



Social Roles of Grandparents in an Ageing, Modern Society

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The authors' aim is to create an original typology of the social roles of grandparents in modern society. The reflection is set in the context of demographic changes related to ageing processes and theories of life cycles.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The main thesis is that despite the significant socio-cultural changes occurring in the context of the intensifying aging processes of societies, it is possible to indicate the multiplicity of roles played by grandparents. The article is based on two research projects conducted among women aged 50-64 and men aged 55-69 living in the Lubuskie Voivodeship. The data used has a qualitative character, and the empirical basis is 110 written biographical stories.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The background of the study is data from public statistics that illustrate the deepening ageing processes of the region's population. Unfavourable demographic processes are intertwined with socio-cultural changes related to the change of gender roles, professional activity, and free time. This element is related to the concept of life phases. An extensive theoretical introduction precedes the analysis of the results of research on the typology of the social roles of women and men as grandparents.

RESEARCH RESULTS: An original typology of the roles of grandparents in the modern world was proposed. The mechanisms related to the roles focus mainly on meeting the needs of the family in the first place. We can draw an axis of traditional vs. modern, which leaves room for some other indirect possibilities (e.g. space for female self-realization). However, it depends on the socio-cultural factors and scripts implemented at earlier stages of family life.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS: There is no uniform and coherent grandfathering pattern, and there is a clear difference between the sexes on the axis of involvement in caring functions. It is important to follow the changes in the proposed models.

→ **KEYWORDS:** **SOCIAL ROLES, AGEING SOCIETY, BIOGRAPHICAL METHOD, GRANDPARENTS**

STRESZCZENIE

CEL NAUKOWY: Celem pracy jest stworzenie oryginalnej typologii ról społecznych babć i dziadków we współczesnym społeczeństwie. Rozważania osadzone są w kontekście zmian demograficznych związanych z procesami starzenia się społeczeństw i teorii faz życia.

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: Główna teza rozważań jest taka, że pomimo znaczących zmian społeczno-kulturowych zachodzących w kontekście nasilających się procesów starzenia się społeczeństw, można wskazać wielość ról społecznych odgrywanych przez dziadków. Artykuł powstał na podstawie dwóch projektów badawczych przeprowadzonych wśród kobiet w wieku 50-64 lat i mężczyzn w wieku 55-69 lat mieszkających w województwie lubuskim. Wykorzystane dane mają charakter jakościowy, a podstawą empiryczną jest 110 spisanych opowiadań biograficznych.

PROCES WYWODU: Tłem rozważań są dane statystyki publicznej, które obrazują pogłębiające się procesy starzenia się ludności regionu. Niekorzystne procesy demograficzne przeplatają się ze zmianami społeczno-kulturowymi związanymi ze zmianą ról płciowych, aktywnością zawodową i czasem wolnym. Ten element jest związany z koncepcją faz życia. Analizę wyników badań nad typologią ról społecznych kobiet i mężczyzn jako dziadków poprzedza obszerne wprowadzenie teoretyczne.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: Zaproponowano oryginalną typologię ról społecznych dziadków i babć we współczesnym świecie. Mechanizmy związane z rolami skupiają się przede wszystkim na zaspokajaniu potrzeb rodziny. Możemy nakreślić oś tradycyjność vs. nowoczesność, co pozostawia miejsce na inne pośrednie możliwości (np. przestrzeń dla kobiecej samorealizacji). Zależy to jednak od czynników społeczno-kulturowych i scenariuszy realizowanych na wcześniejszych etapach życia rodziny.

WNIOSKI, INNOWACJE, REKOMENDACJE: Chociaż można wskazać wielość wzorów roli babci, nie ma jednolitego i spójnego wzorca dziadka. Można także wskazać wyraźną różnicę między płciami na osi zaangażowania w funkcje opiekuńcze. Warto śledzić zmiany zachodzące w proponowanych modelach w czasie.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** **ROLE SPOŁECZNE, STARZEJĄCE SIĘ SPOŁECZEŃSTWO, METODA BIOGRAFICZNA, DZIADKOWIE**

Introduction

Our aim is to create an original typology of the social roles of grandparents in modern society. As a result of unfavourable demographic processes, we are experiencing significant changes in the area of the social roles of women and men. This is particularly important concerning people aged 50 and more, where traditional family models and global socio-economic processes clash. The realized family roles in the ageing phase of life are directly related to earlier ones – e.g., the role of mother/father – and these were shaped over the long-term. Among the most important historical factors influencing the

shaping of the social roles of women (mothers, later grandmothers), one can point to the noble ethos and the patriarchal system, the post-partition archetype of the Mother-Polish woman, the activation of women on the labour market as a result of the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century and their mass activation after World War II (including the development of a model of a super-woman living in a culture of scarcity – see Titkow, 2007). One can also point to the echoes of the second wave of feminism, the moral revolution of the late 1960s, the experience of Solidarity (Solidarność), and the transformation after 1989 (Titkow, 2007; Trzop et al., 2017). As a consequence of the changes related to the Industrial Revolution and the shaping of the foundations of modern society in the 19th century, male roles (father and grandfather) also changed. In the industrial era and the subsequent bureaucratization processes, the father was an absent figure, staying mainly outside the home while working in a factory or office or focusing on fulfilling the expected role of the breadwinner. Even in his spare time, he fulfilled his needs outside the home, most often among other men of a similar origin and social status (Trzop, 2016, p. 25). This absence translated into a model for fatherhood and duplicated neopatriarchy. This model then translated into the roles of grandparents, though it is a rather fuzzy model. The shaping of a new pattern of paternity (and, consequently, “grandfathering”) is a process that is strongly dependent on the cultural, social and political context and will continue to change over time.

Research problem and methods

We want to answer the question – how can we describe the social roles of grandmothers and grandfathers in an ageing society (based on the results of research carried out in the Lubuskie Voivodeship)? We formulate the thesis that despite the significant socio-cultural changes occurring in the context of the intensifying ageing processes, it is possible to indicate the multiplicity of roles played by grandmothers and grandfathers. The grandmother’s role is performed in a more traditional way (this is a consequence of the traditional family model and gender roles). The greatest burden of this role is placed on the caring component (although there are also other scripts for this role). The pattern of the grandfather’s role in contemporary society is less clear and socially internalized (there is no single, clearly outlined model here and it is not entirely clear what this role should be).

The article uses the results of research conducted among women aged 50-64 and men aged 55-69 living in the Lubuskie Voivodeship. The data was collected in two research projects. Both of these were qualitative research projects that were, situated in the methodological assumptions of the biographical method. The empirical basis of the article is a corpus of written biographical stories – narratives (autoethnography). The first of the implemented projects, called “Mature women – selected spheres of life,” was carried out in the spring of 2012 and has been characterized in detail (research methodology, tools, sample description and characteristics of the respondents) in the monograph by Beata

Trzop (2013). Among the significant features taken into account when recruiting people for the study was age – women were organized in accordance with the systematization of public statistics: 50-54 years, 55-59 years and 60-64 years. The aim of the project was to create a sociological portrait of a mature woman from the perspective of selected spheres of life of mature women in the life phase between middle and late adulthood. 167 biographical stories were used in the project. The second study was called “Mature men in contemporary Polish society – selected spheres of life.” This study was conducted at the turn of 2014/2015, and its scenario was adapted to the specificity of the studied gender, leaving the research areas unchanged compared to the first project. Ultimately 110 biographical stories were collected. The age shift in relation to the surveyed Lubus women is related mainly to the later professional deactivation of men, which also affects their various dimensions of functioning. The analyses for this study were made with the use of the WeftQDA application, classified as a CAQDAS tool. In the optics of the analyzed data, we focus only on the roles of grandmother and grandfather. The discussed issue is located in long-term processes; therefore, the empirical data collected over a period of time may show certain trends, and when combined with macrosocial processes, allows the directions of changes in the future to be diagnosed and indicated.

The logic of the reflection

Demographic context

The ageing process of the population is the result of changes in both natural movement processes, extending the average life expectancy, and more and more intense population migrations (especially of a commercial nature). The current demographic situation is a consequence of long-term processes, as indicated by Marek Okólski (2004, p. 147). Negative demographic changes in Central and Eastern Europe are explained today in the context of the theory of modernization and the processes of Sovietization and transformation. The age structure at a country and regional level influences many social, economic, cultural and political processes (Okólski & Fihel, 2012, pp. 147-148). According to demographic forecasts, by 2035 the average life expectancy in Poland will be 82.9 years for women and 77.1 years for men. In 2019, this measure was 79.8 years and 71.4 years, respectively. The ageing of societies also translates into the functioning mechanisms of modern households. There is a growing frequency of coexistence in households of three, four or more generations. The results of the National Census 2011 show that 41.5% of all households contained people over 60 years of age. Compared to 2002, this number increased by 5.5 percentage points. This increase can be observed both in cities and in the countryside (GUS, 2014, p. 42; see also Szatur-Jaworska, 2012). The National Census 2011 also shows that Lubuskie Voivodeship has the largest number of single-family households (264,000). 22,300 two-family households were registered, and there were 1,700 three-family and larger. 10.6% of non-family farms were registered

at that time. It is worth pointing out here that 40% of single-person households are run by seniors. The Lubuskie Voivodeship is one of the smallest regions of the country: in 2019, its population accounted for 2.6% of the country's population. 2019 was the second consecutive year in which the natural decline of the population deepened, and the birth rate was at its lowest level two decades. Moreover, there remains a greater outflow of people over the inflow; as a result, there is a negative balance of migration. In 2019, the population of the Lubuskie Voivodeship amounted to 1,011,600, which is 3,100 lower compared to the end of 2018. Compared to 2010, the number of inhabitants in the Lubuskie Voivodeship decreased by 11,600 people (GUS, 2019, p. 17). In 2019, there was a further deterioration in the basic indicators reflecting changes in the population structure of the Lubuskie Voivodeship by age and the resulting ageing of the population.

Table 1. The condition and structure of the population of the Lubuskie Voivodeship (selected features – forecast)

Lubuskie Voivodship	2013	2035	2050
Population	1,021,500	957,900	878,600
Percentage of people aged 65 and more	13.4	24.4	32.9
Average life expectancy of a woman	80.1	84.3	87.1
Average life expectancy of a man	72.2	78.0	81.7

Source: Own study based on GUS data.

The old-age rate (the number of people aged 65 and over compared to the total population) is one of the measures determining the advancement of the population ageing process. In 2019, older people accounted for 17.6% of the total population, i.e. 0.5 percentage points less than the national average. In Lubuskie Voivodeship, the percentage of people aged 65 and over in the total population has been increasing for years. In 2019, compared to 2018, the old-age rate had increased by 0.7 percentage points and, compared to 2010, by 5.9 percentage points. The ageing society can also be characterized by using the measure defining the share of elderly people (aged 85 and over) in the population of older people (65 and over). In 2019, this measure was 10.3% in the Lubuskie Voivodeship (compared to 11.7% in the country). Compared to 2018, this percentage decreased by 0.2 percentage points and, compared to 2010, it increased by 0.4 percentage points.

The role of grandparents in the family

Among the numerous consequences of ageing societies, it is necessary to point out the socio-cultural consequences that are directly related to changes in the area of fulfilling family roles. Some of the most important family and social roles for adults are family and professional roles. Such roles include the role of a child, sexual partner, parent, and even grandparent. Although each of these is somewhat natural, they can be implemented

in several ways. Over the last few decades, the role of grandparents in the family has evolved significantly. It was dependent on complex changes. The family roles of people entering the age of ageing, and the type of relationship they have with their children and grandchildren, depend on many factors. The structure of the family is one of them. If there are a large number of grandchildren in the family, the role of grandparents is split, and when one of the parents is missing, it may intensify (Kempińska, 2015). The grandparents-grandchildren relationship may also be influenced by their age. When grandchildren are at preschool age, this differentiation is not so visible, but later it deepens significantly. Grandfathers have much better contact with their grandsons and grandmothers with their granddaughters (Vasta et al., 2004, pp. 274-275). Other important factors translating into the performance of grandparents' functions are their physical fitness and mental condition, level of education, personality traits, social structure, type of society, dominant worldview, and home proximity. Older grandparents who are in good health, do not work professionally and live together or close to their grandchildren have a greater opportunity and, at the same time, are more likely to be willing to take care of them. Moreover, the relations between grandparents and grandchildren are significantly dependent on the parents of the children, their attitude towards their parents, and their attitude towards the elderly in general (Kempińska, 2015).

Ageing in terms of the phases of life

When choosing the concept to describe and locate the surveyed mature inhabitants of the Lubuskie Voivodeship, both women and men, we were guided by the adequacy of a specific theoretical framework. The basic criterion was to locate the people we characterize later in the article in the area of a specific life phase. The basis of our reflection is elements of Daniel Levinson's concept, in which the age range of interest to us (i.e. people over 50) is located between middle adulthood (the culmination being 55-60 years) and late adulthood (transition to 65). In the biomedical model of human development, these people function in the declining stage of the stabilization stage (maturity, full life, the third decade – 50-60 years) and the beginning of the regressive development stage (60-65 years), while from a psychological perspective, the age of our respondents is the period of middle adulthood (40-60) and the beginning of late adulthood (over 60) (see Levinson & Levinson, 1996; Boyd & Bee, 2008; Brzezińska & Trempała, 2000). We consider Levinson's concept to correspond in many respects to contemporary requirements relating to the activity of middle age, but it lacks the boundary between late adulthood and ageing. The old age limit has shifted considerably. Setting the old age limit (somewhat arbitrarily) at the level of 65 indicates at least a disregard for the intensifying demographic processes, including the extension of life. Polish theoretical propositions in this regard can be considered as supplements to the newest way of thinking about the cyclical nature of life, in line with the challenges of contemporary demographic processes and a redefinition of the approach to old age. Polish psychologist Piotr Oleś

is critical of defining the phase of late adulthood as old age. The author points out that early adulthood is the time of fulfilling life roles characteristic of an adult, middle adulthood is associated with full professional and social activity, while late adulthood is the time when most professional and social roles have been fulfilled, but a person at this age is still physically fit and active and self-sufficient. Old age, on the other hand, is characterized by a reduction in fitness and independence and, in general, by significant health problems (Oleś, 2012, pp. 15-16).

Components of the identity of mature women and men

We will place the identities of mature people within the framework of Erik Erikson's theoretical proposition. This concept focuses on three dimensions of human functioning. Erikson points to the key importance of the triad soma–psyche–ethos, the elements of which indicate the inseparability of the mental, bodily and social spheres (Erikson, 2004). The integrity of the triad is the foundation for distinguishing eight stages of the development of human identity (each of which relates to the development of the body, the development of the psyche, and the social expectations of the individual at a given moment). All stages are important for identity formation. The driving force behind the changes taking place in the structure of consciousness is the conflict resulting from the crises experienced by the individual. Ageing is a time of changes resulting from both the lived phases of life (mid-life crisis/breakthrough) and biological processes. The emerging new social roles require their internalization, but they can also cause dissatisfaction, rebellion and frustration. New family roles seem particularly important in this matter: grandmother/grandfather, mother/father of adult children, mature partner, and the social role of a pensioner. Here, too, gender inequality becomes apparent. Men perceive retirement, i.e. cessation of professional activity, in terms of loss related to the loss of their social and professional position (and the roles and statuses assigned to it), limitation of social contacts, and the loss of family influence. Women, on the other hand, fulfil themselves caringly, extending the roles performed at earlier stages of life.

Social roles of grandparents in an ageing society – the results of the analyses

The possible models for the implementation of the analyzed family roles can be considered the consequences of the influence of macro-social factors – especially negative demographic processes. Grandmothers' roles are on the axis defined by the dichotomy "tradition vs. modernity." For men, the multi-generational legacy of the absent father role has ramifications in the indefinite and fuzzy role of the grandfather. The fragments of statements by the surveyed women and men, which are quoted for the exemplification of the distinguished types and are provided unchanged, are only illustrative.

A new way to be a grandmother

The collected empirical material allows for general conclusions to be drawn. Lubus women aged over 50, by fulfilling the role of a grandmother, extend their social roles based on the caring function performed at an earlier stage of family life (regardless of whether they were professionally active or not). After the end of their professional activity, the family becomes an important space for women's fulfilment.

Traditional grandmother

The primary field of activity of the women who fit into the traditional grandmother's formula was, above all, caring for family members. The surveyed women who fit this pattern deal with raising their grandchildren and working in the household, which means that after a period of professional activity, they again find themselves in the family space, without looking for another idea for their retirement. This attitude places women in the area of traditional roles for seniors. The following excerpts from the surveys illustrate the implementation of this role:

For me, the role of grandmother is probably the most important. I compare my children with my granddaughter, and it seems to me that my granddaughter is extraordinary and my children were either good or bad. Now I think that I did not have so much time for my children, and there is always time for my granddaughter. I am patient and understanding with her, I would never have believed it if I had not experienced it (...). My life revolves around my family (k. 5).

Now I think my most important role is to be a grandmother. Here I can see that I am needed the most. I have 2 grandchildren from 2 sons. The next baby will be born in a few months. I love my grandchildren. I help with their upbringing, but sometimes I am tired. The worst time is when the preschooler gets sick, so I stay at home with him and I have a whole week of caring for him (k. 21).

Modern grandmother

This role is developing among women with clear passions and interests. They spend time with their grandchildren but devote it not so much to caring for them but to joint creative, developing and interesting activities. Undoubtedly, playing the role of a modern grandmother is also conducive to a successful love life and finding oneself in an organization, association, or circle of interests. A modern grandmother is a wife/partner, mother, employee and friend. Being a grandmother is one of her many areas of activity. The respondents themselves describe this role as follows:

I have been the happiest grandmother in the world for seven years. I was born to be a grandmother. I am busy, but I find time for the little one once a week. Together we draw, paint, put on a play, talk, read, write short stories and make illustrations for them, and we ride bicycles and sometimes roller skates. We also cook things together. After the birth of my granddaughter, I learned patience and gentleness and I feel good about it (k. 162).

Grandfather's new role – general remarks

The research results allow us to propose some general conclusions about the role of the grandfather. At the level of the requirements for the contemporary role of grandfather, it differs from traditional expectations, according to which the grandfather was to be a treasury of historical knowledge and a person responsible for shaping patriotic attitudes. There is no uniform and coherent grandfathering pattern, and a clear difference between the sexes is found on the axis of involvement in caring functions. The role of the grandfather also cannot be placed on a clear continuum. It can be hypothesized that the changes taking place in the roles of modern fathers may influence the involvement of future grandfathers in caring for their grandchildren.

Grandfather is very different to grandmother

The role of the grandfather is treated on the one hand, by men as something natural and neutral for them; on the other hand, there are also statements from grandfathers who are in love with their grandchildren (similarly to grandmothers, although in their case such euphoria is much more common). The forms of spending free time with grandchildren do not indicate individual activities, rather they are carried out with the family, certainly with the support of grandmothers.

Being a grandfather is probably the most wonderful thing a grandpa can have in his life. I have four wonderful grandchildren whom I love with all my heart, especially the youngest. As soon as there is some free time, we spend it together by the water, on the plot, on vacation together, shopping, meeting for lunch together, spending holidays together, or grilling together (m. 61).

In the last year, I became a grandfather when my first granddaughter was born. And I must admit that my role as grandfather is the most important to me (m. 59).

The waning years made me a husband, father, grandfather. At the moment, grandfather is my most important role (...). I already have 2 adult granddaughters, and despite the generational conflict, I won't say, sometimes I'm listened to and my advice is effective (m. 105).

Helping hand

If this term appears in the statements, it is located primarily in the area of typically male” jobs, although the caring function is also present. As one of the respondents points out, “There are no identical relationships, although I feel needed and loved. The children ask me for help with renovations, repairs and looking after their grandchildren” (m. 92).

Unfulfilled grandfather

An unfulfilled grandfather is a role that is found in the aftermath of complicated family systems and fulfilling family roles at an earlier stage of life. It is a conscious role, but also one that is hardly ever performed: “I see my grandson very rarely, I don’t have much contact with him, so I don’t think I feel completely fulfilled as a GRANDPA” (m. 89).

Conclusions

In Polish, the word ‘dziadkowie’ (eng. “grandparents”) is commonly used to describe the family roles of seniors. It is a typical example of gender asymmetry in the Polish language, as this term shows the dominance and privileged character of the masculine form. Describing the roles of mature women and men, Maria Tyszkowa indicates five models of implementation (using the term for both sexes – grandparents): (1) Seniors who continue their parental roles with a dominant position in the family, which is a model in which these roles are fulfilled from the parental position; (2) Seniors who are active (professionally, socially, involved in various types of activities), the so-called grandparents on holiday; (3) Grandparents who do not keep up with the requirements and expectations related to this role and for whom fulfilling this role is a burden; (4) Grandparents who support their children as parents in their life roles; and (5) Holiday grandparents, who live far away from their children and grandchildren (Tyszkowa, 1991, pp. 18-20). Each of these elements has a slightly different connotation due to gender. The first of them indicates strong parenting and the dominance of these roles also towards adult children (more often in the case of women than men). The second is a modern pattern, as our research has shown, that is clearly present in women. There was no anti-model statement in any of the interviews, although its inclusion by Tyszkowa indicates that individuals who are not in a parental role will not be able to play the role of grandparent. There is also a script of a role performed mainly in female caring functions – also found in our empirical research. Finally, a pattern that may become very visible shortly and which is related to migration processes is the so-called holiday grandparents, although nowadays their contacts are supported by technology. The described issue concerns only a fragment of the socio-cultural changes to the family roles of women and men in the phase of life between middle and late adulthood. The discussed topic is located

in the considerations on the new paradigms of masculinity in response to emancipatory processes. Their effect will also bring a change to the roles of grandparents – located in the logic of long-term processes. Based on the analysis of the statements of mature women and men who play the social roles of grandparents in contemporary, ageing societies, we can conclude that the traditionally understood roles of women are set on the axis of building the position and perception of a mature woman in contemporary Polish society. The mechanisms related to the performance of roles focus mainly on meeting the needs of the family in the first place. On this attitude, an axis can be drawn – traditional vs. modern – which leaves space for some other indirect possibilities for which there is time for self-realization. However, this will depend on the socio-cultural factors and scripts implemented at earlier stages of family life. In the case of the surveyed women, family roles are key to them – their role as the parent of adult children is important, but their role as a grandmother is particularly prominent. As the analysis has shown, family roles constitute the core of this new identity, and in the case of the traditional grandmother, they are simply an extension of the original parental roles (Trzop, 2013; 2016). However, the analyzed statements of men show that family roles do not constitute the central axis of their identification. The set of desirable features attributed to a mature man includes the remnants of the general patriarchal male pattern; it is a kind of remnant or a modern variation of the traditional model. In the sphere of the required values and norms ascribed to the model of a mature man, responsibility is a keyword.

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