

WCES 2012

Grandparents-grandchildren relationship

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Abstract

Although grandparents can play a crucial role in the lives of their grandchildren in terms of education, only recently has grandparenthood been a topic in international literature. Studies have suggested that the extent of grandparental investment is influenced by age, gender and paternal/maternal side. Purpose: 1) explore grandparents' perception of their relation with grandchildren; 2) investigate whether grandparent's gender, age and maternal/paternal side have influenced grandparents' perception. Methods: A 26 item self-report questionnaire was administered to 373 Italian grandparents (153 male) age ranging between 53 and 88 years of age. The questionnaire aimed to investigate attitudes and feelings towards grandchild, shared activities, and viewpoint on their children's parenting style. Results displayed that grandmothers shared activities with their grandchildren more than grandfathers ($p < .01$); the paternal grandparents shared activities with their grandchildren, more than maternal ones ($p < .01$). No statistically significant differences were found between younger and older grandparent groups. Conclusions. Throughout literature maternal grandparents have always been indicated as the ones more involved in grandchildren' lives, our results show that paternal grandparents share activities with grandchildren more than maternal ones. These results confirm even further that grandparents play a major role in grandchildren education.

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Keywords: Grandparents, Grandchildren, Rrelationship

1. Introduction

In recent years research has focused its attention on the grandparents role within family relations (Lo & Liu, 2009; Laham, Gonsalkorale, von Hippel, 2005; Pashos & McBurney, 2008). Due to the increase in life expectancy, the role of grandparents and great grandparents in the lives of younger generation has greatly increased. Grandparents often offer economical support to young couples (Carrà Mattini, 1999) and help their siblings to look after their children (Petter, 2009). The increasing phenomenon of "care giving-grandparents" correlates also with various social factors, which lead to problems on parents views on child raising (Graham, 2001; Silverstein & Marengo 2001; Kolomer, 2000; Begnston, 2001; Hayslip & Hicks, 2003; Chang & Hayter, 2011).

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Due to the social relevance of grandparents, several investigations have been conducted over the past 20 years (Westheimer & Kaplan, 2000; Bengston, 2001; Wiscott & Kopera, 2001; Smith, Bouna, Svensson-Dianellou, Quadrello, Sciplino, 2009; Weichold, 2009), also within an Italian context (Battistelli & Farneti, 1991; Farneti & Battistelli, 2003; Vegetti Finzi, 2008). These studies showed that grandparents lived a close relationship with their grandchildren and that grandchildren often responded with a similar enthusiastic involvement (Petter, 2009).

Furthermore grandparents do not have the educational responsibility therefore the relationship between the parties becomes more of an affectionate nature and it is for this reason they seem more generous and tolerant than parents (Petter, 2009).

Moreover studies showed that there are significant differences in the way grandparents live their role regarding to gender, age and maternal or paternal side (Block, 2000; Mills, 2001; Scabini & Iafrate, 2003; Viguer, Meléndez, Valencia, Cantero. & Navarro 2010).

As regarding age, it has been revealed that older grandparents are under less pressure regarding duties and responsibilities for their future, therefore they are able to live in the present and to value daily pleasures such as enjoying looking after grandchildren.

As regarding gender, grandmothers more than grandfathers (Viguer et al., 2010; Block, 2000; Mills, 2001) and specifically, maternal more than paternal ones (Block, 2000; Chan Elder, 2000; Farneti & Cadamuro, 2005; Viguer et al., 2010) are involved in relationships with their grandchildren. These data suggest that maternal involvement in the education of their children makes them as grandparents even more satisfied about their role as educators.

Until now most investigations had assessed data through grandchildren's self report methods and not by grandparents investigation (Davey, Savla, Janke, Anderson, 2009; Viguer et al., 2010; Monserud, 2010; Coall et al., 2009; Rempusheski & O'Hara, 2005; Chrastil, Getz, Euler & Stark, 2009).

A particular objective of this study is to evaluate grandparents feelings and emotions concerning their grandchildren, activities with them and to analyze the more important attitudes in the education of grandchildren as well as their own autonomy and independence.

Moving from literature we hypothesize that grandparents' life regarding their grandchildren vary in: 1) sex; we hypothesized that grandmothers experience the relation to their grandchildren more positive than grandfathers; 2) family lineage; we hypothesized that maternal grandparents are more involved in relationships with grandchildren than paternal ones; 3) age (younger and older grandparents).

2. Methods

2.1. Instruments

Moving from literature and previous investigations (Battistelli & Farneti, 1991; Farneti & Battistelli, 2003) a new self report questionnaire, of 26 items was used. This questionnaire, assessed grandparents opinion concerning their relationship with grandchildren using 3 subscales:

- 1) feelings and emotions towards grandchildren (7 items);
- 2) grandparents and grandchildren shared activities a) symbolic activities based on language (telling fairy tales or family history stories), b) activities based on technology (like watching TV, playing on the computer) and c) sport and physical activities (for instance walking) (9 items);
- 3) attitudes regarding grandparents role as well as children's educational behavior (10 items).

After reading each statements, grandparents had to rate their accordance on the Likert-scale with eleven positions (0=totally not agree; 10=totally agree). Furthermore we assessed some sociodemographic variables like sex, age, marriage and family lineage (maternal or paternal).

2.1.1. Sample

373 Italian grandparents (153 male; 220 female) aged between 53 and 88 years old ($M=68,1$; $SD=7,9$) were recruited for this study. In the sample 205 (55%) were maternal (45% grandfathers and 55% grandmothers) and 168 (45%) paternal grandparents (48% grandfathers and 62% grandmothers). 87 percent of grandparents were married

while 13 percent were widowed. The people were divided into two subgroups according to age median (69 years old). Younger grandparents subgroup was composed by 192 subjects (51%) aged between 53 to 69 years old while older grandparent subgroup were composed up of 181 subjects (49%) older than 69 years.

2.1.1.1. Procedure

Subjects were recruited individually in get-together centers for elderly people and they filled in a questionnaire. Data were then inserted in a SPSS database. We calculated a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) inserting questionnaire scales as dependent variables and sex, family lineage and age as independent variables.

3. Results

Data analysis shows that there are no significant differences regarding emotions towards grandchildren in relation to sex ($F=2.04$; n.s.), family lineage ($F=1.50$; n.s.) as well as age ($F=2.25$; n.s.): in fact all grandparents indicate positive emotions to their grandchildren. Also in grandparents attitudes regarding their role as educator we found no significant differences concerning sex ($F=1.89$, n.s.), family lineage ($F=.065$; n.s.) as well as age ($F=.94$; n.s.); all of them attribute a great importance in their role as educator and helper.

On the contrary we found significant differences in relation to activities with their grandchildren. We found in our data that grandmothers carried out more activities than grandfathers (mean 60.25 vs. 55.46; $F=8.84$; $p<.005$) and paternal grandparents carried out more activities than maternal ones (mean 60,09 vs. 57,07; $F=4.86$; $p<.01$). There are no differences between younger and older grandparents regarding activities with their grandchildren ($F=2.25$; n.s.).

In particular we found differences in the kind of activities grandparents carried out with grandchildren. Grandmothers carried out more linguistic activities than grandfathers (mean 7,5 vs. 6,4; $F=17.77$; $p<.001$) whereas grandfathers carried out more sport and physical activities than the grandmothers (mean 8,7 vs. 8,1; $F=5,58$; $p<.01$). Moreover paternal grandparents carried out more symbolic and language based activities than maternal ones (mean 7,5 vs. 6,7; $F=8.05$; $p<.005$).

4. Conclusions

These findings highlight that grandparents attribute a great importance to their educator and supporting role. This educational role is carried out through shared activities with grandchildren.

In accordance with other investigations (Viguer et al., 2010; Barnett, Scaramella, Neppl, Ontai, & Conger, 2010; Roberto & Stores, 1992) our data indicate that grandmothers compared to grandfathers generally carried out more activities together with their grandchildren – probably due to a greater amount of time spent with their grandchildren (Reitzes & Mutran, 2004). Furthermore it seems that grandmothers are more involved in symbolic activities based on language whereas grandfathers tend to do sport and physical activities with grandchildren. The differences we found in grandfathers and grandmothers, confirm and extend previous investigations (Silverstein & Marengo, 2001). In fact our data seems to confirm traditional educational roles. Men dedicate more time to physical activities, like walking and outdoor games, while women dedicate more time to activities based on language, for instance telling fairy tales, stories or anecdotes regarding their own family.

However compared with previous investigations (Viguer et al., 2010) our study shows that paternal grandparents are involved more in playful activities, especially language based activities

In summary our research shows that exactly narration in the grandparent-grandchildren relationship seems very important in education: narrations have always been an active part of growing up and alongside narrative grandparents also the listeners, i.e. grandchildren are active too. Narration becomes an experience of co-elaboration of sense, which helps to structure identity and mature personality. Moreover narrations as well as anecdotes about family history provide the formation of the self in relation with others over a period of time (Fivush et al., 2004).

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