



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

From grandparenthood to great-grandparenthood. Exploring a family role



Pedro Javier Castañeda-García^{a,*}, Cristina Valle-Sanz^a, Josué Gutiérrez-Barroso^b

^a Facultad de Ciencias de la Salud (Sección Psicología), Universidad de La Laguna, San Cristóbal de La Laguna, Tenerife, Spain

^b Facultad de Ciencias Sociales y Jurídicas (Sección Sociología), Universidad de La Laguna, San Cristóbal de La Laguna, Tenerife, Spain

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Abstract

Background: In the light of the growing presence of a fourth generation in families, that of the great-grandparents, this study examines the interaction between individuals of this generation and their great-grandchildren taking into account their prior role as grandparents and certain sociodemographic characteristics.

Methods: Descriptive study with 46 participants with great-grandchildren, who completed an interview that involved answering questions about sociodemographic variables and some of the most frequent intergenerational activities. The Wilcoxon, Kruskal–Wallis, and Mann–Whitney *U* nonparametric tests were used to analyze the data.

Results: The data showed that 80.5% of the great-grandparents engage in interaction with their great-grandchildren in all the activities studied; further, these activities coincide with those previously shared with their grandchildren, albeit at a much lower rate. Age, the presence of health problems, and the number of great-grandchildren are related to a reduction in the frequency of certain shared activities between great-grandparents and great-grandchildren.

Conclusions: The results of this initial study of the great-grandparenthood role can help show how this generation's socializing role can be complementary to the other extended family roles of grandparenthood and parenthood. Our improved understanding of this role can help us better plan for optimizing interventions over the four generations.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: pcastane@ull.es (P.J. Castañeda-García).

PALABRAS CLAVE

Roles familiares;
 Bisabuelos;
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 Nietos;
 Rol de bisabuelidad

De la abuelidad a la bisabuelidad. Explorando un rol familiar**Resumen**

Antecedentes: ante el aumento continuo de una cuarta generación en las familias, los bisabuelos, se estudia su interacción con los bisnietos, teniendo en cuenta su rol precedente de abuelidad y algunas características sociodemográficas.

Métodos: estudio descriptivo con 46 participantes con bisnietos, a los que se entrevistó mediante un cuestionario que incluía variables sociodemográficas y algunas de las actividades intergeneracionales más frecuentes. Para analizar los datos se aplicaron las pruebas no paramétricas de Wilcoxon, Kruskal-Wallis y la U de Mann-Whitney.

Resultados: los datos muestran que el 80,5% de los bisabuelos mantienen una interacción con sus bisnietos en todas las actividades evaluadas; que coinciden, además, con las habidas con sus nietos, pero ahora con una frecuencia significativamente mucho menor. La edad, los problemas de salud y el número de bisnietos aparecen relacionados con la disminución de algunas actividades compartidas entre bisabuelos y bisnietos.

Conclusiones: los resultados de este estudio inicial sobre el rol de bisabuelidad podrían servirnos para mostrar su papel socializador complementario al resto de la red familiar que forman los roles de abuelidad y parentalidad. Su mayor conocimiento nos podría ayudar a mejorar y optimizar intervenciones de 4 generaciones.

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The study of human relationships faces new challenges, which include studying aging families and the diverse family forms caused by declining fertility, divorce, remarriage, non-marital childbearing and grandparent-headed households (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010), as well as the role of great-grandparents.

Even though women are increasingly choosing to become mothers later in life, Wachter (2003) estimates that by 2030, some 70% of all individuals aged 80 or older will be great-grandparents. Matthews & Sun (2006) found that 32% of families in the United States have four generations or more, with an over-representation of African American families and those with a low socioeconomic level.

Given this increased presence of the fourth generation, and its contact with the first generation of great-grandchildren, it is worth considering whether the type of relationship or role held by these great-grandparents is a continuation of the role they held when they were grandparents or not. The roles and typologies of grandparenthood since Neugarten & Weinstein's pioneer and referential work in 1964 (*Formal, Fun Seeker, Subrogate Parent, Reservoir of Family Wisdom, and Distant Figure*) in changing family contexts have been well-studied (Bordone, Arpino, & Aassve, 2017; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986; Kivnick, 1983; Rico, Serra, & Viguer, 2001; Robertson, 1977; Roberto & Stroes, 1992; Timonen & Arber, 2012; Uhlenberg & Hammill, 1998). However, the role of great-grandparenthood has not; what is more, the few studies that exist often involve considerably fewer participants—we were not able to find any with a sample of more than 52 participants (Barer, 2001; Doka & Mertz, 1988; Drew & Silverstein, 2004; N'zi, Stevens, & Eybert, 2016; Reese & Murray, 1996; Wentowski, 1985), with the exception of one study carried out in Israel with a sample of 103 great-grandparents (Even-Zohar & Garby, 2016).

In studies specifically examining family roles, Drew & Silverstein (2004) studied the impact of the three intergenerational roles (great-grandparenthood, grandparenthood, and parenthood) on the psychological wellbeing of the great-grandparents, and concluded that the more distant the relationships, the lower the significance thereof, and the lower their positive effects on psychological wellbeing. Also, in the same study with the same participants, they found that those who are most satisfied with their role and have the highest self-esteem and least incidence of depression are the following, in this order: parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents.

Doka & Mertz (1988), in their study of 40 great-grandparents, defined two general roles or styles of great-grandparenthood: remote and close. A full 78% of those interviewed felt that their relationship with their great-grandchildren was remote or distant. In this style of relationship, great-grandparents had limited, ritualistic contact with their great-grandchildren; they would see or hear them only during family events and vacations, and they were much more enthusiastic discussing their experiences as grandparents than as great-grandparents. On the other hand, the rest of the sample stated that they had a close relationship with their great-grandchildren: they saw them at least once a month, spoke with them at least once a week, and often cared for them, took them out for visits or shopping trips, and joined them in their leisure or sporting activities (and in many cases, these great-grandparents even kept toys or games in their house for when the great-grandchildren came to visit).

Wentowski (1985) also studied the perception of the great-grandparent's role with 19 great-grandmothers. Here, the focus was on the social, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of this role, on how these dimensions influenced

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