

GRANDPARENTING AND MENTAL HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

With increased life expectancy, individuals are more likely to become grandparents during their life course. Grandparents are a valuable resource in family life, they can provide important practical and emotional support to their children and grandchildren. The care of children by grandparents varies in type, degree of involvement and frequency. This paper aims at investigating the literature on the effects of caring for grandchildren on the mental health of grandparents. Results show mixed data. On one hand, the caregiver role can contribute to feeling fulfilled, rewarded, which is associated with increased self-efficacy and has benefits on their mental health. On the other hand, caring for grandchildren can have negative effects on grandparents' mental health (anxiety, depression, exhaustion), especially when grandchildren are exclusively in their care or when grandchildren are experiencing a disability or chronic illness. The particular case of Romanian parents migration phenomenon and its effects on the children left at home, often in the care of their

RÉSUMÉ

Grands-parents et santé mentale

Avec l'allongement de l'espérance de vie, les individus sont plus susceptibles de devenir grands-parents au cours de leur vie. Les grands-parents sont une ressource précieuse dans la vie de famille, ils peuvent apporter un soutien pratique et émotionnel important à leurs enfants et petits-enfants. La garde des enfants par les grands-parents varie selon le type, le degré d'implication et la fréquence. Cet article vise à étudier la littérature sur les effets de la garde des petits-enfants sur la santé mentale des grands-parents. Les résultats montrent des données mitigées. D'une part, le rôle de soignant peut contribuer à se sentir épanoui, récompensé, ce qui est associé à une auto-efficacité accrue et a des bénéfices sur leur santé mentale. D'autre part, s'occuper des petits-enfants peut avoir des effets négatifs sur la santé mentale des grands-parents (anxiété, dépression, épuisement), surtout lorsque les petits-enfants sont exclusivement à leur charge ou lorsque les

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grandparents is discussed, as well as factors involved in the grandparent-grandchild relationship.

Keywords: grandparents, children, caregiving, mental health, well-being

INTRODUCTION

With the increase in life expectancy and professional insertion of mothers after child birth, the involvement of grandparents in the care of the next generation seems to play an increasingly essential role. Studies show that both men and women are grandparents for longer periods of time, on average for 25 years¹. An estimate by Moore and Rosenthal² in 2016 shows that about 13% of the world's population, or one billion people, are grandparents. Most of them play an active role in the lives of their grandchildren. For example, in Europe, 58% of grandmothers and 49% of grandfathers regularly care for their grandchildren³. Grandparents are a source of support for both grandchildren and their parents. They can provide important practical as well as emotional support for their children and grandchildren, facilitating communication and connections within the family system. They can also influence the early development of grandchildren through the transfer of experience, knowledge and different skills between generations⁴.

Although the proportion of children cared for by grandparents tends to decrease with the development of formal care services (nurseries, kindergartens, afterschool programs, nannies), grandparents remain an important childcare resource for working parents⁵. Some grandparents take the primary role of raising one or more grandchildren when parents find themselves unable to do so in the context of physical or mental illness, substance abuse, or incarceration^{6,7}. In other cases, grandparents share responsibility with parents in response to the financial needs of their adult children, the needs arising from a divorce, or in situations where they have extended work schedules⁸. In this context, the question can be raised about how this role affects grandparents and more precisely, what are the effects on their health and quality of life.

THE OBJECTIVE OF THE PAPER

This paper aims to explore the literature related to the effects of grandparenting on the mental health and well-being of individuals, as well as to investigate

petits-enfants souffrent d'un handicap ou d'une maladie chronique. Le cas particulier du phénomène de migration des parents roumains et ses effets sur les enfants laissés au foyer, souvent confiés à leurs grands-parents, est discuté, ainsi que les facteurs impliqués dans la relation grands-parents – petits-enfants.

Mots-clés: grands-parents, enfants, soins, santé mentale, bien-être.

factors involved in the grandparent-grandchild relationship. In this regard, an analysis of the literature identified after a search in the databases of specific terms, such as: “grandparents”, “grandparenting and mental health”, “grandparents well-being”, was carried out.

RESULTS

Studies on this topic have mainly investigated whether grandparent involvement is significantly associated with their health or well-being and whether this association is positive or negative. Most commonly, in such studies, measurements were made considering family structure, more specifically, family composition and housing arrangements and intensity of involvement, i.e. the number of hours spent caring for grandchildren. Paradoxically, studies have found both positive associations between grandparent involvement in child rearing and mental health problems, as well as inverse relationships, depending on the type of care that older adults provide to grandchildren.

In a recent systematic review, Danielsbacka et al. (2022)⁹, summarized the variables measured by specific studies into two broad categories: health and perceived well-being. The health category includes, for example, longevity, cognitive abilities, mental health, depressive symptoms, stress level, physical health, frailty index, self-rated health, preventive health behavior, and limitations in activities of daily living. The well-being category, in turn, includes variables such as happiness, general satisfaction, subjective well-being, and perceived quality of life⁹.

The effects of grandparenting on their health have been shown to vary across caregiving contexts. Specifically, three relevant contexts were considered: custodial grandparents, grandparents in three-generation households, and grandparents who do not live with grandchildren and who provide occasional care, respectively. A moderate level of involvement in separate living arrangements (for example, between 8 and 19 hours per week over approximately 2 years) appears to be associated with fewer depressive-type symptoms later in life in US adults⁵.

Positive effects of the role of grandparents

There are studies showing that grandparents experience greater life satisfaction, self-efficacy, and feelings of reward through the caregiver role^{10,12}. In addition to these emotional benefits, grandparenting can help older adults remain physically active¹³ and help maintain closer bonds with family members and obtain intergenerational support while interacting with grandchildren and their adult children¹⁴.

One of the theories used to explain the positive effects of the grandparent role on their mental health is the Role Amplification Theory. This perspective holds that fulfilling various social roles and the combined sense of fulfillment and satisfaction gained from these experiences increase individuals' overall well-being¹⁵. In this sense, an additional emerging role in life may benefit the mental health of older adults.

Negative effects of the role of grandparents

It is a well-known fact that caring for a child is a challenge at any age. The daily care of children, especially young ones, requires physical resources, can involve lack of sleep and exposure to infections⁵. These physical demands can increase if caring for grandchildren coincides with physical aging. Time constraints, physical and emotional resources required can lead to high levels of stress and feelings of overwhelm for grandparents¹⁶. In addition to these direct effects, caring for grandchildren affects health indirectly through changes in lifestyle, relationships, and social roles¹².

These effects are particularly visible in situations involving a higher level of care. Often, these situations refer to cases where the grandparents have custody of the children, the so-called missing-generation households, a type of vulnerable family that consists only of grandparents and grandchildren. In these cases, grandparents tend to experience higher levels of depressive symptoms in the US and several European countries^{17,18}.

Role Strain Theory developed by Goode in 1960 can be used to explain these negative consequences. This theoretical perspective suggests that fulfilling multiple social roles can be detrimental to individuals' mental health. Given the limited nature of resources such as time, energy and goods, individuals may experience difficulty in performing different roles concurrently¹⁹. The increased demands required to meet these additional expectations serve as stressors that worsen mental health²⁰. From this perspective, given the different social roles that older adults already must play, the burden of the additional role of grandparents may negatively influence health in older

adults, especially when childcare is exclusively their responsibility or is carried out intensively.

Other stressors, including intergenerational conflict over childrearing, lack of time for personal care and social engagement, and preexisting disadvantages in socioeconomic status and health conditions, also undermine the mental health of older adults^{16,17,18}. When these demands outweigh the perceived benefits of caregiving, the health effects of grandparenting are more likely to be negative.

Mixed effects

For "three-generation" and "multigenerational" families, that is a living arrangement where children, parents, and grandparents live together in the same household, the effects of grandparenting are inconsistent. The results of analyzed studies show that living in a three-generation household has as many advantages as disadvantages for grandparents. Danielsbacka, Křenková and Tanskanen (2022)¹⁹ showed that 39% of the identified studies manifested a positive association, and another 39% showed a negative association, and 22% of the results showed a non-significant association. Measures used include, for example, the following: depressive symptoms, self-rated health, functional/mobility limitations, and various stressors and variables that are related to well-being: happiness, quality of life, and life satisfaction^{8,21-23}.

The Romanian context

In recent years, Romania is facing a social phenomenon that has caused significant changes in the relationship between grandparents and children. This phenomenon refers to the migration of an increasing number of parents to countries with a more developed economy. In 2007, Save the Children Organization carried out an analysis of this phenomenon from the perspective of respecting the rights of children who remained in the country following the external migration of their parents. According to the data cited in the study "Impact of parental migration on children left at home"²⁴, most of the children whose parents went to work abroad remain in the care of their grandparents, often for indefinite periods of time.

The results of the mentioned study highlighted the fact that the relationship established with the grandparents was perceived differently depending on the age and gender of the child. However, one of the consistent results indicates that grandparents are perceived as having outdated values and perspectives, dissonant with current times, which often creates "a barrier in communication and understanding with grandparents"²⁴. In particular, children over the age of 11 years described a "very large distance between

them and their grandparents, the latter being less able to find that optimal way to approach them, to communicate and to support a relationship of friendship and closeness²⁴. Better communication was evident in the relationship between grandparents and younger children or girls, as opposed to relationships with adolescent boys, in the context of difficulties in asserting authority and finding a way to approach them.

Another aspect of the relationship with grandparents is related to children's need to interact with active people willing to engage in play, socialization and exploration activities. Most of the time, old age or poor health prevent grandparents from meeting these needs. Interviews conducted with the grandparents who participated in this study also highlighted their difficulties in providing the necessary support for school related tasks. In addition, the problems are accentuated in situations where the parents do not maintain contact with the children at all or in situations where the grandparents do not have financial and material resources for the basic care of the children²⁴.

The clinical experience of the Mental Health Center is in line with the previous research, identifying the following categories of grandparents: grandparents who exclusively take care of the child's upbringing, being the ones actively involved in the therapeutic processes. Another category of grandparents are those who support the family by supervising them when the parents are busy and, rather, providing transportation and accompanying the children to therapy. The third category is the grandparents who are not involved in the therapeutic process at all, either because of the physical distance or in the context of divergent attitudes towards the child's problems. Among them, it is observed that grandparents who provide exclusive care are the ones who often feel overwhelmed by this role, have an increased level of worries about the future. More often, they are part of disorganized families, families where at least one parent faces significant mental health problems or is absent.

The relationship between grandparents and grandchildren

In a literature review, Mueller and Elder (2003) showed that emotionally involved grandparents live closer to their grandchildren, their grandchildren are younger, and they tend to be maternal grandparents²⁵.

The strongest predictors of a close relationship between grandparents and grandchildren have been found to be geographic distance and frequency of contact between the two generations²⁶. The frequency of contacts varies with age, tending to decrease with the transition to adolescence and then to adulthood²⁷. Although the frequency of contact declines in adolescence, if there was emotional closeness, it

is maintained and even expanded into adulthood, when grandchildren describe a strong bond with grandparents and perceive them as significant influences in their lives²⁸.

One of the most investigated aspects in the literature related to grandchild-grandparent interaction is their gender. In this sense, the results seem to be contradictory. On one hand, some studies show that girls are more emotionally involved in the relationship with grandparents compared to boys²⁹. The same study showed that the relationship between same-gender grandparent-grandchild dyads was stronger. On the other hand, there are several studies that have not identified any significant difference between girls and boys regarding interaction with grandparents, as measured by joint activities, emotional closeness, involvement, and level of relationship satisfaction^{25,30}.

Another important factor that determines the closeness between grandparents and grandchildren is the quality of the relationship between grandparents and their own adult children. In this regard, it appears that intergenerational dynamics are mediated or derived from parent-child relationships³¹. A study of working-class Caucasian mothers indicates how the relationship with their own mothers is strongly related to the young mothers' evaluation of themselves as caring and capable³¹.

Ancestry and gender are other key features of grandparent research. In Western culture, a hierarchy has been developed based on the amount, contact, and involvement grandparents have with their grandchildren³². In this hierarchy, grandmothers ranked higher than grandfathers in that they were found to have more intense contact with their grandchildren. The study also identified a matriarchal trend, meaning that maternal rather than paternal grandparents are more involved in the relationship with grandchildren. Lineage and gender hierarchies are explained as arising from grandmothers' relationships as mothers with their daughters³³ or as related to investments in safer genetic kin³¹.

To investigate the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren, the children's perspective must also be considered. A study carried out in Great Britain in 2001 on a sample of 467 children with diverse family backgrounds, aged 5 to 16, investigated the children's perspective on the relationship with their grandparents. The study showed that grandparents were considered trustworthy and confident especially during times of change within the family³⁴. Likewise, children who felt emotionally close to their maternal grandparents were found to be less prone to adjustment problems (depression, anxiety, aggression, school problems). Moreover, this effect was maintained when other family difficulties, such

as maternal depression or other parent-child relationship problems, were considered³⁵.

CONCLUSIONS

Grandparents can significantly contribute to children's development through the intergenerational transfer of experience, knowledge and skills⁴. Also, harmonious relationships between parents, grandparents and children have influences on the mental health of those involved. A harmonious transgenerational climate, between parents, grandparents and children, is of major importance in the mental and emotional development of the child, but also of the adults involved.

The review of the literature investigating the associations between childcare and grandparental health or well-being showed that, in most cases, grandparental custody was associated with decreased grandparental health or well-being. Studies looking at grandparents living in three-generation households have provided mixed results, while the involvement of non-co-resident grandparents has been associated with better health. It should be noted that there are also several studies that did not identify significant associations between these variables. Also, not only the intensity of involvement, but also the number of grandchildren to be cared for, as well as variables related to the cultural context, must be considered. It is important to emphasize that most of the identified studies highlight the existence of an association between the intensity of grandparents' involvement in childcare and measurements of some variables related to their health or well-being. Further investigation is needed to establish a causal relationship. Frequency of contact, geographic distance, as well as the quality of the relationship between parents and grandparents have been found to be determinants of emotional closeness between grandparents and their grandchildren.

Author Contributions:

R-C.V. conceived the original draft preparation. R-C.V., C-D.S-B., R-D.C. and A.K. were responsible for conception and design of the review. R-C.V., C-D.S-B. and R-D.C. were responsible for the data acquisition. R-C.V., C-D.S-B. and R-D.C. were responsible for the collection and assembly of the articles/published data, and their inclusion and interpretation in this review. R-C.V., C-D.S-B., R-D.C. and A.K. contributed equally to the present work. All authors contributed to the critical revision of the manuscript for valuable intellectual content. All authors have read and agreed with the final version of the manuscript.

Compliance with Ethics Requirements:

"The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding this article"

"The authors declare that all the procedures and experiments of this study respect the ethical standards in the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2008(5), as well as the national law."

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