

## *Original Paper*

# Ageing Society and Advanced Demographic Transition New Developments in the Concept of Grandparenthood

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### **Abstract**

*This paper tries to review some of the changes that the family group is suffering revising the concept of "home", "stepfamilies"; "parenthood", "grandchildren" and the new roles that "grandparents" are taking in facing these transformations.*

*The most relevant result indicates that these new roles of ageing people are essentially importance to understand some of the peculiarities of contemporary families, pointing out how they correlate with demographic trends that world goes through.*

### **Keywords**

*family, ageing, relationships, grandparents, grandsons.*

### **Introduction: Rethinking the demographic transition**

It should be noted that the concept of 'demographic transition' deserves careful consideration, as it combines and brings together highly heterogeneous social and cultural factors. Its complexity is reflected in the fact that two different processes are currently considered within the so-called demographic transition (Lesthaeghe, 1986).

The central components of the first demographic transition are the downward trend in fertility rates and the increase in mortality rates, while the second transition accounts for profound changes in marriage patterns, new forms of family structures and, in general, a questioning of traditional roles between men and women. These situations are accompanied by: an increase in singlehood; delayed marriage; postponement of the birth of the first child; expansion of consensual unions; expansion of births outside marriage; an increase in marital breakdowns; a crucial resizing of gender issues and diversification of family structures, which in turn is related to an increase in matrifocal, single-parent and single-person families (Lesthaeghe, 1986).

Single-parent families—mostly headed by women—and single-person households necessarily imply the creation of new forms of motherhood and fatherhood and, even more structurally, femininity and masculinity. This in turn leads to new forms of relationships and identities that have not yet been

sufficiently studied.

Hence, Van de Kaa's observation (1980, 1987) is understandable, in the sense that the second demographic transition implies a re-evaluation by men and women of the opportunity 'costs' of marriage and parenthood.

Thus, it can be said that we are facing not only factors that are changing population growth and the role of marriage in social and private life, but also new and different forms of family constitution and how social and emotional bonds are becoming more prominent, which until a couple of years ago were marginal or not taken into account.

In addition, there is already talk of a third demographic transition with an increasingly sustained increase in the centenarian population and a drastic decrease in the population replacement rate, accentuating the trend towards population changes and new family arrangements that were, to a certain extent, unprecedented and unpredictable. In this sense, demography itself is also a science in transition, reporting on processes and changes in attitudes, norms and individual and family trends that ultimately go beyond the field of demography, requiring an interdisciplinary approach (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

It is possible to highlight how demographic and population situations are interrelated with processes of deepening individual motivations, together with the need to increasingly emphasise personal autonomy and the search for personal fulfilment and happiness, which in turn leads to profound changes in how couples and families are formed and in the way we conceive of the passage of life and the constitution of personal history. This partly points to a deepening of emancipatory and critical elements that were already present in the characterisation of the individual, since the very constitution of modern society (Klein, 2022).

This deepening is in turn related to new ways of approaching the processes of generational transmission, of focusing on the issue of inheritance and how the figure of the heir is or is not constituted, which are undergoing a profound review that entails the difficulty of accepting the experience of one's ancestors as valid or adapting it to current cultural circumstances, which we will develop as a probable new version of the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren (Klein, 2024).

### **The ageing society**

It is important to note that population changes are accompanied by similar changes throughout the world. Thus, during the 20th and 21st centuries, the world's population is undergoing significant social, economic, demographic, political and cultural transformations. One of the most important changes has been the full and accelerated demographic transition that the world is undergoing, with a gradual decline in mortality, which was accentuated in the mid-1970s by a decline in fertility. These variations have led to profound changes in the age structure of the population, with the relative number of older people gradually increasing and the number of children tending to decrease (CEPAL, 2019).

It is expected that around 2020, the older adult population will reach its maximum growth rate (4.2%), with 14 million individuals, representing 12.1% of the population. From that year onwards, the growth rate of

this population group would begin to decline, leading to a population loss (negative growth) in 2050 (1.58%), when there will be around 34 million older adults (27.7% of the total population) (Lever & Wilson, 2005). For instance, from now until 2050, the population aged 60 and over in Latin America will increase from 63% to 79% of the total older adult population. Likewise, by 2050, the population aged 80 and over will increase from 48% to 69% of the total older adult population (CEPAL, 2019). The population aged 60 and over in Latin America currently represents 14.2% of the total population, and is expected to reach 24.9% by 2050, representing an increase of 10.7% in just a quarter of a century. The 80-year-old group will increase from 1.9% to 5% during this same period (CEPAL, 2024).

Thus, we can observe a change in the so-called ‘population pyramid’ if we take the period from 1976 to projections for 2050, with an increasingly narrow population base and a gradual widening of the top of the pyramid (CEPAL, 2024).

But in fact, the ageing of the population is accelerating all over the world. The ageing index all over the world is superlative: 24.6 adults over the age of 60 for every 100 children under the age of 15 in 2000. Currently, in 2024, it is 62.7 per 100 children under 15. By 2050, these figures are expected to have reversed significantly, with 150 per 100 children under 15 (CEPAL, 2024).

Thus, by 2050, 21.8% of the world’s population will be older adults (ONU, 2008). In the countries of the Northern Hemisphere, by 2050, the 60-year-old population will increase from 667 million to 2008 million people, while the 80-year-old population will increase from 87 million to 395 million people (ONU, 2008, 2018, 2019).

This transition also implies a change in the correlation between the child and older adult populations. In 2050, in the more developed areas, the proportion of children will be 15.4% compared to 32.6% of older adults. In less developed regions, in 2050 the proportion of older adults will be 20.2% and that of children 20.3% (ONU, 2018, 2019).

On the other hand, it is important to note that, in stark contrast to their demographic and population relevance, all the data available on the social and cultural situation of older adults in Latin America indicate a lack of concern and social weakness with marked signs of violence, neglect and vulnerability that cannot fail to attract attention (ONU, 2018).

This structural poverty is compounded by the fact that less than half of urban older adults receive social protection coverage. This situation of extreme vulnerability is further exacerbated in rural areas. In a few countries—Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Chile and Uruguay— social protection covers more than 50% of older adults. In contrast, in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, the Dominican Republic and Venezuela, it covers less than 25% of the older adult population (ONU, 2008).

Plagued by chronic illiteracy, structural poverty, and vulnerability to social protection, these urban older adults are forced to work in precarious and unprotected situations. Their wages are lower than average, and they receive no social benefits. It is estimated that more than 30% of Latin American older adults are in the labour market, once again referring to a cycle of poverty and discrimination that is perverse and extremely hostile (ONU, 2019).

This highlights the pre-eminence in Latin America of ambiguous realities with strong contradictions between legal norms and social situations. Unlike the case of England, where the evolution of citizenship followed a “unitary” path between the formal and the substantive, in the sense that the reality of rights — formal and substantive — is one and the same; and where rights — civil, political and social — involved corresponding institutions — courts, parliaments and health agencies — that are effective; in Latin America, democratisation and citizenship are not unitary, and generally involve the formal recognition of rights that are systematically flouted in reality (Klein, 2022).

Nevertheless, at the same time, there are signs of unprecedented identity renewal as well as significant generational changes, which are also affecting the indigenous peoples of Mexico (Carcaño, 2008).

### **Multi-generational families**

Interest in the study of multi-generational families is related to the increasingly widespread and novel phenomenon of grandparents taking on the education and care of their grandchildren, often acting as substitutes or replacements for parental figures. This implies a change in the role of grandparents, as well as new ways of constructing subjectivity in children and adolescents (Bengtson, 2001).

The ‘nuclear family’ model is associated with a family structure with complementary activities, with differentiated male and female identities, and the presence of both parents in the home, sharing responsibility for the children's education until they reach legal age. However, it is impossible to deny the consolidation of a variety of new family structures as reconstituted families, recombined families, ethnic minority families, single-parent families, or others (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001).

Thus, there are several complex and rapid political, economic, and social transformations that coincide with significant changes in the lives of families and their members. In some families, there is a tendency not to assume parental roles, which could be described as a ‘structure of overwhelmed parents’ in relation to a social and cultural situation that substantially modifies parents' ability to provide care and education (Klein, 2024).

In other cases, a high rate of paternal and maternal absence is verified by abandonment of the home or entry into the labour market. All these social, economic and cultural situations mean that grandparents provide support not only to their children but also to their grandchildren. These grandparents often act as ‘heads of the family’ (Sands et al, 2005; Widmer, 1999; 2004; 2006).

This demand for help from grandparents also occurs even if they do not live permanently with the family. This greater longevity has led to longer cohabitation between grandparents and grandchildren. The role of older people is changing. Older adults are shifting from being passive individuals who need care and protection to being active members of the family who provide protection and care (Feres-Carneiro, 2005; Smith et al, 2004; Cox, 2000).

These social and family changes imply a profound change in the role of grandparents. More and more children and adolescents are being raised by their grandparents, a situation that is considered essential for their development. So, across generations, children find their grandparents to be the most stable presence

in their lives (Fisher, 1983; Rodgers & Jones, 1999; Ehrle & Day, 1994; Wilton et al., 2006).

Neugarten & Weinstein (1964) indicate that grandparents sometimes act as surrogate parents, and according to Bartram et al (1995), data from the United States indicate that grandparents are increasingly taking on the full care of their grandchildren.

These elements suggest that a fundamental generational transmission relationship is being consolidated between grandparents and their grandchildren. At the same time, it is necessary to remember that, in some cases, grandparent care is an option to avoid the institutionalisation of young people in trouble with the law (Eisenberg, 1988; Platt Jendrek, 1994).

Several studies also point out that this generational transmission may be related to various behavioural, health and family difficulties (Minkler et al, 1997). Minkler (1999) concludes in his research that many grandparents feel frustrated and disoriented, unable to make decisions about the behavioural problems and legal offences of their teenage grandchildren. Further research carried out by Kelch-Oliver (2008) provides insight into the relationship between the types of education provided by grandparents and their grandchildren's behavioural problems at school.

Thus, both in Latin America and Europe, there has been a growing recognition of the increasing importance of grandparents. Research, however, has focused on grandmothers. There has been much less emphasis on the roles and relationships of grandfathers. In the United Kingdom, there has been growing recognition of the increasing importance of grandfathers (Bert et al, 2017; Minkler & Fuller-Thompson, 2005).

This is partly explained by the acceptance of a more limited bonding and emotional contribution from grandfathers compared to grandmothers. However, research suggests, first, that this perception may be false, due to the emphasis placed on caring for grandchildren as a dominant role of grandparenting, in relation to the subsequent neglect of other interactions as role models. Secondly, the demographics of intergenerational families mean that we now have a large cohort of younger, more active grandparents whose roles and intergenerational relationships are likely to be significantly different from their predecessors (Furstenberg, 1990; Goodsell, 2011).

The current profile of this cohort is characterised by healthy individuals who are active in the labour market, also prone to physical exercise and early retirement. In fact, the cohort of grandparents in their 50s and early 60s is the first to have been actively involved in the birth of their children and grandchildren. This provides a key opportunity to examine the contrast between a more traditional cohort and a more modern one (Wilcoxon, 1987).

As Hoff (2007) has pointed out, grandfather is synonymous with grandmother in much research and seems to be tacitly accepted rather than questioned. Some researchers have suggested that grandmothers tend to have a warmer relationship and are more involved with their grandchildren than grandfathers.

Others have emphasised that grandmothers are more likely to have frequent contact, and therefore presumably more emotional involvement with their grandchildren than grandfathers. As a result, the specific role of grandfathers has been overlooked. Even when caregiving is not taken into account, grandmothers tend to have more influence in almost all relevant domains of their grandchildren's lives, with

whom they also have stronger relationships (Uhlenberg, 1998; 2005).

British research has followed the trends in the United States in emphasising the importance of grandmothers. Thus, Thompson et al (2015) points out that being a grandparent is a particularly desirable status for grandmothers. Likewise, there is now limited evidence from the US indicating that grandfathers are playing a more central role than previously identified.

It has also been assumed that men become more affectionate as they age. Similarly, the need to consider grandparents as important resources for teenage mothers raising their children has been highlighted (Kelley, 1993).

### **Grandparents and the significant change in their role**

However, we note that some of the research mentioned above essentially emphasises pathological situations, social deficits and communication problems. Without disregarding the value of these references, it is necessary to point out that they focus on the presence and role of grandparents not in the context of changing family configurations, but in dramatic situations within the family environment (Chapman, 2016; Dowdell, 2004; Musil, 1998).

Our perspective is different: grandparents do not appear solely to remedy a pathology (whatever it may be) but in correlation with the change in new family configurations. They do not come only to “compensate” for what parents can no longer offer, but to inaugurate a new place of exchange and relationships in emerging family configurations. In one way or another, when grandparents take responsibility for the well-being of their grandchildren, they do not change the family structure, but rather the family structure is already there, in a highly experimental stage of bonding (Fitzgerald, 2001).

At the same time, many adolescents seem to relate to their grandparents in a way that was reserved for the bond with their parents in the past. There seems to be a projection of the need for care, protection, dialogue and confrontation with these grandparents, who are in turn prepared to carry on this type of bond from a perspective of renewal and change in what it means to be old. Today's grandparents (for the most part) do not want to be grandparents or old people according to the models inherited from their own parents or grandparents (Goodman & Silverstein, 2006).

Little is yet known about the impact of the education given by grandparents to their grandchildren, even less so when these grandchildren become adolescents, and the quality of the bond between them, compared to other family bonds and other adults responsible for their education (Baldock, 2007).

There are undoubtedly two new phenomena. One is that more and more young people are likely to have (and enjoy) all four grandparents alive and in good physical and mental health. This is accompanied by a correlation with more and more people having only one sibling or no siblings at all. In other words, one phenomenon that could be included in the so-called demographic transition is that of many grandparents and few siblings. Today's grandchildren face family changes or often absent parents, but they have the possibility of receiving more attention from their grandparents (Levin & Trost, 1992).

These grandparents no longer simply “pass on” knowledge but also seek new ways of life with their

grandchildren, exploring new qualities of life (Vidal & Menzinger, 2005). There is an effect of symmetrisation and a similar or equal starting point when it comes to exploring life. Grandchildren explore how to become adults, grandparents explore how to leave behind that model of old age in the order of decrepitude with which they no longer identify. Both seek something in the order of renewal and change, and in that sense, there is an alliance of joint growth and change (Moorman et al, 2014).

### Conclusions

Gradually, it seems that the home is changing from being the domestic, economic and emotional unit par excellence to becoming just one family reference point among others. In this way, the family is changing from a solid, secure and predictable expert system to one of change, transformation and uncertainty (Goldberg-Glen et al, 1998).

The supposed 'old' family: caring, nuclear, paternal, is contrasted with the 'modern' family: in crisis, with an absent father and various shortcomings, where the family begins to transform itself, redesigning and repositioning itself, not only socially but also internally, redefining roles, bonds and alliance strategies (Wood, 1985).

This redefinition seems to give rise to generational fractures that make it difficult to transmit what should be transmitted, 'breaking' the need for continuity and fidelity to values related to inheritance and what is socially inheritable. Grandparents are bursting onto the scene with new demands and, in turn, as new emerging figures in the bond they maintain with their grandchildren, as well as in the bond they maintain with changing family configurations (Cox, 2000).

If the category of family has become precarious, the need to be cared for remains clearly present. Grandparents, this new class of grandparents, go from being cared for to being caregivers. The literature consulted indicates that sometimes they do so by choice, other times by imposition (Uhlenberg, 2005), but either way, they must guarantee this care and this need to guarantee new bonds, first to their grandchildren and secondly, perhaps, to the whole family (Adams, 1999)

There is probably no single type of grandparent or type of ageing today, but rather several. In any case, there is not yet sufficient evidence to homogenise types and forms of ageing. Future research may delve deeper into differences between urban and rural areas, socio-economic groups, ethnicities, and others. But in any case, one line of inquiry suggests that a new notion of 'older adult' is being constructed, and that is why we are witnessing a different version of old age (Szinovacz, 1998).

These post-adults (to call them tentatively) seem to maintain, from this new identity, unprecedented relationships with their grandchildren, inaugurating new generational and family processes whose future can only be a question mark.

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