



Exploring the lived experiences of grandparents as primary caregivers to their grandchildren: a phenomenological study

Explorer les expériences vécues par les grands-parents en tant qu'aidants principaux de leurs petits-enfants : une étude phénoménologique

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ABSTRACT

The normalization of grandparents raising their grandchildren has become increasingly common in the Philippines. This situation often leads grandparents to assume responsibilities for their grandchildren at the expense of their wellbeing. This study aims to investigate the lived experiences of grandparents in this role. Additionally, this research seeks to explore their struggles, feelings, and motivations throughout the process. This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach. Eight participants were involved in an in-depth interview, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed several key themes: assuming a parental role as a major struggle, experiencing deprivation as a common feeling, and fostering guidance as a key motivation for raising their grandchildren. Raising a child at a later age, a time considered more vulnerable can negatively impact the holistic health of grandparents. However, it can also positively influence them by fostering a sense of guidance for their grandchildren throughout their life journey.

Keywords: Grandparents, Grandchildren, Qualitative Research, Phenomenology, Philippines.

Article originality and practical implications: This article offers an original approach to address an issue present in contemporary societies with an aging population. In addition to the understanding of the phenomenon, the article can help family decision makers to execute actions aimed at the mentioned population.

RÉSUMÉ

La normalisation des grands-parents élevant leurs petits-enfants est devenue de plus en plus courante aux Philippines. Cette situation conduit souvent les grands-parents à assumer des responsabilités à l'égard de leurs petits-enfants au détriment de leur bien-être. Cette étude a pour but d'examiner les expériences vécues par les grands-parents dans ce rôle. En outre, elle cherche à explorer leurs luttes, leurs sentiments et leurs motivations tout au long du processus. Cette étude a utilisé un modèle de recherche qualitatif, en particulier une approche phénoménologique. Huit participants ont été impliqués dans un entretien approfondi et les données ont été analysées à l'aide d'une analyse thématique. Les résultats ont révélé plusieurs thèmes clés : le fait d'assumer un rôle parental a été un défi majeur, le sentiment de privation est commun et la guidance est une motivation clé pour élever leurs petits-enfants. Élever un enfant à un âge avancé, à un moment considéré comme plus vulnérable, peut avoir un impact négatif sur la santé holistique des grands-parents. Cependant, cela peut également avoir une influence positive sur eux en favorisant un sentiment d'orientation pour leurs petits-enfants tout au long de leur parcours de vie.

Mots clés : Grands-parents, petits-enfants, recherche qualitative, phénoménologie, Philippines.

Originalité de l'article et implications pratiques : Cet article propose une approche originale pour aborder un problème présent dans les sociétés contemporaines avec des populations âgées. Outre la compréhension du phénomène, l'article peut aider les décideurs familiaux à mettre en œuvre des actions destinées à la population mentionnée.

INTRODUCTION

Everyone will inevitably experience old age when an individual should prioritize their holistic health and overall wellbeing. According to world demographics, approximately 4.5 million or 9.8 per cent of households globally are headed by grandparents who are the sole caregivers to their grandchildren, reflecting broader social and economic changes such as higher life expectancies and increasing parental involvement in the workforce. These households, categorized as split-generation, often arise due to financial constraints, parental illness, or the migration of young parents for work, leaving their children in the care of grandparents. In the context of Filipino family culture, this phenomenon has become normalized and has not received much attention, fitting into a more significant trend in Filipino society that values familial interdependence and collective responsibility across generations. Common traits of Filipino grandparents include hospitality and caring nature to the extent that they often voluntarily assume the duties typically fulfilled by biological parents to maintain the family's foundation. This caregiving role, while culturally esteemed, is also a significant source of emotional and physical strain, particularly as it coincides with their aging process. Grandparents, often admired for their understanding, empathy, and care, become the primary caregivers for their grandchildren. Though these qualities are admirable, the responsibilities can profoundly impact their health and financial status, often limiting their ability to self-care and pursue personal interests.

In Chiang Rai Province, Thailand, grandparents are raising their grandchildren due to the biological parents' lack of parenting skills. These grandparents often face stress and challenges, resulting in adverse health effects, emotional outcomes, and perceptions that they are merely servants to the children (Salisa et al., 2024). Such circumstances increase the burden on the elderly, who must balance their health needs with childcare demands. In the United States, the overall wellbeing of grandparents caring for their grandchildren is commonly associated with depressive symptoms, caregiver stress, and emotional strain (Choi et al., 2016). This caregiving role, though fulfilling, can lead to significant physical and emotional exhaustion, impacting the grandparents' ability to maintain their health and wellbeing.

Many grandparents in Cebu City, Philippines, take care of their grandchildren and often feel overwhelmed due to the extra responsibilities and lack of support (Sadang, 2021). Various issues such as money problems, family conflicts, personal choices, and duty lead to grandparents stepping into this role. Despite the challenges, most of these elderly caregivers see looking after their grandchildren as a rewarding part of life, even with the financial difficulties it involves (Dadang, 2019). Along with the emotional and physical stress, grandparents find meaning and motivation in caring for their grandchildren. They feel a sense of purpose and happiness from helping raise and look after the younger generation. Additionally, looking after grandchildren means more work and emotional demands for these grandparents, forcing them to manage their health needs while caring for their children's needs. This role adds more tasks to their daily lives and brings them closer to their families, showing the mixed challenges and joys of being a grandparent (Villafuerte, 2020). These experiences highlight the complicated but fulfilling journey of grandparents who take on the role of caregivers. A documentary by Matubang (2019) in Davao City showed that these grandparents are seeking help because they get little support from the children's parents. Additionally, these grandparents face significant challenges due to poverty, which makes it difficult for them to provide for their grandchildren. This situation puts a heavy strain on their financial and emotional wellbeing.

Numerous studies have explored why grandparents often assume the responsibility of raising their grandchildren, citing the parents' lack of parenting skills, financial instability, and family breakdown. However, fewer studies have examined other significant factors, such as children having parents who work overseas, deceased parents, parents with disabilities, and parents whose jobs require daily attendance. This study addresses this gap by investigating these less-explored reasons, providing a broader understanding of the dynamics within these family arrangements. Through this research, we seek to contribute valuable insights to the field and offer better support to families in similar situations.

The findings of this study contributed to grandchildren. This study encouraged them to value their grandparents as their primary caregivers. It showed the challenges and experiences of grandparents in taking on a parenting role again, leading to an understanding of their situation. Also, it led social workers to provide assistance and services for the needs of grandparents. Educators gained insights from the findings of this study in understanding the needs of children in these family structures, allowing for more support in schools. This study could also have benefited policymakers in developing policies to help grandparents in their situation. Lastly, this study contributed to future research on grandparents raising grandchildren.

METHODS

The methodology section acted as a guidebook, explaining step-by-step how the study was conducted. Detailing the design, population, sampling methods, research instrument, analysis, and interpretation helped ensure the research was transparent and reliable.

Research Design

Various grandparents from different backgrounds were gathered using purposive sampling and phenomenological qualitative approaches. This approach improved the study's findings by providing a detailed look at their experiences (Yaghmaei et al., 2020). This method aimed to fully understand the challenges these grandparents face while raising their grandchildren, which has implications for academic research and practical support services. Using this method, the study linked detailed personal stories with broader data, offering a comprehensive view of the impact of grandparents raising grandchildren. The careful planning and detailed methodology ensured that the study's findings were solid and added valuable insights.

Research Participants

Eight selected participants reside in Santa Cruz, Davao del Sur, in this study. Purposive sampling was utilized to select the participants based on specific criteria: a.) aged 45-60 years old with grandchildren currently enrolled in Santa Cruz National High School, b.) at least 5-10 years of experience in taking care of their grandchildren, and c.) minimal to no support from the biological parents of the grandchildren. Consent forms were distributed to the participants, ensuring their identities remained confidential throughout the study.

Instrument and Analysis

The researchers collected data by conducting in-depth interviews with the participants. They explained the study's primary goal and the importance of the participants' participation. Each participant's interview lasted only one hour. After gathering the data, the responses were analyzed using a method called thematic analysis. The thematic analysis finds, examines, and interprets themes or patterns of meaning in qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Struggles of Grandparents Raising Their Grandchildren

In the Philippines, approximately 1.8 million children have been abandoned. The predominant reasons for such abandonment include parental neglect, substance abuse by parents, and the death of parents (Kaiman & De Leon, 2016). Our survey revealed that 97 per cent of the grandparents had grandchildren, with 56 per cent actively engaged in their care. Additionally, 35 per cent of these grandparents found themselves solely responsible for their grandchildren's upbringing (David, 2014). The data, analyzed using the thematic method, highlighted a single pervasive theme: Parental Role Assumption, which underscores grandparents' struggles in raising their grandchildren.

Parental Role Assumption. During interviews, grandparents consistently expressed difficulties assuming parental roles. These struggles primarily stem from the biological parents' abandonment of their children. For instance, one grandparent shared, "Yes, because that is my daughter's child back when she was younger; that is why I took care of the child" (Chie, Page 1, Line 10). Another remarked, "I experienced difficulties and sicknesses, but I still nursed them despite that" (Sabel, Page 2, Line 34). There are myriad reasons why grandparents end up caring for their grandchildren. Many Filipino children live with grandparents or relatives while their parents seek employment overseas (Asis, 2006). Moreover, the assumption of parental roles by grandparents can lead to adverse personal outcomes, including deteriorations in both physical and mental health (Miltenberger et al., 2004). Additionally, the lack of support from biological parents often leaves grandparents struggling to manage even minor health issues in their grandchildren, such as sickness or hospital stays (Buchanan & Rotkirch, 2018).

Feelings of Grandparents Raising Their Grandchildren

Mental wellness encompasses a stable mind, balanced emotions, unimpaired judgment, and sound reasoning, free from generalized anxiety and depression (Gamble et al., 2012). Upon raising their grandchildren, grandparents felt obligated and burdened by some responsibilities, which damaged their mental wellness. In this study, one theme emerged that could describe the feelings of grandparents raising their grandchildren: deprivation.

Deprivation. Parvan (2014) defined deprivation as suffering resulting from the actions of others. We asked the participants to describe their feelings about assuming responsibilities for their grandchildren. The grandparents reported feeling forced to take on parental roles for their grandchildren. Their responses included both acceptance of and obligation about their roles. Some of their statements included: "Because they were left to me by their parents, it was also okay for me to take care of them" (Sita, Page 1, Line 22) and "I had to endure it, I acted like a martyr for that and scolded them, took care of them as I stayed in the house to care for them" (Sabel, Page 2, Line 36). Assuming the responsibility of raising a grandchild evoked conflicting emotions, as the grandparents experienced heightened anxiety and pressure alongside extreme obligations towards their grandchildren (Sexena, 2016). However, while the grandparents felt burdened and, at times, resented their new roles, they

also recognized that parenting at a later stage in life presents multiple challenges and leads them to feelings of deprivation (Abolarin, 2020).

Motivations of Grandparents Raising Their Grandchildren

Motivations were the driving forces behind human actions, compelling individuals to pursue their goals persistently. These motivations were derived from external and internal factors, such as those around us, who infused positive energy into our struggles and fostered valuable events. Motivation reflected something unique about each individual and allowed them to achieve valued outcomes like improved performance, enhanced wellbeing, personal growth, or a sense of purpose. Motivation is a pathway that changes our ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving (Souders, 2019). Fostering empowerment and resilience has become paramount in understanding the parenting quality of custodial grandparents (Hayslip et al., 2017). Similarly, the development and efficacy of interventions to positively impact the parenting and psychosocial functioning of grandparent caregivers and their grandchildren had emerged as an area of emphasis. In this study, we identified one theme: fostering guidance as the reason behind the motivation of grandparents raising their grandchildren.

Fostering Guidance. As we conducted in-depth interviews, the participants' responses primarily centred around the betterment of their grandchildren. Foster care was sometimes seen as the only and best option, a choice few grandparents willingly chose (Pinderhughes et al., 2007). The participants were motivated by providing daily guidance to their grandchildren, creating factors that would enlighten their grandchildren's potential for a promising future and character development. "I wanted to continue taking care of them because I had to; I wanted them to grow up well and have a good future," one grandparent stated (Sabel, Page 2, Line 38). Grandparents positively influenced the grandchildren they were raising in many ways. Serving as parental figures, grandparents acted as role models, provided their grandchildren with nurturance, love, and support, and communicated with their grandchildren about the direction of their lives, the child's feelings about their parents, and relationships with age peers (Dolbin-MacNab et al., 2009). They also disciplined their grandchildren, tended to their physical health and safety, and represented the outside world in discussions on culture and contemporary life (Hayslip et al., 2017). Grandparents needed to consider their responsibilities to achieve good outcomes, such as providing for their needs, giving moral lectures to enlighten their mindsets about the importance of good character, and offering the love and support necessary for their upbringing. Custodial grandparents reported feeling disconnected from their age peers, facing a range of physical and emotional difficulties related to caregiving, feeling stigmatized by the stigma of being a grandparent and feeling judged by others despite their significant role in their grandchildren's lives and the satisfaction that comes with guiding and protecting a vulnerable child (Hayslip et al., 2015). "You have to take care of them because they are your grandchildren, helping them eat and drink milk until they grow up. However, she died, she was already in her 2nd year, very prone to sickness," another grandparent recounted (Lilie, Page 2, Line 36).

Overall, both participants provided obvious and comprehensive statements about their motivations. Their motivations were focused on their grandchildren's betterment in their day-to-day lives and for the future. Both assumed parental roles and overlooked challenging factors to provide an everyday life for their grandchildren.

CONCLUSIONS

The primary focus of this exploratory research was to emphasize the struggles, feelings, and motivations of grandparents who take on the responsibility of raising their grandchildren. The findings revealed that these grandparents encountered significant struggles upon assuming parental roles and experienced feelings of deprivation. Furthermore, one of their key motivations was to guide their grandchildren, feeling a solid duty to prepare them for the future. This research highlighted that grandparents were driven by a calling to support their grandchildren's development. The results also suggested that this role might grant the grandchildren a heightened awareness of their custodial grandparents' experiences. It is crucial to acknowledge that raising a child at an older age, which is often considered a period of vulnerability, can have negative impacts on the grandparents' holistic health. However, it also has the potential to positively affect them by deepening the emotional bonds and fostering a mutual sense of guidance and support throughout their life journey, underscoring the complexity of the grandparents' experiences and the profound influence they have on their grandchildren's lives.

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