INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS: GRANDPARENT - GRANDCHILD RELATION

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Abstract: Family passed through many changes as a result of social dynamics. Today more than ever in human history extended multigenerational relationships are more frequent. Because of this intergenerational relationships should be the focus of research, they are a necessity more then optional elements. Grandchild-grandparent relationship also changed in this context: grandparents' role in the families with many generations is different, the perception by other generations of grandparents' role is different, grandparents' own perception is different, and so on. The aim of this article is to make a brief presentation of the main dynamics in grandparent-grandchild relationship and to highlight the main characteristics of this relationship.

Keywords: grandparent-grandchild relationship, grandparents' role, grandparents' perception, grandchildrens' perception.

Many issues that are commonly associated with contemporary family are not really recent elaborations; these have existed in social life since ancient times. According to Drimba (1985), divorce existed in antiquity: in Mesopotamia and Egypt marriage was ended by a court’s decision; in ancient China by mutual consent, and for Romans both partners could end the marriage at any time. Also according to Drimba (1985) in Roman upper social classes remarriage was frequent for example the dictator Sylla was remarried 4 times; also in ancient Egypt, just like nowadays, choosing the partner was without any constraints and in regards to founding a family the Egyptians had the trial marriage, which means a premarital cohabitation for one year. Considering all that, the contemporary family differs from the ancient one mainly in terms of multigenerational relationships possible today. Unlike ancient times where life expectancy was probably somewhere around the age of 20 or even less (Wilmoth, 2000) nowadays life expectancy in many developed countries has reached the age of 80 years (United Nations, 2011; World Health Organization, 2006) and in Romania around the age of 77.5 years for a female and 70.1 years for a male (Ciuchea et al., 2012). This allowed a considerable extension of the period that a person can spend with the family, knowing more generations than the people in the past were able to. A person becomes a grandparent today generally after the age of 45 (MetLife Mature Market Institute, 2013) and as life expectancy rose he may spend more time in his role as a grandparent, 3, 4 decades (or more) (Mann, Khan, & Leeson, 2009; Stelle, Fruhauf, Orel, & Landry-Meyer, 2010), being sometimes able to even play the role of the great-grandfather given the fact that according to Kinsella and Phillips (2005) the number of centenarians has doubled in each decade since 1950 in European countries; and people over 80 years, represent, in most countries, the segment of age that recorded the greatest increase (Dobriansky, Suzman, & Hodes, 2007; Kinsella & Phillips, 2005). Grandchildren nowadays have more opportunity than ever to know their grandparents when they have reached the third age (over 65 years old): for example, most Romanian grandchildren have the opportunity to spend around 13.2 years with their
grandparents, and a Korean grandson has the possibility to know his grandparent about 17.4 years (United Nations, 2011).

Although today many elders have the opportunity to know their grandchildren for extended periods of time, and increasingly higher, according to the United Nations projections (2004) for 2300, it does not mean that the present status of the elderly and the elderly grandparent, in general, improved. Modern society has devalued the status and importance of the elder in society and family (Crampton, 2009; Mann et al., 2009): after being the resource and source of guidance and wisdom in the traditional family, elders have become perceived as a burden (because they are associated with the lack of productivity after retirement) and adjacent elements of the nuclear family (Crampton, 2009). Also according to the present society that focuses more on the nuclear family and not on the multigenerational one, the role of grandparents in the family is less visible and often overlooked (Wellard, 2012). The traditional families in which there were three generations - child - parent - grandfather - are rare and becoming more rare, especially in more developed countries (Crampton, 2009; Kreidl & Hubatková, 2014; Ruggles & Heggeness, 2008; Shah, Badr, Yount, & Shah, 2011). For example, in 2000, the percentage of grandchildren living in households together with grandparents was 4.5% in Denmark, 2.4% in Finland, 7.4% in France, 9.3% in Norway, but they are somewhat more common in countries with culturally emphasize multigenerational relations, for example in Italy 32% of the grandchildren live in the same house as their grandparents, 24.4% of Greeks and 31.4% of Romanians; the highest percentages of multigenerational families are also in the less-developed countries such as Albania 32.2%, Thailand 48% (Kreidl & Hubatková, 2014). In Romania there seems to be a growing tendency for grandparents to live with the younger generation, this tendency is associated with housing, job insecurity and the possibility of involving the grandparents in educating the grandchildren (Ruggles & Heggeness, 2008). Also, generally speaking, in developed countries living with grandparents in residences with three generations is associated with a socio-economic disadvantage (Albuquerque, 2008; Kreidl & Hubatková, 2014), and the elders living in their own homes is associated with increased educational level and a small number of children (Shah et al., 2011). The advantage of living in households with three generations is that the grandparents can provide care for their grandchildren (Albuquerque, 2008). The involvement of grandparents in educating their grandchildren has multiple effects on how the grandparents are perceived: for example living with the grandparents is associated with higher satisfaction in multigenerational relationships and also with a positive perception of the role of grandparents as mentors, as a close person, as a supportive and influential one (Taylor, Robila, & Lee, 2005).

Another possible aspect related to the grandparents’ decrease of importance in their grandchildren’s life in modern society is related to the role of grandparents in the survival of their grandchildren. In pre-modern times having grandparents was associated with a greater possibility of the nephew to survive (Sear & Coall, 2011; Sear & Mace, 2008), but today, when the infant death rate is much lower and declining, 0.5-0.6% (Heron, Hoyert, Xu, Scott, & Tejada-Vera, 2008; Wilmoth, 2000) in the conditions where just a small proportion of the population lives in the same house with the grandparents (Bryson & Casper, 1999; Kreidl & Hubatková, 2014), the role of the grandparents changed, it is not vital any longer, it is only related to their grandchildren’s wellbeing, with the decrease of emotional and behavioral
problems in ordinary life situations (Tanskanen & Danielsbacka, 2012) or with the grandchildren’s wellbeing in risk situations when, for various reasons, parents can no longer fulfill their parental duties (Sheridan, Haight, & Cleeland, 2011).

Another challenge for the grandparents nowadays is maintaining relationships with grandchildren in the conditions of greater movement from a country to another, including successive travels in different countries. Big geographical distance between grandparents and grandchildren has significant effects on their interaction (Polleti, Nettle, & Nelissen, 2006) and on the perception of the grandson/grandparent relation (Viguer, Meléndez, Valencia, Cantero, & Navarro, 2010), but apparently it does not have such a big impact on grandchildren’s perception on the grandparents’ influence and neither regarding the grandchildren’s satisfaction with the relationship (Taylor et al., 2005). However, when considering the point of view of the grandparents who live far away from their grandchildren, they often perceive discomfort, frustration and disappointment regarding the relationship they manage to establish with grandchildren, but also disappointment and regret because they perceive an emotional and cultural distance between them and their grandchildren (Sigad & Eisikovits, 2013).

The changes listed above in the contemporary family are not the only ones. Due to the fact that presently, the elders live a lot longer and are in a larger number (Crampton, 2009; Dobriansky et al., 2007; Kinsella & Phillips, 2005) and because grandparents become grandparents for the first time at ages more advanced than their predecessors (Lundholm & Malmberg, 2009), they also offer their grandchildren the possibility to interact with them longer and to more advanced ages. But the grandfather’s old age means the appearance of fragility and physical disorders (Administration on Aging, 2010; Plassman et al., 2008; Schoenborn, Vickerie, & Powell-Griner, 2006). Being fragile and unable to be the same as before can alter the perception of their role in the grandchildren’s life. Grandparents who have health problems not only tend not to give the same importance to their role as a grandparent (Mahne & Motel-Klingebiel, 2012), but can also lead to modify the way grandparents are perceived by grandchildren. According to a study on grandparents suffering from dementia, the grandparents disorder was associated with a change in the perception of the grandparents positive and negative aspects: the grandchildren tended to describe their grandparents as patients with dementia (erasing their past identity), they also recalled their grandparents qualities as aspect related with the past rather than to the present relationship (Celdrán, Villar, & Triadó, 2014).

Frequently grandmothers are those that offer and get involved in most activities related with child care (Viguer et al., 2010), this role was always associated with grandparents from traditional families and societies (Kinsella & Phillips, 2005), but in modern society because women are often involved in the professional life, this role might change, leading to a redistribution of the grandchildren raising responsibility between grandfather and grandmother (Mann et al., 2009). Numerous social changes have imposed and will require further changes of the grandparents’ role in the family life; some elements traditionally associated to grandparents are no longer found today in the grandparent/grandchild interactions, while others remain traditional.

With all the major social changes from today the importance that grandparents give to their grandchildren seems to be unchanged. For a large percentage of people, being a
grandparent has a special importance and value, as well as the involvement in the grandchildren’s life (Mahne & Motel-Klingebiel, 2012). Being a grandparent is equally important for both the wealthy and the poor or for those who have a successful professional life or not, or for those who are educated or not (Mahne & Motel-Klingebiel, 2012).

Furthermore, acting as a grandparent is associated with multiple benefits for grandchildren, it is associated with the grandchildren’s well-being, with improved behavior and less aggressive behaviors (Goodman, 2008; Sheridan et al., 2011). However it seems that not all grandparents who engage in grandchildren’s life have the same success, Tanskanen and Danielsbacka (2012) found that the involvement of the maternal grandparents is associated with a decrease of the grandchildren’s emotional and behavioral problems. On the other hand, grandparents too have numerous benefits involving themselves in their grandchildren’s life: for example, the intense grandparent-grandchild relationship it was associated with an improvement in the grandparents’ mental status (Goodman, 2008).

One of the roles that grandparents often take in their grandchildren’s lives is that of providing care, which seems to be a very active and important role for grandparents in general (Statham, 2011). It was found that one in three employed mothers and one in four families rely on grandparents to take care of the grandchildren daily (Speight et al., 2009). According to Fuller-Thomson and Minkler (2001) in the United States (between 1992-1994) 1 in 15 grandparents provided care for their grandchildren, for at least 8 hours a day, the equivalent of a full-time job and 9% of grandparents with preschool grandchildren offer extensive care (here being excluded those with full custody). Moreover, when the grandchildren are asked what are the main activities carried out with their grandparents, 72.5% indicate activities related to their care (Viguer et al., 2010). The involvement of grandparents in taking care of the grandchildren is influenced by the age of both grandparents and grandchildren, but also by the number of grandchildren, and the number of children that the grandparents have had: grandparents are more involved in caring for grandchildren if they are younger and the grandchildren are smaller, if the children’s parents are actively involved in their professional life and if they have a larger number of grandchildren, but not if they, as parents, had a large number of children (Coall, Hilbrand, & Hertwig, 2014).

Due to the grandparents’ availability to assume educational roles in their grandchildren lives and help the parents in raising their grandchildren, they often provide safety if necessary, operating as reserves of help for the grandchildren. The most conclusive moment when this is visible is when grandparents become surrogate parents for their grandchildren. Grandparents become parents in case of maximum necessity: because of parents’ death, due to addiction of parents, disabilities and diseases due to abuse, divorce or detention (Edwards & Daire, 2006; Goodman, 2008; Ruiz, 2008; Wellard, 2012) and generally is motivated by the biological relatedness (Edwards & Munford, 2005), by the affection that they have for the grandchildren, and the sense of duty / obligation (Butler & Zakari, 2005). All these can be considered a burden because many grandparents who provide intensive care for their grandchildren have high levels of anxiety and stress related to raising their grandchildren, a moderate depression and economic difficulties (Butler & Zakari, 2005; Edwards & Daire, 2006; Edwards & Munford, 2005; Statham, 2011). Generally, the difficulties encountered by grandparents when they become surrogate parents to their grandchildren are because they have to take over this role in times of necessity and mostly
forced by the circumstances and because grandparents’ expectations were to enter in their "golden age" in which they must take care of their own needs more and have more time for themselves (Edwards & Mumford, 2005; Reynolds, Wright, & Beale, 2003) but also because grandparents can evaluate their resources as being outweighed by the grandchildren’s needs (Hughes, Waite, LaPierre, & Luo, 2007).

There are a lot of benefits for the grandchildren due to the fact that they can rely on grandparents anytime. For these grandchildren, grandparents are providers of safety and shelter, of support, a source of supportive social relationships and pleasant activities (Sheridan et al., 2011).

Other important roles that grandparents today have in their grandchildren’s lives are: a binder with the family past, with the family’s past rituals and practices (Taylor et al., 2005), a role in maintaining cultural identity and support for the grandchildren who leave the country with their parents (Sigad & Eisikovits, 2013) the role of mentor and support (Taylor et al., 2005) but also the role of mediator between generations. In relation to the role of mediator between the grandchildren and their parents Wernera, Buchbinderb, Lowensteiniana and Livnib (2005) point out that it is different and sensitive because the grandparents can be involved only with advice and recommendations, but they are unable to make the final choices in regards to the grandchildren.

The role of grandparents in their grandchildren’s life may vary depending on the type of grandparents: for example women undertake activities that involve more emotional feelings, adopt roles in caring for grandchildren, facilitate and often perform activities within the family, are more involved in keeping in touch with their grandchildren and are more involved in giving gifts and attentions (gifts, cards); while men, regarding their grandchildren, undertake more external activities that concern the problems relating to school and the professional activity (Bishop, Meyer, Schmidt, & Gray, 2009; Mann et al., 2009; Viguer et al., 2010). Precisely due to these gender differences in fulfilling their roles, grandmothers are generally perceived as closest and most popular with grandchildren, especially the maternal grandmothers (Viguer et al., 2010). As a token of appreciation from the grandchildren, maternal grandmothers receive more gifts, visits and phone calls from their elder grandchildren (Bishop et al., 2009).

Other issues that may influence the grandparent-grandchild relationship are: the age of the grandchildren, for example, the teenage period is associated with decreasing closeness between grandparents and grandchild, this is often related to the grandson’s need for independence, the need for diversification of social relations, and other events that occurred in the life of grandparents, but grandparents who reported an unchanged relationship during their grandchildren’s teenage period were those who made an effort to engage in their grandchildren’s life sometimes adapting to the new possibilities of communication (Bangerter & Waldron, 2014). The number of grandchildren that the grandfather has influences the relationship: if the grandfather has more grandchildren he will give more thought to his role as a grandparent (Mahne & Motel-Klingebiel, 2012). The relationship is also influenced by the employment status of his adult grandson and his transition to independent life, the relationship being influenced by having less contact with his grandparents (Monserud, 2010).

As a conclusion according to Viguer, et al., (2010) grandchildren consider there close grandparent the grandparent who resembles most the following pattern: maternal
grandmother, retired or housewife with age between 60-70 years old, with residence near the grandchild’s home and who visits her grandchild more often.

Conclusion

Based on the review of literature on the grandparent–grandchild relationship, a primary conclusion can be offered: in contemporary family grandparents' role in grandchildren life is not vital but it is related with the wellbeing due to the fact that they play a big part in family mediation, in securing a direct line with the family past, in mentoring, but also in ensuring shelter in times of need, support, ensuring supportive social relationships, pleasant activities, providing childcare and so on.

Another conclusion is that grandparents are facing new challenges: they have to maintain the relationship with theirs grandchildren who are at a big geographical distance and also they have to find new activities and new roles in there grandchildren life due to the new possibilities to live longer and implicitly to the new possibilities to interact with them from the day one of theirs grandchildren life up to the late adulthood.

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