

Grandparenting: Issues and Challenges

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ABSTRAK

Perbincangan mengenai kesepaduan famili dan hubungan antara generasi secara umumnya cenderung tertumpu pada hubungan dan peranan penjagaan anak-anak yang dewasa terhadap ibu bapa/ ibu bapa mertua mereka yang sudah tua. Walau bagaimanapun, terdapat beberapa kajian yang menunjukkan terdapat ramai daripada kalangan orang tua itu sendiri yang terlibat dengan aktiviti di dalam dan luar rumah. Mereka tidak hanya bergantung kepada anggota keluarga yang lebih muda, sebaliknya menyumbang kepada famili dan masyarakat. Pendek kata, sokongan juga mengalir daripada golongan tua kepada anak-anak mereka dan anggota keluarga yang lain dalam bentuk barangan, tenaga dan perkhidmatan. Salah satu bentuk perkhidmatan yang diberikan oleh ibu bapa tua ialah dari segi menjaga cucu dan grandparenting, iaitu 'membesarkan' cucu dalam keadaan ibu bapanya tiada lagi. Fenomena orang tua menjaga atau membesarkan cucu bukanlah satu perkara yang baru. Namun, fenomena ini semakin meningkat di dalam negara khususnya dan dalam dunia amnya dan dengan itu, perlu difahami dan ditangani. Makalah ini membincang hubungan datuk dan nenek kepada cucu mereka selain penjagaan dan sokongan yang diberikan kepada mereka. Makalah ini juga membincang secara ringkas isu dan cabaran yang timbul berkaitan penjagaan itu yang dihadapi oleh datuk dan nenek yang terlibat.

ABSTRACT

Generally, discussions regarding family solidarity and relationships between generations have tended to focus on the relationships and care giving role of adult children to the elderly parents/ parents-in-law. However, studies have also shown that many older persons are themselves involved in activities both inside and outside the home and that they do contribute to the family as well as to the society. In short, support also flow from the elderly to their children and other members of the family in the form of goods, labour and services. One of the services provided by the elderly parents is caring for the grandchildren and grandparenting, that is basically raising their grandchildren in the absence of both the natural parents. Grandparents raising or caring for the grandchildren are nothing new. However, this is an increasing phenomenon within and outside the country and which needs to be understood and addressed. This article discusses the relationship of grandparents to their grandchildren as well as the

care and support transferred to the grandchildren. It also briefly discusses the issues and challenges such care giving entails and are faced by the grandparents in their informal care role.

INTRODUCTION

Generally discussions regarding family solidarity and relationships between generations have tended to focus on the relationships and care giving role of adult children to the elderly parents/ parents-in-law. A very common belief is that older persons are generally unproductive and only receive care and goods from their children, other family members and members of society. However, studies have also shown that many older persons are themselves involved in activities both inside and outside the home and do make positive contributions to the family as well as to the society. In short the support does not only flow from the children to the elderly but also flow from the elderly to their children in the form of goods, labour and services. One of the supports provided by the elderly parents involves their grandchildren, that are caring for the grandchildren and grandparenting – basically raising their grandchildren in the absence of both the natural parents. Grandparents raising or caring for their grandchildren are nothing new. In fact, the provision of regular care for grandchildren by grandparents can be located within the broader context of intergenerational exchange within families, which was primarily being provided by older generation to the younger generation. However, this is an increasing phenomenon within and outside the country and which needs to be understood and addressed.

Across the country, regardless of income, socio-cultural background, ethnicity et cetera, grandparents are finding themselves with the added responsibility of helping to meet the needs of their grandchildren. The demographics of ageing societies, especially the increasing longevity and proportions of the elderly plus the impacts of modernization and development have added new demands to the family and its functions especially in terms of care and support for the very young and the very old. In the light of such a demand, the number of children being raised or cared for by their grandparents, either solely or part-time is becoming an increasing phenomenon, so much so, that no grandparents can exclude the possibility that, at some point in their lives they have to face the decision whether to care for or raise their grandchildren, part or full-time. This increase in the number of grandchildren who need to be cared for by their grandparents pose an important challenge to the older persons.

This article is a brief discussion of the relationships of grandparents to their grandchildren as well as the care and support transferred to the grandchildren. It looks into the issues and challenges such care giving entails and faced by the grandparents in their informal care role. The data used in the discussion is part of a bigger study on Intergenerational Relationships of Older Persons conducted in 2004.¹

GRANDPARENTAL SUPPORT AND CARE

In modern times grandparents caring for or raising their grandchildren is becoming more prevalent as an alternative family form. Grandparents play a variety of roles in the lives of their grandchildren compared to their predecessors. It is generally known that grandparents provide care for other family members, especially grandchildren, either on a temporary or part-time, day care basis (such as when a parent is away, or ill) or on a more permanent basis as a custodial care giver when both the child's parents are absent.

Day care grandparents generally provide regular daily care to the grandchildren for an extended period. Under this type of care grandchildren are sent to the grandparents to be cared for while the parents are away working. Under the 'living with grandparents' category are two types. (1) The grandchild resides with the grandparents, but the grandparents do not have legal custody over the child. (2) The grandchild resides with the grandparents and the grandparents have legal custody over the child. That is the grandparents have legal responsibility for ensuring that the welfare of the grandchild is fulfilled. In Malaysia grandparenting is mainly on a part-time, day care basis or residing but not having legal custody. This is because in a caring, close-knit society in general, and family in particular, social responsibility is generally exercised with less thoughts given to its economic or other implications although those problems may surface.

Reasons for caring for the grandchildren vary depending on the type of care required. Most day care grandparents cited the child's parents' full time work schedule and absence of a maid as reasons for agreeing to grandparenting. The changing pattern of women's labour force participation due to increased rate of industrialization has resulted in some elderly mothers looking after their grandchildren to help their parents, especially mothers, combine both work commitments and family responsibilities. In fact grandparents' looking after grandchildren is a much cheaper alternative than other forms of childcare especially for those in the lower and middle-income groups. For grandchildren to be living with grandparents could be due to migration, illness, death, divorce, emotional and financial problems, and child abandonment, that inevitably calls for parenting assistance.

Besides providing instrumental support and care, grandparents also play many other roles that were not acknowledged before. They provide social as well as emotional support. Among others grandparents are important role models in the socialization of grandchildren. They contribute to family solidarity and act as an 'anchor' to bind the family members together. Most important of all in the absence of formal support grandparents raise and provide care for the grandchildren who may have lost their natural parents or because the parents are simply unable to care for the children without assistance. Grandparents may also indirectly provide support to their grandchildren. By providing

emotional or material support to their adult children, grandparents may help to reduce stress in the family and thereby contribute to the wellbeing of their grandchildren (Denham and Smith 1989).

MALAYSIAN DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

There has been enough written on the demographic changes in the fertility and mortality of Malaysian population and their impact on the family structure and functions. Malaysia's current population is not particularly aged, however demographic ageing has set in. It is sufficient to note here that in the year 2000 for instance, those aged 65 years and above made up 0.93 million (4.0 percent) of the total population, which then increased to 1.15 million (4.3 percent of 26.75 million) in 2005 and is expected to increase to about 1.36 million (4.7 percent of total population) in the year 2010 (*9th Malaysia Plan*: 238). In terms of geographical distribution, a larger proportion of the elderly population is found in the rural area compared to the urban area. This increase of the elderly population indicates a need to increase the support and facilities provided for the elderly. However, with more Malaysians pursuing higher education and career advancement, delayed marriages and delayed childbearing have resulted in a decrease of the fertility rate from 2.88 in year 2000 to 2.76 in 2005 (*ibid*), subsequently resulting in smaller size families as well as preference for nuclear families as opposed to extended family structure and larger families.

Successes of modernization and processes of development have made it possible for Malaysians to enjoy better health and medical services with increasing emphasis on preventive care measures. This has contributed to the increase in life expectancy at birth of the population from 70 years for males in year 2000 to 70.6 years in 2005. Life expectancy for females increased from 75.1 years in 2000 to 76.4 years in 2005 (*ibid*). This increase in life expectancy compared to 50 years ago when the country gained its independence, means that most Malaysians would live long enough to experience grandparenthood.

TABLE 1. Sex Ratio Among People Aged 60 Years and Above
by Age Group. 1970-2020.

Age Group	1970 Sex Ratio	1980 Sex Ratio	1991 Sex Ratio	2000 Sex Ratio	2020 *Sex Ratio
Total (60+)	108.4	97.2	89.6	91.4	85.2
60-74	112.1	98.2	91.7	94.7	89.0
75+	89.5	93.4	82.2	79.2	85.2

Note: * = Projection

Source: Department of Statistics, Malaysia. 1998 and 2001.

It is a known fact that generally women survive longer than men and that there is a general decline in the sex ratio among older Malaysians. In 1970, there were more elderly males than females (108.4), but the ratio has dropped to 89.6 by 1991, before rising to 91.4 in the year 2000 (see Table 1). This means that demographic ageing in Malaysia as elsewhere is skewed towards more female elderly than males. This trend seems to suggest the future feminization of ageing. The longer life expectancy of women also means that there is a strong contrast between elderly widowed males and widowed females (see Table 2). In 1991 almost one in three elderly was classified as widowed. Elderly widowed males constituted 12 percent of the male elderly population, while widowed females comprised about 51 percent of the female elderly population. By the year 2000, the percentage of widowed males had dropped to 11.4 percent, while that of widowed females dropped to 45.8 percent.

TABLE 2. Older Persons' Marital Status by Sex and Age Groups, 1991 and 2000 (%)

Marital Status	Male			Female			Total		
	Age (years)			Age (years)			Age (years)		
	60-70	75+	Total	60-70	75+	Total	60-70	75+	Total
1991									
Never married	2.1	2.0	2.0	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.8	1.7	1.8
Currently married	87.4	71.1	84.1	49.7	24.0	44.0	67.7	45.3	62.9
Widowed	9.3	24.8	12.4	45.2	70.2	50.7	28.0	49.8	32.8
Divorced/ Permanently separated	1.3	2.1	1.4	3.6	4.3	3.8	2.5	3.3	2.7
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2000									
Never married	2.2	1.9	2.2	2.1	1.5	1.9	1.8	1.7	2.0
Currently married	88.3	73.4	85.6	56.3	27.5	50.2	61.4	47.8	67.1
Widowed	8.6	23.5	11.4	39.6	68.7	45.8	35.3	48.7	29.4
Divorced/ Permanently separated	0.79	1.16	0.9	2.01	2.4	2.1	1.6	1.8	1.5
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Department of Statistics, Malaysia. 1998 and 2001.

The demographic trend means that women would experience more years in the grandparenting role compared to the men. Also, since women tend to marry at a younger age compared to the men, they become parent (mother) and hence grandparent (grandmother) at a much younger age than men. Hence, women experience some of the years as grandmothers while they are still married, then while widowed. On the other hand, men tend to be married throughout their grandparenting experience. Although recent trend in fertility

among today's young adults may result in slight decrease in percentage of the elderly experiencing grandparenthood in the future, nonetheless most would still have grandchildren. In fact many may experience being parents and grandparents at the same time because they may have become first time grandparents while still caring for their own dependent children.

As indicated earlier the increase in life expectancy, decrease in fertility and consequently in the population birth rates, also means that the family structure has changed from the shape of a pyramid to what might be described as a 'beanpole' (Bengston, Rosenthal and Burton, 1990). This new 'beanpole' structure is shaped long and thin, with more family generations alive, but with fewer members in each generation. This means that more families will have both older and younger dependents. Thus, families may need to support older parents and younger children at the same time – economically and socially – as well as meet their emotional demands. This change in the family structure has important implications for family functions as well as relationships. In such a structure more ageing (and in better health) grandparents and even great-grandparents can be found to be available to provide family stability and support. It also means that there is a 'latent network' (Riley and Riley, 1993) that can be activated to provide support and wellbeing for the younger family members should the need arise.

THE 2004 'PSYCHOSOCIAL AND INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS OF OLDER PERSONS IN MALAYSIA' STUDY

The 2004 study entitled 'Psychosocial and Intergenerational Relationships of Older Persons' in Malaysia was conducted nationwide among 2910 households with older persons defined as those who are 60 years old and above. The study found that there are at least four different household types namely: (1) 3-generation household consisting of grandparents, parents and grandchildren; (2) 2-generation household which can be further categorized into (a) parents-children and (b) grandparents-grandchildren household types and (3) 1-generation, that is elderly living alone or with spouse household (Table 3).

TABLE 3. Household Types

Household type	Frequency	Percentage
1-generation (elderly living alone or with spouse)	792	27.2
2-generation (elderly living with children)	231	7.9
2-generation (elderly living with grandchildren only)	48	1.6
3-generation (elderly living with children and grandchildren)	1839	63.2
TOTAL	2910	100.0

Source: 2004 study data.

The following discussion in this article is based on findings from the 48 grandparents-grandchildren household type. Although the number of such household is small in the study, it is an interesting phenomenon to highlight, especially since such household type is said to be on the increase and generally not much study has focused on it, at least not in Malaysia. These 48 households are found to be in both the urban (41.7 percent) and the rural areas (58.3 percent). Majority of these grandparents (89.6 percent) owned the houses that they live in. The study also found that although there were among the grandparents who would prefer to live with their offsprings, the majority prefer to stay on their own. Personal freedom and not wanting to inconvenience their children are the most often cited reasons for the choice.

The study also shows that the majority of these elderly depend on their pensions and/or financial support from their children for their economic well-being (Table 4). In fact for 75.0 percent of the grandparents their children are the main source of income. Only 25.0 percent are found to be working (self-employed) in their old age in order to supplement their income.

These grandparents are engaged in the caregiving role of their grandchildren ranging from one-year old to even above 21 years of age as shown in Table 5.

TABLE 4. Source of Income

Source of income	Yes	No
Pension	20.5	79.5
Employee Provident Fund (EPF)	0.0	100.0
Social Welfare Department (JKM)	4.5	95.5
Insurance	0.0	100.0
Children	75.0	25.0
<i>Baitulmal</i>	4.5	95.5

N= 48

Source: 2004 study data.

TABLE 5. Age of Grandchildren

Age (years)	Frequency	Percentage
1-5	6	12.5
6-10	5	10.4
11-15	15	31.3
16-20	13	27.1
21 and above	9	18.8

N= 48

Source: 2004 study data.

In fact the study shows that 37 or 77.2 percent of the grandparents interviewed provide care to grandchildren aged 11 years and above compared to those younger. Among the reasons given by grandparents who care for their grandchildren are their parents' financial problems, divorce and migration. In such cases, grandparents either voluntarily offer to provide the care or see themselves as having no choice, but to provide the care.

GRANDPARENTS-GRANDCHILDREN RELATIONSHIPS

The relationship between grandparents and grandchildren come in diverse forms. In this regard Cherlin and Furstenberg (1985) for instance had identified three different styles of grandparenting: (1) Grandparents may be 'detached' and have little contact with the grandchildren, especially when it involves geographical distance; (2) the relationship could be 'passive' because although there is regular contact it is somewhat superficial; and (3) the relationship is 'active' and the grandparents are involved in the lives of the grandchildren. The types of relationship that exist would depend on the (1) social factors such as geographical proximity; timing of grandparenthood, marital and employment status; (2) situational factors in the family; and (3) mediating role of the parents. People become grandparents through reproduction of their children. As such the grandparents-grandchildren relationships are sensitive to the influence of the middle generation, i.e. the parents. Face-to-face contact between grandparents and grandchildren may only take place in the presence of the parents, especially when the grandchildren are younger. Grandparents may lose contact with the grandchildren when tension arises between the grandparents and the middle generation and bonds can be weakened.

In many instances the relationships that exist between grandparents and their grandchildren can be said to benefit both parties. In general grandparents provide a safe place for children to practice being away from their parents. They provide a sense of identity and family history and traditions. They are also known to make time to play and participate in various types of activities with the grandchildren (Brussoni and Boon, 1998) in a way that busy parents sometimes are unable to do. They help to socialize and instill norms and values important in social relationships. They provide advice and support for parents. And they represent stability and continuity (Gladstone, 1988).

On the other hand grandchildren are assurance of continuity of the bloodline. The grandparents are assured that the family name would be passed on to the next generation. Grandchildren provide companionship to the grandparents. They help reduce feeling of loneliness as well keep grandparents in touch with changing cultural values and new trends. Although tangible assistance in the form of economic and financial support may not be common, grandchildren have been found to help with the household work and other personal chores.

Studies elsewhere of the grandparents-grandchildren relationship also shows that most grandparents have positive feelings towards their grandchildren, although they may have a grandchild to whom they feel particularly close (Chelin and Furstenberg, 1985; Fingerman, 1998). Similarly, grandchildren too have been found to have a favourite grandparent.

In the 2004 study referred to the grandparents were asked about their relationship with their grandchildren. They were asked to respond to statements given to describe the relationships, which generally could be categorized into four types namely (1) instrumental; (2) expressive; (3) social; and (4) personal. Table 6 shows that overall the grandparents-grandchildren relationship can be

TABLE 6. Grandparents-Grandchildren Relationship

Type of Relationship	Statements	Agree	Moderately Agree	Disagree
Instrumental	I spend time with my grandchild	62.5	33.3	4.2
	I take my grandchild on trips such as shopping, see movies, go to the zoo/park	25.0	41.7	33.3
	I baby-sit my grandchild	58.3	37.5	4.2
	I participate in home recreation activities with my grandchild such as reading, telling stories, play indoor games etc	27.1	47.9	25.0
Expressive	I give presents to my grandchild	31.3	52.1	16.7
	I advice my grandchild on moral and religious matters	83.3	16.7	0.0
	I have helped my grandchild in time of sickness, trouble with parents and friends.	62.5	33.3	4.2
Social	I advice my grandchild on work plans or schooling	41.7	39.6	18.8
	I spend more time with my friends than with my grandchild	14.6	20.8	64.6
Personal	I think it is important that my grandchild respect his/her elders	95.8	2.1	2.1
	I would feel very lonely without my grandchild	77.1	18.8	4.2
	I believe I should be able to give my grandchild whatever I can without being worried about spoiling him/her	18.8	39.6	41.6
	I feel young and active again because of my relationship with my grandchild	75.0	22.9	2.1
	I feel my grandchild has brought emotional fulfillment in my life	77.1	22.9	0.0

N= 48

Source: 2004 study data.

said to be positive. The grandparents are involved in all of the types of relationships mentioned.

The grandparents are found to provide instrumental care and make themselves available for the grandchildren. This provision of care for the grandchildren by the grandparents can be located within a broader context of intergenerational transfer or exchange within families, provided by the older generation to the younger generation. In fact grandparental care can be said to present a significant intergenerational economic transfer in support of their adult children (Hishorn 1998:203). Besides providing the tangible support and care in the form of housework, transportation, shopping and giving personal care and attention, support relating to emotional matters such as advice and reassurance related to work, schooling, personal or religious/moral matters are also given.

Through expressive and social relationships grandchildren are also socialized and informed of social graces and manners to sharpen their social skills and values. Grandparents play a role in assisting with the formation of the core sets of values within grandchildren. Their myriad of experiences as they lived through the many stages of societal change and development could be drawn upon to assist the grandchildren through various moral or social dilemmas that the grandchildren will encounter. Lastly, the grandparents-grandchildren relationship also takes on a personal meaning. The relationship has helped reduce their feeling of loneliness and added purpose to their lives as agreed by the majority of the grandparents interviewed.

The study also shows that because they are involved in providing childcare, grandparents spend less time with their friends, This means that their social lives are somewhat curtailed to a certain extent as they spend more time caring for the grandchildren. It is also found that quite a large percentage of the grandparents (41.6 percent) see the caregiving as an opportunity to indulge and spoil the grandchildren without having to worry about its long-term consequences. An opportunity that they might have missed when they were themselves parents with young children due to their greater focus on their career development and advancement.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Although grandchildren provide a sense of joy, hope and continuity, grandparents would usually anticipate later life as a time to enjoy the privileges of grandchildren without the responsibilities. However, the increase in the number of children who need to be cared for by their grandparents poses an important challenge for grandparents today as it demands sacrifices at a time in life when one may be looking forward to more leisure and less responsibility (Minckler and Roe 1993). Although some grandparents may look forward to

caring for their grandchildren, other grandparents while enjoying its pleasures may resent the responsibility thrust upon them and the attendant inconveniences that are involved. Grandparents may want to help out, but there may be a fine line between feeling useful and feeling exploited or pressured into helping out more than they want to. Thus, grandparents find they may need to make adjustments to their new role as carers of their grandchildren.

Furthermore, since grandparenting normally comes at a time when individuals are older, the grandparents would have relatively less energy or their state of health would have lessened somewhat to enable them to cope with the demands of childcare and behaviour problems. In such a situation grandparents who are primary caregiver may suffer from fatigue compared to others their age. During the in-depth interview, respondents were asked if they found looking after grandchildren a positive and satisfying experience, quite a strain or if they have mixed feelings about their role. Although generally they reported the experience to be very important to them and enjoyable, nevertheless it could be tiring and exhausting. They may even face depression and experience an increase in psychological stress due to their inability to cope especially when grandchildren exhibit emotional or behavioural problems.

Some grandparents talked about wanting some 'private space' for themselves without grandchildren, to do other things or to just sit quietly. They need to continue engaging in adult friendship and to have quiet time for themselves each day. However, social contact and 'private times' may need to be reduced, as they would have less time for themselves. Economic pressure too may increase, especially for grandparents who may have to assume responsibility of full time care and support of their grandchild despite limited financial resources. For grandparents who may be working to supplement their income, they may have to reduce their working hours for paid employment or stretch their financial resources.

One other issue that may arise with regard grandparenting is related to 'spoiling the grandchildren'. Spoiling is almost synonymous with grandparenting. It is one of the bonuses of grandparenthood. However, too much spoiling can lead to communication breakdown between parents especially and grandparents. Parents or the middle generation may have different views about how children should be raised or treated. As such grandparents need clear information about this. This is because while parents might want help from grandparents, and grandparents might want to help and be involved with their grandchildren, the generations may differ on the amount and nature of help to be given. Trying to observe the norm of non-interference, while at the same time meeting children's expectations for assistance, places grandparents in what Thomas (1990) describes as a "double bind," in which it is almost "impossible" to do the "right" thing.

Grandparenthood is often a reflection of negotiated relationships that occur within a larger family system. It is to be viewed not only in personal term, but

also as an interactive process. This is because by definition, and as often mentioned grandparents do not exist in their role without grandchildren and the shape that grandparenting takes, especially in the early years would depend on the mediating position that adult children, children-in-law, spouses, and other family members might have in shaping it. Thus, grandparents need always to be sensitive to those around them *vis-à-vis* the grandchildren.

There are very few guidelines or none at all to help grandparents cope or position themselves in various family situations. Just as there are no formal trainings for one to become parents, there are also no means to develop a sense of competency in grandparenting.

CONCLUSION

Lifestyles and expectations are rapidly changing in tandem with the rapid societal transformations. As geographical and social mobility increases, relationships and the extent of shared experiences among family members also change. The accumulating impact of accelerating change and development requires the adaptation of traditional expectations and social understanding in general and with regard to grandparenting in particular.

Relationships between grandparents and grandchildren occur within a complex system of family relationships and are fostered or constrained by these relationships. Grandparenting as a complex social process can be experienced in a variety of ways by virtue of the many grandparenting roles that it brings. However, the many roles that they play are in part due to a lack of clear definition of what their role should be, spanning from less active as just ‘being there for the grandchildren’ to active grandparenting roles, that is carry out surrogate parenting functions. The role that is increasingly becoming more prevalent in Malaysia and elsewhere is the role where grandparents raise or care for their grandchildren as an alternative family form. However, as wonderful as the grandparent-grandchild relationship is, it is not without its share of issues and challenges. Without much guidelines to help grandparents cope with the added responsibility grandparents often need assistance to meet the needs of their grandchildren – financial, educational, emotional, medical, child development etc. They are likely to need extra support and encouragement from other family members and others outside of the family. As such some form of supportive interventions ought to be considered for such grandparent caregivers to enable them to cope.

NOTES

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