



The importance of the grandparent role—A class specific phenomenon? Evidence from Germany

Katharina Mahne^{*}, Andreas Motel-Klingebiel

German Centre of Gerontology, Manfred-von-Richthofen-Str. 2, 12101 Berlin, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 January 2011

Received in revised form 25 June 2012

Accepted 26 June 2012

Keywords:

Grandparenthood

Grandparent role

Importance

Ageing

German Ageing Survey

ABSTRACT

In the light of changing opportunity structures for the experience of grandparenthood, we address older parents' attitudes towards the grandparent role. Our focus is on the interrelationship between the importance of the grandparent role and social class. The likelihood of the transition to grandparenthood and the opportunities to enact the grandparent role clearly differ according to an individual's social class position. We therefore ask whether the importance attached to grandparenthood varies for individuals from different social classes as well. Furthermore, we test for other correlates of the subjective importance of grandparenthood, such as the quality of family relations, marital status, and value orientations towards life in general.

The analyses are based on data of the German Ageing Survey, a nationally representative study of individuals aged 40 years and older. Data collected in 2008 provide information on the subjective importance of (prospective) grandparenthood as reported by grandparents and non-grandparents.

According to our data, the subjective importance of experienced as well as prospective grandparenthood does not vary by social class. Instead, we find relationship quality with grandchildren to be most influential and positively related to the perceived importance of the grandparent role. The same holds true for non-grandparents and their relationships with children. Conservative value orientations promote the importance of a future transition to grandparenthood only. In light of the findings, and given the changing opportunities to experience the grandparent role, grandparenthood might evolve into an unequally distributed social resource for later life.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

There is a constantly growing literature on grandparenthood. However, comparatively little is known about the attitudinal and symbolic aspects of the grandparent role (Szinovacz, 1998; Thiele & Whelan, 2006; Werner, Lowenstein, & Katz, 1998). Moreover, the classics on the meaning of grandparenthood (Kivnick, 1982; Neugarten & Weinstein, 1964; Robertson, 1977) originated several decades ago and may well have little validity for today's society.

So far, the grandparent role has been described as generally important and rewarding by ageing individuals (e.g. Clarke & Roberts, 2004). However, the opportunities to experience the grandparent role are changing. On the one hand, due to the increasing proportion of childlessness in following cohorts (Frejka & Sobotka, 2008), fewer parents undergo the transition to grandparenthood (Uhlenberg & Cheuk, 2010). On the other hand – once grandchildren exist – events and conditions such as divorce or geographical distance between family members increasingly affect the possibilities to enact the grandparent role (e.g. King, 2003; Uhlenberg & Hammill, 1998). Within the context of our study, it is important to point out that both factors of changing opportunities for

^{*} Corresponding author. Tel.: +49 30 26074018; fax: +49 30 7854350.
E-mail address: katharina.mahne@dza.de (K. Mahne).

the experience of grandparenthood are affected by social class.

Fertility behaviour is socially stratified and varies across educational backgrounds (Skirbekk, 2008). Increased education is associated with higher rates of childlessness among women in Western industrialised countries (González & Jurado-Guerrero, 2006; Weeden, Abrams, Green, & Sabini, 2006). Delayed childbearing is also more prevalent among higher educated women and those who are employed and career orientated. In Germany, there is a complex interplay of uncertainty in employment careers, education, and women's postponement of first births, indicating that mainly well educated women show delayed childbearing when facing job uncertainty (Kreyenfeld, 2010). This has consequences for the experience of the grandparent role as the transition to and the timing of grandparenthood is more precarious in higher social classes (Gee, 1991).

Reasons for the present shifts in fertility behaviour in higher social classes are seen in secularisation trends, changes in gender roles, and increased labour force participation of women, etc. The association between education and fertility is usually stronger for women because they are especially affected by raised opportunity costs. Increased female autonomy and contraceptive use lead to distinct preferences concerning family planning and the timing of births (Skirbekk, 2008).

As for how social class is associated with the actual relationships with grandchildren once they are established, there is a negative interrelationship between education and geographical proximity between familial generations (Hank, 2007). Greater spatial distance can hinder frequent face-to-face contact and shared activities between grandparents, children and grandchildren (Mills, 1999; Mueller & Elder, 2003; Uhlenberg & Hammill, 1998). Evidence for the impact of education on grandparent–grandchild interaction is mixed. Whereas some studies find less contact for higher educated grandparents (Reitzes & Mutran, 2004b; Uhlenberg & Hammill, 1998) others find no influence of education (Mahne & Huxhold, 2012). Studies on divorce in the children's as well as in the grandparents' generation revealed that marital disruption can come along with decreased contact between grandparents and grandchildren (e.g. Cooney & Smith, 1996; King, 2003; Kruk & Hall, 1995). The risk of experiencing marital disruption or union dissolution is also clearly socially structured. Although there is considerable cross-cultural variation in the factors and the direction of effects, education in general is negatively associated with a couple's break up (Amato, 2010; Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010; McLanahan, 2004). Women's employment and individual income, however, increase the risk of divorce (Amato, 2010; Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010).

Hence, it is not only the probability of becoming a grandparent at all but also the conditions within the family for establishing grandparent–grandchild ties that differ between social classes. Although becoming a grandparent is out of an individual's direct control, parents prepare the ground for the transition to grandparenthood. Strong intergenerational transmission effects exist for both fertility behaviour and education (e.g. Schneider, 2011;

Skirbekk, 2008; Steenhof & Liefbroer, 2008; Stocké, Blossfeld, Hoenig, & Sixt, 2011). Accordingly, especially among parents in higher social classes, the transmission of fertility behaviour and education works as a self-reinforcing mechanism and impacts on the probability of a transition to grandparenthood as well as the opportunity structures to enact the grandparent role. As norms and value orientations are one of the mechanisms underlying educational aspirations and fertility behaviour, they should become visible in attitudes towards the grandparent role. Therefore, this study asks whether the importance of the grandparent role varies across social classes as well.

Little research has been done so far on the interrelationship between social class and attitudes towards the grandparent role. The existing literature, however, quite consistently suggests that an individual's educational background – as one major parameter of social class membership – impacts on the level of importance or centrality attached to family roles such as grandparent. It is argued that individuals with higher education receive more validation from work roles, whereas for individuals with lower education, family roles are more central to their identity (King & Elder, 1998). Accordingly, we assume that the importance of the grandparent role and the opportunities to experience the grandparent role are equally and uniformly associated with education: higher educated individuals attach less meaning to the grandparent role and have less opportunity to experience or enact the grandparent role. However, it could also be that the importance of the grandparent role – unlike the actual opportunities to experience grandparenthood – does not vary with an individual's educational background. This situation may then result in unmet life expectations, since a role invested with importance cannot be enacted as desired.

Our study addresses older adults' attitudes towards grandparenthood and analyses the importance of the grandparent role within the German population. The following paragraphs look at correlates of the importance of the grandparent role that can be derived from the existing theoretical and empirical literature on the subject. We pay special attention to social class. Furthermore, we are interested in how role behaviour and overall value orientations are interrelated with the importance of the grandparent role. In addition, we conduct an analysis on the importance of future grandparenthood as reported by parents who do not as yet have any grandchildren. By doing so, we aim for further insights into the interrelationship between values, behaviour and attitudes towards grandparenthood. We use a nationwide representative dataset to analyse the importance of the grandparent role for parents with and without grandchildren in Germany for the first time.

1.1. The importance of the grandparent role for grandparents

Reasons to study the importance of the grandparent role are manifold. So far, little research has been done on the attitudinal aspects of the grandparent role, such as the importance attached to the role. However, in order to fully understand the grandparent role, it is necessary to give

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/313262>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/313262>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)