



Full Length Research

Meanings of great-grandparents of children from Bahia, Brazil

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Grandparents have been subject of studies for already some time, but as people are getting older, great-grandparents become emerged at children life horizons. This exploratory study is part of a bigger one where children were asked about the meaning of their family members, including their great-grandparents. Fifty children, aged 6 to 12 years old, from medium and low socio-educational class answered a question about: what is a great-grandmother? What is a great-grandfather? 15 (30%) children answered about what it was to be a great-grandmother and 7 (14%) about great-grand-father. The other answers were: "I don't know/not questioned" (31%) and "I don't have" (47%). The main results were: more responses about great-grandmothers than about great-grandfather; more answered "I don't know" and "I don't have" to great-grand-fathers. As a qualitative description, children said: "they are the same as grandparents but older, need more help and they are going to die sooner". One general conclusion is that children's experience of living with more generations may give them a different approach to time. Another conclusion is that some great-grandparents may already be in the traditional place of grandparent, for instance, giving support and caring. The main conclusion points to the need of studying the fourth generation, and even the fifth generation, in relation to children lives.

Key words: Great-grandfather, great-grandmother, children.

INTRODUCTION

As world populations are aging, the great-grandparents begin to appear at the horizons of family life. This increase in average age is due to several factors, including the decrease in birth and mortality rates, and improvements in living conditions, health care and social resources (Martins, 2006; Dias, 2007; Flowers, 2008).

Demographic data indicate that the number of elderly in Brazil is about 20,622,000 (IBGE, 2010). In the Northeast state of Bahia, changes in demographics, such as reduced mortality and increased life expectancy, have been particularly sharp since the 1980's. In more recent years, the rapid decline in fertility, the drop in mortality and changes in the spatial distribution of the population have altered its dynamics and

reinforced the need for demographic projections. By 2030, those projections indicate that population aging will contribute to a declining trend in population growth (SEI, 2013). In demographic terms, this fact has important implications for the family network and the roles of its members (Sousa, 2006).

There are an increased number of generations living together, often three or four to a family (Harper, 2006), especially including women that live longer (Motta, 2004). Accordingly, family connections will be more vertical than horizontal, and members will spend more time in intergenerational roles than before. "In vertical terms, a family structure of four generations has three levels of parent-child relationships, two sets of grandparents-grandchildren connections and one consisting of

great-grandparents – grandchildren” (Harper, 2006).

Research conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom, provided by the studies of intergenerational links of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), revealed that more than half of the respondents were members of families of four generations. Three-quarters of adults will become grandparents, and nearly one-third will have that experience in families of four generations, and one fifth of all women over 80 years will live in a family of five generations. One third of the people in the UK are grandparents, a role played for 25 years on average, with predictions suggesting that perhaps three quarters of the population will ascend to the status of grandfather/grandmother (Harper, 2006). This generational transition to the condition of grandfather/grandmother, or even great grandfather/great grandmother, may determine individuals’ identity, roles and duties, and the relationship that grandchildren have with their grandparents in the early days will determine, in part, how they assume their roles, and later how they relate with their own grandchildren (Harper, 2006).

In this context of life extension, it appears that the current generation of grandchildren is the first expected to know the four grandparents, so the relation grandchildren – grandparents is emerging as potentially important. This tie has been very little studied, mainly due to its rarity, but for sure it will increase in the coming years (Sousa, 2006). The study from which the present one is derived investigated the meanings that 60 Brazilian children, 6 to 12 years of age, attributed to fathers, mothers, brothers and grandparents (Rabinovich and Moreira, 2008; Moreira et al., 2009). Of the 60 children interviewed, 50 replied referring to their great-grandparents. Therefore, the objective of this research is to identify the meaning attributed by great-grandchildren to great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers.

METHODOLOGY

Fifty (50) children aged between 6 to 12 years, 22 males and 28 females, residing in the state of Bahia, in the northeast of Brazil, were interviewed concerning what it was to be a great-grandparent. They were divided into two groups: Group 1 to 15 living in the capital, whose parents had high socio-educational (college degree or more) levels, and 15 from low socio-educational (1st to 8th grade) level; Group 2 to 5 children living in inner cities, whose parents had a high socio-educational level and 15 whose parents had low socio-educational level. Children responded to the following questions: Do you have great-grandparents? How it is to be a great-grandmother? How it is to be a great-grandfather? Parents completed a socio-demographic questionnaire about family composition, place of residence, number of residents, their ages, genders, education and occupations. A criterion by which the children were chosen was accessibility. The researchers went to the children’s homes or educational institutions and invited their parents to authorize their children to participate in the study. Parents answered the socio-demographic questionnaire and subsequently researchers

recorded interviews with the children. These interviews were transcribed, verbatim, and analyzed.

The analysis took place through a horizontal reading, in an attempt to understand the personal and social experiences of the participants, and to capture the meanings that each particular phenomenon had for each child. The results were then grouped into topics driven by the differences underlying the responses, providing an overview of the results thus analyzed (Minayo, 2010). A “typology” emerged as a methodological resource inspired by the study by Gomes-Pedro (2006) which, from the nature of the bond between grandparents and grand-children, suggested four types: little influence; sees little; spoiling; relationship engaging; partners in playing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the 50 children who responded about their great-grandparents, 31% said they did not know what to say (15 to great-grandmothers, 16 to great-grandfathers), 47% reported that they did not have great-grandparents (great-grandmother, 20; great-grandfathers, 27) and 22% gave responses (15 to great-grandmother, 7 to great-grandfather). From these data, two aspects emerge as relevant: 30% of the respondent children reported having great-grandmothers, and only 14% to great-grandfather. Therefore, either because women are more present and/or because they live longer (“don’t have”: 20 to great-grandmothers and 27 to great-grandfathers), children can tell more about great-grandmothers than about great-grandfathers. In general, the great-grandparents are viewed by children from a longevity perspective as family founders. So, great-grandparents seem to provide a broader experience of temporality than do grandparents.

“Great-grandmother is the one who had the father of the granddaughter. It is a thing of loving the grand-daughter’s father”.

As they come prior to grandparents, they would have more responsibility to the family.

“If grandfather and grandmother have to have a lot of responsibility, great-grandfather and great-grandmother must have twice that because they started the family long ago”.

“They have more responsibility also to take care of the whole family. Instead of it being the grandfather who only has to take care of the children and the grandchildren, the great-grandfather has to take care of the son, the grandson and the great-grandson”.

Children’s relationships with their great-grandparents are mainly to help them. They help them to carry things, to pick up things on the ground, to climb stairs. Some children showed they liked to help their great-grandparents.

“It’s cool because we can help him get things, to climb in the

car, to talk like “hey, watch your step.”

The relationship with grandparents appears reversed because they are in need of great-grandchildren, and not the contrary. In fact, if the grandparents’ seniors are to be seen as supporting the care of grandchildren “while grandparents fourth age will receive care, if not at home, in institutions outside the family, eventually losing contact with them” (Pires, 2010).

“It’s like being a grandmother, because great-grandmother also gives affection, attention, toys, and candy. The difference is that she is already older, you know, elderly, where the pain begins”.

This relationship can manifest itself in a playful way.

“She pretends you’re sick, then she will give some medicine to you, then everything is fine. It’s fun”.

An important feature of this study refers to an apparent loss of differentiation by genre. With respect to gender differences, Gomes-Pedro (2006) describes the difference in performance between elderly men and women: “The grandmothers/great-grandmothers over 70 years of age have a greater tendency to have a relationship characterized by spoiling or protecting, but both sexes tend to have a more remote relation, in general, associated with health factors”.

“It is not like the grandfathers and grandmothers. She (great-grandmother) likes me, and I like her. Then she gives me things and I give things to her. Also my great-grandfather gives me things and I give him”.

But differences due to gender were also observed:

“To be a great-grandfather is to be cool, a lot! He has more stories than the grandfather because he’s lived more. Every man has many stories, women do not have the gift of becoming old ladies and telling many stories like men”.

Telling a story from their life to their great-grandchildren lets the elderly relive experiences and give some continuity to them (Sousa, 2006). Cultural differences, especially when there is the African influence associated with lower socio-educational levels, were observed in the speech of some children.

“I must respect the great-grandmother, not to mention things that do not please her. You have to do only the things that pleases her. All the things that she does not like, she gets angry with us”.

Gomes-Pedro (2006) pointed out the importance of grandparents in Asian, Hispanic-American and African cultures. Silva (2009), studying Northeast Brazilian grandparents and great-grandparents, concluded that the myth of maternal love was replaced by the myth of “grand-parenting or even “great-grand parenting.”

“The great-grandfather has to support to help his daughter, to help his son”.

Although we have more reports on great-grandmothers, children were very positive toward their great-grandfathers, especially in the low socio-educational group.

“He is nice. He is very good to me. He gives me money. When I go there, I always give him a hug”.

According to Harper (2006), men are more likely to care for their grandchildren and great-grandchildren; more likely to have frequent contact; and they tend to develop closer relations. However, women are considered more influential than paternal grandparents in terms of closer ties and in providing a sense of security, no matter how old the grandmother is. If the grandparents are already described as old, the great-grandparents are seen as closer to death.

“It’s like the grandmother, but she can not work because she is old and when I met her, she was already ninety”.

For Silva et al. (1997), the last stage of the family life cycle is considered a step that has been extended, given the greater human longevity marked by the restructuring of roles, as well as the physical departure of some members of the family, the retirement of one or both spouses, the loss of autonomy and physical fragility. At this stage, there is a closing cycle. Barros (1987) stated that, as a person ages, she/he is aware of the end of life. Something equivalent seems to occur in the child’s understanding that life is heading to an end. Therefore, even if most children in this study (78%) have not met their great grandparents, great-grandparents already appear on their horizons. Given the aforementioned, one might think there are two types of great-grandparents, as organized around two core senses:

1. Great-grandparents are more than grandparents: older, need more help, tell more stories, and are closer to death:

“It’s like being a grandmother, she also gives affection, attention, toys, and candy. The difference is that she is already older”.

“She is like my grandmother, but she cannot work because she is old”.

Another difference would be that the great-grandparents do not seem to live with the great-grandchildren – since no child reported such, which would indicate only a sporadic relationship, while grandparents may perform the systematic, the resident or the integral kind of children care.

2. Great-grandparents are in the traditional place of some grandparents: although this type is underrepresented, we can already perceive its existence.

“They are unlike the grandfathers and grandmothers. She likes

me, I like her. Then she gives me things and I give things to her. My great-grandfather also gives me things and I give him too”.

Therefore, it can be proposed that the difference, as experienced by children, between the relationship of the grandparents and great-grandparents with their descendants is the quality of the bond, in which great-grandparents seem more fragile and dependent.

CONCLUSION

The great-grandparents were seen by children from a perspective of generation and longevity. If the grandparents are already described as old, the great-grandparents further the child's concept of death. This is perceived as an extinguishing of life and the ending of the vital energies. Therefore, the most obvious feature of the existence of great-grandparents is this extension in the child's understanding of the time line and the change in position from one who is cared for to one who does the caring.

Another important feature refers to an apparent loss of differentiation related to genre, probably due to great-grandparents' loss of the functions previously related to genre roles. However, we also observed differences associated with gender. Although children reported more about great-grandmothers than about great-grandfathers, we observed great positivity afforded the latter.

As a suggestion, we propose two types of great-grandparents, as organized around core meanings: 1. they are more than grandparents - because they are older, they need more help, tell more stories, are closer to death; and 2. they are similar to grandparents - although this type is very little represented, we perceived their existence as providers or caregivers.

This study points to the urgency for further studies about the fourth and even fifth generation in their relation to the lives of children. One aspect that was not explored in this study, but emerged as a question to be addressed, is: Where and with whom live the great-grandparents? Another issue for further exploration concerns the relationship between child and adult within a framework of aging.

Conflict of interest

Authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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