

RELATIONSHIPS WITH GRANDPARENTS AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE OF GRANDCHILDREN¹

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Abstract

The aim was to assess the strength of the relationship between the closeness and the frequency of relations between grandchildren and grandparents, taking into account the age of life and the structure of the family of origin of the respondents. The research was conducted on a group of adolescents who retrospectively assessed their relationship with their grandparents. The obtained results showed that young people assessed the closeness and frequency of contact with their maternal grandmother more favorably in single mother families than respondents from full families. On the other hand, young people from full families assess the quality of life higher than those from single mother families.

Keywords

grandparents, the quality of life, grandchildren

INTRODUCTION

Empirical studies concerning intergenerational relationships have shown that grandparents improve the quality of family life in many ways. They do it by passing on family traditions and cultural knowledge (Stepulak, 2014), history and family customs (Małecka, 1997), providing financial and emotional support (Napora, 2016), supporting the well-being of grandchildren, providing care for family members in need, which, in particular, is childcare. Emotional affinity with grandparents is associated with fewer depressive symptoms (Ruiz, Silverstein, 2007) and influences the cognitive development of their grandchildren. Grandparents teach the skills of establishing and maintaining contact with others. Additionally, communication with grandparents is broader than

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with parents (Zawadzka, 1998). They may play the role of role models (Tyszkowa, 1990). Grandparents are perceived by adolescents as persons who influence which values and life goals choose their grandchildren (Franks et al., 1993, Hwang et al., 2022). The younger generation presents a special sense of a close relationship with their grandparents, and they indicate specific benefits they owe to their grandparents. An illustration of this is the research by Aquilino (1996), in which children under the age of 15 living with a parent and one of the grandparents do better at school compared to those who were raised only by their mother. Contacts with grandchildren influence the psychological comfort of grandparents.

The feeling of being useful and showing love and help to others in the family are important factors in the mental balance of elderly people, having an indirect positive effect on their physical condition (Trela, 2015). The need for the affinity of grandparents is often felt by families more strongly than in previous periods of life (Susułowska, 1989). On the other hand, grandparents expect respect and want to be useful in fulfilling appropriate family roles, appropriate to their age (Straś-Romanowska, 2012). Disturbances to this natural system contribute to negative consequences. It has been noticed, amongst others, that grandparents who have no contact with their grandchildren are more often exposed to the risk of depression, disappointment, and a sense of loss (Myers, Perrin, 1993).

The problem of incomplete family structures is raised by many researchers, including Bee (2004). The researcher believes that these families create different conditions for the development of a child for at least two reasons. First of all, the transformation of a family brings unpleasant experiences to the child who has difficulties getting used to the departure of a parent. What is more, the period of a complete breakdown of the parents' life usually lasts few years. Such a situation makes it difficult to maintain supervision and control over the child and contributes to lowering the functionality of the family system, as well as creates negative experiences that affect the child's psyche, which is why it is difficult for the mother to conduct educational process later on at an appropriate level. Secondly, single parenthood increases the likelihood that the parenting style will be less democratic, diminishing the child's subjectivity, or that there will be atrophy of upbringing. A single mother is distracted in her activities and is often in a depressive state which makes it impossible to exercise control combined with giving the child parental warmth (Bee, 2004, p. 256).

The role of grandparents increases especially in times of crisis and the breakdown of the existing family system. The generation of grandparents can then perform the function of emotional support for both parents and grandchildren (Kornhaber, 1986), as well as to take a direct part in the process of socialization of adolescent children (Sutor-Głodzik, Wnęk, 2008). Common stressful experiences can be the basis for the establishment of closer emotional ties between grandparents and their grandchildren (Barber, 2014). In the critical period of the functioning of such families, grandparents usually provide financial support, as well as they provide support, such as living together with the child or taking care of their grandchildren from a distance. A divorced, or lonely mother often requires similar supportive care, and meeting these expectations helps her return to balance and in effective further fulfillment of both social and parental roles

(Napora, 2016). This is especially important in a family deprived of the father's role model. In this context, the role of the grandfather, his contribution to the family's efforts to restore the mental and functional balance of the family system must be emphasized (Napora, 2016). In general, it must be emphasized that close and open relationships with grandparents enrich widely understood family resources. In particular, they provide emotional support, contribute to the mitigation of anxiety and fears (Kriegerlewiecz, 2015), allow to maintain basic family ties, social norms as well as social and cultural values.

Problems and hypothesis research

The purpose of the research was to evaluate the relationship with grandparents by grandchildren from families with different structures, as well as to illustrate the differences between the quality of life of grandchildren in terms of the structure of the family structure of the respondents. Research problems covered two questions. The first one, how do grandchildren from families with different structures evaluate their relationships with of their grandparents, and with what factors can they be explained? The second one, if the respondents similarly evaluate their quality of life considering the family structure. The following hypotheses were formulated.

The first hypothesis states that grandchildren evaluate their relationship with their grandmother significantly better than with their grandfather, irrespective their period of their life and family structure. This hypothesis was reinforced by research statements that women, unlike men, are more socialized and more involved in helping their family (Dunifon, Bajracharya, 2012), as well as they invest more in family ties compared to men (Cavanaugh, 1997). In the second hypothesis, it was expected that the frequency of contacts and the degree of affinity of grandparents as evaluated by grandchildren decreases in the subsequent developmental periods, irrespective of the family structure. The hypothesis was justified by the views that the mutual relationships between grandparents and grandchildren are not static but they are subject to changes as the child grows up (Hurlock, 1985, p. 404–405). Compared to older grandchildren, younger ones have greater opportunities to initiate and maintain their relationships with their grandparents (Shapiro, Cooney, 2007). Considering the increasing role of the peer group and the social environment as adolescents mature, the above opinions of researchers led to an assumption based on the expectation of significant dynamics of these relations. The third hypothesis was reduced to the expectation that grandchildren are characterized by a similar level of subjective evaluation of the quality of life, irrespective of the family structure. It can be expected that the obtained results will contribute to the strengthening of preventive measures aimed at adolescents and families exposed to the risk of dysfunction or experiencing difficulties.

Method

The research group consisted of students aged approximately 24 ($M = 23.91$; $SD = 6.86$), in which women were a dominant group, 67.34% ($n = 132$), while men constituted

31.63% of the respondents ($n = 62$). 34.69% of the respondents ($n = 68$) came from rural areas, 35.20% from small towns ($n = 69$), and 30.10% from large cities ($n = 59$). 33.67% of the respondents ($n = 66$) came from single-mother families created as a result of parental separation, divorce, or death of a father, and 66.32% ($n = 130$) of the subjects were from complete families. The overwhelming majority of respondents (70.40%; $n = 138$) evaluated the wealth of their family as satisfactory, and 29.08% ($n = 57$) as unsatisfactory. In the families of respondents, 19.38% of mothers ($n = 38$) and 10.20% of fathers ($n = 20$) had higher education; 45.91% of mothers ($n = 90$) and 34.69% of fathers ($n = 68$) had secondary education; 30.61% of mothers ($n = 60$) and 44.89% of fathers ($n = 88$) had vocational education; 4.08% of mothers ($n = 8$) and 8.16% of fathers ($n = 16$) had basic education).

To evaluate the relationship between grandchildren and grandparents, two authorship scales were used to evaluate two dimensions of the relationship (Napora, Kozerska, Schneider, 2014). The first one was used to measure the frequency of time spent with grandparents. A question concerning the evaluation of relationships during primary school, secondary school, and in present days was used in this scale. The evaluation was made on a scale from 0 to 5, where 0 meant that the respondent had no contact with grandparents at all, and 5 meant that the respondent had contact with them every day. One survey question was used to measure the affinity with grandparents, with a six-point response scale, where 0 meant that the respondents had no close contact with their grandparents, while 5 meant the highest degree of relationship – a very close contact. The Huebner scale (SLSS) was used to evaluate the quality of life, consisting of seven statements, which the respondents evaluate on a six-point scale (from 0 to 5) and determine to what extent they agree with the statements (Oblacińska, Woynarowska, 2006). To collect socio-demographic data characterizing the respondents, the questionnaire sheets were supplemented with an appropriate record.

The research covered persons who agreed to participate in the survey. These persons were informed about the anonymous nature of the answers and the possibility of terminating the research without any consequences, at any time. A total of 206 respondents took part in the research. Due to incorrectly completed or incomplete information in the questionnaire, a part of the research material was omitted in the course of analysis and compiling the data. Ultimately, 196 data was used for the statistical research.

Results

The results show the phenomena and trends occurring in two groups of grandchildren covered by the research (i.e. those coming from complete families and those from single mother families), and determine the parametric differences and their statistical significance.

The results of the analyzes are presented in tables 1 to 4.

Tab. 1 The frequency of contact with grandparents according to the evaluation of grandchildren from families with different structures

Grandfather/grandmother period of life	The evaluation of grandchildren from complete families		Z	p	The evaluation of grandchildren from single mother families	
	M	SD			M	SD
BM sp	3.71	1.38	– 1.11	0.140	3.82	1.64
BM ss	3.09	1.4	– 2.19	0.028	3.54	1.59
BM t	2.67	1.49	– 2.84	0.004	3.4	1.68
BO sp	3.14	1.44	3.16	0.001	2.27	1.77
BO ss	2.64	1.49	2.48	0.013	2.0	1.8
BO t	2.06	1.57	2.35	0.018	1.48	1.67
DM sp	3.23	1.55	– 0.75	0.449	3.34	1.83
DM ss	2.6	1.65	– 0.41	0.681	2.69	1.99
DM t	2.12	1.51	– 0.27	0.781	2.3	2.02
DO sp	2.88	1.73	3.93	<0.000	1.64	1.7
DO ss	2.39	1.77	3.29	0.001	1.34	1.57
DO t	1.76	1.85	1.74	0.081	1.14	1.51

BM – maternal grandmother, BO – paternal grandmother, DM – maternal grandfather, DO – paternal grandfather, sp – primary school, ss – secondary school, t – now

The results show that significantly higher frequencies of contact with maternal grandmother (BM) occur in a single-mother family, especially in the present time (BM t: $Z = -2.8$; $p = 0.004$) and during education of grandchildren in secondary school (BM ss: $Z = -2.2$; $p = 0.028$). On the other hand, when children attend primary school, this relationship is characterized by a similar frequency both in complete families and single mother families. Therefore, during this period, the structure of the family is irrelevant. In both cases the frequency of contacts is high, the highest, considering other periods of youth's life. No significant difference in the evaluation of the frequency of grandchildren's contact with maternal grandfather (OM) when considering family structure. The results indicate that the frequency of spending time with the maternal grandfather is similar in both a complete family and a single-mother family. It is worth emphasizing the higher mean values for the mother's father in a single mother family as compared to complete families and a lower frequency of contacts with the paternal grandfather in a single mother family. The comparison of the percentage distributions shows that in a single mother family contacts with grandparents were more frequent in the mother's line. 42.4 % of young people from single mother families and 17 % from complete families declare

a high frequency of contacts. The total percentage of people who declared very frequent contacts among adolescents from single mother families reached the value of 57.7%, whilst among respondents from complete families it was 43%.

Tab. 2 The affinity of relationships with grandparents according to the evaluation of grandchildren from families with different structures

Grandparents	Grandchildren from complete families		Z	p	Grandchildren from single-mother families	
	M	SD			M	SD
BM	3.62	1.47	- 2.92	0.003	4.17	1.36
BO	2.99	1.63	3.25	0.001	2.09	1.83
DM	2.98	1.62	- 0.94	0.343	3.14	1.82
DO	2.17	1.87	2.35	0.018	1.49	1.84

BM – maternal grandmother, BO – paternal grandmother, DM – maternal grandfather, DO – paternal grandfather

In the dimension of *affinity* of relationship with grandparents, a significantly higher evaluation of contacts with the maternal grandmother was obtained in a single-mother family ($Z = - 2.9$; $p = 0.003$), compared to the evaluation of affinity in complete families. There was no significant difference in the evaluation of the maternal grandfather in both types of families, the affinity to the mother's father is on a similar level. This confirms the assumption that a grandfather does not have to compensate for the lack of a father, as the maternal grandmother more often compensates for the absence of a parent. Tables 3 and 4 present the values of the correlation coefficients and the significance level for the relationships between the evaluation of frequency and the evaluation of the affinity of relationships in a complete family and a single mother family.

Tab. 3 Spearman's rho correlation coefficients between the frequency and the affinity of relationships in a complete family

Development period of grandchildren	Grandparents			
	BM	BO	DM	DO
School	0.53***	0.63***	0.44***	0.65***
Adolescence	0.49***	0.65***	0.54***	0.70***
Early adulthood	0.34**	0.64***	0.34**	0.72***

** $p < 0.005$; *** $p < 0.001$

Tab. 4 Spearman's rho correlation coefficients between the frequency and the affinity of relationships in single mother families

Development period of grandchildren	Grandparents			
	BM	BO	DO	DO
School	0.54***	0.63***	0.57***	0.71***
Adolescence	0.42***	0.65***	0.5***	0.74***
Early adulthood	0.36**	0.64***	0.52***	0.86***

** $p < 0.005$; *** $p < 0.001$

The results presented positive and statistically significant. Both, in a complete family and a single mother family, the results suggest that increasing values on the frequency scale are accompanied by increasing values in the evaluation of relationship affinity. What is more, in both groups the correlations have a similar strength. The strongest correlation with current (expressed in early adulthood) evaluation of affinity is with the frequency of contacts with grandparents during primary school ($R > 0.4$ in both groups), this correlation is the weakest in the present time, in the early adulthood period ($R < 0.4$). The observed regularity occurs regardless of the family structure. Correlation coefficients regardless of the family type show that the frequency of grandchildren's contacts with their maternal grandmother decreases as they grow up, contrary to the frequency of meetings with the paternal grandfather, for which the values of correlation coefficients increase significantly.

Table 5 presents descriptive statistics together with a test of significance of differences for the quality of life of grandchildren from a complete family and a single-mother family.

Tab. 5 Descriptive statistics for the quality of life of grandchildren from families with different structures, together with a significance test

Family structure	<i>M</i>	<i>Me</i>	Min.	Max.	Lower quartile	Upper quartile	<i>SD</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>
Young people from complete families	25.45	26	9.00	35.00	22.00	29.00	5.36	2.07	0.037
Young people from single mother families	23.66	25	9.00	34.00	19.00	27.00	6.03		

The obtained result ($Z = 2.07$; $p = 0.037$) represents a statistically significant difference in the perceived quality of life in the compared groups. The values of *Me* and *M* indicate that in complete families there is a significantly better evaluation of the quality of life. In the group of subjects from single-mother families, we can find a higher percentage of low evaluations.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The collected empirical data make it possible to respond to three hypotheses.

In the first one, it was expected that grandchildren evaluate their relationship with the grandmother much better than with the grandfather, regardless of the evaluated period of their life and the structure of the family of origin. The observed statistically significant results support this hypothesis with one exception. Better evaluation of contacts with grandmother was associated with both school time and adolescence and the present time (early adulthood). Likewise, better evaluation was obtained by grandmothers than grandparents, regardless of the family structure. It should be emphasized, however, that the breakdown of the family not only changes this situation in formal and legal terms but also affects contacts with grandparents. There is no doubt that in the circumstances of the crisis and breakdown of the current family model contacts with the maternal grandmother are intensified, good relationship with the maternal grandfather is at least maintained and relationship with the father's parents are weakened, especially with the paternal grandfather. Then, there may be a situation in which grandchildren's contact with maternal grandfather will be significantly better than a relationship with grandmother – the father's mother (Napora, 2016).

The above findings confirm the obtained research results. Irrespective the circumstances, the evaluation of young people concerning the relationship with grandmother is more favorable than the evaluation of the relationship with grandfather, and at the same time in a single mother families there is a higher frequency and affinity of contacts with the mother's parents than with the father's parents, whereas we may still point out better relationship with grandmother than with grandfather, primarily on the mother's side. Detailed analyzes lead to the conclusion that the frequency of contacts with paternal grandmother is evaluated more favorably by grandchildren from a single-mother family, compared to the evaluation of young people from complete families. Parental grandmother was evaluated significantly more favorably than grandfather by the grandchildren from a complete family. In this context, opinions concerning the frequency of contact with paternal grandmother stand out, where the evaluation expressed by grandchildren in relation to the period of attending primary school was similar in both complete and single-mother families, as opposed to the opinion of grandchildren from single-mother families satisfied with the regularity (frequency) of meetings with maternal grandmother during secondary school and in present time, and at the same time indicating a lack of contacts with paternal grandmother, which is in particular visible at the stage of early adulthood.

The presented results may lead to the conclusion that in an incomplete family maternal grandmother is significantly more parentified than other grandparents. Moreover, opinions expressed in the literature are confirmed stating that grandchildren have better relationships with their grandmother than with their grandfather (Roberto, Stroes, 1992). The intensity of maternal grandmother's contacts regardless of the family type may confirm the higher socialization and activity of women, their tendency to offer help and care for others (Cavanaugh, 1997). Less favorable evaluations of the maternal grandfather (compared to those obtained by maternal grandmother) in a family in which the head is a single mother may be explained by his professional activity. Until recently, men retired later than women, so grandfather could simply have less spare time, which made it difficult to help as often as in the case of grandmother. This is quite an arbitrary and rather a secondary guess, since a similar argument can be applied to the relationship with grandmother her, so to speak, natural unforced presence. However, it may be worth raising this issue as well and some differentiation of evaluations can be explained by the forms of activity of grandmother and grandfather, their ways of spending time with grandchildren.

The younger generation has a higher sense of tie with grandparents in other words, these relationships play a special role in their childhood and adolescence. Grandchildren who experienced this tie point out specific goods that they owe to their relatives (Napora, 2016). Grandchildren to whom grandparents played caring and educational roles for some time owe much more to them than those whose contact with grandparents was sporadic (Szatur-Jaworska, Błędowski, Dzięgielewska, 2006, p. 104). Grandparents father's parents obtain much more favorable evaluations concerning the affinity and frequency of contacts from grandchildren coming from complete families, while in families in which the head is a single mother, these evaluations drastically decrease. In single-mother

families, the growing role of maternal grandmother is noticeable, which as already mentioned confirms the assumption that in the absence of a father, grandmother is trying to make up for him with her commitment, while the grandfather plays a supporting role (Napora, 2016).

The conclusion resulting from this part of the analyzes leads to the conclusion that the evaluation of the frequency and affinity of contacts with grandmother, expressed by grandchildren from both complete families and single mother families are more favorable than the analogous evaluations of contacts with grandfather (Napora, 2019). This means that the results are in line with the initial hypothesis, the verification of its assumptions gave a positive result. The observation that the participation of the mother's parent in terms of the quality of relations with grandchildren was similarly evaluated by young people from families with different structures is also interesting. It is also worth emphasizing that maternal grandparents (i.e. grandmother and grandfather on the mother's side) obtain better evaluations in terms of frequency and affinity than paternal grandparents, regardless of the family structure, whereas in single mother families there is a significant worsening of relationship with the father's parents, which increases the differences between the kinship lines and has a direct impact on the opinions expressed by grandchildren (Napora, 2016). The analysis of results makes it possible to respond to the second hypothesis, in which it was expected that the degree of involvement of grandparents, expressed by the frequency of contacts and the affinity of the relationship, decreases as grandchildren reach maturity, regardless of the family structure.

The effects show a quite clear the relationship between the distinguished parameters, the frequency of contacts and the affinity of relationship between grandchildren and grandparents. Better evaluations expressed in respect of the first parameter are accompanied by better evaluations of the second parameter. In other words, the more often we see or meet someone, the better we assess our mutual affinity. This dependence also appears in a somewhat opposite situation a lower frequency of contacts is associated with a lower evaluation of affinity (Napora, Jakowska-Suwalska, 2020).

The correlation coefficients between the distinguishing features show that both in a complete family and in a single mother family, the degree of involvement of maternal grandmother decreases with the increase of the age of grandchildren, in contrast to paternal grandfather, for whom the values of the relationship between frequency and affinity increase with the age of grandchildren. The dynamics of the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren can be already seen when discussing the problematic issues earlier, quite clearly indicate a weakening of relations with grandparents as the grandchildren grow up. This regularity applies to contacts with both grandmother and grandfather, regardless of the family structure. Therefore, the obtained results confirm the views on the dynamics of mutual relations between grandparents and grandchildren, and on the decrease in the frequency of contacts as the child grows up. This conclusion is consistent with the observations expressed in the literature, where it is pointed out that the best evaluations of grandparents' involvement are related to the opinions of grandchildren about the earliest years of life

and the period of primary school. In later periods, these relationships are weakened or relaxed (Hurlock, 1985). This suggests that in the process of growing up and reaching a certain threshold of maturity, grandchildren may feel uncomfortable showing closeness to their grandmother or grandfather. It is also stated that with the age of grandchildren and depending on the sex of grandparents, these relations undergo not only quantitative but also qualitative differentiation (Napora, 2016, Napora, Kozerska, Schneider, 2014). Over the years, conversations emphasizing passing on traditions, enriching experiences, discussing problems and life experiences are dominating in mutual contacts. This favors the emotional development of adolescents (Falkowska, 2002, p. 47), and helps them to overcome the threshold of adulthood.

Referring to the last hypothesis, which expresses the expectation that adolescents are characterized by a similar level of subjective evaluation of the quality of life, regardless of the family structure, it should be stated that the obtained results do not confirm it. The obtained results quite clearly indicate that in complete families there are significantly better evaluations of the quality of life, while in the group of respondents from single-mother families a higher percentage of low evaluations can be noticed. This result confirms the results of previous research conducted on a group of adolescents from south-eastern Poland, in which the obtained values indicated significant differences in the evaluation of the quality of life between adolescents from complete families and those from single-mother families (Napora, Kozerska, Miszczak, 2014).

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