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THE PARENT AND GRANDPARENT ROLES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CONTEMPORARY CZECH GRANDPARENTS

ELIŠKA MICHLÍČKOVÁ, MONIKA ŠPANIÉLOVÁ

Abstract

This paper is focused on differences in the roles of parent and grandparent from the perspective of individuals who have had experience with both roles. The work is based on a secondary analysis of eighteen semi-structured interviews with younger seniors. Using grounded theory, the authors identified two categories of fundamental differences between these roles. The first category describes differences between the value that respondents attributed to the time spent together with their grandchild or child. Respondents more enjoyed the time that they spent with their grandchild than with their child. The second category deals with the higher degree of fear associated with caring for grandchildren than taking care of their own child.

Keywords

grandparenthood, parenthood, over-loaded role, child care

Introduction

In relation to increasing life expectancy, the role of the grandparent is gaining importance and can become an essential part of the identity of today's ageing individuals. This chapter deals with perceived differences in the life roles of parents and grandparents as seen from the perspectives of grandparents who have already experienced both roles. The work is based on a secondary analysis of qualitative interviews conducted within a project focused on the issue of role overload, in which the experience of grandparenting played the core role. The first part is dedicated to existing knowledge about the role of grandparents in the Czech Republic and to the method of analysis inspired by the grounded theory approach. The second part presents the results of our secondary analysis of the interviews: we aimed to understand the relational nature of social roles through their mutual comparison. Two central categories arose from the data and led us to the formulation of two main findings. We present the differing nature and values attributed to leisure time in the context of parenting and grandparenting. We then depict the different perceptions of fear associated with caring for grandchildren and for children. In addition to these main areas, other meanings attributed to grandparenting in contrast to parenting, such as the voluntary nature of care or the willingness to transfer to and via the next generation, are described in the final section.

Grandparenting with an emphasis on the Czech context

The question of the functioning of intergenerational assistance is one of the main topics of sociology of the family and, in the context of current demographic trends, specifically an ageing population, its importance is intensifying in many cultural contexts (Arber & Timonen, 2012). While in earlier times, many children were born when their grandparents were no longer alive, now the coexistence of three or even four generations is not uncommon due to increasing life expectancy, and the number of grandchildren in families is decreasing (Gauthier, 2002). For this reason, many grandparents spend more time throughout their lives with their grandchildren and play a vital role in caring for grandchildren (Crawford, 1981). Many authors have indicated an intensification of the relationship between grandchildren and grandparents because of the amount of time spent together. Intergenerational ties are becoming a more important source of support throughout the life cycle of an individual than the nuclear family (Bengtson, 2001, p. 2) and play an important role in transforming economic and welfare systems (Herlofson & Hagestad, 2012); they also become an important source of satisfaction in later life (Thiele & Whelan, 2006).

Different ideas about the role of grandparents and the increasing heterogeneity of the family arrangements and lifestyles of seniors lead to different forms of grandparenthood. A number of studies (Arber & Timonen, 2012; Gauthier, 2002; Stelle et al., 2010; Thiele & Whelan, 2006; Uhlenberg, 2005) point to the existence of different types of grandparent roles that demonstrate different expectations as well as changes in related cultural norms (Hank & Buber, 2009), often of an ambivalent and contradictory nature (Mason, May, & Clarke, 2007). These studies stress the importance of socio-demographic characteristics, which affect not only the intensity of the involvement of grandparent's care for grandchildren, but also the ways in which grandparents fulfil their roles. Uhlenberg and Hammill (1998, p. 277–278) identified six factors that influence the extent and frequency of contact between grandparents and grandchildren. These include geographical distance, the quality of the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren and parents, the number of grandchildren, the gender of the grandparent, the grandparent's family status, and the lineage from which the grandchildren originate (children of the family of a son or daughter). Other important factors that affect grandparent care for grandchildren include the age, health, and economic activity of the grandparents; the economic activity of the child's parents; and the family status; as well as public policies supporting families, such as the availability of institutional child care or employment regimes (Hank & Buber, 2009).

These factors have been identified in various studies in the Czech Republic as well (Hamplová, 2014; Hasmanová Marhánková, 2010; Hasmanová Marhánková, 2015; Hasmanová Marhánková & Štípková, 2014; Možný, Přidalová, & Bánovcová, 2003; Petrová Kafková, 2014; Vidovičová, Galčanová, & Petrová Kafková, 2015). Assistance with child care by grandparents, including housing and financial assistance, was an expected and fulfilled part of intergenerational solidarity in the former Czechoslovakia, and it was also one of the prerequisites for the successful return of mothers to the labour market. The intensive involvement of grandparents in caring for grandchildren was established as a norm in the second half of the twentieth century (Hasmanová Marhánková & Štípková, 2014, p. 16). Current empirical research (Možný, Přidalová, & Bánovcová, 2003; Petrová Kafková, 2010) indicates a transformation in the perception of the relationship between parents and children and a decrease in the normative solidarity among the elderly and young people. All measurements taken since 1991 have shown a decrease in the number of individuals willing to help their children at all times. It follows that the original standard of availability and of expected help from the older generation have ceased to be commonplace.

The gender of grandparents is often regarded as the most important factor affecting the care of grandchildren. An almost universal finding is that women look after grandchildren more often than men (Hasmanová Marhánková, 2010). In the Czech Republic, grandmothers spend an average of nine hours a week caring for grandchildren, and grandfathers five (Höhne, Kuchařová, Svobodová, Šťastná, & Žáčková, 2010; Patschová, 2014; Šindelář, 2014). The relationship between gender and caring for grandchildren is even more complex. The gender of the grandparents is important, but so is the gender of the adult child and the combination of both generations. The most intensive help is between mothers and their adult daughters; the least frequent is when a father takes care of the child of his adult son (comp. Igel & Szydlik, 2011, p. 219). According to studies by Hasmanová Marhánková (2010, 2015), some female seniors currently living an active lifestyle strongly disagree with the idea of babysitting grandmothers. On the contrary, they emphasize life in retirement as a time to be filled with hobbies and personal interests, or perform their grandparent role in the context of other important life roles, such as care for older parents or other relatives (Vidovičová, Galčanová, & Petrová Kafková, 2015).

Another factor that influences the form of grandparenthood is the difference between men and women in relation to age of a grandchild and to the intensity of care. Probably the most problematic factor is the relationship between childcare and the geographic distance of the grandparents and the parents and grandchildren. Distance determines the possibility of contact and thus the frequency of babysitting of grandchildren by grandparents. At the same time, there is a tendency to choose a residence where the distance between grandparents and grandchildren is not great. This allows the grandparent to care for the grandchild, thus facilitating a smoother return to work for their child. The tendency to look for housing in the vicinity of the parents is stronger primarily where children are forced to rely on help from their parents (Hamplová, 2014, p. 28), e.g. due to the high workload of one or both parents or the insufficient capacity of the nearby kindergarten.

There is little empirical evidence of the forms of contemporary grandparental involvement in Czech families. Empirical studies dealing with intergenerational relationships often focus on the value preferences of individuals, specifically their willingness to assist in the care of older dependent family members, and are more concentrated on the experience of grandmothers (Hasmanová Marhánková & Štípková, 2014). Issues regarding the involvement of grandparents in childcare still remain on the margins of interest. Our work is devoted to the fundamental differences that the respondents perceive in their experiences of the parent and grandparent roles. The available findings highlight some trends in contemporary grandparenthood.

Used data and methods

The text is based on a secondary analysis of eighteen semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted as part of the Masaryk University project “Overloaded Roles: Grandparents During Active Aging,” carried out with individuals who hold a certain grandparent role. Two of the interviews were conducted with married couples; therefore, the number of respondents in our analysis is twenty. In terms of gender, women predominated among the respondents; only six of the respondents were men. The age distribution of respondents was between 56 and 67 years old, so the analysed group falls into the category of younger seniors. We can assume that they were taking more care of grandchildren due to their health status and that they were likely to have grandchildren at an age that requires adult supervision (e.g. Hasmanová Marhánková & Štípková, 2014). The range of years between parenting and grandparenting was 22 to 33 years. Many aspects of a person’s attitude can change in that number of years.

The respondents included both economically inactive retired people and working people, as well as individuals who were formally retired but still working; this category of people predominated in the sample, as did respondents with higher education. There were also respondents with secondary education and apprenticeship. The interviews were conducted with particular regard to the possibility of the overloading of the respondents, resulting from the combination of more demanding life roles (Vidovičová, Galčanová, & Petrová Kafková, 2015), so the interviews were devoted to work, family, and other leisure activities. The main aim of the study was to describe the role of grandparents in the context of an overload, especially for those who combine grandparenthood with other demanding roles. Among other questions in the interviews, the retrospective perception and actual experience of these fundamental roles was compared in order to elicit, stimulate, and deepen the narration of the grandparenthood experience. Within our secondary analysis of the interviews, we concentrated on those particular parts of the interviews aimed at identifying the fundamental differences that respondents felt between the roles of parent and grandparent. The basic research question we therefore asked ourselves was: What are the differences between being a grandparent and being a parent for individuals who have had experience with both roles?

For the purposes of our study, we decided to use a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) as a framework that allows us to generate theoretical categories from our analysis (Charmaz, 2008). Each of the authors of this article analysed some of the interviews, and after the first reading of them and individual open coding, the authors agreed on the definition of the two main categories that arose from the data. Following the

recommendations of Charmaz (2008), focused coding was applied in which the most attention was paid to these central categories and the authors worked together on the most important parts of interviews. Based on the categorization of data from the interviews, we identified two central categories: the grandchild as a child without added responsibility and the grandchild as a greater concern than the child. In the following text, we further specify the main findings based on the contents of these categories and their main dimensions.

Grandparenthood disparity compared to parenthood

In our secondary analysis of interviews with grandparents, we identified two fundamental differences between the role of grandparent and the role of parent as perceived by the respondents. The first was the value attached to the time grandparents spent together with their grandchild. Due to the life circumstances that usually accompany the role of grandparents and parents, the respondents claimed more fun was associated with time with their grandchild than was the case with shared time with their children. A second difference was that taking care of grandchildren was attributed a higher subjective responsibility by respondents. Taking care of the grandchild was therefore coupled with greater fear for the child. We also identified other less significant differences between the two roles that the respondents described, but their frequency was low, and so these differences are only outlined at the end of this chapter.

Grandchild as a child without added responsibility

All respondents agreed that the role of grandparent particularly meant enjoying time with their grandchildren, whether, for example, playing a game together, spending leisure time, or preparing for school. The essential difference is that one's own child comes with the obligation of caring for the child – to financially secure and educate them. After a child is born, the parents enter a long-term commitment in the form of the care of another individual besides themselves. For this reason, we have named the category processed below *grandchildren as a child without added responsibility*. This name shows that grandparents care for the child in a way more connected with fun because they are free from the worries related to care and security that they felt with their own child. We are of course aware that this finding comes from interviews and the analysed results do not apply to all individuals in the grandparent role; however, this perspective was heard very strongly in the analysed interviews.

Respondents connected the role of grandparents with less commitment to the child, which leads to the time spent together being more enjoyed by the respondents and having a more fulfilling value. The respondents were not forced to deal with the child's upbringing, as described Mrs. Adriana:

When you're a mother, you're on top of those forces every day. I can see it in my daughter. And now you still have to do this one and that one. And you want to make a career, right, and now you have to do something (...) The child, yes, you love him so much, but you do not really have them for that much time. (Mrs. Adriana, 61 years old; one grandson 4 years old)

Thus, respondents associated the role of grandparents with less burden than other life roles such as the parent role. The role of workers, especially connected with efforts to build a career for which one must sacrifice a certain amount of their time, and connected with a commitment to the financial security of a child, is very important in this. This finding is based on our analysis and it is quite remarkable because often it is old age that is connected with overloaded roles (e.g. Patschová, 2014, p. 53; Vidovićová, Galčanová, & Petrová Kafková, 2015). In our analysed interviews, respondents talked more about the role of parents seeming to them to be more burdensome, but this may be related to the fact that a large part of the respondents did not work or worked voluntarily and were retired, as exemplified by Mrs. Vanda:

I think that having grandchildren is much more pleasant. Of course, like when you have your first child, it's a miracle, and it's passion, but a person is young and has to work, so for example me, I went back to work when my daughter was ten and a half months, yeah. (Mrs. Vanda, 65 years old; one granddaughter 17 years old, two grandsons 15 and 8 years old)

Respondents in retirement revealed that they had significantly less time for their own children than for their grandchildren. There is a question concerning what role might be played by the respondents talking about their parental role retrospectively while currently experiencing the grandparent role, but the aim of the text is not the objective determination of the time demands of either role, but rather to understand the current meaning and practice of grandparenthood as compared with parenthood. A pivotal role in the value attributed to spending time with grandchildren was also that the respondents focused less on the upbringing of grandchildren and more on the value of spending time together. The frequency of contact of grandparents with their grandchildren also signalled the value that respondents attributed to this time and to how they spent this time. It is clear that less frequent meetings, i.e. once a week or less, of grandparents with grandchildren leads to that time being fully devoted to the interaction between grandchild and grandparent rather than to other activities. The frequency of contact is strongly dependent

on the distance between the residence of the grandparents and the residence of grandchildren, as well as on the grandparent's work commitment and their other personal activities:

With grandchildren you forget everything and give all your attention to them. If there is a mess or anything else, it doesn't matter. Each task simply waits. And I'm saying when they begin supposedly to be annoying, then we will give them back to the parent, so this is not a major concern. With the upbringing, I think the grandparents can afford to pamper the child, because the parents are responsible for the upbringing of the child. (Mrs. Vanda, 65 years old; one granddaughter 17 years old, two grandsons 15 and 8 years old)

The respondents said that they did activities with the grandchildren that they would never do without them. These activities were often visits to various cultural events and museums. The respondents also claimed that they do normal activities differently with their grandchildren, which is again linked to the value that they ascribe to the time spent together. One of the activities where this difference was reflected was housework:

A restless person calms down thanks to grandparenthood. So if you find in yourself plenty of discipline and patience, you are so calm and stop running around like a crazy person. And you begin to play in peace. So when I cut the wood just by myself, I cut like a madman, and when I cut with my grandson, then we cut slowly, in the way that a three-year-old boy can cut, and we cut a little stick, we do not have to cut a giant log. It is not the achievement that is important, but the joy behind us. (Mr. Quido, 62 years old; one grandson 5 years old, one granddaughter 1 year old)

This enjoyment has its limits – in, for example, experiencing a different kind of fear than that associated with parenthood. In the following section we focus on the second central category identified in the analysis: the worries and fear about the grandchildren associated with caring for the grandchild.

The grandchild as a greater concern than the child

Respondents agreed that taking care of a grandchild involves more worries about the child than when they were taking care of their own children. The respondents mainly attributed the increase of worries to the grandchild being a member of their family, but not their full responsibility. Respondents defined the situation as being that even if they perceived the grandchild as their family, the grandchild was not their child. They realize that they will return the grandchild to their children (the parents of the child) and, therefore, attached great weight to not seeing themselves as the final persons responsible for the child: *“Well, I guess it's the same, only that a person is more worried about the child, yeah. Because it's not really mine, yeah. Like it is mine and is not mine”*

(Mrs. Žaneta, 56 years old; two grandsons 4 years old and 4 months old, one granddaughter 1 year old).

Some respondents reported more concern and worries about the grandchild because they have more life experience and ideas about everything that could happen. Respondents also frequently pointed out how easily any accident could happen, and some of the respondents connected these problems with the current form of society that attaches greater weight to the supervision of children than it did when the respondents were taking care of their children, or when they themselves were children:

Well, you certainly more perceive... you are more concerned about the kids, it is probably due to age, because you have more experience, more various misfortunes, troubles, you know what can happen and how easily it can happen, and moreover, like, they are not yours, if you are with your children, you are the person who is responsible for them. (Mrs. Dana, 62 years old; three grandsons 5 years old, 1 year old and 3 months old, two granddaughters 7 years old and 4 years old)

More concern about the grandchild was also associated with respondents being aware of their physical condition. A loss of mobility and an increase in health problems is associated with increasing age. Some respondents said that they were worried for the child in connection with, for example, the grandchild going off somewhere and their being unable to catch them, so that anything could happen. In addition to health problems, respondents often reported that they no longer had enough strength and taking care of the child was more difficult for them. As one respondent said: *“The difference is that one has less strength, so when you are with the grandson the whole day, there is no time to go somewhere and have fun in the evening, yeah”* (Mr. Quido, 62 years old; one grandson 5 years old, one granddaughter 1 year old). The physical demands associated with caring for grandchildren are also associated with the time limits of their care. Respondents often expressed the positive perception that the child can return to their parents and thus caring for the grandchild is only temporary. This point is also associated with the perception of the responsibility for raising the child in general.

The increased concern about the grandchild that the respondents most often mentioned was associated mainly with their defining the grandchild as their family, while the grandchild is not directly their child. An important role in these testimonies was played by the awareness that grandparents are not the ones who are primarily responsible for the child – but at the same time, caring for a grandchild is part of the responsibility they have to their children from whom they “borrow” the grandchild (see also Vidovićová, Galčanová, & Petrová Kafková, 2015). Greater concern for the grandchild was, however, largely associated with the physical condition of grandparents

who were aware of the limits of their age. Respondents reflected that they no longer had the energy to care for young children that they had when they raised their own children.

In addition to the main findings of our analysis related to the most important analytical categories, we would like to present other relevant results. In the following chapters we deal with perceived differences in the roles of grandparents and parents that were referred to by only some of the participants. However, these differences were of some importance to the respondents, and their descriptions helped us to reach a more complex understanding of the experience of contemporary grandparenting based on the comparison to the memories of parenting.

Leaving a legacy, hand over values

Respondents reported that they often asked themselves what the grandchildren learn or what they bequeath to the grandchildren in relation to time spent together. A large role in these questions was played by what respondents tried to pass on to their children. The bulk of them spoke mainly about the child's relationship with nature. In addition, they often agreed that they want to lead a child to work – especially to do manual work around the house, which was usually associated within the interview with the garden and its maintenance. The effort to build a relationship between the grandchild and nature and the tendency to lead the child to manual work were particularly pronounced among the grandparents whose grandchildren are permanently residing in the city. As one of the respondents suggested:

But here in this grandfathering it is such a special moment, namely that grandfathers do with those children, or at least I do, something different than their own parents. (...) Grandparents can treat grandchildren as a second chance, so they try to give their grandchildren something they couldn't give their child or that they didn't know how to give or simply they didn't have time for it. (Mr. Gregor, 67 years old; three grandsons 4 years old, 4 years old, and 1 year old, four granddaughters 13 years old, 8 years old, 6 years old, and 5 years old)

These efforts have led respondents to a different perception of the time spent together. The value of time with their grandchildren and the possibility of influencing the next generation differed in grandparenthood and parenthood. Respondents usually connected this topic with the desire to leave something behind them. Respondents ascribed greater importance to leaving something to the generation of their grandchildren, because for them it meant that their influence reached further than just to their children: “*Well yeah, that's one of the basic human needs: to leave a legacy. Something that you left behind. Because just a child is not enough. Grandparenthood is a much higher fulfilment that it continues*” (Mr. Quido,

62 years old; one grandson 5 years old, one granddaughter 1 year old). Some respondents wanted to pass on some value to their grandchildren, often associated with the relationship to nature and to work in general. Furthermore, for respondents it was important to leave a legacy to the next generation. Both men and women respondents spoke about the desire to convey something to the grandchildren; the desire to leave something behind was more expressed by male respondents.

The (in)voluntary nature of grandparent care

While the theme of leaving a legacy occurred especially with men, another topic occurred more particularly with women. Although grandparenthood was indeed an important part of their lives, they also expressed a need for time to themselves. That women are more devoted to caring for grandchildren, for example as grandmothers, was pointed out by Hasmanová Marhánková and Štípková (2014). In other words, they do not want to be “automatic babysitting grandmothers”; grandparents who have lost the space for self-fulfilment (more in Hasmanová Marhánková, 2010). As one respondent claimed:

Anyway, I broke the feeling that I am so excited to babysit and it is my duty. It's not my duty. They have a mother, and when I am free and if I want I will take care of the grandchildren. So it is not the aim of my life. (...) She [daughter] tells me ahead of time that she needs me to babysit and I do it. (Mrs. Emilie, 60 years old; one grandson 11 years old, one granddaughter 1 year old)

According to some female respondents, watching their grandchildren should be arranged well in advance so that they can arrange their private interests. It was also stated that if there was an unexpected situation where a grandchild needed to be watched, but the grandparents were already busy, the grandchild's parents should understand and obtain babysitting elsewhere. Babysitting the grandchildren, according to these respondents, is not and should not be taken for granted by parents and viewed as a duty of grandparents. Among female respondents, however, there were those who took for granted that the grandparent role was associated with automatic care for the grandchild. This was connected with their own parents helping their children in the past, so now the same was also expected from them: “*My mum helped me with my children whenever I wanted. And so I thought that I would also do it, that I would help my daughters as my mum helped me as some kind of repayment. I was just counting on the fact that when they have children, I would also help them*” (Mrs. Františka, 65 years old; two granddaughters 20 years and 13 years old, four grandsons 15 years old, 15 years old, 11 years old, and 2.5 years old). The respondents' perception of their grandparent role varied greatly. Although all respondents expressed joy in connection with the time spent together with the grandchildren and

some respondents perceived care for grandchildren as a pleasant thing, some found that taking care of children was connected with compulsory solidarity between generations, and others (especially women) strongly positioned themselves against the idea that grandparents should be full-time and they stressed that they have their own lives and other interests, especially leisure activities.

Conclusion

In this paper, we examined the question of the perception of differences between the roles of grandparent and parent among contemporary Czech grandparents. We identified many differences between the parent and grandparent roles in a secondary analysis of interviews with grandparents. The most frequently mentioned differences were a different perception of the time shared with grandchildren and the greater concern associated with caring for a grandchild. We outlined two other additional findings related to different perceptions of caring for grandchildren which are likely to break down along gender lines. Further representative research is necessary to confirm these findings.

Our first main finding describes the value of time that respondents attributed to the time spent with their grandchildren. Given a certain freedom from the worries associated with the security of the child and their upbringing, respondents described spending time with their grandchildren as time that they enjoyed more than they enjoyed the time with their own children. An important role was also played by the fact that most respondents were in retirement, so they worked voluntarily and not full-time, which gave them more time options for the care of their grandchildren. Respondents reported that they spent time with their grandchildren doing pleasant activities that they did not do without them. They stated that even if they spent time with their grandchildren doing normal daily activities, these activities happened differently in the presence of grandchildren and were adapted to them (see also Vidovičová, Galčanová, & Petrová Kafková, 2015).

The second central finding is connected with the perception of care for grandchildren as a bigger worry or fear than it was during the care of their own children. It was especially important that nothing bad would happen to the grandchildren while the respondents were taking care of them. Respondents mainly associated this worry with the fact that a grandchild was for them a very close family member, but not their own child, so respondents did not bear the greatest responsibility for the child (see also Hasmanová Marhánková & Štípková, 2014). The role of the respondent's life experience and their state

of health and physical fitness were also important, as they affect the respondents' ability to care for a child.

Among the other identified differences between the parent and the grandparent role was the desire to leave something behind from the respondents' lives and to transmit something to their grandchild. An important dimension here is represented by the relationship to nature and manual work, primarily gardening and do-it-yourself activities that were mostly mentioned by the grandfathers.

The fundamental difference for some respondents between the parent and the grandparent roles was the aspect of voluntary care. Respondents associated care for their own children with the duties and responsibilities of economically securing them and giving them a good upbringing. However, these responsibilities are not usually related to grandparenthood, so some respondents talked about themselves being the ones who decided when they spent time with their grandchildren. In some cases, the respondents, especially women, strongly disagreed with the defined perception of the role of grandparents as obligated to care for their grandchildren and responsible for helping their children. This difference, however, was not universal: there was also the idea that the care of grandchildren was in some way a reproduction of intergenerational solidarity, which respondents should not deny their children because they had received it from their own parents.

The presented findings are not universally valid, because they come from a relatively limited amount of data. However, our two main findings could help to understand the present form of grandparenthood in the Czech Republic, thereby contributing to a better and deeper understanding of the life strategies of today's ageing individuals, complementing the contemporary mosaic work on the subject (e.g. Hasmanová Marhánková, 2015; Hasmanová Marhánková & Štípková, 2014; Vidovičová, Galčanová, & Petrová Kafková, 2015), and hopefully inspiring further research.

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