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Eleanor Quirke · Hans-Helmut König · André Hajek

Department of Health Economics and Health Services Research, University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf, Hamburg, Germany

Extending understanding of grandchild care on feelings of loneliness and isolation in later life

A literature review

Viewpoint

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is well-recognized to particularly affect older persons, with the case fatality rate for COVID-19 increasing considerably with age. Social distancing measures significantly reduce the risk of being infected with COVID-19. In view of this, older persons in particular have been strongly encouraged to self-isolate, and to even avoid contact with their family members.

It is increasingly recognized that whilst social distancing measures are effective in reducing the spread of the virus, reduced social contact may have implications for individuals' mental health and well-being. In addition, while more stringent social distancing measures are slowly lifted across Europe, vulnerable groups, including older persons, continue to be encouraged to stay home and reduce their social contacts. Older persons may therefore have a differential experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, and whilst also shouldering a higher burden of mortality, may also shoulder a disproportional burden of negative social and mental health implications.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a growing body of literature had explored loneliness and social isolation among older individuals, identifying clear links between loneliness, social isolation and health outcomes [1–4]. Social activities in later life that fostered social interaction had been emphasized

as a key tenet of active and successful ageing frameworks. As part of this, the role of grandparenting and the provision of auxiliary grandchild care has been analyzed. Beyond the benefits that grandchild caregiving extends to grandchildren themselves, it has been theorized that undertaking grandchild care may also positively shape a grandparent's social relations.

This theory has been underscored to an extent by some scientific research in recent years. We present findings of our comprehensive review of existing literature that was identified via search of PubMed and Google Scholar, using the keywords “auxiliary care”, “grandchild care”, “loneliness”, “social isolation”, “social exclusion” and “social network size”. A hand search of the reference lists of identified articles was also conducted. A second person was involved in determining the search strategy and also critically reviewed the results of the literature search. Two recent studies drawing on the German Ageing Survey found that undertaking grandchild caregiving was associated with an increase in the grandparent's social network size [5, 6], suggesting that providing grandchild care generates additional opportunities to make meaningful social connections as well as access social circles that might not otherwise be accessible. This aligns with the findings of a study exploring the effects of grandchild caregiving on health and life satisfaction, which sug-

gested that the provision of auxiliary care to grandchildren can be a source of positive emotions, and can facilitate social connectivity [7]. Studies pertaining to the role of grandchild caregiving in feelings of loneliness and social isolation present mixed findings. In their 2013 study Tsai et al. found that the provision of grandchild care was associated with lower loneliness scores among grandparents living in Taiwan, characterizing the provision of grandchild care as possible protective factor for older Taiwanese [8]. The cross-sectional study that found an extended social network among German grandparents, also found reduced loneliness and social isolation scores among those undertaking care of a grandchild [5]. However, the literature to date also points to gender differences in the experience of grandchild caregiving. For example, a longitudinal study using data from the same cohort study in Germany found that grandchild caregiving resulted in increased loneliness scores among men but not women [6].

Studies that have explored gender differences in grandchild caregiving and grandparental well-being have linked these to the types and content of care undertaken by grandparents. For example, following a review of the literature on the topic, Winefield and Air suggested that negative implications of grandchild care seen among women can be attributed to the more physically demanding tasks undertaken by women (such as cleaning

and washing). Men, on the other hand, are more likely to engage in game playing and social activities with their grandchildren [9]. A division in the labor of tasks associated with grandparenting may lead grandfathers to feel lonely, as it is a role that is experienced independently as opposed to jointly undertaken with their spouse. On the other hand, other studies have suggested possible gender differences in the experience of grandparental caregiving can be attributed to discrepancies in expectations of the task and its reality. While grandmothers may perceive grandchild caregiving as a continuation of their role as a mother, grandfathers may perceive that undertaking grandchild care precludes them from undertaking other social or leisure activities. In any case, these differential findings underscore the differences between the concepts of social network size, loneliness and social exclusion, and emphasize that a larger number of contacts do not prevent people feeling isolated or alone. While grandchild caregiving may objectively provide an opportunity for more social connections, it may not be subjectively experienced by (male) grandparents as such.

This topic is particularly important during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, where how we interact with each other, including our family members, has been suddenly and drastically altered. The impact of grandparenting, and specifically, the inability to provide childcare to grandchildren, on the mental and social well-being of isolated grandparents, is currently unknown. Further research into this area, particularly longitudinal research is of value given the well-established associations between loneliness and well-being [1–4]. Social relations represent a key aspect of positive ageing, and further research into this field will contribute to further knowledge on protective lifestyle factors in later life. Our recommendations for further research during and after the COVID-19 pandemic include:

- To examine the role of grandparenthood and grandchild caregiving on feelings of loneliness and social isolation as well as social network size,

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E. Quirke · H.-H. König · A. Hajek

Extending understanding of grandchild care on feelings of loneliness and isolation in later life. A literature review

Abstract

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic presents serious challenges across the world. Among these challenges are the possible negative implications for the mental health and well-being of older persons that ongoing social distancing measures may cause. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a growing body of literature explored the associations between grandchild caregiving, loneliness and social isolation. We summarize the existing literature on this topic. An association between the provision of grandchild care and reduced feelings of loneliness was found in cross-sectional studies; however, a longitudinal

study identified possible gender differences in the impact of grandchild care on feelings of loneliness, with the commencement of grandchild care linked to grandfathers feeling lonelier. At the conclusion of the summary, we highlight the need for further research in this field. Further research is of particular relevance given the drastic changes to the way families and older people interact socially, brought about by the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Keywords

Social network · Successful ageing · Social exclusion · Grandparenthood · Caregiving

Erweiterung des Verständnisses der Enkelkinderbetreuung auf Gefühle der Einsamkeit und Isolation im späteren Leben. Eine Literaturübersicht

Zusammenfassung

Die COVID-19-Pandemie stellt die Welt vor große Herausforderungen. Zu diesen Herausforderungen zählen die möglichen negativen Auswirkungen auf die psychische Gesundheit und das Wohlbefinden älterer Menschen die durch die anhaltenden sozialen Distanzierungsmaßnahmen verursacht werden können. Vor der COVID-19-Pandemie befasste sich eine zunehmende Zahl von Studien mit der Assoziation zwischen der Enkelkinderbetreuung sowie Einsamkeit und sozialer Isolation. Wir fassen die vorhandene Literatur zu diesem Thema zusammen. In Querschnittsstudien wurde festgestellt, dass die Enkelkinderbetreuung mit einer geminderten Einsamkeit bei den Großeltern assoziiert ist. Andererseits hat eine Längsschnittstudie mögliche

geschlechtsspezifische Unterschiede in den Auswirkungen der Enkelkinderbetreuung auf das Gefühl der Einsamkeit identifiziert, wobei sich Großväter bei Beginn der Enkelkinderbetreuung einsamer fühlen. Am Ende unserer Zusammenfassung unterstreichen wir die Notwendigkeit weiterer Forschung auf diesem Gebiet, vor allem vor dem Hintergrund dieser Pandemie. Weitere Forschung ist angesichts der drastischen Veränderungen auf die Art und Weise wie Familien und ältere Menschen sozial interagieren von besonderer Bedeutung.

Schlüsselwörter

Soziales Netzwerk · Erfolgreiches Altern · Soziale Exklusion · Großelternschaft · Kinderbetreuung

based on nationally representative samples.

- To examine these associations longitudinally. Limited longitudinal studies exist on the impact of grandparenthood and grandchild caregiving on many aspects of social life and the ageing process. A statistically significant association between loneliness and grandchild caregiv-

ing did not hold once it was tested longitudinally.

- To elucidate the mechanisms that underlie current findings. Research should consider the quality and intensity of the interactions between grandchildren and grandparents, including the total amount of time spent caring for grandchildren per week/month. The types of tasks involved in the provision of care, as

well as the ages of the grandchildren, should also be considered. The perceived difficulty of providing care to grandchildren should also be included, given its identified effect on the health and well-being of grandparents providing auxiliary care [7]. Research in this area may also assist in elucidating the mechanisms that underlie gender differences in the experience of grandchild caregiving.

- To explore how change in the grandchild-grandparent relationship, due to the grandchild growing up, shapes the effects of the provision of child-care on a grandparent's feelings of loneliness and social exclusion. This is particularly pertinent to experiences of the current pandemic. Older grandchildren, particularly of speaking age, or those able to engage with technology, may be better able to communicate with their grandparents in times of social distancing.

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Corresponding address

Eleanor Quirke

Department of Health Economics and Health Services Research, University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf
Martinistr. 52, 20246 Hamburg, Germany
e.quirke@uke.de

Compliance with ethical guidelines

Conflict of interest. E. Quirke, H.-H. König and A. Hajek declare that they have no competing interests.

Ethical standards. For this article no studies with human participants or animals were performed by any of the authors. All studies performed were in accordance with the ethical standards indicated in each case.

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