The Family as a Source of Support: How Do Grandparents of Today Take Care of Their Grandchildren?

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The changing social and economic context of western European welfare states

More and more mothers and grandmothers are now being employed while multigenerational households represent the exception rather than the rule. Furthermore, due to their longer life expectancy, many older adults are now able to become involved in the care and supervision of their grandchildren. In the course of individualization, grandparental roles have also changed. Against this backdrop, an empirical study of how grandparents of today take care of their grandchildren is overdue.

The case of western Germany

Childcare provided by family members is particularly important in the western German context with its low average number of daycare facilities. Despite a national initiative towards building more day nurseries for the under–threes, demand still massively outweighs the available number of places (41.7% vs. 32.5%).

Theory and hypotheses

Luo et al. provide a heterogeneous picture of how grandparents of today care for their grandchildren in the USA. A majority of 66% of non co–resident grandparents provide less than 50 hours of care a year and only 5% care for their grandchildren for 10 or more hours a week. Still, social policies typically assume that grandparental support is comparably high and extensive regardless of their social position or their place of residence. In my analysis, I examine why grandparental support varies and distinguish between three areas as determinants of the extent of grandparents' caregiving.

First, how do opportunities for grandparents to be involved in a grandchild's care determine the extent of their support? I assume that the likelihood of actually providing care is higher when grandparents live close to the grandchild, are healthy, and are unemployed than when they live far away, are ill or employed full–time. If they have additional grandchildren, they may only be able to provide limited support to each child. Therefore, the likelihood of grandparental support decreases with the number of grandchildren.

Second, the needs and preferences of parents matter for grandparents' involvement in the supervision of their grandchildren. If parents work long and irregular weekly hours, then it is more likely for grandparents to take care of their grandchildren. Yet, if parents have a high net income, they can afford extra–familial supervision, thus lowering the likelihood of grandparent involvement. Parental age is a further determinant: very young parents are more likely to need support in childcare than older parents. Parental preferences also play a role in grandparent involvement. If parents adhere to a conservative view of the family, they are likely to prefer grandparent involvement over extra–familial care, therefore increasing the likelihood of grandparents providing childcare.

Third, the willingness of grandparents to take care of their grandchildren and thus the extent of their support depends on cultural norms. If grandparents adhere to a conservative view of the family, they are likely to be more willing to provide intra–familial care. As women are often the main recipients but also main providers of support, I expect that grandmothers are more likely than grandfathers to provide care for a grandchild.
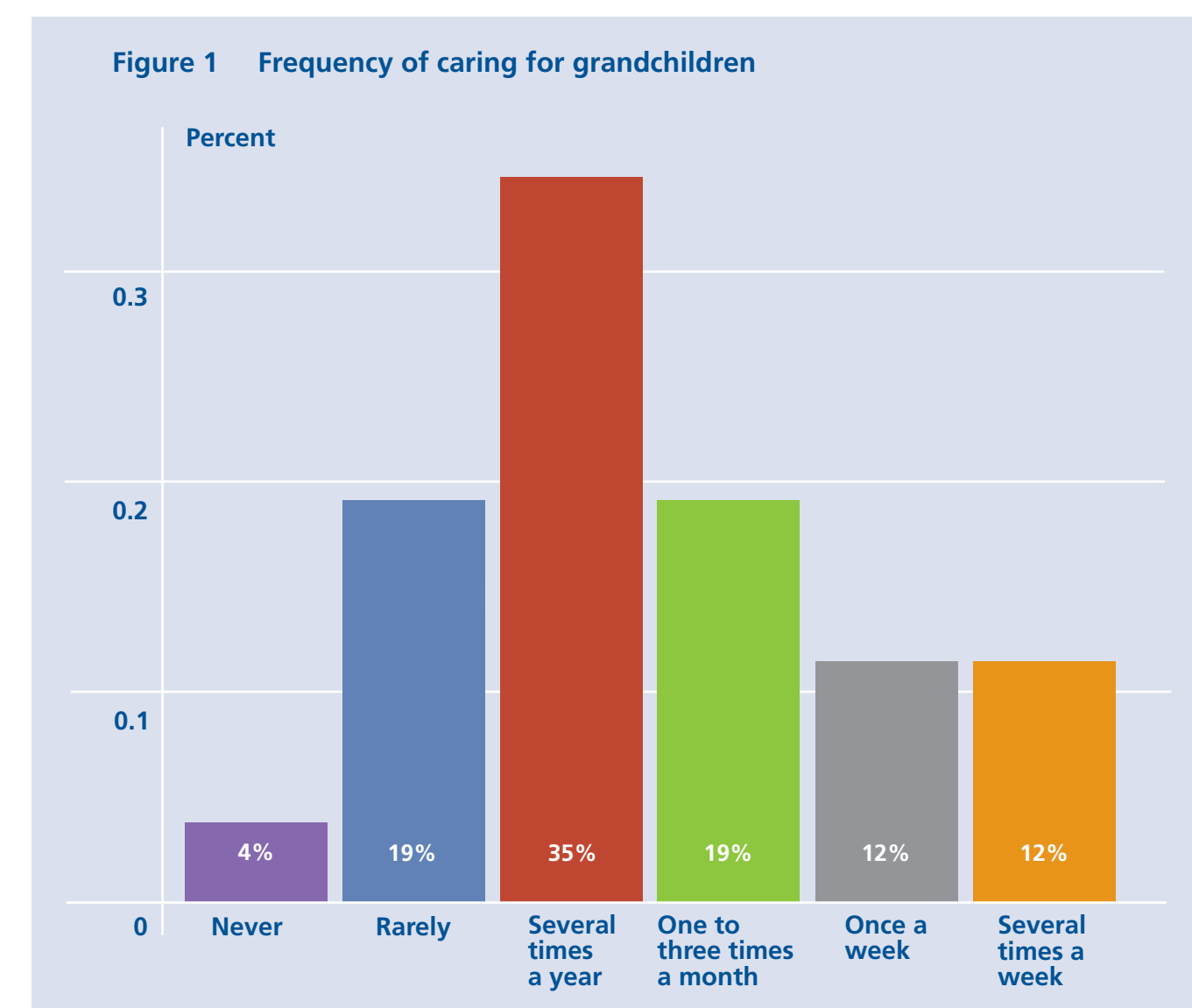
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Data

Analyses are based on data from the first five waves of the German Family Panel (pairfam), release 5.0.[1] I constructed a dyadic multi–actor dataset by merging anchor data from waves 1, 2, 4, and 5 and parent data from wave 5. The dataset contains 440 dyads. The respondents all belong to the native population of western Germany. The 155 male and 285 female respondents have at least one child. Only one of both grandparents was interviewed: 179 of those were male while 261 were female. If a grandparent reported looking after grandchildren from more than one child, the pairfam dataset uses the focus–grandchild, i.e., the child for whom the greatest frequency of caregiving was reported.

Conditions for how often a grandparent took care of his/her grandchild during the past 12 months (Multinomial logistic regression, logits)

	Rarely	Several times a year	1 to 3 times a month	Once a week	Several times a week	Daily
Constant	−1.60***	−3.93***	−10.11***	−4.25***	2.94***	1.10***
Opportunity						
Proximity of grandmother's home (ref.: we live in the same house)						
less than 10 minutes	−1.41***	−6.08***	−2.32***	−1.26***	−3.22***	−0.84***
10–30 minutes	−3.06***	−15.83***	−4.40***	−2.30***	−5.56***	−2.77***
30–60 minutes	4.32***	−12.20***	−5.86***	−2.60***	−17.78***	−1.89***
1–3 hours	4.70***	−15.55***	−6.52***	−2.14***	−10.89***	−3.19***
more than 3 hours	−8.40***	−20.28***	−11.37***	−3.40***	−22.42***	−4.19***
Proximity of grandfather's household (ref.: less than 10 minutes)						
10–30 minutes	1.43***	1.92***	2.39***	0.51***	2.87***	1.57***
30–60 minutes	2.93***	8.90***	3.54***	1.16***	3.27***	0.98***
1–3 hours	3.40***	8.48***	3.97***	−0.10***	3.89***	1.56***
less than 3 hours	4.22***	12.22***	6.82***	1.56***	6.36***	2.78***
Housewife–husband (ref.: other)	1.87***	2.22***	3.07***	2.03***	3.71***	1.50***
Employed full–time (ref.: other)	−1.43***	−1.74***	−0.76***	−1.03***	−2.49***	−0.76***
Grandparental health status (ref.: bad)						
Feeling physically weak	0.45***	−2.46***	0.93***	−1.34***	5.55***	3.02***
Satisfying	1.09***	0.19***	2.34***	−0.36*	5.72***	3.51***
Good	0.85***	−0.51***	2.07***	−0.47**	5.22***	3.30***
Very good	1.32***	−1.45***	2.22***	0.12*	4.43***	3.33***
Grandparent's age	0.03	0.06	0.04	−0.10***	−0.05	−0.02
Grandparents' other grandchildren aged from						
0–3 years (ref.: none)	−0.16	2.05***	0.11	−0.22	−0.84***	−0.70***
6–7 years (ref.: none)	0.37*	−0.52***	0.74***	0.51***	0.62***	0.39***
8–10 years (ref.: none)	−0.14	−0.47***	−0.12	0.01	−0.61***	−0.16
11–15 years (ref.: none)	−1.00***	−4.48***	−1.54***	−0.24	−1.30***	−0.63***
Over 15 years (ref.: none)	−0.41**	−0.33***	−0.71***	−0.56**	−0.78***	−0.66***
Necessity and parental preferences						
Parental characteristics						
Age	0.05	0.11	0.06	0.06	0.08	−0.02
Parent's net income	0.00	0.00***	0.00***	0.00	0.00**	0.00
Weekly working hours	−0.01	0.00	−0.04*	−0.02	−0.03	−0.04**
Not frequently working after 7 p.m. (ref. freq. working after 7 p.m.)	−0.83***	−7.61***	−1.87***	−0.70***	−1.85***	−1.09***
Characteristics of grandchild: Age						
Age of grandchild	−0.05	−0.17	0.03	−0.05	−0.19**	0.00
Cultural norms of parents: Parents and children should support each other mutually (ref.: disagree completely)						
2	−10.73***	−12.10***	−14.00***	−7.01***	−2.47***	1.51***
3	3.24***	0.78***	0.79***	4.23***	−0.25***	2.41***
4	3.62***	3.49***	1.54***	4.80***	2.44***	3.38***
Agree completely	3.21***	3.07***	1.71***	4.51***	2.74***	3.15***
Cultural norms of parents: Women should be more concerned about their family than about their career (ref.: disagree completely)						
2	1.11***	−1.50***	2.65***	0.21	1.58***	−0.86***
3	1.26***	0.07***	2.42***	1.06***	1.89***	−0.06
4	2.89***	2.49***	4.73***	1.59***	2.81***	0.24***
I fully agree	0.37***	11.40***	14.01***	−6.08***	10.68***	9.16***
Cultural norms of parents: Men should participate in housework to the same extent as women (ref.: disagree a bit)						
3	−0.25**	3.12***	−0.21	−1.00***	−0.31***	−1.46***
4	1.01***	−1.00***	1.02***	1.06***	0.61***	0.40**
I fully agree	0.74***	−1.44***	−0.34***	−0.81***	−1.27***	−1.26***
Willingness						
Sex of grandparent (ref.: female)	0.82***	−0.22***	−0.76***	−1.57***	−1.82***	−0.82***
Cultural norms of grandparents: Parents and children should support each other mutually (ref.: disagree completely)						
2	5.61***	0.50***	10.20***	5.78***	5.04***	4.94***
3	−0.25**	0.42***	4.57***	3.50***	−1.85***	−0.58***
4	1.29***	−0.93***	4.00***	2.71***	−2.17***	−0.53***
I fully agree	0.69***	−0.15***	3.68***	3.83***	−1.90***	0.14
Cultural norms of grandparents: Women should be more concerned about their family than their career (ref: disagree completely)						
2	−0.19***	−3.73***	−0.74***	−0.36***	−1.29***	−1.54***
3	−1.93***	−2.19***	−1.29***	−1.55***	−2.05***	−0.57***
4	−0.96***	−9.45***	−1.80***	−1.27***	−2.28***	−1.00***
I fully agree	−2.87***	−2.47***	−3.28***	−2.04***	−2.93***	−1.37***
Cultural norms of grandparents: Men should participate in housework to the same extent as women (ref: disagree completely)						
2	−4.08***	−1.71***	−1.39***	3.91***	−1.76***	−0.26***
3	−2.30***	2.36***	−2.65***	4.54***	−0.88***	−0.26**
4	−3.11***	4.38***	−1.23***	5.28***	−0.34***	1.27***
I fully agree	−1.98***	1.90***	−0.52***	5.03***	0.18	1.26***
Cultural norms of grandparents: A child aged under 6 will suffer from having a working mother (ref: disagree completely)						
2	0.86***	3.73***	1.88***	1.46***	2.07***	−0.01
3	0.58***	−0.24***	1.93***	0.88***	1.87***	0.38**
4	1.92***	3.51***	3.52***	1.14***	3.06***	0.71***
I fully agree	2.08***	0.51***	3.50***	1.55***	3.03***	0.37***
AIC	1657.55	1657.55	1657.55	1657.55	1657.55	1657.55
BIC	3006.19	3006.19	3006.19	3006.19	3006.19	3006.19
Log likelihood	−498.78	−498.78	−498.78	−498.78	−498.78	−498.78
Deviance	997.55	997.55	997.55	997.55	997.55	997.55

*** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05
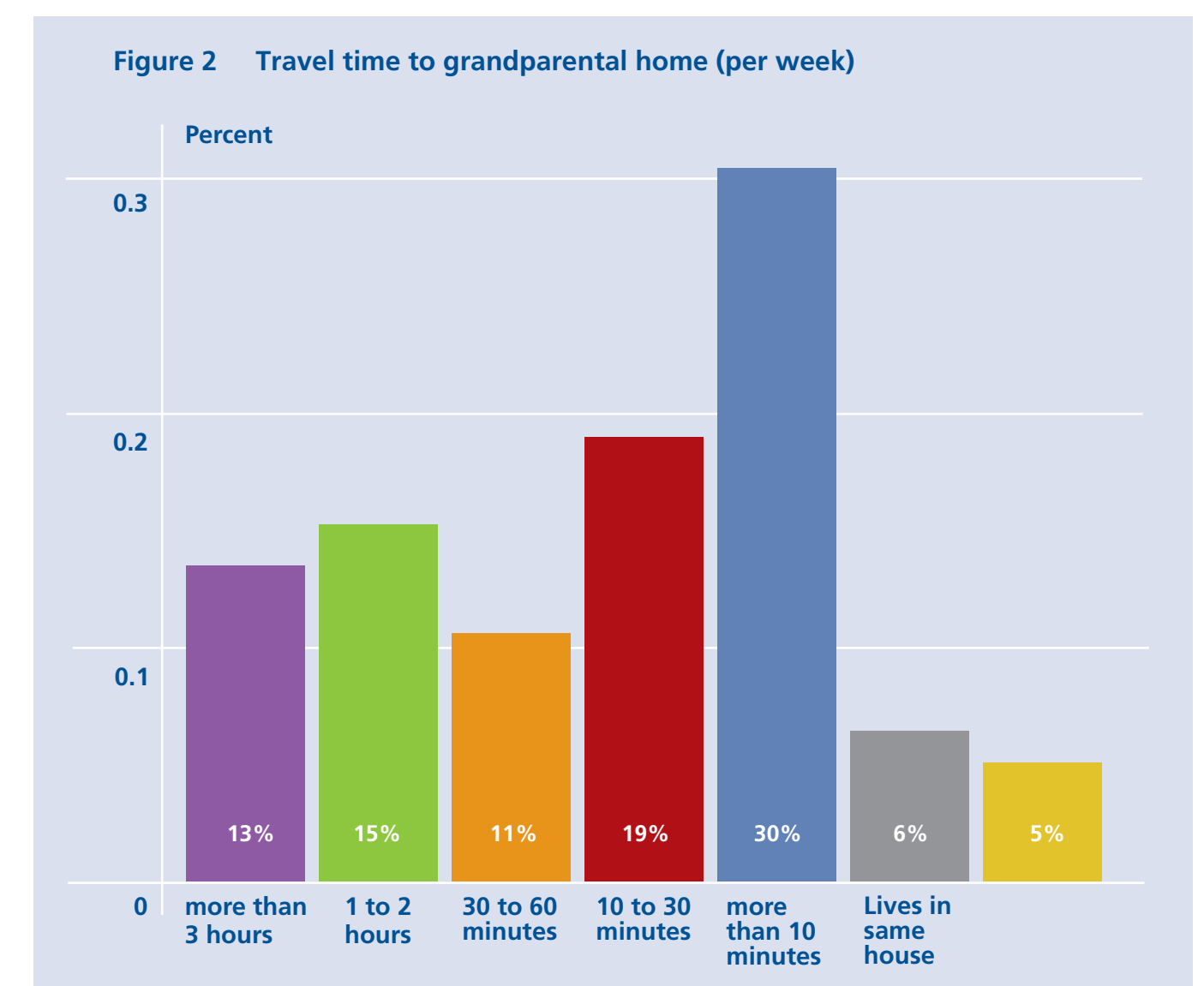Source: pairfam wave 1, 2, and 5. Own calculations.

Method

- Imputation of missing values in R by help of the "Amelia" package.
- Confirmatory factor analysis confirms that observed patterns of grandparents support differ substantially.[2] These results suggest that different kinds of support and their conditions should be analyzed separately.
- I then perform cross–sectional analysis with my dyadic dataset and estimate logits by multinomial logistic regression. The dependent variable indicates whether grandparents took care of their grandchild on a daily basis, several times a week, once a week, 1 to 3 times a month, several times a year, less often or even never during the previous 12 months.

Results

Descriptive statistics show that most grandparents seem to have the opportunity of becoming involved in their grandchildren's care: About 33% of grandmothers live less than 10 minutes away from their grandchild's home. Only about 15% live more than 3 hours away. Most grandparents are neither employed full–time nor are they a housewife or a househusband: most appear to work part–time. Most grandparents are healthy: about 35% responded by saying that their health status is "average" with another 35% judging their health to be "good."

Yet, although most grandparents live quite near to their grandchildren, do not work full–time, and are healthy, parents report that only about 2% of them take care of their grandchild on a daily basis. The majority take care of their grandchildren several times a year, rarely, or even never (Figure 1). This pattern can also be observed for how often grandchildren stay overnight, how often grandparents take part in leisure activities with their grandchildren, or talk with their grandchildren about their problems. The descriptive statistics seem to indicate that grandparents would have opportunities to take care of their grandchildren more often.

Multinomial logistic regression firstly shows that multinomial logits are higher for grandparents that take care of their grandchildren when they have the opportunity. If the grandmother lives in the same house as her grandchildren, the multinomial logits are higher relative to her living more than 10 minutes away. This is also the case if the grandparent is a housewife or a househusband. Inversely, the multinomial logits of taking care of a grandchild are lower if the grandparents are employed full–time and they decrease with each additional year of grandparental age. Having other grandchildren also decreases the multinomial logits of taking care, irrespective of grandparental age.

Method (continued)

Regarding the parents' need for grandparental support in childcare, multinomial logistic regression shows that **the multinomial logits of grandparents providing care increase with parents' need of childcare support.** Multinomial logits of grandparents taking care are higher with increasing parental weekly working hours and parental age. If parents work only infrequently after 7 p.m., multinomial logits are lower than if they frequently work later than 7 p.m. Surprisingly, the grandchild's age does not significantly increase the multinomial logits of grandparents providing care.

Results for the willingness of grandparents to take care of their grandchildren and the extent of their support in grandchildren's care are mixed. Surprisingly, the multinomial logits of agreeing fully with the conservative view that women should be more concerned about their family than about their career are negative for how often grandparents take care of their grandchildren. As I expected, the multinomial logits of grandparents taking care are lower if grandparents agree with the egalitarian views of "Men should participate in housework to the same extent as women." In general, the multinomial logits for taking care of a grandchild are higher for grandmothers relative to grandfathers. This confirms my hypothesis.

Conclusions

- Grandparents support their grandchildren in many different ways. There is no one dominant model of supervision by grandparents.
- The frequency of support differs, too: about 35% of grandparents take care of their grandchildren several times a year only, while for 44% of grandchildren, support varies from several times a week to one to 3 times a month (Figure 1).
- As expected, having the opportunity of taking care of grandchildren and the higher need of parents for intra–familial support increases the multinomial logits in my model. However, results for how grandparental cultural norms influence the extent of them taking care of their grandchildren are unclear.

Next steps

Although my analysis sheds light on the conditions of grandparental support, the extent to which grandparental financial and their actual support level each other out still needs examination. Another unresolved issue concerns how the social context of grandparents influences the extent of their support. Further research should therefore examine (regional) context effects. Finally, the extent of extra–familial support and its conditions are still unclear and should be examined.

1 A detailed description of the study can be found in Huinink et al. (2011).

2 This means that the null hypothesis is rejected that they can all be combined in the single factor of "Taking Care."

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Figure 1   Frequency of caring for grandchildren

Percent — Never 4% | Rarely 19% | Several times a year 35% | One to three times a month 19% | Once a week 12% | Several times a week 12%

Figure 2   Travel time to grandparental home (per week)

Percent — more than 3 hours 13% | 1 to 2 hours 15% | 30 to 60 minutes 11% | 10 to 30 minutes 19% | more than 10 minutes 30% | Lives in same house 6% | 5%