More than grandparents: Multiple case study on the role of great-grandparents in the multigenerational family

Emily Schuler¹, Cristina Maria de Souza Brito Dias¹

¹Universidade Católica de Pernambuco, Brasil, schuler.mily@gmail.com; cristina.msbd@gmail.com

The increase of human aging is a phenomenon observed worldwide and allows the experience of several roles within the family. Now grandparents can see their grandchildren grow up and have children, becoming great-grandparents, and thus adding another generation in the network of relationships. Consequently, more and more multigenerational families are emerging, formed by four or even five generations, and therefore more vertically. It is a multiple case study with three families consisting of four generations, totaling twelve participants, who were accessed through people known to the researcher. As research instrument, a semi-directed interview was used, with a specific script for each generation, as well as a questionnaire with the sociodemographic data of the participants, elaborated by the researcher. The data were analyzed through the thematic content analysis. The main results pointed out the following: 1) As for the feelings experienced when becoming great-grandparents, they reported joy, satisfaction and gratitude; 2) The support provided by them, most of the time, is of the emotional type; 3) The family relationship appeared as significant, being kept especially in the form of visits; 4) Conflicts exist, but seem to be circumvented with wisdom and much respect; 5) The legacies transmitted by them are related to faith, solidarity, education and order; 6) The meaning of being great-grandmother is intimately linked to the feeling of transcendence, the sense of having fulfilled the purpose of life and also its continuity in grandchildren and great-grandchildren. It was observed in other generations the appreciation of the great-grandparents, perceived as wise people, who can contribute as teachers to the new generations. It is hoped to give visibility to this generation still little studied in our country. The qualitative method used was seen as essential to fulfill the proposed objectives and to have a more systemic view of the role of great-grandparents in the family. The semi-directed interview, with the specific scripts for each generation made it possible to maintain the focus of the research, however, addressing different generations’ views about the role of great-grandparents studied in this research. In addition, the participants felt comfortable to talk in depth and thus cover the topic in question. However, it should be noted that this theme has not been exhausted and that multigenerational families are expanding. There is still a lot to be explored about it, since it appears to be quite new in academia. In addition, the urgent need for a closer look at society for this elder population is needed to create new public policies that include this generation, as well as psychological support and family therapies.

Keywords: Multigenerational families; great-grandparents; qualitative research.