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Coparenting in kinship Families With Incarcerated Mothers: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The number of incarcerated mothers has risen steadily in the past 20 years, with a majority of the mothers' children being cared for by relatives, usually the maternal grandmother (Smith, Krisman, Strozier, & Marley, 2004). This article examines the unique coparenting relationship of grandmothers and mothers through qualitative individual interviews with a sample of 24 incarcerated mothers with children between the ages of 2 and 6, and 24 grandmothers raising their children. The study revealed many different variants of healthy coparenting alliances, achieved against often huge odds. Much variation was also discovered in dyads where coparenting alliances were not as successful. Implications for practice include performing structural family assessments, enhancing jail education programs, and offering extended coparenting treatment after discharge.

The number of incarcerated mothers has increased steadily over the past 20 years (Engstrom, 2008), and a majority of the mothers' children are now cared for by relatives (Cecil, McHale, & Strozier, 2008; Smith, Krisman, Strozier, & Marley, 2004). According to Mumola (2000), 53% of incarcerated mothers report that their children live with a grandparent, with national data indicating that the vast majority of these grandparent caregivers are grandmothers (Engstrom). This has been a positive trend, as research indicates that kinship care during the mother's incarceration reduces the level of trauma for the children (Travis & Waul, 2003). To date, however, there has been little research explicating how and why this is so. One particularly important variable in the kinship network worth considering is the coparenting relationship between the mother and the grandmother.

Coparenting with an incarcerated mother is itself an inherently challenging task, given the mother's physical unavailability and limited access to information about her children and their ongoing developmental progress. Matters are complicated further by the significant likelihood that the mother will be struggling to overcome substance-related problems: 69%

of incarcerated mothers have contended with substance dependence or abuse (Karberg & James, 2005), with as many as 80% of the sentences served by mothers being related to drug offenses (Shamai & Kochal, 2008). The mothers' ability to combat substance involvement might be expected to have bearing on the extent to which the mother and grandmother are able to attain consistency and communication in their ongoing coparenting relationship (Engstrom, 2008).

Despite these challenges, mothers retain dreams of a return to active parenting, and indicate that their children are foremost in their thoughts during the incarceration (Smith et al., 2004). Hence, it is apt to characterize the relationship they have with their mothers and their children as a coparenting relationship. The concept of coparenting is based on Salvador Minuchin's extensive clinical work and theory development outlining a framework of adaptive family structure (S. Minuchin, 1974; P. Minuchin, Colapinto, & S. Minuchin, 2007). According to S. Minuchin (1974), caregiving adults operate most effectively in times of stress when they successfully collaborate to create a hierarchical structure that allows them to function jointly as the family's architects and decisionmakers. These "coparenting" individuals, whoever they may be in any given family, share the executive power in the family system. When a coparenting alliance functions effectively, children learn that there is solidarity and support between the adults, safety and security within the family, and consistency in its rules and principles (McHale, Lauretti, Talbot, & Pouquette, 2002). In the case of kinship systems, grandparents or other relatives assume responsibilities for children during their parents' absence. Such systems can be characterized by cooperation and alliance between the cocaregivers, which directly benefits children, or by conflict, strain, and resentment, which have been linked to significant child behavior problems (McHale, 2007, 2009; McHale & Sullivan, 2008; Young & Smith, 2000).

Coparenting research with kinship families is a relatively new undertaking. However, there is reason to believe that solidarity between mothers and grandmothers is an important feature of such relationships. Consistent with Minuchin's appropriately flexible conceptualization of executive leadership in diverse family systems, Kellam, Ensminger, and Turner (1977) reported that children from families led by mother–grandmother teams, as well as children from families led by mother–father teams, showed better social and emotional adjustment than children from families with no cocaregiver. Unfortunately, however, with the important exception of Harden, Clark, and McGuire's (1997) examination of informal kinship care, very little is known about stable and enduring mother–grandmother cocaregiving partnerships (Hogan, Hao, & Parish, 1990; Stack, 1974).

This study examines cocaregiving relationships in a sample of incarcerated mothers and the grandmothers working together to raise the mothers' preschool-aged children. The data collection method, semi-structured interviews, is useful in advancing theory and providing a rich understanding into phenomena that include complex behaviors and relationships (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1990; Wengraf, 2001). Since little is known about these mother–grandmother alliances, a constructivist qualitative research methodology was employed for the data analysis to help advance an understanding of how the two women comprehend, make sense of, and manage their daily lives as coparents (Miles & Huberman, 1994).¹ Constructivist research assumes that realities are multiple and that individuals create meaning through interactions with others and their environment. The focus of such research is on understanding the worldview held by people in a specific situation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Rodwell, 1998).

¹The qualitative study is part of a larger project funded by the National Institutes of Health examining cocaregiving alliances between incarcerated mothers and kinship caregiving grandmothers. The larger study also employs quantitative measures to help determine the impact, if any, of these cocaregiving alliances on the adjustment of the families' young children.

Method

Participants

Participants were 24 mother–grandmother dyads (48 women), from families in which the grandmothers were coparenting young children between the ages of 2 and 6 during the mothers' incarceration at the county jail. Our focus on female kinship caregivers is consistent with that of prior studies (Ehrle & Day, 1994; Joslin & Brouard, 1995; Minkler, Row, & Price, 1993; Minkler, Row, & Robertson-Berkley, 1994), reflecting the feminization of grandparental caregiving; in the 2000 U.S. Census, 63% of grandparents raising grandchildren were women. The sample for this study is demographically similar to those of extant research studies of kinship care (for review, see Cuddeback, 2004; U.S. Department of Health and Human Service, 2000). Mothers' ages ranged from 20 to 44 years, with a mean age of 27. Grandmothers' ages ranged from 40 to 64 years, with a mean age of 51. Nationally, 56% of grandparents responsible for raising grandchildren are between the ages of 50 and 69 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Service). Forty-eight percent of grandmothers and 17% of mothers were married, consistent with Greenfeld and Snell's (1999) report that 85% of women incarcerated in county jails are single (1999). Thirty-six percent of both grandmothers and mothers ($N = 17$) were African American, 48% ($N = 23$) were Caucasian, and 10% ($N = 5$) were Hispanic/Latino. One participant was Native American and 2 did not report their ethnicity. Though the higher proportion of Caucasian women in this sample differs from other studies on kinship care (Generations United, 2005; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000) in which most participants are African American, it is consistent with other data from the same county in Florida where 54% of 1,070 caregivers were Caucasian (Strozier & Krisman, 2007). Prior to the mother's jail sentence, 58% of the grandmothers and 62% of the mothers had been unemployed; 39% of the grandmothers and 52% of the mothers had incomes of less than \$15,000 per year. These employment rates and income levels of mothers and grandmothers are also consistent with other studies of this population (Cuddeback, 2004).

Design and Recruitment Procedures

The study commenced following receipt of internal approval from the county jail and institutional review board approval from a large Southern university. We identified eligible participants using a multistep process. First, a project liaison located at the jail made initial inquiries with newly incarcerated women to establish whether they were mothers of young children being cared for by a grandmother while the mother was in jail. During a jail orientation, eligible women were told about a research study examining mother–grandmother coparenting relationships. Those interested signed an interest and demographic form, and were subsequently visited by one of three onsite social workers who (a) answered questions about the study, explained child maltreatment reporting laws, and obtained informed consent from the mother; and (b) obtained the mother's permission to contact the maternal grandmother. The project coordinator then mailed a letter to the grandmother's residence to appraise her of the study and of the mother's interest in participating, and to state that a follow-up phone call would be forthcoming. In those families where both mother and grandmother agreed to participate, we obtained consent from both and scheduled separate interviews. Of the 35 mothers who initially indicated interest, 24 grandmothers agreed to participate and 11 declined or were not reachable. Among those who declined, the reasons included lack of time, transportation issues, fear of involvement by the child welfare system, or child living with different caregiver.

Prior to data collection, all interviewers received training on the interview protocol and confidentiality. The interview protocol questions were based on the theoretical framework of the parent study. The questions covered the following domains: the degree to which power is

shared regarding coparenting; teamwork; agreement regarding parenting styles and discipline; communication; and feelings related to the self and other's views of coparenting.

Data Collection

All interviews were conducted with each mother and grandmother individually to elicit frank and open discussion. Interviews were conducted in either English or Spanish, based on participants' preference. An onsite jail social worker conducted the interviews with mothers in a jail interview room. Grandmother interviews were conducted approximately three months into the mother's jail sentence by one of two study team members either in the grandmother's home or (less commonly) by telephone if there were problems scheduling a home visit. We sought permission to audiotape the interviews, and all participants agreed to the recording. Interviews were transcribed, marked with an identifying code number, and secured in a locked project space prior to and after data analysis.

Data Analysis

We developed an initial set of coparenting codes from the interview questions for the mothers and grandmothers. We used Atlas.ti™, a qualitative software package, to assist with data management and analysis. Three independent coders analyzed and coded transcripts, with every third interview double-coded for establishment of interrater reliability. Trustworthiness was established in several ways. During team meetings held to review doubly-coded transcripts, coders made adjustments to the initial codes, added new codes that emerged from the analysis, and clarified code definitions. Reliability checks across the three independent coders were conducted until an acceptable overall agreement rate was reached. In order to guard against coder bias and strengthen credibility of the analysis, we used frequency counts to identify the number of times in the transcripts that participants mentioned certain themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Once we developed definitions for the final set of codes, the three study members together decided what major themes emerged from the codes. Minuchin's theory of adaptive family structure, which served as the study's conceptual framework, helped to inform the team's decision making process concerning theme development. After the most central themes were finalized, the team decided together which codes were relevant indicators for each theme.

Findings

As presented in Table 1, themes discovered during the coding process that describe the coparenting relationship were divided into two major domains: solidarity in the parenting relationship and absence of solidarity in the parenting relationship. Solidarity refers to the women's capacity to work together for the benefit of the child.

Solidarity in the Parenting Relationship

Either mother or grandmother is in control and the other endorses the arrangement—Power and control are central in any coparenting relationship. One important finding from the analyses was that many mothers and grandmothers expressed both clarity and comfort with a coparenting relationship where one or the other was clearly in control of parenting decisions. Eight mothers and seven grandmothers—including both women in five different dyads—described parenting situations where the grandmother was in control. In these arrangements, the daughters conveyed a belief that their mothers were the experts when it came to parenting. “She allows me to have a phone relationship with [my children] because I know she's older and knows what's best.” Some described mothers having played this role well before their incarceration: “She makes sure that I take him to get a physical for school and make sure his shots are up-to-date. She is doing a good job while I'm in here.”

Among the grandmothers who likewise described themselves as being in control of all aspects of parenting, 2 revealed that it had been their choice to parent: “We wanted to take the kids, that was our choice so our family life is fine and having the children is fine.” Other grandmothers believed that their daughters chose not to parent: “She just went on with her partying life but she knew what she was doing and didn’t want to drag him through all that so she knew he was in good hands. She was cooperative the whole time.” In other families, however, grandmaternal control operated in a more co-equal arrangement: “We kind of share the role of parenting with a lot of advice from me, and me just kind of overseeing her.”

There were fewer instances where the mother was the one in control, and in only two dyads did both women agree that the mother was indeed in charge. In those cases where the mother was in control, both the mothers and grandmothers offered descriptions of their roles. One mother explained: “I’ve had her since she was born until March of this year and then from March to May I was incarcerated...I’ll get her back when I get out in December.” Often the grandmother’s role was described as a back-up to the mother: “I’m just kind of here, I live in the house so I don’t take care of her much when [my daughter’s] here.”

It is noteworthy that both mothers and grandmothers in several families concurred that grandmothers needed to give up the parenting role in order that their daughters might assume the major parenting role. One daughter explained: “Now we have come to a better understanding where she sees me as an adult and not so much her little girl. Now she acknowledges that I am the parent and she is the grandparent.” A grandmother described a similar insight: “I think the biggest thing for me is to recognize that while she is my daughter, she is also [child’s] mother. I need to let her go, continue to let her grow.”

Parenting is shared without a struggle—Among dyads where data indicated that coparenting was a shared and agreed-upon arrangement between grandmother and daughter, some transcripts were distinguished by descriptions of coparenting as a way of life. A grandmother described coparenting: “Ever since she had kids, if she isn’t at my house, I’m over at her house caring for them together. We have cared for them together all 5 years.” More common were descriptions from both mothers and grandmothers about how they shared daily parenting tasks. “We work pretty good. She takes care of one while I take care of the other so we get things done pretty quick.”

Compromising, problem-solving together—Compromise was another major theme that distinguished high-solidarity families. Even when coparenting was portrayed as a struggle, certain mothers and grandmothers explained how they sought to solve problems together and compromise. For example, 1 mother told us: “I know we aren’t always going to agree upon the same thing but we do our best to try to. We do make compromises.” Some women went so far as to outline that compromising was based on mutual respect: “We both respect each other’s spaces and rights as parent and grandparent.”

Similar philosophies regarding child rearing—An important theme distinguishing the majority of high-solidarity families was a belief that the two women shared similar philosophies regarding parenting: “We have similar ideas. The same way my mom raised us is how I’m raising my kids.” Some recognized, however, that they still had work to do: “[We’re] similar in theory, but in actions—that is still down the road.”

Cooperation/teamwork—Many high-solidarity families cooperated with each other: virtually all of the mothers and grandmothers reported times when they had cooperated and worked as a team. “I think we are a great team. We don’t second guess each other, we tend to reference each other, we don’t make major decisions unless I’m here and we don’t have time or any other choice.”

Good communication—Effective communication was another major theme, described by many of the mothers and grandmothers in high-solidarity families. “We are always discussing stuff and even if they are different we find a way to make them combine to one.” Communication about teaching the children to communicate their feelings openly and honestly was explicitly discussed by over half of the mothers and grandmothers. For example, 1 mother reflected: “I want my child to learn that it’s okay to be sad, talk to me so I can console her; her grandma feels the same way.”

Affirmation, empathy, and emotional support for parenting—Finally, several mothers and grandmothers cited the important role the other played in providing affirmation and emotional support. One mother said: “She will tell me all the time that I am a good mom and I will tell her the same thing.” As the grandmothers cared for their grandchildren, sometimes they remembered how hard it was to raise children, and they showed empathy for their daughters. Daughters also were empathic toward their own mothers: “I know she gets sad, but she’s staying strong for the kids and being there, but it’s just hard for her.”

Absence of Solidarity in the Parenting Relationship

Power struggles over coparenting—In contrast to the dyads where caregivers felt comfortable with the power balance between them, some mothers described their struggle to wrest power from the grandmothers. As one mother stated, “You are the grandmother and deal with it. You raised your kids, you can help me raise mine, but realize that I am the parent.” Surprisingly, none of the grandmothers expressed a parallel desire to usurp power over parenting from their daughters. In fact, some grandmothers explicitly mentioned wanting to do less parenting as time went by, hoping to become “normal” grandmothers. One grandmother articulated this sentiment particularly well:

I don’t think that the goal should be that together the mother and daughter raise the child. I think the goal should be...that the mother raises the child and lets the grandmother get to live the role she was designed for: to see that these are the children she would get to spoil. That these are the children that get the gravy of her life and not have to eat so darn many vegetables.

Conflict over the quality of parenting—Not all conflict involved power struggles over who was in charge. In fact, much conflict was related to nonparenting-related issues, spilling over into discussions about the child. We nonetheless see this as a coparenting-relevant issue because it is important for effectively functioning teams to work actively to prevent spillover of other relationship issues into their co-parenting alliance (Feinberg, 2002; Katz & Gottman, 1996). Examples of these conflicts included a grandmother’s sentiments that: “We just clash,” and her daughter’s parallel perception that “I’m not here near enough as I should be. My mom likes to throw that in my face a lot.... We are always at each other’s throats.” Another grandmother mused: “Oh my God, I would change her from start to finish. I’d give birth to her all over again if I could.” Most grandmothers were less negative, but did levy fault-finding in describing their daughters’ negative attitudes, partying, and parenting. Mothers, for their part, reported resenting the grandmothers’ criticisms: “When I want to do something with my children, I don’t want her to throw up my past in my face, what I’ve already done wrong.”

Unresolved disputes about discipline—The most common disagreements mothers and grandmothers described concerned disputes over the handling of mealtimes, bedtimes, and schedules. Interestingly, half of the grandmothers felt the daughters were too lenient and nearly half of the mothers felt that the grandmothers were too lenient. One mother told us: “We are different at parenting, like she lets him get away with a lot and I set boundaries.” In general, grandmothers’ depictions of mothers’ disciplinary practices were more critical than

the mother's comments about grandmothers. One grandmother told us, "She lets them run all over her. They can't come over here and color all over the walls or throw food all around like they do at home."

In many cases, grandmothers attributed their daughters' poor disciplinary practices to the fact that their daughters were not grown up enough to handle disciplining. For example, 1 grandmother said, "I think it has to do with age, you know being young you just don't have that discipline because you're still like a kid yourself." Another grandmother stated: "My daughter is like a big sister to them instead of a mom—but you can't be a best friend to your kids."

This characterization of mothers as children is an important one, evident most clearly in alliances that are low in solidarity. Indeed, several grandmothers described how they engaged in basic parenting not only of their grandchildren, but also of their ostensibly adult daughters. This circumstance sometimes led to inter-adult conflicts in front of the young children. One grandmother insisted, "I as a mother will not stand there and have any child of mine talk back to me and I will correct her in front of her children. That's probably not the best thing to do, but when they are in the same house what can you do?" While some daughters acquiesced to their mothers' perspectives that they (the mothers) still needed to be parented, others felt disempowered and sometimes infantilized. One daughter lamented, "I hope she will let me be a little more involved in my daughter's life, not be so scared that I am not going to be."

Undermining or overturning discipline—The fourth major theme of low-solidarity families was undermining; both mothers and grandmothers agreed that most undermining was carried out by grandmothers. A grandmother stated: "Sometimes I forget our agreement about child disciplining and when she punishes the child, I remove the punishment." Thus, even though they are sharing a co-parenting role with their daughters, many grandmothers also wish to claim what they see as their earned entitlement to spoil the child. However, in contrast with nuclear families, where one parent's efforts to win a child's favor often evoke strong emotional responses from the other parent, mothers typically seemed less angry about such activity by grandmothers.

Mother disconnected from parenting—The fifth common problem seen in low-solidarity alliances was maternal disenfranchisement and detachment. Ten grandmothers reported that their daughters were simply absent, physically or emotionally, as coparents. As 1 grandmother said, "She has four beautiful children. These are the children who are supposed to come visit me and then go home, and instead for 10 years I have been taking care of them." Several mothers in these families concurred that they had not been involved enough with their children's upbringing:

Half the time I really wasn't trying to be the mother so I would do my own thing. We would argue a lot...and then I would end up leaving and that is pretty much how my day would go every day. I would come back home after my son had gone to sleep.

Most mothers who discussed their low levels of coparenting involvement also expressed guilt and regret. They recognized that grandmothers spent more time with their children than they had, and made sacrifices for their children that the mothers did not: "I see my mother as the primary mother. I hate to say that, I think it makes me feel ashamed and it hurts my head."

In some families, the grandmother described having unwittingly gotten into a cycle wherein her stepping up and taking control of the parenting enabled the mother's outside activity and

freed the mother from assuming responsibility. One grandmother noted: “She just assumes we are going to do it for [the grandchild] and we do.” Another grandmother noted, “I rescue her....If someone would do things for you, you just let her do it, and get into that bad habit.”

Substance abuse issues—While not explicitly a coparenting-related theme, we heard of substance issues so often that any portrayal of problems in solidarity in alliances involving incarcerated mothers would be incomplete without their mention. Indeed, many grandmothers saw substance abuse as the root of their daughters’ parenting problems: “She is a loving mother. When she wasn’t using no drugs, she did everything for him.” Often the grandmothers feared that once their daughters were out of jail for awhile, they would go back to abusing drugs: “She’s been clean for 100 days, but we’re worried.” Mothers, too, recognized the need to stop abusing drugs, often concerned that their children might emulate their behavior: “I need to change a lot of my ways like stealing and smoking marijuana. I need to change because I don’t want my kids doing that.” Other mothers described the destructive power of drugs in their lives:

If I do this again, I will not go back home. That is not what is good for my son or daughter. I’m really thinking I’m going to sign adoption papers anyway, even if I’m there every day of the rest of my life, just so my mom knows they are always safe, just so I know they are always safe. But if I use again, I will not go back home.

Despondency, guilt, and fear—A final theme characteristic of the narratives of low-solidarity families was the expression by both mothers and grandmothers of sadness, remorse, and fear about the future. Most mothers expressed guilt about their drug use, and remorse about their lack of involvement in parenting their children. One mother stated as she cried: “I keep trying and I keep screwing up. And when I’m not with my child, after awhile, I don’t think about him.” Other mothers expressed fears about the future: “I don’t want to go back into my son’s life and have him get real attached to me and then I screw up again.”

Grandmothers also expressed guilt: “Sometimes I blame [the daughter’s problems] on myself.” Others reported feeling hopeless: “I have given up. I don’t even have a hope.” Another grandmother worried that her daughter would not be able to assume a parenting role: “I have great concern for his future. I don’t know how she will straighten up or be mature enough to where she’s going to be ready to start a home for [the child].”

Discussion

Data from this study provide important insights about the nature and dynamics of the coparenting relationships that evolve in kinship families where mothers are incarcerated and grandmothers maintain care of young children in the mother’s absence. When the coparenting relationship is characterized by solidarity, there appear to be three distinct cocaregiving arrangements: situations where the grandmother has primary power and control, situations where the mother has the power, and situations where the parenting is shared. Data reveal that all three forms of relationships can be functional. Findings further reveal that while they can be positive and supportive, crossgenerational coparenting relationships can also be compromised by negative dynamics including power struggles, relational disputes, disagreements about discipline and undermining behaviors, and the physical or emotional absence of one parent. For many families, substance abuse is seen as a primary threat to the prospects of a positive coparenting alliance and healthy mother–child relationship in the future.

Consistent with structural family theory and extensive clinical data on multiply stressed families (P. Minuchin et al., 2007; S. Minuchin, 1974; S. Minuchin, Rosman, & Baker, 1978), coparenting alliances seemed on the most solid footing when mothers and grandmothers were able to work collaboratively to support one another and navigate challenges owing to their own intergenerational differences, helping children experience solidarity, not divisiveness. In other grandmother–mother dyads in this study, crossgenerational power and control issues between the two caregivers got in the way of an effective coparenting alliance. In families where mothers or grandmothers could not flexibly accommodate to the mothers' development and new role as adult mother to her own child, coparenting problems were especially likely to surface.

Many of the challenges that incarcerated mothers and grandmothers described (e.g., conflicts, undermining, detachment) have been documented as core features in other coparenting systems as well (McHale, 2009; McHale et al., 2002; McHale & Sullivan, 2008). Moreover, conflict and disparagement can also be seen in the multigenerational dynamics of families where mothers are not incarcerated and where grandmothers can afford children "the gravy of life and not so many darn vegetables." A unique dynamic of some multigenerational alliances, however, is one whereby mothers and grandmothers collude to keep the mother disenfranchised despite one or both women's wishes that mothers be more involved—a dynamic likely exacerbated by substance abuse.

Sadly, in the kinship care systems described here, negative feelings and dynamics that are common in so many family systems became painfully intense and sometimes destructive to the women's shared aim to work collaboratively as coparents in the child's best interests. Moreover, both mothers and grandmothers in this sample faced formidable social stressors far beyond those experienced by families in other coparenting samples that have been studied, typically including unemployment, insufficient income, substance abuse, and a history of involvement with the criminal justice system and resulting stigmatization. Their connection was also strained by the after-effects of drug offenses and abuse that led to the mother's incarceration and separation from her children. Those mothers and grandmothers who were able to sustain a spirit of collaboration, support, and esprit-de-corps as coparents through these major challenges undoubtedly offer their child a buffer against the chaos and adversity that often accompany prolonged separations and poverty.

While our data revealed that some mothers and grandmothers managed to maintain a strong coparenting alliance despite the odds, many others described the challenges related to the mothers' substance abuse struggles. Mothers expressed concerns over how drugs affected their ability to parent; grandmothers lived in fear of their daughters relapsing and their substance abuse plunging the whole family back into turmoil. When mothers "diverted" from their roles as mothers, coparenting typically disintegrated and grandmothers stepped in to rescue their daughters and grandchildren by taking over household and parenting responsibilities. Though certain grandmothers shared their fears about the ultimate futility of these actions, they portrayed themselves as unable to act differently. This interpersonal dynamic has been identified in the substance abuse literature, and interventions have been designed to help address it (e.g., Fisher & Harrison, 2000; Kitchens, 1991).

We also note the role of despondency, guilt, shame, and fear about the future in sidetracking healthy coparenting adjustments. Though many mothers and grandmothers described having worked hard to become a parenting team, many also felt discouraged and feared allowing themselves to grow hopeful again. In other families, the process of coconstructing an effective intergenerational coparenting alliance had been chronically problematic with a blurring of intergenerational boundaries, causing problems leading to resentment and anger. Burton (1985, 1990) has described similar dynamics in her seminal work with age-

condensed multigenerational Black families. When such difficulties arise, mother–grandmother intergenerational coparenting dyads will often need even greater support than coparenting partners in other family systems to navigate their work as coparents effectively.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Findings of this study are based on a sample of 24 incarcerated mothers and 24 grandmothers who were raising their children. Though the women were broadly representative of the demographics of both the jail and county in which they were studied, we see this report as heuristic in nature. It outlines a number of key issues and dynamics at work in the families of the women we interviewed; replication studies with other populations of incarcerated mothers and caregiving grandmothers will now be needed.

A second limitation of the current study is its use of point-in-time data collection. It was sometimes difficult to disentangle what was cause and what was effect in the data of the present report, particularly in families where the index incarceration was not the mother's first. Prospective longitudinal designs will be of great help in charting the coparenting experiences of these women and for their children over developmental time.

Lastly, in-depth analysis of sufficiently large samples varying in racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity is very much needed. Many conceptualizations of coparenting in African American family systems outline how shared caregiving by both blood and fictive kin over the course of the child's lifetime is both healthy and adaptive (e.g., Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1999). Data analysis by racial or ethnic group could assess whether there are within-group differences among African American families worthy of consideration, and circumstances where lower-socioeconomic families from other cultural groups make similar adaptations, with mothers developing a degree of comfort with grandmothers' more active parenting role with the mothers' children. Framing family adaptations in terms of coparenting adjustments allows such analyses to be undertaken with the necessary level of ecological validity.

Implications for Practice

We believe that the many different complications and impediments to successful coparenting articulated by the mothers and grandmothers in this report will be useful in helping professionals design interventions that speak to the major issues the women face in successfully coparenting children. Although many jails currently offer parenting training for their detainees, such training does not address the issues involved in creating and maintaining a solid coparenting relationship. An understanding of the benefit and value that supportive coparenting alliances have in protecting children can be used as a point of entry to engage both women in coparenting work during the mother's jail sentence (McHale, Baker, & Radunovich, 2007). Although we believe it premature to offer guidelines for the form such interventions might ultimately take, a concrete focus on specific, developmentally normative child challenges (e.g., handling noncompliance, engendering social competence) would likely help in directing any such work. We would also imagine that for motivated women, use of basic principles of therapeutic coparenting interventions with couples (such as the importance of avoiding blaming, practicing nondefensive listening during conflictual discussions, and use of empathic responding; see Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, & Lamke, 2004) would likewise be appropriate when intervening to support these relationships, respecting the power differential inherent in the current circumstance where mothers have little active voice or power.

Both women endure tremendous strain from lack of finances, employment, education, addictions, and criminal records. Professionals both in county jails and in our communities can serve them and their children more effectively if they understand the family's very real

fears and worries about basic needs. In addition, a careful structural assessment of the boundaries and subsystems in the family, grounded by an appreciation for both expectable coparenting dilemmas and successful coparenting adaptations, can contribute to the development of treatment and discharge plans and supportive services that encourage healthy parenting and coparenting of young children in these families. Crossdisciplinary collaboration will be of particular importance in any enterprise aiming to buttress effective coparental alliances for each client and the postrelease family system. We believe the results of this study will be instructive for future efforts to strengthen inter-generational coparenting relationships in this neglected population.

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Table 1

Parenting Relationship Solidarity Domains With Themes

Presence of solidarity	Absence of solidarity
Either mother or grandmother is in control and the other accepts the arrangement	Power struggles over coparenting
Parenting is shared without a struggle	Conflict over the quality of parenting
Compromising, problem-solving together	Disputes about discipline
Similar philosophies re: child rearing	Undermining/overturning discipline
Cooperation/teamwork	Mother disconnected from parenting
Good communication	Substance abuse issues
Affirmation, empathy, and emotional support for parenting	Despondency, guilt, and fear