarchy that allows them to manage multiple roles and identities, as the problem of juggling multiple role and identities is solved by favoring some of them over others (Bielby and Bielby 1989; Marks and MacDermid 1996; Stryker

and Serpe 1994). Bielby and Bielby (1989) argued that, in families with a traditional division of labor, women are more likely than men to take responsibility for household roles; therefore, women's family identities take precedence over any working identities.

Work-family conflicts can be stressful for black women who need the financial resources they receive from their jobs, but who believe that giving their nieces and nephews the parenting they require a more important job. Considering that black women are at a disadvantage in the workplace, as far as wages, finding employment, and job security are concerned, to place their nieces and nephews before their jobs could be detrimental to their work careers. In the book, *Double Burden: Black Women and Everyday Racism*, St. John and Feagin (1998) examined black women at work. They stated that what goes on in the workplace shapes job tracks and careers but also affects the way in which individuals see themselves (p. 40). The types of workplace discrimination they list as experienced by black women are views of incompetence, stereotyping, excessive demands, the absence of mentoring, exclusions from work cliques, being ignored and harassed, and hiring barriers (p. 41). Black aunts who put the needs of their children before the needs of their jobs may experience even greater discrimination, as their loyalty to jobs are questioned. However, in spite of these possible complications, black aunts continue to salvage their children's lives the best way they can.

> *But still there's just one supervisor that gives me a hard time with it, because she just doesn't see it. She thinks it's not fair and stuff. And when I'm like, "That's my child, I have to see about him. I don't care if he's not my blood child, he's my child. I'm taking care of and I have to see about him.*" (A17)

Coping strategies that black aunts utilized to minimize the conflict between work and family obligation were to quit their jobs, cut the numbers of hours worked, ask family or friends to take children to school or daycare or to pick them up from daycare, and take early retirement. A black aunt who was taking care of four great-nieces and a great-nephew, had a husband and one of three biological children at home, and was trying to deal with the behavioral issues of her great-nephew, along with the stress of working and constant travel, simply took early retirement.

Financial Issues

When asked why she believed more black women do not consider taking on the responsibility for their nieces and nephews, a black aunt (A6) answered that some black women are unable to meet the financial burdens associated with this new parental role. For black aunts to salvage children's lives, they must be able to provide the basic needs of children, such as food, clothing, shelter, and medical assistance when children are ill or in need of emotional counseling.

> *And I said, I understood she needed some help, I could not get it to her. She needed some actual therapy. There would be funding there available for her through her guardian that I couldn't get. Everything here we had to pay for her. Because I wasn't the legal guardian.* (A18)

Financial issues were important because eight aunts had total annual household incomes of less than $10,000, nineteen had annual incomes of less than $30,000, and twenty-one had annual incomes less than $50,000. Regardless of the income differences

within the sample, all black aunts in this study reported some form of financial issues associated with assuming the parenting role for their nieces and nephews.

All black aunts reported some frustration and worry regarding being able to provide for their nieces and nephews. However, black aunts with higher incomes were better able to cope with the unexpected added expenses that came with raising non-biological children. Black aunts with greater financial resources were impacted financially by having to use monies allotted for specific needs to place children in private schools versus public schools, to pay for professional counseling for nieces and nephews, and to place children in activities, such as dancing, swimming, art, or sports, which help foster a more middle-class outlook (Lareau 2002). The following story illustrates the fact that even black aunts with sufficient incomes are still financially vulnerable. A married black aunt with two children of her own and with a total annual household income of greater than $70,000 reported how taking her niece impacted her financially.

> *She's a young lady, so the cost that was just for her. She was a tall, big-sized woman, so her clothes cost more than it would for my daughter. I couldn't shop at those little department stores for her, to get things that would fit for her that would look nice for her. And just the activities! She was in sports. She played volleyball and there were fees for that, so I could tell the amount of money that would go out. Because Kayla, even though she was of teenage age, we didn't feel as though she was mentally able to watch our children safely. We would still pay a babysitter with a teenager who could have watched for us to go somewhere so we would drive to the city with her to the babysitter's house. Now, she at that time was 15 and we're paying a babysitter to watch a 15-year-old, a 9 and 7-year-old.* (A18)

Conger, Conger, Elder, Lorenz, Simons, and Whitbeck (1993) argued that preoccupation with financial issues generates feelings of frustration, anger, and general

demoralization. A great-aunt who earned less than $10,000 annually and still took her ten-year-old nephew out of foster care reported the financial difficulties she experienced. Her frustration stemmed from the inability to get support for the child.

> *See, I got him out of foster home, but I'm still going back and forth to court trying to get custody for him. Don't nobody want to help me with him, and don't nobody want to give me nothing, you know. And it's just kind of hard…. One time they gave him $55 worth of food stamps and Medicaid. Yeah, and that gets hard, 'cause I ain't making nothing really, so I just stretch what I got and divide, share what I have with him and make ends meet. Something like the phone and stuff. I let the phone get cut off so he can have clothes or something like that. You know, I do stuff like that.* (A16)

This sample of black aunts repeatedly stated that the level of assistance received from state child protective services is often inadequate to allow them to meet the needs of their nieces and nephews, even when they have other types of financial wherewithal.

> *Child care was like $350 a week. I couldn't. Now, we get basic DFACS assistance, which is really not enough…. DFACS wouldn't help because they were like, they on this case, they on that case…. They said, "Well, we can't do anything until this case close out." I was like, "What are they suppose to eat in the meantime? Milk is $5 a day, a can, I mean $5 a can a day! In the meantime, like, what do y'all expect us to do?" Forget about the medical bills I had, you know what I'm saying, "Who's going to pay the medical bills?" Come on, now. They were like, "As soon as this case closes out we will go ahead and try this." It was so much drama.* (A6)

Therefore, many of these black aunts paid out of their own pockets for food, clothing, and other physical needs of the children, as well as for activities such as music lessons, school supplies, day-care, and medical bills. One black aunt had to file for bankruptcy, because of the monies she spent trying to care for five nieces and nephews as well as her own biological son.

> *I did file bankruptcy, Chapter 13, where everything was paid back 100 percent, and that enabled me to purchase a home. Yeah, it did impact me because some things fell short…Like now, I have a box of things that I have to send them now.* (A29)

Black aunts who were recognized as relative caregivers received more monies from state child protective services than black aunts who were not so recognized. However, black aunts did not receive the same level of support as foster parents even after taking the foster care classes.

> *But then when I moved to this county, they were like, "No one ever told you could become the foster parent and get a per diem for him?" And I was like, "No, Ma'am, no one ever told me that." So then I went through the foster care program. And then that, but still, because he is an out-of-state resident, I don't get a lot of things for him. After I became a foster parent, the other state started sending me a per diem, but child care, that's your responsibility. Any other programs, like they give him clothes, but Christmas and stuff, that's your responsibility.* (A17)

Research indicates that welfare reform has impacted families receiving assistance, as relative caregivers receive a stipend that is less than what foster care home providers would receive (Albert, Iaci, and Catlin 2004; Henderson and Cook 2005; Kolomer 2000). Henderson and Cook (2005) studied black grandmothers' experiences with rearing children on Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), and they found that the enactment of The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 has contributed to the social construction of poverty. They stated, "Because they are related to the child, grandparents may get *only a third* [emphasis added] of the cash assistance given to licensed group homes or licensed foster care parents who are not related to the child (p. 3). The differential treatment of caregivers according to whether they are related to the child kept black aunts constantly looking for other sources of

support. When asked how her financial burden could be lightened, a black aunt who took responsibility for three great-nieces answered in the following manner:

> *You know one aspect of it that I've talked about a lot of times is the money aspect, you know the financial. Because I think that if they opened it up to the aunts and uncles like they open it to foster-care parents, they we wouldn't have a problem with doing it. But you know, it's that financial obligation, you know, and DFACS wants to slap you with $200 a month and that's not enough, for three children. So, I mean, it's just, I think that's part of it, the money part.* (A9)

The majority of these black aunts did not receive any support from the biological parents, and, when a black aunt did receive help from the biological parent, it was not consistently given. Many of the children's fathers did not support their children, even the brothers or the nephew of the respondents. Brinich (1989) reported that relatives who become primary caregivers for children's whose biological mothers are dead receive little support for their efforts from fathers of the children or from social agencies.

Coping strategies used to mediate the additional financial burdens to black aunts who transitioned to parenting included dual incomes, taking second jobs, receiving financial aid from family members, church assistance, prayer, and welfare benefits such as food stamps, cash awards, and state medical insurance for nieces and nephews. Prayer was an example of an emotion-focused coping strategy. Other coping strategies represented problem-focused coping strategies. Black aunts were not above asking for help or accepting help when it came. They did not view receiving assistance as deviant. Instead, accepting help when it was offered was an affirmation of their high self-efficacy.

A great-aunt who took in three great-nieces had the help of her mother, but not of the biological mother or of the grandmother, who was the respondent's sister.

> *My mother helped a lot. My mother really helped a lot on the clothes issue, and I had an aunt still living at that time and she helped out a lot on that. But, overall, you know, it just was rough for three years. You know I would ask the mother and the grandmother for help, but they. You know I'd say bring me a bag full of groceries, something to just to help me out, but never. They didn't do it.* (A9)

Two aunts reported receiving help from their church members when bills got too high or at the loss of a job.

> *And so, you know, I was able to talk to them [church members] and it's like whatever I needed, you know, they were there. At first, I was like, I don't know if I want to do that but then the bills started piling up and then he got sick and I needed money for that, and then it's like I didn't want to get stressed out, 'cause you can get sick like that.* (A34)

> *I had got laid off from this job. I'm at sixes and sevens. I don't know what to do with my life. And now all of a sudden I had all these children and they had nothing. And I had no money. So, I go to a United Methodist church [in the neighborhood], and the people at that church took care of me and these children. People that I did not even know, they'd walk up to me in church and hand me clothes. And you know, God has taken care of these children.* (A20)

Another aunt had the help of the children's uncle on their father's side of the family, which helped a lot.

> *But, they had an uncle that was over the estate, when the mama died, the grandmother died, which was the grandmother that raised them, and occasionally when I just felt like we was at rock bottom, a check would come in the mail. We did thus and so, and this came with the estate. And you looked at it and said, "Lord, I thank you. You still watching over me." And that would help. Then you know, I'd call them and I'd say, "Well, you know, I wasn't expecting this." And I said, "But it came at a needed time, and I thank you."* (A11)

Financial issues added to the burden and stress of transitioning from aunting to parenting. Research consistently demonstrates that grandparents who parent their grandchildren must deal with issues regarding too little finances, particularly in light of the welfare reform legislation of 1996 (Albert, Iaci, and Catlin 2004; Hareven 1992; Hunter and Ensminger 1992; Kolomer 2000; Waldrop and Weber 2001). Waldrop and Weber (2001) stated that the financial burden in grandparent-headed families results from the strain of providing for extra people in the household. In the present study, these black aunts also experienced financial difficulties as they found themselves with the added financial burden of providing for unexpected additions to their families.

Although every black aunt in the study experienced challenges in many areas of their lives, at least seven were unable to continue to parent their nieces and nephews. In each case, the challenges became too great for the black aunt; consequently, nieces and nephews were either sent to other members of the children's extended family or placed in state custody because of constant misbehavior.

> *And then, then after certain period of time, I just said, "I can't do this anymore and, you know, they need to come get these kids…." What happened was that it got to the point where it was getting too much for me.* (A9)

For three black aunts, their nieces or nephews became too violent to remain in their homes, as there were other children living with them that needed to be protected. Two aunts had nephews who were committed to a psychological hospital to deal with their behavioral issues. Another aunt found that her two nieces were disobeying her when she was at work and she could not trust them. Another black aunt found evidence in her niece's journal of plans to harm her children and husband. She told her husband of the

threat, and he decided that they had to send her niece back to her grandmother, the respondent's mother. Still, knowing that she had done all that she could for this niece, this black aunt cried during the interview with great sorrow for not being able to continue to help her niece. These black women viewed themselves as saviors and rescuers, in addition to loving their nieces and nephews; therefore, having to place the children in another home was a source of great sadness.

FAMILY STRESS

Family stress occurred in the families of origin and the families of procreation, as black aunts transitioned to primary caregiver of nieces and nephews. Waldrop and Weber (2001:465) define family stress as family problems precipitated by changes in roles, and they state that family relationships were cited most as the source of long-term stress in their study of grandparent kinship caregivers. Because of the connectedness of family life (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993), decisions made by one family member affect the experiences and well-being of other members of the household.

Despite the connectedness of their family households, only five of the twelve married respondents reported that they consulted their husbands before making the decision to take responsibility for the children. Only one parent reported discussing the impending arrival of nieces and nephews with their children. These black aunts, for the most part, decided by themselves, and often, family stress ensued. Two relationships

were altered by the transition from aunts to primary caregivers: relationships with spouses and boyfriends/lovers and relationships with biological children.

Relationships with Spouses and Boyfriends/Lovers

Black aunts reported that marriages and other intimate relationships were impacted by their decisions to become kinship care providers to nieces and nephews. These aunts placed the needs of their nieces and nephews above their marriages, as would be expected under cultural coercion. Sudarkasa (1996) asserted that, historically, blacks' consanguineal ties have been stronger than their conjugal ties.

Marital stress occurred when husbands disagreed with the decisions and black aunts took the children anyway. One black aunt reported that, after her nephew came to live with them, her husband would agree to take care of their biological son but not the nephew, meaning that she took care of the needs of two children but her husband only one. Eventually, the marriage ended. Another cause of stress was the lack of time that couples had to spend together, because of the needs of nieces and nephews. For married aunts with children already, the addition of one or more children meant that husbands and wives had even less time together. Routines and plans were changed, as the needs of nieces and nephews were met. Aunts reported that over half (n=24) of the nieces and nephews and some type of physical, emotional, or psychological problems. The increased time demands dealing with children's needs did not leave much time for couples to spend time together, which lowered marital quality.

> *My husband was leery, because he said that if anything, our marriage is going to be tested because, it's going to*

> *be a big strain. I didn't listen to that. "It's allright. It's okay…." And it got to the point that somedays, we never went anywhere. Never went anywhere. My husband made me clearly aware of that…. Marriage-wise, the marriage was hanging by a thread, and I think everybody realized that, even though no one was saying it*. (A2)

For one black aunt, taking care of her nieces and nephews costs her one committed relationship, because the boyfriend could not tolerate the amount of her time spent on issues regarding her family.

> *I was here by that time, and I met a guy, a very nice Guy. I met him through a mutual friend, very good job, educated, nice home, no kids. We dated off and on, off and on. And he told me, "You know what, ___," he said, "I really do like you. I really could see myself with you. But there's no way I can be with you, because if we ever get married, your family would move in with us." But my heart was torn between I can't just leave them.* (A29)

When husbands were supportive of the decision and understood the children's needs, the level of marital stress went down.

> *Oh, Lord, no, it didn't cause a problem, I did whatever I wanted to do. I never had to ask. I never thought of asking. Oh, Lord. That's why I miss my husband so. I never had to ask to do anything. I did what I wanted to do…. As he worked, he'd come home, and they loved him and he loved them. That was it. I was the person that did all the chastising. He was the breadwinner and they talked and played with him.* (A4)

One black aunt took her two nephews with her from her mother's home when she got married. Her new husband knew the children, and when the couple moved into a new home, they took the two boys with them. For many years, they were the couple's only children, until they had two daughters. She stated that her husband was a good father to her nephews and never made a distinction between the children.

Relationships with Biological Children

Eleven black aunts with children reported problems with their biological children as a result of taking responsibility for their nieces and nephews. Problems included jealousy, feelings that mothers were paying too much attention to their cousins, loss of privacy as they were made to share rooms, and fear.

> *And it's only now that I'm finding that my middle child, who's still here was overwhelmed, because she said like, because they were so much younger. But, you know, it was like one big family but she felt, you know, like they were taking, they were getting attention that belonged to her.* (A35)

> *My daughter said, "Why do they have to come? You never asked me if they could come. And you know, it's not right, now we have to share a room." And I said, "No, you won't have to share a room," and I made sure that she had a separate room from the other girl. And then, the boys shared a room together. So, there was more camaraderie developed with the boys, than it was with the girls. In hindsight, maybe that was something that I should not have done, but, I really felt that I had to keep her and respect her in the sense that she had no control over anything. And she just had to accept.* (A2)

The one black aunt who consulted her children on the matter was an anomaly; however, her portrayal of the relationships between her own children and her two great-nephews was good. At times, she had to tell her children that they were too young to chastise their cousins, but that they could help her in other ways with the children. Her children became a great support system for the respondent. For the most part, black aunts stated that they grew up in a culture where children were not allowed to make adult decisions and that's the cultural script they used as well.

> *So, it wasn't where I had to sit down and convince them because I don't have that kind of, I don't raise children.*

> *You know, I'm the adult. I make the decisions, and this is what we're going to do. You just have to go along with it. You know, I'm not, well what do you think? No, I'm not one of those. I tell them this, too, I'm not going to adjust, or change my philosophy to accommodate you.* (A35)

Black aunts also stated that their biological children started to have issues similar to what their nieces and nephews were experiencing, which added to familial stress. Other causes of stress included older children having to take care of younger cousins, conflict and fights among children, lack of money, and arguments over chores. One black aunt reported that her children felt that she spent more time with her niece, which she acknowledged was true, as she believed her children were already stable and secure.

Family stress occurred with the unexpected entry to one or more children. Where husbands and other significant others as well as biological children were not a part of the decision-making process for additional children to come into the home, resentments, jealousy, and misunderstandings abounded. But when other family members were part of the decision-making processes, family stress was reduced.

CHANGED LIVES

The choice to become a kinship care provider to nieces and nephews is a life-changing one, whether one child or five children are involved. The black aunts in this study reported living very different lives from what they expected at the time of their interviews. The majority (n=33) stated that their lives were changed tremendously by the decision to parent nieces and nephews. Allen and Pickett (1987) argued that life experiences are cumulative in nature, for the past bears upon the present and, together,

they make a claim on the future. Black aunts lives were changed in three dimensions: childhoods lost, educational goals put on hold, and parenting again.

Childhoods Lost

Three black aunts began caring for nieces and nephews before they were age 18. In each of the three cases, part or all of their teenage years were spent caring for children, instead of enjoying their teen years. A black aunt who took care of three nieces and nephews ages seven, four, and two when she was still in her teens, stated the following:

> *I didn't never had no childhood. I never had a teenage life because I always had to take care of them, since they were born…I don't know what it is to be a teenager.* (A16)

This black aunt didn't finish high school, as she had to drop out to care for a sick grandmother as well. Today, she earns less than $10,000 annually and is taking care of a teb-year-old great-nephew whom she took out of foster care and plans to adopt. She has been parenting nieces and nephews as well as her own children for over 35 years. Even though she gave birth in her thirties, she had developed a desire not to have her own children because *"I done taken care of all them all those years and stuff."* Her life changed at an early age and at the time of the interview, at nearly age 50, her greatest two wishes was to take a vacation and to someday have a house of her own.

A second black aunt began to care for a nephew when she was age ten or eleven. She reported that her life changed because she was not able to go out to play with kids her age, because of her caregiving duties. Moreover, she stated that she had taken care of

children for so long, including the three nieces and nephews she was raising at the time of the interview, that she questioned her ability to do anything else.

> *I always feel like I've raised kids all my life, and it's to a point now where I sometimes question, "Can I do anything else other than raise children?"* (A1)

The third black aunt reported having to take care of a niece when she was only in the seventh grade. She emphatically believed that her childhood had been taken, and she saw differences in being forced to parent nieces and nephews and making the choice to do so.

> *My childhood, my childhood was kind of taken, basically. My sister she had a baby… She left the child with my mother to come to school. So, my mother, she was never a homebody. She was running the street and stuff. So, I was there with this baby, another baby….I might was like in seventh grade and you know, she'd just leave the baby with me. I said, "What am I supposed to do with her?" So, I learned how to take care of a child at a really young age So, I just went to school, came home and went to work with the child. Because my mother, she's been with the baby all day, so she's like, "Your turn!"* (A34)

Educational Dreams On Hold

Several aunts (n=10) reported having to place school or college on hold so that they could take care of their nieces and nephews. The lack of a good education was viewed as a setback for them, as they believed they had to struggle harder to make ends meet because of lost job opportunities.

> *Wow, my life would have been so different had I not done that….Just for instance, I was in college, my grades started falling tremendously, because I thought it was more important*

> *to take care of these kids, because I had to be Mama…..And I really started falling behind in my school grades to where I ended up on academic probation and ended up sitting out of school…I think for me, probably school, not finishing school, it just held me back, because, after that point, I couldn't get the jobs I needed to get without having a degree. Everything from that point has been a struggle for me.* (A1)

However, three aunts were either in college or taking vocational classes at the time of the interviews. These black women felt somewhat off-time as non-traditional students, but believed that in taking care of their nieces and nephews, they had gained knowledge that made them better students. Even though they had to place their dreams on hold, none of the ten aunts expressed regret in taking responsibility for their nieces and nephews. Indeed, one aunt did not blame her nieces for being behind in her educational goals.

> *Well, you know what, I can't blame my nieces for getting behind in my goals, because at that time I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I just knew that I was in school and should have been in school. Now, my goals are solid….* (A7)

Parenting Again

Five great-aunts began parenting again, taking responsibility for nieces and nephews after their own children were grown or nearly grown. They reported the stress of starting over again just when they believed they were free to put parental issues behind them. One great-aunt had undergone surgery to prevent another pregnancy after the birth of her last child, because she was ready to stop parenting. However, when her youngest

child was in her late teens, this great-aunt began caring for two great-nieces and one great-nephew ages four and five, who are teenagers today. Additionally, today she is also caring for two great-nieces ages six and eleven. She expected that, at the time of the interview, she would be through parenting, preparing to retire from her job, and start traveling. But, once again she must wait until her parenting days are over.

> *So there's times when had I stayed, I would have had 34 years in next year, and I would've been able to retire and not work another day in my life…. I could travel.* (A35)

Future research will need to examine how the age of aunts and the age of nieces and nephews impact the life course trajectories of aunts. What differences in the life course would have been found if the study had been conducted 50 years ago, or even 20 years ago? Also, how would the life course look different across time for whites?

The challenges to transitioning from aunting to parenting could be overwhelming at times, but each of these black aunts worked very hard to make their living arrangements suitable for their families and for themselves. As parents to their nieces and nephews, the aunts labored diligently to see that the needs of every member of their households were met. However, often they were unable to meet their own needs, resulting in fatigue, frustration, and anger when nieces and nephews failed to appreciate the amount of work performed on their behalf.

CHAPTER 6

PARENTING NIECES AND NEPHEWS

The role of the black aunt is a formal role within black families. Formal roles refer to positions or statuses within social organizations, groups, or institutions (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993). Like all roles, there are many identities associated with being a Black aunt, such as second parents, an extension of the parents, and supporter. Milardo (2005) found that uncles in New Zealand viewed their roles in a variety of ways. Therefore, black aunts as parents to nieces and nephews is but one of the identities of black aunts, and not all black aunts have the opportunity or the desire to perform this aspect of black aunting. The black aunt as an othermother is a historic role that has been enacted since the time of slavery (Collins 2000; Foster 1983; Hill 1999).

The black aunts in this study enacted the role with specific expectations of behavior for themselves and for other black women who may potentially find themselves in this role. Black aunts learned parenting expectations from past interactions with their own aunts, through witnessing the actions of other black women as aunts, and through stories of black othermothers. The following story underscores the history of the role of black aunts as parents in the meanings associated with parenting nieces and nephews. This black aunt was raising three great-nephews who were abandoned in her home, and she named her aunts as role models for parenting her nephews as well as her belief in her obligations to help all people.

> *My mother had two aunts that took care of us when we were small. They taught us to cook and to sew and*

> *to garden. And my Aunt Carol used to go to everybody's funeral who died. And I asked her why do you do that? And she said, "Because sometimes there's nobody there but me and the preacher"….And she used to make these beautiful little baby outfits for these little children in China, and Africa…And I said, "Why, you'll never see those babies." But she said, "But this may be the only nice things they ever get in their life." And, but was faithful. They took care of us and they didn't complain about it. My Aunt Rachel was a role model for me…She was an elevator operator in a hospital, and she decided she wanted to be a nurse….She was in her 40s. Her husband didn't want her to. She was tired of doing day work and operating an elevator, so she took them courses and she became a nurse. And when she was 65, she went back to school to be a labor advocate for her union.* (A20)

These black women learned that all children in their homes should be viewed as their own children and, therefore, they developed a sense of a responsibility to parent their nieces and nephews in the same ways that they would if the children were their own biological children. Utilizing the skills learned from members of their women-centered networks to perform the role of parent to nieces and nephews demonstrated role-taking. Through role taking, individuals identify the regularities that unite persons in the role and they begin to align their behaviors with the role.

> *I was raised that when you are in the presence of an adult, not in the presence of your mother, that adult is your parent in that moment. And, you know what I'm talking about. When you go to school, the teacher is your parent. So I just automatically, "You're coming in here. You're minors who need to be taken care of. You're in my home, so you're my children for all intents and purposes."* (A7)

However, black aunts altered lessons learned from other women, because of differences in historical times as well as using different parenting strategies that allowed them to

cope with parenting challenges that other women may not have experienced. In personalizing their roles as parents of nieces and nephews, black aunts demonstrated role making. Role making emphasizes that in the course of enacting roles, individuals create and modify roles so as to make them explicit to their unique situations.

In the act of role taking and role making, black aunts as parents exhibited the role flexibility within black families that has been recognized as one of the strengths of black families. Foster (1983) asserted that there is so much role flexibility within black families that relatives can perform the social role of absent parents. Standing in for absent parents, these 35 black women served as a survival mechanism against the destructive and destabilizing impact of American society on the youngest members of their families. St. Jean and Feagin (1998) noted that black families help black men and black women "absorb and counter the many damaging impacts of racial oppression" (p.151). These women understood that their roles as parents went beyond providing the basic physical needs of their nieces and nephews. They also needed to ensure that, while still children, nieces and nephews learned the skills needed to survive in this society.

> *As a child, I owe them. I have to make sure they have food to eat, clothes to wear, that I am raising them to go to school, to be responsible. That I was teaching them the basic things that they need to make it in life as an adult. And I feel like that's something that all parents should owe their children, which all of them don't get…My thing is once they get in the twelfth grade, I still owe them. I owe them the fact that you need to make a decision to go to college or get a job, and I have to make sure you going down that right track. And if, from now until the twelfth grade. "If I trained you right, you're going to know that you need a job" or I'm going to college. I'm joining the armed services. I'm going to do something.* (A17)

Gibson (2005) stated that parenting is an important aspect in the culture of kinship care. One of the most consistent findings was that black aunts wanted to teach their nieces and nephews lessons that would serve them if their aunts were no longer in their lives. Also, black aunts emphasized the need to train their nieces and nephews in ways that allowed the children to transmit familial values to future generations of the family.

> *And so these are the values you see and these are the values I want you to take with you, you know, because that's how you're going to make it in life, because I am not going to be around all of your life. And when I'm gone, I want you to carry on, and when you have your children, you do the same thing, you know. It's a generational thing.* (A35)

> *And I would tell her the things we are trying to teach you are not only for yourself, it's for your children and your children's children. That everything is a multigenerational act. God is a multigenerational. He didn't just do it for Adam and Eve, he did it for mankind. And we have to think beyond ourselves. It's a servant heart. It's about what I am doing, how is it going to affect somebody else.* (A18)

Respondents were asked to name their parenting strategies, parenting philosophies, and what advice they would give to other black aunts who may potentially find themselves in this role. An analysis of their answers resulted in three dimensions of parenting nieces and nephews: parenting trials, parenting strategies, and sacrifices and rewards of parenting nieces and nephews. In this chapter, each dimension will be examined.

PARENTING TRIALS

Parenting trials refer to situations with nieces and nephews and/or aunts' own children that made parenting nieces and nephews difficult. These trials added to the stress

felt by black aunts as they sought to salvage the lives of nieces and nephews. Schwartz (1994) asserted that parenting is a trial for all new parents, but additional elements involved in parenting non-biological children, such as previous experiences of the children, relationships with extended family members, and supervision by social welfare agencies, can add stress to the already complex role of parent. There were five parenting trials reported: treat children the same, troubled youth, unhealthy relationships with biological parents, personalities already formed, and the teen years.

Treat Children the Same

Some respondents found it difficult to use the same parenting strategies with nieces and nephews that they used with their own children, because they believed that their children already were stable and secure. For aunts, nieces and nephews appeared emotionally vulnerable, due to their prior living conditions.

> *Well, I treated them the same as far as, you know, everybody is going to be comfortable, we are all going to eat. But lots of time, I think he got more, because he required more, because my daughters were already secure and comfortable. The adjustment period for him was a little difficult, you know?* (A5)

One major area of difference was discipline. Several black aunts used corporal punishment on their own children but not on nieces and nephew. This difference stemmed from the belief by black aunts that their nieces and nephews had already suffered enough abuse.

> *But the children because they were abused, I didn't want to further that physical abuse…It was time out or taking things away from them…. Because I made a promise to*

> *them when they came. They had been abused enough, so, I had decided that I didn't want anymore beatings.* (A2)

> *I don't whip my nephew because of the atmosphere that he came out of. I have to not discipline him the way I probably would my own child. My daughter has never been a discipline problem…. The sort of things I do teaches him that he is not going to get away with it.* (A6)

The use of corporal punishment also depended on whether children were placed by state child protective services. Black aunts whose nieces and nephews had been placed in their homes by state child protective services found out, often after they had already spanked their nieces and nephews, that the guidelines of state child protective services did not allow for children to be spanked.

> *We couldn't spank him or anything like that, and at first, I didn't know that. I was spanking him at first, like I do my own child. And then when I started those DFACS classes, they tell you that you couldn't spank him. And then in the class, I told her, "I didn't know that. Nobody never told me that." But then I had to stop that and try to approach it the way they tell you to approach it, and it was not working out.* (A17)

Respondents reported that their children were often aware of the differences in disciplinary styles or in treatment, which only added to the challenge of parenting nieces and nephews. Black aunts also reported that their children were different from their nieces and nephews in attitudes and behaviors, which made treating children the same very difficult.

> *Because he real hard-headed. My children wasn't hardheaded. All I had to do was look at my children one time and they knew what the business was. And him, he'll try me, he'll try me. He'll do stuff and keep doing it, keep doing it until he make me mad with him. He makes me mad with him and I just put him on punishment.* (A16)

Troubled Youth

Black aunts reported physical, behavioral, and emotional problems with over half (*n*=24) of the 44 nieces and nephews being cared for that resulted from the chaos in their families of origin and/or the losses associated with the absence of the biological parents.

> *It [mother leaving him] really messed him up. He asked me why his mama don't want him, you know. And I don't know what to tell him, you know. I just say, "Baby, she just got problems right now. She'll be all right. She still loves you." You have to make him think, you know, you can't tell him nothing negative.* (A16)

One black aunt was raising two great-nieces and one great-nephew, and all of the children suffered some type of problem.

> *Okay, the set of twins they were born like thirteen weeks premature, addicted to crack cocaine, and the female of the twins had mild CP (cerebral palsy) and developmental delay problems. And then we found out after having them that her twin brother, that his is psychological, I guess. Because first, they thought it was ADHD, then they thought it was bipolar. Over the years, he was going to a ____ psychiatrist, but they couldn't really diagnose what was wrong with him, cause they didn't know what was wrong with him. So now the current diagnosis is that he is oppositional defiant. That just means he's bad. I mean, that's just the long and short of it. As a matter of fact, he is not even in the home at the moment because the twin sister has accused him of some sexual improprieties. So he is in a respite home, and he comes home on the weekends.* (A35)

Previous research demonstrates that many children in kinship care have emotional and behavioral problems (Gibson 2005; Hayslip and Kaminski 2005; Winston 2003). Gibson (2005) asserted that, for black grandparents to parent grandchildren effectively, they must acknowledge that "their grandchildren have special needs resulting from their

prior neglectful situation, the emotions associated with their absent biological parents, and being cared for by their grandmothers" (p. 289). Hayslip and Kaminski (2005) noted that young children have not developed the abilities to verbalize complex feelings and tolerate intensely painful emotional experiences; therefore, their grief may be expressed through irritability, aggression, and depression. Common problems reported by aunts included attention deficit disorders, anger management issues, and violent and destructive behaviors.

Black aunts utilized professional counseling to help nieces and nephews to overcome the effects of prior experiences in their lives, to help children deal with the death or absence of biological parents, and to improve children's behavior. They reported that nieces and nephews would not cooperate with counselors and doctors. This refusal to help themselves was very frustrating for these black aunts, as they utilized professional counseling as a strategy in salvaging the lives of nieces and nephews. Black aunts also reported that when one counselor did not work, they continued looking until they found a counselor who would help. These strategies, while helpful and needed, added to the time demands.

> *And we went through counseling for months, and he would not…He would sit there for an hour…He would not open up. Truly, to this day, I'm not sure what he needs. I know we provided support, we provided safety, and we provided what love we could. (A2)*
>
> *I took him to a doctor in [suburbs]. I took him down to [public hospital] to the help children staff, all these places and nobody ever helped him. And then, I took him to the lady he sees now, and she's getting ready to drop him, because she's going to start working at [a local university], but she's supposed to be putting me in touch with someone*

> *else who can help him. But, he goes to see her. She tries to make him talk, because you can ask him a question, and he'll just sit there and stare at you, hunch his shoulders and say I don't know, about his behavior. (A17)*

Unhealthy Relationships with Biological Parents

Black aunts reported that the relationships between nieces and nephews and their biological parents were unhealthy. They stated that, in cases where nieces and nephews had some type of relationships with biological parents, the parents would make promises to children of money, potential visits, of correcting problems in their lives, and of taking children back. Black aunts reported that these children believed that the biological parents would keep their promises, but when biological parents did not keep their promises, it fell on black aunts to deal with the children's disappointment and sadness.

> *They know them. It's a very strange relationship, in the sense that the girl idolized her father and always told me, "He's coming back for me. He told me he'd be back to buy me a pony." He's going to do this and he's going to do that, and all these wonderful things. And he has been a disappointment to her, everyday….The boy, on the other hand, my nephew, wants no part of the mother and no part of the father. (A2)*

Black aunts coped with the disappointment and sadness of nieces and nephews by asking biological parents, who consistently lied to children and/or upset children very badly, not to call or contact the children. In the case where children were placed in their aunts' homes by state child protective services, black aunts would request that child protective services put a stop to the calls. This strategy was used to minimize the effects of unhealthy relationships with biological parents, so the children could begin to heal.

> *In fact, my nephew had called him once, and they stopped him from calling, because when he would call, he would promise him stuff. I'm going to send him this, this, and this, and he never did. And with the behavior, he already had, that made it worse. Like, "Did my Daddy send me something? You didn't give it to me*." *And, I'm like, "But nothing came." And so I had to explain that to him. So, you know, they stopped him from calling.* (A17)

Another coping strategy that black aunts utilized to minimize the effects of the biological parent on nieces and nephews was to advise their nieces and nephews that they did not have to interact with their biological parents until they were ready to do so.

> *And after a while it's like, look, we, really can't have you go through this. So, don't deal with your Mom right now. Don't deal with your Dad right now. Just, you know, when you're ready, then you're ready.* (A2)

Aunts also reported the fact that on those occasions where nieces and nephews went back to live with their biological parents, when the parents would bring the children back, the children suffered.

> *Now, the baby boy, he never wanted to live with her. The oldest son went to live with her when she first got her apartment, and that was in August, and he went to live with her. And by November, he was back. The baby boy never wanted to take the chance because he knew that he would be back. "I'm not going because I know we just going to come back." So he never wanted to go. So the oldest boy was back, what, in less than three months? He wouldn't even go, he didn't even go visit.* (A26)

Also, visits to parents also meant that the aunts would have to start all over again undoing bad behaviors and/or helping children understand why they could not remain with their biological parents. Although, many of the black aunts wanted to see the children have relationships with their biological parents, those visits added to their parenting challenges.

> *Now, today, you know, I have to go back and start all over again, because he was with his mom for the weekend. So, some things that I ordinarily wouldn't do, we have to go back to square one and start over again, that Thursday where we left off… He's not a bad kid, by any means. But, he just, like I said, because of the atmosphere he was in. He has a lot of things that we have to address, you know.* (A6)

One black aunt who had formally adopted her nephew allowed her sister, the child's biological mother, to keep him for a weekend, only to have her try to kidnap him and keep him, which resulted in a physical fight. From that time on, she had to restrict her sister's access to him, for her son's sake, which caused problem with other members of her family of origin.

Personalities Already Formed

Black aunts took responsibility for children from newborn to sixteen-years-old. They reported that it was easier to raise an infant or toddler (up to age five) than an older child. They believed that it was harder bonding with older children whose personalities were already formed.

> *Maybe if she would have been a lot younger…When I got her, she was a teenager. So, really, I heard, it's been said that a lot of her beliefs, and her attitudes, and personality has already been made up in her by the times she's ten or something like that. I had her many years after that.* (A18)

> *They were already molded. Any time you get a child that's over five or over four, they've already been set, and they had some difficult times…. So, I had to be just consistently hard and firm with them, letting them know that no meant no. I had to also win some trust with them, because they didn't trust anybody. They were not the type that you can play with and tease and joke with, because they didn't know where it cut off at.* (A11)

It became a trial to teach children to think and behave the way the aunts wanted to them to do. A black aunt who raised two nieces, who were ages twelve and thirteen when they came to live with her, was saddened because the youngest niece had run away from her home and was living on the streets at seventeen-years-old. She stated that she wished she had intervened earlier in their lives. The children had been placed in foster care and the father and his girlfriend moved three or four times a year, meaning the children had to keep changing schools. When she took them, parenting them was difficult because they had already formed habits and had beliefs that needed to be changed. Her story is informative.

> *I had many years' worth of undoing to do. Oh, there were just so many things, just again from their lifestyle, that I just had to undo you know. And they didn't value a lot of things. Just the way, you know, just they learned how to live. They learned kind of the hustle and just how to get by, and things like that. The household that you know my brother and his girlfriend kept was nothing near the cleanest. For example, whenever I went, if I went inside, I would stand at the threshold. I never went in the whole house most of the time because the times that I did, the kids were like "Come back and look at our room," and it was just like a tornado. You know, and that just wasn't an environment. And I wanted to catch them being young girls. And knowing what was going on with a lot of kids today and the kids in school, I just really wanted to catch them and you know at least try to help mold their mindset …give them some consistence, give them some adult interaction. They didn't really get that. You know, they got a lot of the discipline, you know, don't do this, don't do that, but not a lot of the spending time with them, and you know and just teaching them how to be young ladies.* (A14)

This black aunt's greatest wish is that the lessons she gave to her nieces will pay off in the long run and that she succeeded in planting a seed of hope by interacting with them on a daily basis and being involved in their lives.

Teen Years

Every black aunt with teenagers or who had went through the teen years with their nieces and nephews found parenting a challenge when nieces and nephews became teenagers. Research indicates that the teenage years are stressful as children attempt to become autonomous (Cooksey, Menaghan, and Jekielek 1997).

> *I had burnt out because they were all very needy. I didn't really realize what I was getting into. I did my best, but adolescence did me in.* (A2)

Black aunts viewed adolescence as a time of tremendous growth, but also as a time of stress and frustration for black aunts and nieces and nephews. The challenges increased as teenage nieces and nephews began to act out. One black aunt admitted that she forgot that teenagers see the world differently than adults.

> *I forgot that to teenagers to ask them to do something to them felt like forever. And they felt overwhelmed, taken advantage of, and to me, my word was law….Well, it was teenager things they were doing, and so, they still respected me when they faced me. And I didn't expect them to be angels behind my back, nobody is. So the fact that they were doing teenager rebellious stuff behind my back, to me, wasn't a reason for me not to have them back. Because they weren't doing anything, I thought, that would endanger us, so, or my household.* (A7)

For one black aunt, the teen years changed her son/nephew, for before he became a teenager, the two of them shared an especially close relationship in which she even cut his hair. That all changed with adolescence.

> *Not until he became a teenager. Not until he became a teenager and he started, and I'm going to say, that's when he started high school, when he decided that he was somebody, I guess, and had feelings and ideas and the schools and the crowds and what have you. Used to be how I dressed you or what I bought was fine. But all of a sudden, it became a name brand, and "I don't want K-mart stuff any more. I want to go to the mall to get this." He didn't want me to cut his hair any more, he wanted to go to the barber shop. So, there we were. (Laughs)* (A13)

PARENTING STRATEGIES

Parenting strategies were used by black aunts to help overcome the challenges of raising their nieces and nephews. Parenting strategies are defined as ways or methods of parenting (Gibson 2005). To salvage children's lives, it was important for these black aunts to use parenting strategies that allowed black aunts to do the very best job. This role was salient for them, mainly because of their self-identities as helpers, saviors, and rescuers.

Black aunts viewed their role as parents to nieces and nephews as that of a trainer whose job it was to impart knowledge that allowed nieces and nephews to grow into self-sufficient and capable adults.

> *Well, I think that we have to prepare kids for the world. You know, I can be the aunt that is worried about her career and her money or something and never teach them anything, never train them. I mean, the level of training? I*

> *did not realize we have to train. That's our role as teachers, parents, you know, moms, dads. As a trainer, a parent is not just somebody to be spoiling kids and just sit them in their room and that's how you raise themselves….You can't get tired or else there's that one little area you've missed.* (A12)

Black aunts stated that it was important to teach black children because of the racism and discrimination that black children will have to endure as adults in this society.

> *And I think that in today's society, and I know that parents got to work, have other responsibilities, but we've got to take time for our black children and we've got to work with teachers, teach them at school and teach them at home and in the church.* (A13)

As trainers, black aunts taught their nieces and nephews how to survive as black adults in this society, a process known as enculturation. Spencer (1991:110) defines enculturation as the specific ways that human infants and children learn to become adult members of a particular society. She argued that human infants develop into competent or efficacious adults only through being reared in a human society. Poliak-Eltz (1979) stated that enculturation preserves a people's way of life (Poliak-Eltz 1979).

Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, and Allen (1990) stated that it is the goal of all families is to help prepare children to participate successfully as citizens of the wider society, but that black families also must act as a buffer between their children and society. Black parents utilize parenting strategies that help inculcate into black children prescriptions and proscriptions regarding growing up black in America that seek to keep them safe and secure. Among this sample of black aunts, parenting strategies included teaching of life lessons, discipline, providing socio-emotional support, gender

socialization, the involvement of children in school and community activities, and the intergeneration transmission of religious values.

Teaching of Life Lessons

I conceptualized life lessons as teachings that prepare children for the world beyond their families. Life lessons emphasize how to treat others, values, expected behaviors in different contexts, and how to conduct oneself in the proper manner at all times. Spencer (1991) asserted that each child is enculturated to become a particular kind of human rather than just another human being.

One form of life lessons included teaching basic homemaking skills. An interesting finding in this study is that black aunts taught their nieces *and* nephews to do chores normally defined as "women's work." This is consistent with research that shows that, among blacks, the strength of role flexibility has been fostered through training all black children in housekeeping and outdoor work (Crosbie-Burnett and Lewis 1999; Hill 1998; Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, and Allen 1990). Crosbie-Burnett and Lewis (1999) argued that in black families, all children are taught to cook, clean, mend, build, and perform other necessary work for the benefit of the family unit.

> *I just want these children to learn. I taught them how to make their beds, how to cook, how to be responsible. Now, my grandboys are nine years of age, but they can cook! I don't play…When they were six, they knew how to work the microwave, but now I'm teaching to how to make pancakes and things. It's a little bit harder.* (A24)

> *You know, I told them that "living here, your job is to do things around the house that you are supposed to do," you know, and go to school and get your grades ...The rent,*

> *what you pay for living expenses is just to do the things around the house that you're supposed to do, clean and those kind of things. I was like, "When you don't pay your rent, you don't get to stay where you are."* (A14)

Another form of life lesson was the imparting of financial wisdom. Five black aunts reported a need to teach black children the value of money, of having savings and checking accounts and knowing how to maintain them, of being meticulous in paying bills on time, and that utilities and food do not come free.

> *See, no one taught me, but I'm teaching them how to save their money. I teach them how to, they have a bank account.* (A17)

> *We would pretend she had a checkbook, explain the value of money and how things work, and how it's not easy to just say I'll get a job*…(A18)

One black aunt taught her nieces the whole gamut regarding having financial wisdom. She taught them about staying out of debt and to understand about paying bills. The following story highlights the depth of her teachings to her nieces.

> *I mean, just the whole credit issue, the whole, credit is the American way, no. Teach them how not to be in debt ….They need to learn early on about that. And when my niece was here this last time, her senior year, I got her a checking account and a savings account, and you know, had her get her a little job. And you know, she could keep the job as long as her grades stayed up. I tried to teach her how to write checks and manage money….I was going to let this first thing bounce, because I wanted it to happen so she could understand, you know, if you spend $3 at Starbucks, use your check card and don't have money in the bank, you now pay $33 extra for that cup of coffee, and it's not really worth it. So, teach them those types of things. teach them about money, teach them about integrity, and you know, and just values.* (A14)

Other life lessons reported by black aunts included the value of education, the need for a strong work ethic, and to show respect to their bodies by avoiding drugs, alcohol, and other possible addictions.

Discipline

The form of discipline used by black aunts differed according to age of the child, gender of the child, child's previous history of abuse or neglect, biological or non-biological status, and children's personalities. However, the majority of aunts used corporal punishment. They did not differentiate spanking from whippings. The social class and age of black aunts did not appear to influence which type of discipline was used. This is consistent with research that posits that blacks are more likely than whites to use corporal punishment (Flynn 1998; Horn, Cheng, and Joseph 2004; Musil and Standing 2005; Spencer 1991). In a study on the use of discipline in black families across socio-economic status, Spencer (1991) found that there are no significant differences in the use of corporal punishment across social class; only the loss of privileges is a different strategy more likely used by higher-income blacks than lower-income blacks.

One black aunt who was raised in a solidly black middle-class family reported spanking her niece at school when her niece became involved with gangs.

> *What happened was, it was an episode where we found out she was messing with gangs. We show up there and I literally whipped her tail in school….And I in front of everyone, just whipped her tail. And , of course, the school, "You can't do that on this property. You can't do that." And my attitude was with them was then, "If I don't do it, you're going to take, when she gets in trouble with this boy and something happens, then you're going to want to put her in detention or in jail or whatever. Let us handle her. Nobody's going to hurt her."* (A15)

Many of these black aunts viewed timeout as a punishment style of white families, not one popular among black families. Another black aunt simply stated that she was not the kind of person to use timeout.

> *I mean, I'm not a timeout person, timeout may work for some kids, and for the ones it works for, that's great, let's do that. You know, you do have to find out what method of discipline works for which, but I'm still not of the school, I mean I'm of the school of you might have to spank.* (A14)

Discipline was dichotomized as either old-fashioned methods, meaning the use of corporal punishment, or as new methods, such as time-out, discussion or lecture, or compromise. Instead, personal preference and beliefs regarding the function of discipline determined which type of discipline was used. When asked who disciplined the two nephews that she is parenting, one respondent answered:

> *Me and my mother, and my brother…But we do it the old-fashioned way, and he's doing the new way…. Old-fashioned way is, "I'm going to tell you once and after that we going to get a whipping, something, some type of tap or body contact will be made." My brother is the type, he'll take you to the place of discipline, timeout, 1-2-3, or counting. And I can't do that with a four and two-year-old and let them give me decisions.* (A3)

One black aunt spoke of her grandfather who was her primary caregiver and the discipline he used as old-fashioned.

> *He was old-fashioned. He whipped us, real bad. He was old-fashioned. I mean, he, we were living scared. If we made too much noise in the house, and if he's sleeping and he wakes up, then we were going to get a whipping. He had this thing called the scribe, and it was made out of this rubber material like from tires, so you always had whelps on your legs so we just made sure that we were good. He was all down for beating you.* (A34)

Corporal punishment was viewed as a means of conveying love to nieces and nephews and as a strategy for ensuring the life lessons that had been taught to nieces and nephews.

> *I did, I spanked them if they needed to…I spanked my own children. You know, I tell them it was because I love you, and I wanted you to do what's right. Now it's called child abuse. I said, you can't spank children like, you know, we spanked you all out of love, for being disobedient, but it wasn't because we just wanted to whip you. (*A11)

Other aunts believed in spanking, only after other techniques had failed to achieve the desired outcome. These aunts tried many types of disciplinary practices, according to the problem and to what methods were available to use.

> *The discipline I used was according to whatever the situation was at hand at that particular time. Each child was different, so I had to discipline them and handle them in different ways. I could not, you know, I couldn't say, "Well, you all are on punishment and you all have to do so-and so and so and so…." I might have said, "Well, you can't go outside." Well, one of them, like the baby boy, he didn't care about going outside anyway. All he wanted to do was stay and watch TV, so that wasn't no punishment for him, you know. So, it was all different with each one* of them. (A26)

Other types of discipline reported was yelling, lecturing, and taking things away such as no television. One black aunt reported a hodgepodge of disciplinary practices.

> *I use everything from bribery to beating them butts. We use the naughty chair. We use the naughty room. We take away privileges. We send people to be without supper. We spank. I take stuff away. I throw stuff away. I'll sell it, if it means that much to you and you won't do what you're supposed to do. But I try to talk to them and tell them why what they've done is wrong, how it hurts them and how it hurts others, and*

> *how what you put out in the world is what comes back to you, and how it impacts their body and their spirit.* (A20)

The most stressful aspect of disciplining nieces and nephews occurred when discipline did not work. Three black aunts found that with some children who had suffered extreme physical and/or sexual abuse as well as exposure to drug dealing and other inappropriate parenting, no type of discipline worked in trying to teach their nieces and nephews right from wrong.

> *But Jonathan, we tried time out, it didn't work. You had to be sitting in the room with him. And that's when we realized that something was wrong with him, because, you know, timeout didn't work, taking away, we tried taking away toys and spanking didn't really work, either. And I don't know what works for him….Now they thinking that he might have been sexually molested in one of those foster homes, but they don't know cause he was just four.* (A35)

When discipline failed to work with vulnerable children, black aunts tried compromise and negotiation, in efforts to minimize violent behavior.

> *When he was very explosive, he damaged things. Or he would do little things, like rip the curtain in a place, in a way that you couldn't see it….So, we made an agreement: "You will not damage anything. You will not hurt yourself nor will you hurt anybody else."* (A2)

All black aunts agreed that discipline needed to be consistent, strict, firm, and that children needed to understand why they were being punished at the time of the offense.

> *You know, but you always got to explain yourself in all situations, I may discipline first and explain later, or explain first, then discipline later. It all depends on how I am feeling at that moment. Now, my Mom, she's the discipline first and explain later.* (A3)

However, all black aunts with children of different ages and in different stages of development reported that they used differential disciplinary styles according to the age of the children. The most frequent form of discipline for pre-adolescent children was spanking. For adolescents and teenagers, black aunts reported talking and lecturing, as they tried to explain why behaviors were unacceptable.

> *Yes. I didn't spank them. They were 13 and 15. I spanked him…. I spanked him, but if there was a conflict between him and the youngest niece, I got on her, I got on her more than I got on him, because I felt that, because she was the oldest, she should have acted the oldest. And sometimes, they were acting the same age. He was five and she was 13, or 14. And so, yeah, I would lecture her more in those kinds of conflicts.* (A7)

> *Now, at this age, because they are 11 and 12, it's mostly get a bath, goodnight, the day is over. But when they were younger, it was usually, "You know what, if you are not able to deal, I will do more explaining. If you are unable to deal right now, we'll give you a moment, and let you take a break from this and pull yourself together."* (A5)

Providing Socio-Emotional Support

As noted earlier, nieces and nephews exhibited emotional and psychological problems. Black aunts utilized parenting strategies that sought to minimize the grief felt by nieces and nephews. These aunts emphasized the need to give nieces and nephews as much attention as possible. They ensured children knew they were loved, awarded success, encouraged children in their abilities and talents, shared moments and events with nieces and nephews, and showed patience and understanding.

> *We did things together. You know, I taught them to ride the bike. We played ball. It was like a, I don't know, it*

> *wasn't like these are the children and I have to maintain or it's a struggle. It wasn't like that with us.* (A26)

> *And make sure you have the patience, especially if they were drug kids. I think that they are totally different from any other normal kids, if their mom was on drugs twenty-four hours.* (A22)

Black aunts reported that it was important to spend time with nieces and nephews, and not just buying nieces and nephews material articles that were meant to compensate for lack of quality time with them. Instead, giving of oneself was crucial in helping nieces and nephews overcome the unhealthy conditions in which they lived before coming to their aunts.

> *Now, the one thing that I've seen about kids and about parents today is, parents today are so busy giving their kids what they didn't have, all the material things, that they are not giving them what they did have which was instilling the integrity, and the discipline and the things like that. There used to be a difference, I think, in the black community and the white community and families as far as these things.* (A14)

> *Involve yourself, you know, you got to take that assessment. Give them what you did have, you know, and again that's give them the integrity, teach them how to be good people in this society….[D]on't just take them to give them some place to live, and to, you know, to give them food and shelter. Spend the time, be involved, and that takes energy.* (A14)

> *You know, you got to be THERE. You don't have to do it all right. They will forgive you.* (A20)

Gender Socialization

While both boys and girls learned basic homemaking skills, other parenting advice emphasized the differences in girls and boys. Whereas black aunts reported not tolerating the baggy-pants look for nephews, they were more accepting of boys' dress than they were of girls', whose clothing choices were most monitored. In salvaging children's lives, these black aunts set guidelines of behavior that they felt allowed children to grow into respectable adults.

> *Yes, there were things they couldn't do, like they couldn't dress any kind of way. I wouldn't let them go out of the house looking like what I thought was a slut. And they would say, "Well my mama let." "Well you are not going to do that." And I knew my sister well enough to know that, if she was in her right mind, she wouldn't allow them to go out in the manner that they wanted to sometimes. Black lipstick, black fingernails, you can't do that cause you representing me now…* (A7)

> *I was satisfied to see the results of my training through them. For example, how to be young ladies, how to carry themselves when they were out besides at home…* (A22)

Other issues that black aunts reported teaching girls were the need for personal hygiene; how to demand respect from boys, meaning not to allow boys to call them names; and how much contact they could have with boys.

> *The other point was how much interaction, socializing they could do with young boys. They couldn't have them in my house unless I was there. They couldn't go anywhere with the young man unless they were going with friends I trusted.* (A7)

> *She didn't know anything about hygiene for a young lady. I had to teach her. She didn't know how a young lady was to carry herself, how important it is to know just how to demand a young man to treat you.* (A18)

For boys, black aunts concentrated on issues that emphasized the greater chances for black males to be in the criminal justice system, such as the greater possibility of black males going to jail and of the police's predilection for arresting black boys. Research indicates that today, black parents continue to provide racial socialization messages for the protection of their children (Johnson and Staples 2005). A black aunt raising a seven-year-old great-nephew and her own six-year-old son reported telling them the dangers of being black males.

> *I tell mine that it don't matter how small they are that the police would rather have you in jail beating on you. "And they don't have to worry about you, just put you in jail and beat you and stuff, rather than have you out here walking around here and trying to live your own life. So you need to think about that….So you make a decision, do bad, go to jail, or do good, and live your life right. I tell them that all the time."* (A17)

Another issue that black aunts concentrated on for boys was having manners such as opening doors for women, of being neat, and of making passing grades in school.

> *See I kept his hair cut neat, and dressed him and all. And then he, when we got ready to go in, and he opened the door for us to go in. And then everything was "yes, maam" and "no maam."* (A11)

Involvement in School and Community Activities

The level of activities that nieces and nephews participated in was related to social class. Children's participation in school and community activities was expensive and time-consuming. Nevertheless, participation kept nieces and nephews out of trouble

and instilled in them a sense of accomplishment and the ability to use their skills and talents in a positive way.

One black aunt who was parenting three nieces and one nephew involved the children in sports such as football, baseball, and track. Other black aunts involved nieces and nephews in church activities, Girls' and Boys' Scouts, school chorus, and community activities sponsored by black organizations.

> *I put him in little scooter basketball and stuff like that. I mean, I figured if I kept him busy and I mean the positive reinforcement, you know, as well as discipline.* (A12)

> *I had them in football, baseball, I mean he was forever in something, and he was always the one, he was the man as they would call him. "Mickey's the man, give the ball to Mickey." See he was hyper. I don't care where he was, if he got that football, he made a touchdown.* (A11)

> *They sing in the choir. I've watched them develop in gifts. Jeremy, he's four, so he's gotten all As and Bs in his academic career so far. I got James into the Project Success program for the 100 Black Men.* (A2)

Intergenerational Transmission of Religious Values

In their study of the religious dimensions of the grandparent role in black families, King et al. (forthcoming) found four dimensions of the intergenerational transmission of religious values by grandparents: religious instruction, modeling religious behavior, engagement in intercessory prayer, and the promotion of religious values in family relationships. Religious instruction included both biblical teaching and giving spiritual advice. Modeling religious behavior involved living lives that expressed their religiosity,

being present in the household, and tolerance of religious differences in their households. The promotion of religious values in family relationships included loving one another, lack of conflict in family relationships, and respecting each other. I found that these black aunts also provided the intergenerational transmission of values in three dimensions: religious instruction, model religious behavior, and the promotion of the religious values in family relationships.

One consistent finding, as noted in Chapter 4, was the importance of faith to all respondents. Their faith was important not only in their decision-making, but also in the way they lived their lives and in the wishes they had for their nieces and nephews under their care. One of the ways that black aunts imparted their faith to their nieces and nephews was through religious instruction. They reported teaching their children the importance of worshipping God and reading the Bible. It was important that children not come to believe that individuals can stay home and learn the Bible, but understand and appreciate the value of worshiping with others.

> *And I would tell him, "You got to go to Philippians. God says that you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you." And he would always say that on his test, before he take his tests, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." And he would do good on his tests, and he would say that to me. He was like, "I said that, I was sitting there and Mama, everything went blank." But he said, "When I said that, I started writing on that paper." God first, you got to know that you can't do nothing without him. And that's why I ask them to put God first. (A19)*

> *You just got to worship God, and you have to know the Bible. And you can't know it, I mean, you can read it on your own, but you also have a spiritual leader to reveal a lot of things. And you got to go to church. And like the daughter that's 23, "Well, I don't see why you have to go to church. You can read the Bible"… "NO, that's because you missed it. I don't know when you did,*

> *but you did."…. And I said, "You know communing with the saints, you go on a Sunday."* (A35)

Another means of transmitting religious values was in "walking the walk and talking the talk." This means that these black aunts modeled religious behavior for their children to emulate. Their way of life demonstrated their religious beliefs, through church attendance, choice of words, no smoking or use of drugs, and caring for others.

> *And would I tell her the things we are trying to teach you are not only for yourself, it's for your children and your children's children. That everything is a multigenerational act. God is a multigenerational. He didn't just do it for Adam and Eve, he did it for mankind. And we have to think beyond ourselves. It's a servant heart. It's about what I am doing, how is it going to affect somebody else?* (A18)

> *And that's why I tell these children, I said, "I teach you right from wrong." We don't do drugs… We don't smoke. I use the D-word and the H-word when I get real angry, talking to my friends. My husband doesn't use any of that. I said, "So it's not like you hear profanity in the house. And you see where I'm not stealing anything. I'm working hard for whatever it is I want or need….And when I'm gone, I want you to carry on, and when you have your children, you do the same thing, you know. It's a generational thing.* (A35)

The third way these black aunts transmitted religious values was through the promotion of religious values in family relationships. They taught their children the importance of respecting each other as a sign of belief in God. They did not tolerate fights between children and actively promoted loving each other. Family was very important to these respondents and having family care for each other and take care of each other were religious values black aunts felt necessary for family stability.

> *I never thought of it in that way. I just looked at myself as somebody who tries to be a woman of God and live my life accordingly…And so, therefore, we are supposed to treat each other, look out for each other, and take care of each other…*(A28)

SACRIFICES AND REWARDS OF PARENTING NIECES AND NEPHEWS

The decision to become a kinship care provider was often made without full knowledge of the personal changes that were required to salvage children's lives. The challenges and stressors associated with the transition that follows the decision, such as role ambiguity, alterations in everyday lives, and family stress, emphasize the tremendous level of sacrifices that were made by these black aunts. Nevertheless, nearly all (*n*=34) of these women also reported receiving rewards and benefits from taking on the role. This finding is consistent with research that indicates that grandparents serving as surrogate parents report both challenges and rewards (Burton and Devries 1992; Johnson-Garner and Meyers 2003; Weber and Waldrop 2000). Weber and Waldrop (2000) asserted that positive and negative feelings about raising young children were expressed by all grandparent caregivers in their study. Moreover, Woo and Raley (2005) stated that there are costs and rewards to becoming parents.

In keeping with symbolic interactionism, what individuals view as a sacrifice or a reward differs according to how individuals appraise the situation, or their definitions of the situation (Simon 1997). Therefore, not all black aunts reported the same rewards or sacrifices. The sacrifices and rewards listed represent those sacrifices and rewards that

more than three individuals reported, with full recognition that some reported information would be omitted.

Sacrifice is conceptualized in terms of the challenges that accompany parenting nieces and nephews. As black aunts enacted kin-work for their nieces and nephews, they often experienced significant losses in personal time, money, and in their careers. They sacrificed their personal goals and dreams. When asked what advice they would give to other black aunts anticipating taking on the role of kinship care providers for their nieces and nephews, black aunts consistently emphasized that aunts should realize the enormity of the hard work and sacrifice that goes into caring for nieces and nephews.

> *[I]t takes a lot of sacrifice and you can't be a selfish person. And you just have to give. And you just have to recognize that we have to take care of the children because they're the next generation. And it's not an easy job, but it's rewarding, you know, because I have a lot of fun with them. I mean, they say things and they do things and we you see them. I mean, I haven't, I'm not old enough to see, you know like the fruits of my labor.* (A35)

> *Raising kids to me is not a hard thing, you just got to be willing to give the sacrifice, that I got this child now, this is my life. How I'm going to make it be good for both of us. If I bought me a six-pack, I bought him a dollar toy and some juices. If he was happy, I was happy. I wasn't going to be happy and he wasn't happy. And that's how I did it.* (A13)

One significant area of sacrifice among the single women in this sample of black aunts, and that is a smaller pool of eligible males for marriage. Consistently, black aunts reported that the men that they would consider for marriage had to be accepting of their lives as kinship care providers. They spoke of being part of a package with their nieces and nephews; therefore, when men showed interest in a long-term relationship with them, but could not accept that these were their children, they ended the relationship.

> *Unfortunately for me I haven't been able to get the right men, but I still would've enjoyed my life and having Harold because if they wouldn't have treated him right, they didn't need to say nothing to me, cause I was a packaged deal and I didn't mind working.* (A13)

Also, men had to be accepting of their beliefs in their obligations to their families, as a whole; otherwise, the relationship would not last.

> *I'd have to make sure that even if I wanted to get a house and get settled in it, and if I needed to give her two, three hundred a month to help make it, they, that the husband was on board with that, that you understand that, I'm not going to make it a lifetime commitment, but if she needs something, that I'm going to be there to do it for her, and to help out.* (A21)

This willingness to forego relationships with men who cannot accept their familial obligations is significant, due to the fact that research demonstrates that black women are at a disadvantage when it comes to finding potential mates (Crowder and Tolnay 2000; Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, and Landry 1992; Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1995). Therefore, for a group that is already experiencing reduced chances for marriage, for these black women to sacrifice their opportunities for marriage to parent nieces and nephews represents a tremendous sacrifice.

Along with the sacrifices, black aunts reported on the rewards of parenting nieces and nephews. The majority of nieces and nephews remained in the homes of these black women for at least one year, and taking care of them was viewed as very rewarding work by black aunts. Rewards reported by black aunts included learning parental skills; purpose and direction in their lives; the appreciation of family members, including nieces and nephews; and opportunities for social integration. Two rewards pertained to aunts

who parented nieces and nephews until the children were adults: lifelong bonds and gratification in the success of nieces and nephews.

Learning Parental Skills

Black aunts not only taught their nieces and nephews lessons, but in salvaging children's lives, they learned some lessons of their own. Five black aunts stated that they learned parental skills that prepared them to be better mothers. Symbolic interactionists would view parenting nieces and nephews as a form of anticipatory socialization, in which individuals have the opportunity for role taking and role making. Nomaguchi and Milkie (2003) asserted that caring for others is a primary way in which adults grow psychologically.

> *…it definitely helps me be a better mother today. It helped me realize that you are responsible for these people and you're totally responsible for their happiness and for their well-being…. It definitely made me make better decisions and definitely any sense, or any chance of me being stubborn or selfish, it just totally wiped that away, and it made me realize that being a mother, you do have to make sacrifices.* (A1)

> *So by the time I had my kids, I was ready, you know? I had a feeling what it meant, you know, I didn't go through things that a lot of new parents go through, because I already been through that.* (A15)

Purpose and Direction in Their Lives

Ten black aunts reported that becoming kinship care providers had given their lives purpose and direction, which was missing at that time. In her study of lifestyle effects on grandparents who parent their grandchildren, Jendrek (1993) noted that over

half of her sample (55.4 percent) reported having more purpose in life because of providing care for their grandchildren. Black aunts reported that before they took responsibility for their nieces and nephews, their lives were boring, they had no directions in life, or they were saved from getting on drugs or falling victim to alcoholism.

> *So, me having the children saved my life as well as theirs, 'cause you know I've never been the type to go out or partying and all. It's just that I liked sitting at home anyway, and I would tell, you know the kids, the ones that said, "Well mama what about your life?" "I ain't doing nothing no way, I got all these rooms here in the house, why not have them?"* (A11)
>
> *Yeah, 'cause I think that if didn't have my children, I'd probably be on drugs or doing some things I didn't need to be doing, too. By me having my children, kept my mind focused off other things, cause I knew I had to raise my kids.* (A16)
>
> *That helped, too. It kind of gave me a sense of purpose. I learned to drive behind it, yeah. And it made me not feel like I wasn't being selfish and self-centered.* (A21)

Simon (1997) asserts that helping others provides individuals with a sense of purpose and a meaningful existence. All of the black aunts said that they would take their nieces and nephews if asked again, as well as other children in their families; what they would do is handle the challenges differently.

The Appreciation of Family

To have sacrifices and contributions recognized was consistently reported as a reward for taking on nieces and nephews. Black aunts who were recognized by family and their nieces and nephews had their identities affirmed. Gecas (1989) argues that, for

women especially, the self is created and affirmed through parenting. Also, having children and family acknowledge one's contribution represents a form of identity validation (Simon 1997). The following story underscores the fact that having one's contribution acknowledged by family is rewarding.

> *And he said, "Mary," he said, "I want to tell you something. I want to tell you what you may not realize that I love you." And he said, "And you are the strongest, most intelligent black woman, or any woman," that's exactly what he said, "I have ever known. He said I have more respect for you than any woman I have ever known." He said, "You are our base." He said, "You have been there for me at, when times when I have done you wrong. You have taken care of my kids"….And I couldn't do anything but shed tears, because that to me meant everything. You know how some people say money means everything, hearing my brother say that, because I have worked so hard, not worked, I have always been there….So to hear my brother after all this time understood the sacrifice in life I made helping him meant the most. He couldn't have told me anything better, for the rest of my life. Because it's like, I got that acknowledgment that I've been there. I am, this is my life.* (A15)

Therefore, the recognition by family is also a form of authenticity. Hitlin (2003) noted that people feel authentic when they behave in keeping with their values. Black aunts who viewed themselves as kinkeepers for family members were authenticated by affirmation of their kin-work.

Opportunities for Social Integration

Nomaguchi and Milkie (2003:357) define social integration as the existence or quantity of social ties or relationships. They note that children may give adults opportunities to interact with other people, including relatives, neighbors, friends, and

those in community institutions such as schools and religious organizations (p. 357). Six black aunts reported that having their nieces and nephews increased their social contacts.

They reported learning the names of the parents of friends of nieces and nephews and setting up a network of social support, such that parents baby-sat for each other. Other black aunts spoke of becoming team mothers, as they encouraged nieces and nephews to participate in sports. Still, other aunts reported being involved in school activities that they would have missed had they not parented their nieces and nephews.

> *And my associates and friends here that I had met and came to know…[w]e would meet at one or another's homes and as our family migrated in, brought them in. Our kids were there, too.* (A13)

Life Long Bonds

One consistent finding among older aunts whose nieces and nephews were now adults was the rewarding feelings these aunts felt for the life long bonds they have with nieces and nephews. They reported feelings of mutual love and respect, and they told stories of assistance from their nieces and nephews. Moreover, these aunts reported being viewed by the children of the nieces and nephews they parented as their grandparents. Black aunts thought of the children of nieces and nephews as their grandchildren as well.

> *I introduced them as my sons… He is mine. He had been with us about two weeks when he started calling me Mom and calling my husband Pop. But that's just how it worked. He still calls my husband Pop, although my husband passed in 1980. He still calls me Mom, and not only he, but his wife calls me Mom, his children call me Grandma…. Occasionally, he'll call me. Mother's Day, my birthday, special things, he'll call. And occasionally, if he haven't heard from me in a long*

> *time, and me the same if I don't hear from him….. I called him right away. He was losing his vision. I called him, yeah, I still stay in touch with him.* (A10)

Others spoke of the love from nieces and nephews that lasted throughout their lives. One black aunt reported the wealth of love displayed by her nieces and nephews at the death of her husband.

> *You should have seen the love that they give me. When my husband died…. That whole aisle of people, those was my nieces and my nephews. People said that they never saw so much love. 'Cause me and my husband, we had touched every one of their lives in one way or another. If they weren't in the house, we still was sending money to help to take care of them.* (A4)

Another form of life long bonds that black aunts reported was the fact that nieces and nephews were willing to help take care of their physical, financial, and emotional needs, now that the aunts are older and the nieces and nephews are adults.

> *'Cause, when my husband died, which was two years ago…. She said, "If you just got to have somebody stay with you, I'll come and live with you"….I said, "Well, tell me what would you do with that house of furniture that you got?" "Aunt Kris, I would sell every piece of it and I'll come live with you." I said, "That's all right, baby. That's all right, just stay where you are."0* (A23)

Future research should study aunts and nieces and nephews to understand just how much help nieces and nephews feel that they owe the women who raised them, if any at all. This research also would help validate or disconfirm present theories regarding the amount of intergenerational assistance and in what directions the assistance flows.

Gratification in the Success of Nieces and Nephews

The success of nieces and nephews represented an affirmation of Black aunts' self-efficacy. Black aunts took their nieces and nephews so that they could save their lives and give them opportunities to grow into successful adults. When nieces and nephews were successful, Black aunts reported that they felt successful in their parenting.

> *I never had any trouble out of them. I've never been to Juvenile to pick up neither one of them. I've never went to jail to pick up neither one of them. They have never, ever, ever given us any trouble. They have always been very respectable and as of today, right now, they're not on drugs. They're not alcoholics. They have their families, and they are doing well. I always say God raised them. That was our blessings, giving back to others for what we did for them. Because I know they have been around people's children that was doing other things, and it had to be the grace of God. It couldn't have been no other way but the grace of God. And I thank God for that. I really do, and they all four of them turned out very well, you know, and I'm happy for that.* (A26)

The rewards of parenting nieces and nephews mediate all of the hard work and challenges that accompany transitioning from aunting to primary caregiver. As they seek to salvage the lives of their nieces and nephews, these black aunts deserve the respect of their family, friends, and the society as a whole. They are protectors, saviors, and rescuers of the most at-risk children in our society. They have earned their rewards.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Using qualitative data from a sample of 35 black aunts, I conducted an exploratory study of black aunts raising their nieces and nephews. I considered the respondents as “experts” on their lived experiences. Consequently, I used a narrative style, with extensive quotes from the respondents in the findings. This study has been conducted with the belief that caring for children within extended families is one of the strengths of black families and, therefore, should be encouraged.

No research to date has examined the role of black aunts within black families; however, as this research clearly showed, black aunts are an important source of anticipatory socialization for black women in their own families and in their communities. All respondents in the study reported that they learned the expectations of the role of black aunt through interactions with their own aunts or by watching their mothers, grandmothers, and othermothers play the role of aunt. Also, as *de facto* mothers, black aunts assumed parental responsibility for the most at-risk black children. This research examined the lives of black aunts in one of the role identities associated with the role of black aunts: black aunts who became kinship care providers for their nieces and nephews.

Extensive research has examined the lives of grandparents, especially grandmothers, in their roles as kinship care providers to their grandchildren (Dressel and Barnhill 1994; Gibson 2002; Waldrop and Weber 2001). My study indicated that black

aunts and grandmothers share some of the same challenges and rewards, such as time constraints, legal and financial issues, and the parenting of non-biological children. However, challenges for black aunts differed from those of grandparents in four ways. First, aunts are generally of the same generation as the biological parents. Great-aunts are the exception. Second, many black aunts and great-aunts were still in their initial parenting career, whereas grandparents are generally parenting again. One-third of the respondents in this study did not have any biological or adoptive children at the time that they became kinship care providers. Two black aunts adopted newborns who became their only children. Third, many of the aunts were at the beginning or in the middle of their work careers; grandparents are usually at the end of their work lives. Finally, whereas many grandparents serving as surrogate parents report health problems, no black aunt in the study reported problems with health.

The sample was very heterogeneous, in terms of social class, definitions of family and familial membership, notions of family obligations, parenting practices, and parenting philosophies. What this sample of black aunts had in common was a willingness to accept primary responsibility for their nieces and nephews. All of their families experienced conditions which required children to be taken out of their parental homes, including parents' drug addiction; death of primary caregivers; domestic violence and child physical abuse; abandonment; neglect; parents' physical or mental illness; incarceration of one or both parents; teenage parents; and parents' divorce or separation.

From an analysis of their personal accounts, I conceptualized a core variable, salvaging children's lives. As understood here, salvaging children's lives is a process that

includes three basic, non-linear stages: (1) making a choice to become a kinship care provider; (2) transitioning from aunting to parenting; and (3) parenting nieces and nephews. Their stories demonstrated that there are five characteristics of salvaging children's lives. First, salvaging children's lives is viewed as necessary work. Second, salvaging children's lives is considered women's work by both black men and black women. Third, salvaging children's lives involves providing not only physical needs such as food, clothing, and shelter, but also socio-emotional support, so that emotionally and psychologically vulnerable children can begin to heal. Fourth, salvaging children's lives entails challenges that require major sacrifices on the part of black women; however, there are rewards that help mediate the challenges. Fifth, salvaging children's lives is continuous work, with the capability of becoming a career.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The Choice to Become a Kinship Care Provider

Previous research by Stack and Burton (1993) indicated that black families, through a process called kinscription recruit family members to perform kinwork. Kinwork refers to the collective labor expected of family-centered networks across households and within them. The findings in this study extend their research by indicating that often family members self-recruit for kin-work duties. Decisions to become kinship care providers to nieces and nephews are grounded in cultural expectations of the roles within black families that are intergenerationally transmitted in black families. Therefore, roles within black families, including the role of aunt, represent

a common language within black families. One of the expectations of black aunts among this sample was that black aunts assume the parental role when biological mothers or fathers cannot do so. Despite the use of cultural scripts, the black women in this study demonstrated human agency, or the power to make their own choices, in making their decisions to become kinship care providers for their nieces and nephews.

The analysis showed that decisions to become primary caregivers to nieces and nephews were influenced by the beliefs that black families differ from white families. Respondents also believed that care of nieces and nephews was the responsibility of all adult members in black families, and, for some of the respondents, care of black children was the responsibility of black communities as a whole. I conceptualized the labor or tasks undertaken by aunts to preserve families as *aunting*.

One of the major findings was that black men in families often requested the assistance of their mothers, sisters, aunts, and grandmothers in taking care of their children when the biological mother was unable or unwilling to do so. In this study, more than one third (n=30) of the children represented were brothers' or nephews' children who were not in the care of maternal relatives, as would be suggested by previous research. This finding extends the research that posits that female relatives in women-centered networks care for each other's children, by emphasizing that black women also care for the children of male relatives. Future research on black aunts should include questions regarding whether nieces and nephews are sisters' or brothers' children or grandchildren. For example, future research on familial obligations among black aunts

and their nieces and nephews could determine if the gender of siblings impacts feelings of intergenerational support among nieces and nephews and their aunts.

My research indicated that decisions regarding provision of kinship care for black children within black families are not so much negotiated as that black aunts volunteer for this kin-work. The analysis showed that there were six factors that impacted aunts' willingness to salvage children's lives: perceptions of crisis, family consciousness, a black helping tradition, the importance of faith, personal identities, and the role of aunt.

In keeping with symbolic interactionism, perceptions of a crisis depended on the meanings that black aunts attached to the events in their nieces' and nephews' lives. Therefore, the analysis indicated that the greater the perception of a crisis in the lives of nieces and nephews, the greater the willingness of black aunts to intervene on behalf of their nieces and nephews. The majority (n=33) of the black aunts felt they did not make a decision, per se, because the alternative to leave the child in the circumstances they were in was not an acceptable option. Factors that affected perceptions of a crisis were belief in the helplessness of children, unhealthy living conditions as defined by familial standards or by state child protective agencies, and state intervention in children's lives.

Family consciousness was an important variable for making the choice to become a kinship care provider. I conceptualized family consciousness as the recognition of "we-ness," or the sense that individuals belong to a unique group of individuals. Regardless of the view of families as close or not close, black aunts reported that families were important and the obligations to family supersede all other obligations, especially when it

comes to children within black families. Family consciousness was characterized by definitions of family, a sense of family obligations, and family rituals.

Black aunts defined family more broadly than does the Census Bureau. An analysis of the data showed that black aunts defined family as a collectivity of persons, not residing together or even living in the same state, who consider themselves as entities separate from other people. Black aunts included close friends, church members, and co-workers as part of their families. This finding is significant in that Billingsley (1992) determined membership in black families according to African descent. However, if church members, close friends, and co-workers are white, Asian, or Hispanic, and the respondents in this study view them as family, then some black families will not “fit” the definition of black families that Billingsley offers.

I conceptualized the tendency and the expectations for family members to help each other, or to take care of one’s own family members, as family ritual. Many of the black aunts reported witnessing family members also taking care of non-biological children. The belief that families take care of their own members is transmitted intergenerationally in black families. When individuals internalized these expectations and acted on them by taking care of family members, the act of care became a family ritual. Family members who would not become primary caregivers were viewed in negative ways by this sample of black aunts.

A belief in a black helping tradition impacted the choice to become a kinship care provider. Respondents reported remembering that when neighborhood children were in jeopardy because their biological parents could not or would not care for them, someone,

generally an aunt, grandmother, sister in their families, or othermothers in the community would take them in. They stated that the whole community was given rights to discipline all children, knowing there would be no repercussions from parents or other caregivers.

One finding regarding a black helping tradition was the belief by these black aunts that blacks today have lost the spirit of familial and community caregiving. This finding is consistent with recent research that posits that the helping tradition among blacks is changing (Collins 2000; Roschelle 1997). However, the fact that fourteen black aunts in the present study are providing care to extended family members indicates that, at least in some families, the practice lives on. Caring for members of extended families is recognized as one of the strengths of Black families (Alston and Turner 1994; Hill 1972, 1997). These black aunts represented the resiliency of extended family support within black families. Future research on black families should seek to determine what factors may be contributing to the decline in the willingness of blacks to support family members and other blacks, such as social class, urban versus rural residency, region of the country, religious affiliation, gender, and age.

Faith was an important variable in respondents' willingness to become kinship care providers. In this study, faith is conceptualized as the meanings attached to beliefs in a higher power as well as the impact of those beliefs on the attitudes, motivations, and behaviors of individual and group actors. Faith encompassed three elements: religion, religiosity, and spirituality. Johnson (2000:259) defines religion sociologically as a social arrangement designed to provide a shared, collective way of dealing with the unknown and the un-knowable aspects of human life, particularly the distinction between the

sacred and the profane elements of human life. Religiosity describes an individual's or group's intensity of commitment to a religious belief system (Renzetti and Curran 2003). Religiosity includes attendance at religious organizations, prayer, belief in a religious doctrine, and active participation in religious organization. Spirituality entails reflecting on the meaning of one's life honestly and candidly, and it is more concerned with inner connectedness, meaning, and purpose in life (Starks and Hughey 2003). All respondents reported faith in God; however, all respondents did not belong to an organized religion or attended religious ceremonies. Faith in God impacted respondents' willingness to become kinship care providers for nieces and nephews in three aspects: family history, religious practice, and personal beliefs.

Respondents reported a family history of believing in God, attending religious organizations, and active participation in religious activities. They reported growing up in the church, being sent to church, and being taken to church. Respondents also identified mothers, grandmothers, and aunts as spiritual mentors. This finding confirms research by Starks and Hughley (2000) that found that black women in midlife said that their mothers and grandmothers were spiritual mentors who passed along lessons of survival and success. Two respondents who were without strong family support viewed their church as their family.

Forms of religious practice included Bible reading, prayer, church attendance, and active participation in religious services. Respondents reported that being active in their church increased their beliefs in caring and sharing with others. Personal beliefs impacted willingness to become kinship care providers. Three respondents viewed taking

responsibility to raise their nieces and nephews as a part of God's plan. This finding demonstrates that faith is still a valuable cultural strength in Black communities.

Personal identities played a major role in respondents' willingness to become kinship care providers. Symbolic interactionism posits that self-concepts provide an important motive for action. Their personal identities were shaped through interactions with family members and strangers. Personal identities included a helping spirit and the kin-keeper role. Respondents self-identified as having a helping spirit. The terms that they used to describe themselves and from their statements, such as caring, giving, loving, and unselfish, it was obvious that they were helpers. These values made them more willing to become a kinship care provider for nieces and nephews.

I conceptualized that respondents were kin-keepers from the terms used to describe themselves and from statements regarding a history of taking care of family members. Respondents described themselves as peacemakers and as the responsible, stable, and reliable person in the family who is always called upon during family crises. This self-identity impacted willingness to become kinship care providers in a positive way. However, some respondents reported being tired, frustrated, and feeling used because of helping family members who often resent them even as they provide for them.

The way that respondents defined the role of black aunts also impacted their decisions to become kinship care providers. Aunts were most often viewed as the same as mothers, second mothers, extensions of the mother, supporters, and as persons who love nieces and nephews unconditionally. Two aunts described the aunt as someone who "stands in the gap." Their conceptions of the role of aunt derived from interactions with

their own aunts, and from seeing their mothers, aunts, and other women in the role of aunts. Consequently, the role of aunt is a social construction, meaning the definitions and expectations will differ according to family definitions. Symbolic interactionism posits that culture is composed of commonly shared signs and symbols from which actors construct the meaning, or shared understandings of the symbols, found in the culture (Klein and White 1996).

The analysis indicated that the greater the belief in obligations to family members, the greater the likelihood that aunts would choose to become kinship care providers for nieces and nephews. Some of the black aunts believed that there is never a time to deny help to other family members, and others reported that there is a limit to helping, such as funding a drug habit. Becoming kinship care providers was a form of meeting family obligations for respondents. Black aunts stated that family obligations are different when children are involved, as people have no choice but to help children.

Respondents reported consequences to meeting family obligations, such as resentment from family members, a lack of personal resources, a desire to move away from family, and feelings of being used. At least three respondents reported being resented by the biological parent(s) of their nieces and nephews, even as they provided safe and stable homes for the biological parent(s)' children. Decisions to become kinship care providers are complex and involve many factors that must be taken into consideration. Future research on black aunts caring for nieces and nephews should endeavor to see if there are other factors not reported here. My research showed that most of the time, individuals viewed themselves as the helper/kinkeeper, and their self-

perception influenced their decisions to become kinship care providers to their nieces and nephews.

Challenges to the Transition from Aunting to Parenting

The second phase of salvaging children's lives was the transition from aunting to parenting. All the black aunts, except black aunts who took responsibility for newborns, reported previous social interactions with nieces and nephews. In their previous interactions with nieces and nephews, aunts reported that they were able to "give children back to their parents." However, once children came to live with their aunts as their primary caregiver, aunts were not able to give the children back. Instead, black aunts became de facto parents. They transitioned from aunting to parenting. The analysis indicated three challenges to the transition from aunting to parenting: role ambiguity, family stress, and changed lives.

Role ambiguity was most evident in the confusion of aunts and nieces and nephews over how to address black aunts as parents. Among the women in this sample, aunts were referred to as Auntie, Aunt plus name (e.g., Aunt Ann), Mama, their given name, or by a family nickname. In some cases, aunts were referred to by different names, according to the children's motivations. One strategy used by some of the black aunts to minimize role ambiguity was to allow children to use the titles the children were most comfortable using.

Role ambiguity was also found when nieces and nephews as well as other family members and friends refused to accept black aunts in the new role. Nieces and nephews

who refused to acknowledge aunts as parents made comments such as, “You’re not my mother. You can’t tell me what to do.” According to symbolic interactionism, roles can only be understood in relation to complementary roles (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993). Therefore, for aunts to have role clarity in regards to the transition from aunting to parenting, nieces and nephews must come to accept their new role as children of these women.

Role ambiguity occurred also when the biological parents interfered in the lives of the aunts and children and insisted on informing children that the aunts were not their “real” parents, even after children were formally adopted and the parents’ parental rights had been terminated. Adoptions by aunts were open adoptions, which meant that biological parents were able to find the information needed to stay in touch with the children. Also, the lack of legal papers left black aunts without any input on medical and academic decisions, which contributed to role ambiguity.

In making the transition from aunting to parenting, black aunts’ everyday lives were altered from the first day of parenting nieces and nephews. Black aunts had to arrange adequate daycare and after-school care for younger children, prepare children for school, do hair, cook meals for larger numbers of people, and they had more social obligations, such as attending PTA meetings and school activities. Black aunts referred to the new role in many ways: a job, a responsibility, a great strain, a challenge, a burden, a duty, and as hard work. Moreover, these respondents reported being tired, frustrated, and sometimes feeling overwhelmed in their new role. Three factors contributed to the stress

of transitioning to the new parental role: increased time demands, work-family conflicts, and financial issues.

All black aunts reported increased demands on their time. These demands included seeing to the physical and emotional needs of children, giving children quality time, attending and being active in children's school or after-school activities, taking children to school or to after-school activities, preparing meals, and helping with homework. The impact of increased time demands in altering the everyday lives of black aunts depended on the numbers of nieces and nephews in the care of black aunts, the ages of nieces and nephews, the physical and mental capabilities of the children, the amount of trauma experienced by children prior to coming to live with aunts, numbers of other children in residence, the existence of a support system, and other work, familial and social obligations. Another factor that affected the impact of increased time demands was single status. Of the aunts interviewed, 23 women were unmarried at the time they assumed responsibility for nieces and nephews.

Work-family conflicts occurred as black aunts attempted to take care of the needs of nieces and nephews, such as doctors' appointments, school appointments, taking children to and picking them up from daycare, and meeting the responsibilities of their jobs. The analysis demonstrated that when supervisors understood this new role in aunts' lives and the amount of time needed to perform it, work-family conflict was lessened. Work-family conflicts can be stressful for black women who need the financial resources they receive from their jobs, but who believe that giving their nieces and nephews the parenting they require is a more important job.

The analysis indicated that, regardless of social class, all black aunts reported additional financial burdens with becoming parents to their nieces and nephews. Aunts with more resources felt the burden less. However, even aunts with annual incomes greater than $50,000 reported financial issues, due to the costs of keeping nieces and nephews in activities that would help nieces and nephews learn to live solid middle-class lives.

One factor that impacted many of the black aunts was welfare reform. Black aunts reported not receiving the same amount of financial resources as non-relative caregivers. This finding is consistent with research on grandparents that show that grandparents as relative caregivers receive less than non-relative foster parents (Albert, Iaci, and Catlin 2004; Henderson and Cook 2005; Kolomer 2000). The fact that state welfare agencies do not give black aunts sufficient funds to offset the costs incurred by nieces and nephews is especially critical, because black aunts reported either no help from biological parents or inconsistent help. Coping strategies used to mediate the additional financial burdens to black aunts who transitioned to parenting included dual incomes, taking second jobs, receiving financial aid from family members, church assistance, prayer, and welfare benefits such as food stamps, cash awards, and state medical insurance for nieces and nephews.

Family stress refers to family problems precipitated by changes in roles (Waldrop and Weber 2001). Because of the connectedness of family life, decisions made by one family member affect the experiences and well-being of other members of the household. Despite the connectedness of families, only five of the twelve married aunts reported

consulting with their husbands before deciding to take responsibility for their nieces and nephews. Also, only one black aunt reported talking to her children before their cousins came to live with them. Marital stress occurred when husbands disagreed with the decisions. Often boyfriends/lovers ended relationships with single black aunts rather than deal with the women's family issues. Relationships with biological children also suffered, as biological children experienced jealousy, feelings that mothers were spending too much time with their cousins, loss of privacy as they were made to share rooms, and fear. Also, relationships between black aunts and their biological children were strained when biological children began to have issues similar to those of their cousins.

The challenges to transitioning from aunting to parenting were too great for seven black aunts who reported that, because of the stress, they were unable to continue caring for their nieces and nephews. This finding highlights the need for support for aunts caring for nieces and nephews. Types of help will be covered under implications for policy makers. Rewards of surrogate parenting are listed in the next section.

Because of data constraints, I could not determine how life course trajectories are changed among this sample of black aunts. Future research will need to examine how the ages of aunts and ages of nieces and nephews impact the life course trajectories of aunts. However, my analysis did show how the lives of black aunts are changed. It was obvious in the data that becoming a kinship care provider to nieces and nephews is life changing. The ways in which black aunts' lives were changed included childhoods lost, educational dreams placed on hold, and parenting again after thinking that parenting days were over or almost over.

Three black aunts began taking care of nieces and nephews before age 18. All three reported losing all or part of their childhoods. Future research on black aunts should examine the effect of young age, particularly the loss of friends or even learning how to make friends. Is this an incidence of being off-time that may affect all other areas of the aunts' lives later on? Five great-aunts were parenting again after their children had grown up or were nearly grown. They reported stress over starting over. This finding is consistent with research on grandparents raising grandchildren who feel off-time (Burton and Devries 1992).

Respondents reported having to put educational dreams on hold, as they found it difficult to see to the needs of nieces and nephews and keep up grades in school and in college. However, three aunts were in college or taking vocational classes at the time of the interviews. One black aunt did not finish high school because of obligations to nieces and nephew as well as her sick grandmother. Despite the challenges to transitioning from aunting to parenting, black aunts were committed to the care of their nieces and nephews.

Parenting Nieces and Nephews

Parenting nieces and nephews was the third stage of salvaging children's lives. The analysis indicated that the role of aunt is well-articulated in black families; therefore, it was considered a formal role. Formal roles refer to positions or statuses within social organizations, groups, or institutions (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993). The role of black aunts as parents to nieces and nephews is but one of the identities associated with the role of

black aunts. Black aunts learned the parenting strategies from role models, such as mothers, grandmothers, and aunts. Utilizing the skills learned from members of their women-centered networks to perform the role of parents to nieces and nephews demonstrated role-taking. However, black aunts also personalized their roles as parents of nieces and nephews, and, in doing so, they demonstrated role making. They exhibited the role flexibility which is a recognized strength in black families (Foster 1983). Parenting nieces and nephews involved three dimensions: parenting trials, parenting strategies, and sacrifices and rewards of parenting nieces and nephews.

I conceptualized parenting trials as situations with nieces and nephews and/or aunts' own children that made parenting nieces and nephews difficult. The analysis revealed five parenting trials: treat children the same, troubled youth, unhealthy relationships with biological parents, personalities already formed, and the teen years. Some black aunts often found it difficult to treat nieces and nephews the same as they did their own children, because they considered their own children as being secure and comfortable. Nieces and nephews were considered emotionally vulnerable, due to their prior lives.

The use of corporal punishment was one area of difference. Several aunts felt that their nieces and nephews had suffered enough physical abuse before coming to live with their aunts; consequently, they chose not to use corporal punishment with their nieces and nephews. Also, due to state guidelines, nieces and nephews placed in the homes of black aunts by state child protective services could not be punished with corporal punishment. Therefore, black aunts had to utilize other disciplinary styles, such as time-outs, taking

things away, lecturing, and compromise. Respondents reported that their biological children recognized the differences in disciplinary styles, resulting in further parenting trials.

Black aunts reported physical, behavioral, and emotional problems with over half (*n*=24) of the 44 nieces and nephews being cared for that resulted from the chaos in their families of origin and/or the losses associated with the absence of the biological parents. troubled nieces and nephews presented a challenge to Black aunts. Hayslip and Kaminski (2005) noted that young children have not developed the abilities to verbalize complex feelings and tolerate intensely painful emotional experiences; therefore, their grief may be expressed through irritability, aggression, and depression. Blacks aunts utilized professional counseling as a means of helping their nieces and nephews overcome the effects of prior experiences in their lives. However, often the counseling was not as effective as it could have been because of the children's reluctance to cooperate and talk to counselors.

One cause of the emotional problems appeared to be the unkept promises of the biological parents. Black aunts reported that children believed that the biological parents would keep their promises, but when biological parents did not keep their promises, it fell on black aunts to deal with the children's disappointment and sadness. Black aunts coped with unhealthy relationships with biological parents by asking the parents not to call, or, in the case of children placed by state child protective services, asking caseworkers to stop the calls. Moreover, when nieces and nephews were allowed to interact with their

biological parents, black aunts often had to start over undoing unacceptable behaviors learned while away from their homes.

Respondents reported that it was difficult to parent children who already had formed their personalities. Black aunts did not feel that they could teach nieces and nephews to think and behave the ways aunts wanted them to do. This was especially true for children who came in their teen years. It was evident in the analysis that the teen years were the most difficult, whether nieces and nephews came to live with black aunts during their teen years or had lived with aunts since early childhood. Respondents reported stress and frustration, as teenagers attempted to become autonomous.

Parenting strategies were conceptualized as ways or methods of parenting. Black aunts reported that it was important to teach black children how to survive in a society where racism and discrimination still exist, albeit covertly. Parenting strategies used included teaching of life lessons, discipline, providing socio-emotional support, gender socialization, the involvement of children in school and community activities, and the intergenerational transmission of religious values.

I defined life lessons as teachings that prepare children for the world beyond their families. Life lessons included basic homemaking skills, such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry. One important finding was that both boys and girls were taught these skills. This finding is consistent with previous research on role flexibility within black families (Foster 1983). Another form of life lessons was teaching of financial wisdom, including how to stay out of debt, the need for savings and checking accounts, the importance of paying bills on time, and understandings that utilities cost money. Other life lessons

included the value of education, having a strong work ethic, and respecting their bodies by avoiding drugs, alcohol, and other possible addictions.

The analysis showed that, among these black women, regardless of social class, corporal punishment was the most mentioned form of discipline. This finding is in keeping with previous research that found that blacks are more likely to use corporal punishment than whites (Flynn 1998; Horn, Cheng, and Joseph 2004; Musil and Standing 2005). Discipline was dichotomized as old-fashioned methods, which meant spanking, or new methods, meaning time-out, compromise, and lecturing. Forms of socio-emotional support offered to nieces and nephews included ensuring children they were loved, awarding success, encouraging children in their abilities and talents, sharing moments and events, and showing patience and understanding. Socio-emotional support was utilized to minimize grief. Gender socialization included teaching black girls how to dress, how to demand respect from boys, the need for personal hygiene, and how much contact they could have with boys. In contrast, gender socialization for boys emphasized how to stay out of the criminal justice system, as well as lessons regarding their chances of doing so because they are black males in America.

Black aunts involved nieces and nephews in school and community activities, as a way to keep children out of trouble, for instilling in them a sense of accomplishment, and giving children the opportunities to use their abilities and talents in a positive way. The activities that children were able to participate in depended on the social class of their aunts. Moreover, through the intergenerational transmission of religious values, aunts imparted their faith to their children, by religious instruction, modeling religious

behavior, and the promotion of religious values in family relationships. They taught their children to utilize religious values in their own lives, but also to transmit those values from one generation to the next generation.

The challenges listed above associated with transitioning from aunting to parenting underscored the sacrifices made by these black aunts. Not every sacrifice was named by every black aunt, but one sacrifice that was significant in the analysis was a smaller pool of eligible marriage partners. Nearly all single black aunts reported that they could not consider for marriage someone who did not accept their kinship care responsibilities. This finding was significant considering that research demonstrates that black women face a smaller pool of eligibles than white women (Crowder and Tolnay 2000; Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, and Landry 1992; Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1995).

Along with sacrifices, aunts reported rewards as well. Rewards included learning parental skills, purpose and direction in their lives, the appreciation of family, and opportunities for social integration. The research showed that black aunts who were not parents when they took responsibility for nieces and nephews consistently reported learning how to be mothers or being better mothers because of caring for nieces and nephews. Black aunts reported learning the names of parents of the friends of nieces and nephews, and in doing so, creating larger networks for social support. Other black aunts became team mothers and became involved in school activities, both of which increased their social networks.

For black aunts who had parented nieces and nephews until adulthood, two other rewards were life-long bonds and gratification at the success of nieces and nephews. Life-long bonds included being viewed by the children of nieces and nephews they raised to adulthood as their grandmothers, showing love across time, and intergenerational support from nieces and nephews to back aunts. Future research on black aunts and the nieces and nephews they raised should focus on understanding obligations for assistance in later life. Lastly, the analysis indicated that black aunts felt that the success of nieces and nephews was an affirmation of black aunts' feelings of competence.

The research showed that challenges and rewards abound when black aunts become kinship care providers for their nieces and nephews. However, all of the aunts reported that if asked again, they would make the same decision to care for their nieces and nephews, even knowing what they know today. What they would do is change some of the strategies used to cope with the challenges they faced.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings in this research demonstrated a need for further research on black aunts raising their nieces and nephews. Future researchers who examine black aunts should build as meaningful variation in their samples as possible to facilitate more sophisticated comparative analyses. Variations in black aunts could include age of aunts at acceptance of responsibility, ages of nieces and nephews, numbers of nieces and nephews taken, marital status, parental status, numbers of siblings, amount of time as

kinship care provider, and rural versus urban residency. Large scale surveys with questions structured from my findings would allow systematic comparisons to be made.

Future research on black aunts raising nieces and nephews should interview partners, biological children, and nieces and nephews to facilitate understandings of the impact of this family arrangement on all involved. Research indicates that grandfathers who serve as parents to grandchildren feel powerless because often they were not consulted on this life-changing decision (Bullock 2005). Also, research that studies nieces and nephews raised in the homes of black aunts would help us understand the feelings, attitudes, and beliefs regarding living without biological parents, as well as if they feel their aunts made a difference in their lives. This would allow us to test the processes associated with salvaging children's lives. Questions for nieces and nephews could include: Were/are there feelings of being an outsider? What are the factors that facilitate feelings of being part of the family?

My research showed that black women are socialized directly and indirectly regarding norms in the role of black aunts; therefore, research that studies other black aunts would facilitate a fuller understanding of the range of identities associated with the role of black aunt. Future research should also study aunts from other racial and ethnic groups, to facilitate comparisons across race, ethnicity, and immigrant status. Research studies of this kind help us to understand how roles are socialized within different families. When I was seeking my sample, a white gentleman told me that his mother had raised his cousin and suggested I include white women. I decided against this because I

wanted to focus specifically on black women. I thought this was a good place to start. However, broader comparisons in future studies would be very informative.

The findings of this research indicated that researchers should study all the roles within black families, including aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews. Understanding the meanings attached to each of the roles listed, as well as the expectations of individuals in each role and complementary roles, could further theories of role identity and role accumulation. This research needs to be done among whites, Asians, Native Americans, and Latinos, to understand the same roles in other racial and ethnic groups. Also, studies that ask nieces and nephews of their expectations of aunts and uncles and obligations to each other throughout the life course would further understanding of the meanings of intergenerational support across the life course.

Lastly, if the findings regarding the decline of the black helping tradition are true, then research needs to be conducted to determine what factors impact decisions to help other blacks. With research indicating that the numbers of black children in foster care is increasing, it is imperative to understand factors that maximize the likelihood that black extended families will intervene in the lives of black children before they are placed in foster care, as this research indicated was the case in prior generations.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Utilizing a synthesis of symbolic interactionism and black feminist thought not only provided a dynamic approach to understanding the lived experiences of these 35 black aunts, but it extended the sociological significance of the findings into many areas

of study. The findings in this research have theoretical implications for the study of structure and agency; definitions of family and the stability of black families; and the meanings attached to motherhood. Each of the following areas will be examined.

This study looked at the impact of growing up in black families and black communities on the development of personal identities, and on the decisions made by black women to become kinship care providers within their families. The women's personal identities of kin-keepers who are stable, responsible, strong, and courageous influenced the decisions they made to become kinship care providers to the point that the great majority did not feel they had a choice but to care for their nieces and nephews. This finding underscores the fact that structure and agency operate together.

Historically, extended family networks within black families have been socially constructed on the premise that blacks take care of their own problems and do not call for outside help to resolve issues within black families and communities. This credo is part of a collective memory among blacks that may limit or constrain possible responses to requests for help. St. John and Feagin (1998:30-31) define collective memory as how people experience their present in light of the past. They note that memories are shaped by collective memory, and that, for blacks, the physical presence and spirituality of relatives like grandparents, aunts, and uncles, facilitate the development of strong collective memory of the family.

While collective memory represents a strong form of social integration that can hamper human agency, it can also enable individuals. Nearly every black aunt formed her personal identity around the caregiving they witnessed or heard of while interacting with

their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and othermothers within their families and communities. This finding illustrated how the self is developed through social interactions with others. But it also illustrated how powerful these interactions can be in socially constructing the expectations of individuals within families to the point that some human agency may be lost in much of their decision-making. Black families as a social institution with such a strong collective conscience may limit the possible responses individuals can make regarding requests for help, utilizing stigma and sanctions against individuals who do not buy into the creed.

The findings in this research demonstrated that the word, family, has different connotations according to who is defining it. The women in this study stretched the definition of family to include co-workers, church members, and any persons who are share a common interest in each other's well-being. Historically, blacks have been known to consider persons not biologically related to them as family, as in fictive kin; however, this research indicated that, for many of these black aunts, self-defined kin are more important than socially-defined kin. This finding is significant in that Billingsley (1992) determined membership in black families according to African descent. However, if church members, close friends, and co-workers are white, Asian, or Hispanic, and the respondents in this study view them as family, then some families will not "fit" the definition of black families that Billingsley offers. This research also implied that persons considered family are likely to receive more assistance and greater assistance than individuals who are considered outside the family. The implication of this finding is that family stability is still a value among black families.

In *Black Families at the Crossroads: Challenges and Prospects*, Johnson and Staples (2005) asserted that although black families are challenged and wounded, they remain committed to hard work, role flexibility, family kinship, and strong spiritual orientation. They questioned why the traditional ideology of black families has not changed or adjusted to changing economic conditions. I believe the findings in this research help answer these questions: black women have traditionally sacrificed their personal needs and goals for their families and they still do so.

All of the black aunts' lives were changed in significant ways regarding personal time, work responsibilities, financial resources, and life goals. All stated that, knowing the hard work and sacrifice that they would have to make, they would still accept the responsibility if asked again. The love that these women give to their nieces and nephews, as well as other family members, underscored their commitment to family values that have been passed down to them by other generations of black women. They are not matriarchs or emasculating women set on destroying families. Indeed, as the findings show regarding financial burdens, black women as a group lack the social, financial, and legal resources to oppress anyone. Many live financially vulnerable lives as they attempt to care for one or more additional children on their pay.

This research extends the sparse research that examines positive examples of black families working to stabilize the lives of all of their members, however family is defined. The findings regarding why black nieces and nephews are living with their aunts highlighted the fact that black families are facing many societal pressures. However, this research indicated that, in many instances, black families remain stable, as aunts,

grandmothers, or other family members step in to care for the youngest and most at-risk members, and in doing so, salvage their lives.

The findings in this research also extend the theoretical meanings of motherhood. For many of these women, the children ceased to be considered nieces and nephews and became their children. One black aunt raising four great-nieces and a great-nephew reported that she had to remember that her six-year-old and eleven-year-old great-nieces were not her children and that they had mothers who might one day want them back. Another black aunt acknowledged that she did not give birth to her son/nephew, but he was her child. This research indicated that, when research studies examine the meaning of mothering and the costs and rewards of mothering, social mothers cannot be overlooked as part of samples. The implication of the research was that when children came to live in the homes of their aunts, a bonding occurred quite unconsciously that, over the years, had less to do with being on the periphery of children's lives as an aunt and everything to do with becoming a mother.

This research thus illustrated that biology is not a necessary or sufficient variable in feelings regarding motherhood. For many of the black aunts who parented nieces and nephews in the past, the children of their nieces and nephews are considered as grandchildren. For three black aunts parenting nieces and nephews today, becoming kinship care providers afforded them the opportunities to be parents which they would not have had otherwise. These findings indicated that meanings attached to motherhood must extend to include social mothering. Does the choice to become a mother through informal or formal adoption mediate the costs and challenges to transitioning to

parenthood? This research cannot answer that question, but the fact that nearly every aunt in this research spoke of the rewards and benefits of becoming a kinship care provider may demonstrate that the answer cannot be known without including social mothers in studies regarding transitioning to parenthood. Age of children, numbers of children who come at one time, and age of the aunt at the time of taking responsibility for children were factors that affected the level of challenges felt by black aunts. How their answers may match those of biological mothers would enhance studies of the meaning attached to motherhood.

Reclaiming black women's ideas also involves discovering, reinterpreting, and analyzing the ideas of subgroups within the larger collectivity of U. S. black women who have been silenced (Collins 2000). In this research, black women spoke as experts on their lived experiences. The findings indicated that the lived experiences of black women are sociologically significant, as they touch on issues of family and definitions of family, gender and work, the development of the self and its affect on social choices, and the effects of racism and discrimination on the stability and continuity of black families in America.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Black feminist thought posited that, as intellectuals, black women should use research to better the lives of other black women. One of the hopes of this research was an understanding of the lives of black aunts who serve as kinship care providers that facilitated the creation and formulation of interventions and practices that would help

these women succeed in raising their nieces and nephews. I also wanted to know the constraints in the role that may prevent other black women from deciding to become kinship care providers to their nieces and nephews.

Several findings in the research highlighted the need for policies by state child protective services that are more culturally competent. The finding that every black aunt who dealt with state child protective services had negative opinions of their treatment by caseworkers emphasized the need for culturally-specific training. These black aunts felt stigmatized by visits to state child protective services. They reported feeling that caseworkers viewed them as lazy and lacking a strong work ethic. They also felt that caseworkers, regardless of race or ethnicity, treated black aunts as though they were lying just to get benefits. I know from personal dealings with state child protective services that interactions with caseworkers can be dehumanizing and leave one feeling a sense of shame or guilt for asking for benefits that nieces and nephews are entitled to receive. At least half of the black aunts who were not receiving benefits for their nieces and nephews had not applied to state agencies because of the likelihood of being viewed in such negative ways.

However, black families make up a significant portion of the caseloads of public social service agencies (Logan 1996). Black families have consistently been judged according to white models and norms, even as they faced the “daunting tasks of raising their children and ensuring the survival of the family in the hostile and racist environment of the United States” (Crawley 1996). Therefore, it is imperative that issues such as how black aunts are treated by caseworkers be addressed on several levels. First, diversity

training is necessary, so that caseworkers can learn to appreciate the strengths and resiliency of people of other races and ethnicities. This research indicated that a lack of understanding of the history, culture, struggles, and abilities of peoples of all races and ethnicities creates ignorance that results in the beliefs in stereotypes such as black women as welfare queens. Crawley (1996) noted that practitioners who are not trained in understanding the specific developmental and socialization needs of blacks or those whose understanding is limited to some general understanding of racism as a random occurrence cannot provide competent or adequate services or interventions to black families, individuals, or groups. Therefore, what social scientists suggest is an African-centered framework that focuses on the strengths and resiliency of black families (Crawley 1996; Hurd, Moore, and Rogers 1995).

An African-centered framework could be used to educate social workers and other professionals in the culture of black families, so that caseworkers can understand the meanings of family and family care to black women who sit before them in their attempts to ensure that the needs of the youngest members of their families are fulfilled. Black women who utilize state child protective services are trying to do the best job possible for their nieces and nephews, so they should be treated with respect and admiration for their willingness to take care of the most at-risk children. This research demonstrated that when black aunts are appreciated in this role, their self-concepts are affirmed, which helps these women cope with the inevitable challenges that accompany raising non-biological children.

Along with appreciation is a need for the financial resources that allow black aunts to provide for their nieces and nephews without risks to their financial viability. This research demonstrated that no matter how many economic resources are available within black families, the additional expense of just one child can place these families on the brink of financial crisis. The need for financial help is even greater as economic support from biological parents is rarely available. Yet, relative caregivers so often receive fewer benefits than do non-relative caregivers. In a study of black grandmothers' experiences with state child protective services, Henderson and Cook (2005) found that foster care policies penalize relative caregivers by giving them lower amounts of cash assistance and fewer social support services and, thereby fail to support these families.

Three of the black aunts in the study had undergone the foster care program and become licensed foster care vendors, to increase the benefits received. However, often they had to reconcile work conflicts with the time of the lessons. It should not be the responsibility of caregiving aunts to rearrange their lives to receive the benefits needed to salvage the lives of nieces and nephews. Karp (1996) suggested one state approach could be to allow kinship care providers to choose either the standard foster care program (without waiver to licensing requirements) or to choose an alternate voluntary program with services geared specifically to kinship care needs. Supervision, training, and services for kinship care providers would be more flexible, such as changing the specifications that kinship care homes must have a set number of bedrooms or minimum square footage which may be difficult for relatives to meet.

As for cash assistance, children have the same needs whether they are in the care of non-relatives or relatives; therefore, cash assistance for the maintenance of a child should be the same, regardless of the kinship ties between the children and their caregivers. Parenting their nieces and nephews is invisible kin-work that requires sufficient monies from the state to provide for the children. If these black aunts had not taken their nieces and nephews, more black children would be in state custody, which would be more costly to the state (Albert, Iaci, and Catlin 2004). Therefore, help should be available for them without the stigmatization and images of "welfare queens" that have traditionally has been associated with black women receiving state assistance (Collins 2000; Onwuachi-Willig 2005).

This research also highlighted the fact that black aunts need a support network, possibly one that includes other black aunts raising their nieces and nephews that can be modeled on the Project Healthy Grandparent program at Georgia State University. A support network would give black aunts opportunities to talk about problems they encounter raising their nieces and nephews with other women who understand the problems. Also, each member of a support network could help each other, by taking turns babysitting each other's children, to give black aunts some respite. Family leave could be extended to include time off when aunts informally adopt nieces and nephews. Proof of receiving legal guardianship of nieces and nephews should result in time off, without the fear of losing one's job. Black aunts need to be able to take care of all of the initial work that accompanies children moving into one's home, such as doctors' appointments for physicals, initial appointments to counselors, and changing children's schools.

Lastly, my research demonstrated that black aunts need professional counseling when they become kinship care providers to emotionally and psychologically vulnerable children. They need to know the signs of emotional and psychological disturbance in children, so they can get help for their nieces and nephews quickly. This research underscored the fact that becoming a kinship care provider introduces challenges into the lives of black aunts. Waldrop and Weber (2001) note that professionals who provide intervention must come to understand the similarities and differences between diverse groups of caregivers, and respect the chronic stress and uncertainty present within these caregiver populations. They state, “Satisfaction derived from stabilizing the life of a child, is always an important result to consider” (p. 471). With the proper assistance, black aunts can stabilize the lives of their nieces and nephews and, in doing so, salvage the lives of the most at-risk children in our society.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

SALVAGING CHILDREN'S LIVES: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Who was/were the child(ren) you took care of?
   a. How is/are the child(ren) related to you, such as sister's child(ren) or brother's child(ren)?
   b. Is/Are the child(ren) parents(s) a friend of yours or of your family?

2. How old was/were the child(ren) at the time that you began to take care of them?

3. How old were you at the time you began to take care of the child(ren)?

4. How did you come to be the surrogate parent to your niece(s) or nephew(s), great-niece(s) or great-nephew(s)?
   a. What was the event that precipitated the need for the child(ren) to be with you?
   b. What were the circumstances of the biological parents? Substance Abuse? Illness? Death? Unwillingness to care for child(ren)? In the Streets? Divorce?
   c. Were the circumstances different for the biological father and biological mother?

5. Was the decision to become a surrogate parent to the child(ren) a group or an individual decision?
   a. If a group decision, how were you chosen to raise the kids as opposed to another family member?
   b. If an individual decision, why did you choose to take on this responsibility?
      1. Familial duty?
      2. Religious obligation?
      3. Love for one of the biological parents?
      4. Love for the child(ren)?
      5. Other

6. What was your marital or parental status at the time you became surrogate parent to your niece(s) or nephew(s), great-niece(s), or great-nephew(s)?
   a. Were you in a committed relationship or partnership at the time?
   b. Were you already a parent at the time?
   c. If yes to committed relationship or partnership, how did your partner respond to your decision to become a surrogate parent to non-biological child(ren)?
   d. If yes to being a parent, how did your child(ren) react to your decision to bring other child(ren) into the home?

7. How did other persons outside the family feel about your decision, such as close friends, neighbors, church or other religious members, teachers, or anyone else?
   a. Were the comments negative?
   b. Were the comments positive?
   c. Was it always clear to you how people felt?

8. Are you the legal guardian, adoptive parent, or have any legal custody of the child(ren)?
   a. If yes, what procedures did you go through to establish legal custody?
   b. If yes, what are your feelings about seeking legal custody?
   c. What were your feelings regarding going through the procedure(s), such as guilt, happiness, sadness, satisfaction, elation, sorrow at having to take such a step(s)?
   d. If no, did/do you wish to have legal custody?
   e. If no, what kept you from doing so?
      1. Biological parent(s) refused to relinquish parental rights?
      2. Did one or both biological or adoptive parents object?
      3. Did other family members object?
      4. Family does not believe in involving the courts or outside agencies in familial decisions?
      5. You did not want to cause trouble for the biological parent(s)?
   f. If none of the above, what are the circumstances under which you would seek legal custody?

9. What does/do the child(ren) call you?
   a. Are you called Mom, Mama, Mother, Ma Dear, or something of that nature?
   b. Are you called Auntie, Aunt, or other reference to a family role?
   c. Are you called any other term of endearment that differs from what the child(ren) call others?

10. Do you think of them as your child(ren)?
   a. Do you feel like their mother? Can you describe those feelings, or the meanings you attach to the term, mother?
   b. If they call you Mom or some variant, are you comfortable having them call you by that name?

11. How close are you and the child(ren) today?
   a. Do you still have contact if they are no longer in your home?
   b. Is the relationship a good one?
      1. If no, what are the problems?
      2. If yes, describe the relationship(s)
   c. Do you feel the child(ren) appreciated what you did/are doing for them?

12. What were/are the lessons you have learned from being a surrogate parent?
    a. Who did/do you consider a role model for parenting skills?
    b. What were some of the experiences you encountered, both negative and positive?
    c. Are there any regrets about the decision?

13. What were/is your relationship to the biological or adoptive parent(s), if one or the other is still living?
    a. What is the relationship to the biological father?
    b. What is the relationship to the biological mother?

14. How do you define family?
    a. Is family defined by blood, adoption, and/or marriage?
    b. Can friends be considered part of the family, such as play sisters, play brothers, play cousins, etc.?
    c. Are aunts, uncles, great-aunts, great-uncles, great-nieces, or great-nephews considered part of the family?
    d. Are there restrictions, such as length of time seen or level of contact with the family, considered in deciding if someone is part of the family?
    e. To what degree of relationship are individuals still family, such as second, third, fourth cousin?
    f. Is/Are the child(ren) born out of wedlock to male members of the family considered as family members?
    g. What if the male does not acknowledge or establish paternity?

15. How does your family define family?
    a. Is family defined by blood, adoption, and/or marriage?
    b. Can friends be considered part of the family, such as play sisters, play brothers, play cousins, etc.?
    c. Are aunts, uncles, great-aunts, great-uncles, great-nieces, or great-nephews considered part of the family?
    d. Are there restrictions, such as length of time seen or level of contact with the family, considered in deciding if someone is part of the family?
    e. To what degree of relationship are individuals still family, such as second, third, fourth cousin?
    f. Is/Are the child(ren) born out of wedlock to male members of the family considered as family members?
    g. What if the male does not acknowledge or establish paternity?

16. Do you or any members of your family treat people differently according to whether they are considered family or not considered family, in terms of support, feelings of familial responsibility or obligations?

a. Are individuals considered family members allowed the same respect, love, or support as those persons not considered family members?
b. Are family members by marriage treated differently? In what ways same or different?
c. Are persons related by adoption treated differently? In what ways same or different? In what ways same or different?
d. Are persons related by marriage treated differently? In what ways same or different?
e. Are children born out of wedlock to male members of the family treated differently, according to whether paternity has been acknowledged or established? In what ways same or different?

17. What are the obligations and/or responsibilities that family members have toward each other?

a. Are the obligations/responsibilities the same for children and adults?
b. If no, how do they differ according to whether it is a child or an adult?
    1. What are the obligations to a child family member?
    2. What are the obligations to an adult family member?
c. Are the obligations/responsibilities the same for immediate family and extended family?
    1. If no, what are the obligations/responsibilities for immediate family, such as mother, father, sister, or brother?
    2. If no, what are the obligations/responsibilities for extended family, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, great-aunts, or great-uncles?
d. Are the obligations/responsibilities the same for family by blood and/or adoption and family by marriage?
    1. If no, what are the obligations/responsibilities for family by blood and/or adoption?
    2. If no, what are the obligations/responsibilities for through marriage?
e. Are the obligations/responsibilities the same for family by blood and/or adoption and fictive kin?
    1. If no, what are the obligations/responsibilities for family by blood and/or adoption?
    2. If no, what are the obligations/responsibilities for fictive kin, such as play mother, play father, play sister, play brother, or play cousin?

18. How do you decide whether to meet obligations/responsibilities to different members of the family?

a. To children in the family?
b. To adults in the family?
c. To immediate family members?

d. To extended family members?
e. To Fictive kin?

19. How has your life changed since becoming a surrogate parent to your niece(s) or nephew(s), great-niece(s) or great-nephew(s)?
a. How were/are any goals, dreams, or objectives impacted by this decision?
b. Were/Are there ever any regrets regarding the decisions?
c. Did/Do you ever feel you missed out on anything by making the decision?
d. What did you feel were/are the gains obtained from making the decision?

20. What advice would you give to another aunt or great-aunt about to make the decision to become a surrogate parent to nieces or nephews, great-nieces, or great-nephews?
a. Would you encourage them to do so?
b. What, if any, are the cautions you would relate to them?
c. What, if any, are the positive aspects you would relate to them?

21. Did you work before becoming a surrogate parent?
a. If yes, how did becoming a surrogate parent impact your ability to work and/or your income level?

22. What is your current occupation?

23. What are the parenting strategies that you used with your niece(s) or nephew(s), and how did you learn these strategies?

24. If a parent already, did you alter childrearing practices for your niece(s) or nephews(s)
a. If yes, in what ways did you alter childrearing practices?
b. If yes, why did you alter your childrearing practices?
c. If no, what was the rationale for treating your niece(s) or nephew(s) the same?

25. What is your current age?

26. Did becoming a surrogate parent affect the level of education you completed?
a. If yes, in what way(s) was/were your level of education affected by becoming a surrogate parent?
b. If yes, did it hinder or enhance the level of education completed.

27. What is the highest level of education you achieved?
a. Some high school.
b. High school diploma or GED certification.
c. Some college.
d. College graduate
e. Some graduate school

f. Graduate school degree
g. Other

28. What do you think or believe are other questions or concerns regarding becoming a surrogate parent that I did not ask you or that we have not covered already?

29. What are the three words that you or others would use to describe you?

30. Where do you see yourself in five years? In 10 years? In what ways will caring for your nieces and nephews hinder or enable your goals?

31. What do you think is the role of an aunt? What are the expectations of aunts in your family?

32. Did you spend time with your aunt(s) as a child? What were the experiences you shared with your aunt(s)?

APPENDIX B

RESEARCH FLYER

ARE YOU A BLACK AUNT THAT IS RAISING A NIECE OR A NEPHEW? HAVE YOU RAISED ONE IN THE PAST?

IF SO, I AM OFFERING $25 TO INTERVIEW YOU ABOUT YOUR DECISION TO DO SO.

To participate in the research study, respondents must be Black women, over the age of 18, who are raising, or have raised in the past, at least one niece, nephew, great-niece, or great-nephew for one year or longer. Legal custody is not necessary to participate in the study.

If you or someone you know meets the requirements of the study, please contact Regina Davis-Sowers at 404-505-1538 at home, or 404-651-2285 in the Sociology Department at Georgia State University. My email address is: rdavis2@student.gsu.edu. All participants will be paid $25 for their time. Each interview will last at least 1 ½ hours to 2 hours. Each participant will be asked to sign an informed consent form, and a copy of the informed consent form will be given to each woman. All interviews will be confidential, and will be held in places convenient to the respondents. Thank you in advance.

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Georgia State University

Department of Sociology

Informed Consent

Title: Becoming Mama: Understanding the Lives of Black Aunts Who Serve as Kinship Care Providers within Black Families

Principal Investigator: Dr. Ralph Edward LaRossa
Regina Louise Davis-Sowers

Sponsor: Georgia State University
Dissertation Grant

I. Introduction/ Purpose:

You have been asked to participate in a research study on understanding the lives of aunts who serve as kinship care providers within Black families. You are being asked to participate in the research study because of your experiences as a kinship care provider within your family. Answering these questions may take one and one-half hours to two hours of your time. You have the right to ask the interviewer to clarify any questions. Approximately thirty-five subjects will be involved in the research study.

II. **Procedures:**

You will participate in a face-to-face interview regarding your life, your relationships with others, and how you define family, i.e., the obligations and responsibilities that individuals have to other family members. The interview will be audio-taped. You will only interact with the student principal investigator, Regina Davis-Sowers. The time and place of the interview will be agreed upon by the subject and the student principal investigator when subject is contacted. You will participate in one interview that lasts from one and one-half hours to two hours. You will receive $25 for their time.

III. **Risks:**

There are no foreseeable risks associated with completing the interview, although answering questions about sensitive topics might make you feel a little uncomfortable. However, at any sign of discomfort or distress, you may ask to pause or stop altogether.

IV. Benefits:

Participating in this research study is not likely to directly benefit you, but the knowledge gained about kinship care within Black families may contribute to the creation of interventions for Black children whose parents are unable to care for them.

V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:

Participation in research is voluntary. You have the right to refuse to be in this research study. If you decide to be in the research study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or discontinue participation at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. By completing the interview, you are in no way obligating yourself to provide additional information, or to participate further in the project.

VI. Confidentiality:

We will keep your records private to the extent of the law. After the interviews are transcribed, the tapes will be erased. We will use a pseudonym for all names given during the interview. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. The findings will be summarized and reported in group form. You will not be identified personally.

VII. Georgia State University Disclaimer:

If you have questions about the study, or believe you have suffered any injury, you may contact Dr. Ralph LaRossa at 404-651-1836 or Regina Davis-Sowers at 404-651-2285. Your personal physician will make available or arrange for appropriate management and treatment for any physical or psychological injury resulting from this study. Georgia State University, however, has not set aside funds to pay for this care if something should occur.

VIII. Contact Persons:

Call Dr. Ralph LaRossa at 404-651-1859 if you have questions about this study.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this research study, you may contact Susan Vogtner in the Office of Research Compliance at 404-463-0674 or svogtner1@gsu.edu.

IX. <u>Copy of Consent Form to Subject:</u>

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer for this project, please sign below.

_____	_____
Subject	**Date**
_____	_____
Student Principal Investigator	**Date**

APPENDIX D

TABLE 1: DEMONGRAPHICS OF CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

Table 1. Demographics of Characteristics of the Respondents

Characteristics	Frequency Distribution[2]
Age Became Kinship Care Provider	**10-19: 3 (9%)** **20-29: 7 (20%)** **30-39: 21 (60%)** **40-49: 4 (11%)**
Marital Status[3]	**Unmarried: 23 (66%)** **Married: 12 (34%)**
Number of Biological Children	**0:13: (37%)** **1: 10: (29%)** **2: 8: (23%)** **3: 4: (11%)**
Number of Nieces and Nephews	**1: 13 (37%)** **2: 14 (40%)** **3: 3 (9%)** **4: 2 (6%)** **5: 3 (9%)**
Relationship to Aunts[4]	**Sisters' Children: 25 (35%)** **Brothers' Children: 29 (40%)** **Nieces' Children: 17 (24%)** **Nephews' Children: 1 (1 %)**
Employment Status	**Employed: 32 (91%)** **Unemployed: 3 (9%)**
Education	**Less than High School: 3 (9%)** **High School: 6 (17%)** **Some College: 16 (46%)** **College Graduate: 8 (23%)** **Graduate Degree: 2 (6%)**
Income	**Less than $10,000: 8 (23%)** **$10,000-$29,999: 11 (31%)** **$30,000-$49,999: 10 (29%)** **$50,000-$69,999: 5 (14%)** **Greater than $70,000: 1 (3%)**

[2] Some percentages do not add up to 100 percent, due to rounding.
[3] Unmarried includes black aunts who are divorced, widowed, and never-married.
[4] Indicates the percentage of children related to respondents through siblings, nieces and nephews.

APPENDIX E

TABLE 2: REASONS AUNTS BECAME KINSHIP CARE PROVIDERS

Table 2. Reasons Aunts Became Kinship Care Providers

Aunt#	Nieces and Nephews	Ages	Crises Reported
A1	2 Nieces, 3 Nephews	Infant, infant, 8, 9, 10	Bad Living Conditions, Mother Absence
A2	Niece and Nephew	7 and 9	Physical Abuse
A3	2 Nephews	2 and 4	Unexplained Death of Sibling
A4	Great-nephew	3	Care-giver Death
A5	Nephew	4	Father Incarceration
A6	Great-Niece, Great-Nephew	Infant and 4	Neglect
A7	2 Great-Nieces	13 and 15	Mother's Drug Addiction
A8	Niece	Infant	Neglect
A9	3 Nieces	5, 6, 9	State Intervention
A10	2 Nephews	7, "teenager"	Better Education, Parent's Separation
A11	3 Nieces and 1 Nephew	5, 6, 7, 9	Mother's Mental Illness
A12	Nephew	Infant	State Intervention
A13	Nephew	Infant	Abandoned
A14	2 Nieces	12 and 13	Parents' Unhealthy Living Style
A15	Niece	16	Mother Murdered
A16	2 Nephews, 1 Niece, Great-Nephew	2, 4, 7 10	Mother's Drug Addiction State Intervention
A17	Nephew	4	State Intervention
A18	Niece	Infant	Abandonment
A19	2 Nieces Great-Niece	Infant, 7, 13	Mother's Death Neglect
A20	3 Great-Nephews	Infant, 4, 6	Abandonment
A21	Nephew	8	Neglect
A22	2 Nieces	3 and 6	Mother's Drug Addiction
A23	Niece	12	Mother's Death
A24	Nephew and Niece	Infant and 4	Neglect
A25	Niece and Nephew	Infant and 11	Neglect
A26	2 Nephews	5 and 6	Abandonment
A27	Nephew	6	State Intervention
A28	2 Great-Nephews	2 and 4	State Intervention
A29	4 nieces and 1 Nephew	4, 5, 6, 7, 9	Abandoned
A30	2 Nieces	10 and 12	Abandoned
A31	Nephew and Niece	5 and 8 months	Mother's Death, Abandonment
A32	Nephew	16	Domestic Violence
A33	Nephew and Niece	2 and 6 months	Mother's Death
A34	Nephew	Infant	Father Incarceration
A35	4 Great-nieces and Great-nephew	3, 4 (Twins), 5, 8	Death of Caregiver, Mother's Incarceration, Neglect