

Intergenerationality in Contemporary Society: Contributions of the Bioecological Theory of Human Development in the grandparents- grandchildren relationship

*La intergeneracionalidad en la sociedad contemporánea:
aportes de la teoría bioecológica del desarrollo humano
en la relación abuelos-nietos*

*Intergeracionalidade na Sociedade Contemporânea:
Contributos da Teoria Bioecológica do
Desenvolvimento Humano na relação avós-netos*

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ABSTRACT: This article aims to study the relationship between grandmothers and grandchildren, based on the “time” dimension of the Bioecological Theory of Human Development. Of qualitative design, six grandchildren and six grandmothers participated in the research, the question: "How much time is spent on care?" A general conclusion is that it depends on type of care: integral, systematic or sporadic

Keywords: Grandparents and Grandchildren; Bioecological Theory; Human development; Intergenerational Relationships; Family and Society.

RESUMEN: *Esta investigación tuvo como objetivo estudiar la relación entre abuelos y nietos, a partir de la dimensión "tiempo" de la Teoría Bioecológica del Desarrollo Humano. Con un diseño cualitativo, seis nietos y seis abuelos participaron de la investigación, respondiendo a la pregunta: "¿Cuánto tiempo le dedicas al cuidado?" Una conclusión general es que depende del tipo de cuidado: integral, sistemático o esporádico.*

Palabras clave: *Abuelos-Nietos; Teoría bioecológica; Desarrollo humano; Relaciones intergeneracionales; Familia y Sociedad.*

RESUMO: *Nesta pesquisa objetivou-se estudar a relação entre avós e netos, tendo como base a dimensão «tempo» da Teoria Bioecológica do Desenvolvimento Humano. De desenho qualitativo, participaram da pesquisa seis netos e seis avós, respondendo à pergunta: "Qual é o tempo que dedica ao cuidado?". Uma conclusão geral é que depende do tipo de cuidado: integral, sistemático ou esporádico.*

Palavras-chave: *Avós-Netos; Teoria Bioecológica; Desenvolvimento Humano; Relações Intergeracionais; Família e Sociedade.*

Introduction

The world is aging, and the 21st century will be the century for the elderly and grandparents. This reality brings many challenges and opportunities to society, public policies, the family, and intergenerational relationships, in particular the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren.

Intergenerational coexistence allows older generations to revisit the past, through which they are able to revisit the role they played as parents and continue to exercise as grandparents. The figure of the grandparents is a symbol of memory and tradition, and the playful, affective and educational aspects permeate the relationships, and the interaction between generations appears as a guarantee of the transmission and maintenance of knowledge, both of the family group and of local and regional cultures, to bring generations closer and reduce stereotypes and negative attitudes between

generations, also contributing to promote active aging and intergenerational education (Dias, Magalhães, & Albuquerque, 2011; Ramos, 2017; Villas-Boas *et al.*, 2019).

This intergenerational relationship and coexistence favor new identities, relationships and learning and promote more positive representations and attitudes towards older generations. In this reciprocal relationship, grandparents and grandchildren exchange knowledge and life experiences, build consistent family and intergenerational bonds and connections, and thus, although living in different times, there is coeducation, solidarity and intergenerationality between different generations (Azambuja, & Rabinovich, 2017; Oliveira *et al.*, 2017).

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2017) highlights the importance of intergenerationality and active and healthy aging, namely in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda, mainly in the following objectives: ensuring a healthy life and promoting wellbeing at all ages (SDG 3); ensure inclusive, equitable and quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (SDG 4).

Bronfenbrenner's (1996, 1998) bioecological and social perspective provides valuable contributions not only for understanding human development and the multiple interactions and interdependencies that characterize, influence and modify it throughout the life cycle and across generations, but also for the identification and understanding of the factors and opportunities that condition or promote the development and integration of children in the current family and society, in interaction and constant change.

The analysis of reciprocity relationships between family members and their children must take into account proximal processes, when considering that human development occurs permeated by these progressive and complex processes of multiple, regular and lasting interactions in their environment and in extended time periods (Bronfenbrenner, & Morris, 1998).

Thus, the complementary relationship that occurs between the dyad is enhanced through the exchange of timeless life experiences, revisiting the past, living in the present and making plans for the future and, in many cases, assuming the education and guardianship of grandchildren as substitute parents.

In the family, caring for children, as well as the elderly, "is composed of exchanges and affections, gifts and reciprocities, relationships that are established over time, 'duty' that is not questioned, more than external rules and imposed ideologies,

with debt, gratitude and obligation towards the ascendants and descendants being present, to a greater or lesser extent, in discourses and practices” (Ramos, 2008, p. 326).

Caring and educating implies concrete, symbolic, interactive, dialogic and systemic socio-cultural practices directed by adults to the being-in-development, so that this being, born human, becomes part of a specific social-human and cultural group. The caregiver, in turn, the educator, is not an isolated being who takes care of another isolated being: both are inserted in specific contexts and in complex and interdependent inter-family, subjective, affective, social-family and cultural networks. These networks and interactive environments, of development and solidarity, should provide development opportunities to people according to their needs, capabilities, life span, stages of development and generations. In the case of grandparents and grandchildren, these relationships, solidarities and gifts are manifested through loyalty, affection and gratitude, due to the fact that the former took care of the latter, welcomed them in times of need and difficulty, and by regular and long-term care and education (Bronfenbrenner, & Morris, 1998; Mainetti, & Wanderbrooke, 2013; Ramos, 2017).

Grandparents are important figures in socialization, in the transmission of values, in the emotional, attitudinal, cognitive and social spheres, also functioning as companions for grandchildren. Thus, one of the grandparents’ functions is to be confidants, companions, keepers of secrets, perceived as those who listen and better understand their grandchildren. The coexistence between grandparents and grandchildren can be beneficial for both, mainly because both can enjoy a relationship that is not as determined by responsibilities, obligations and conflicts as is the relationship between parents and children (Garcia, & Veja, 2013; Silva, Magalhães, & Cavalcante, 2014).

In bioecological theory, Time is seen as one of the dimensions to consider in the analysis of human development, studied in relation to the systems that compose it: micro, meso, exo and macro. The “time” dimension consists of the sequence of events that make up a person’s history and routines. It functions as a social and emotional organizer that points to the stability or instability of events in the life cycle, and is divided into *microtime*, *mesotime* and *macrotime* (Bronfenbrenner, & Morris, 1998).

According to these authors, historical events can alter the course of human development, in any direction, not only for individuals, but for large segments of the population. In historical terms, the passage of time has profound effects on all societies,

with, for example, small episodes of family life, such as a child's entry into school, the birth of a sibling or the change of a parents' job, having a significant influence on the development of family members at a given point in their lives. "Another example of how time influences a person's development is the difference in the way parents raised their children, in the 1940s and 1980s, or today" (Martins, & Szimansky, 2004, p. 66).

Another aspect determined by Bronfenbrenner (1979/1996) is the *chronosystem*, which consists of the sequence of events that constitute history, changes and societal, individual or family routines. It works as a social and emotional organizer that points to the stability or instability of events in the life cycle, of family or daily life. The *chronosystem* is divided into: *microtime*, *mesotime* and *macrotime* (Bronfenbrenner, & Morris, 1998).

1) *Microtime* – refers to the measurement of activities in small moments of the proximal processes. In general, it is marked by continuities and discontinuities of episodes related to the proximal process.

2) *Mesotime* – refers to the frequency, periodicity, of these episodes over wide intervals, such as days and weeks, involving routines, the establishment of disciplinary organization, the perception of limits, times and rules of coexistence in which proximal processes occur in the subject's immediate environment.

3) *Macrotime* – is centered on the child's life story (and on all the people and contexts in which he interacts) and on the expectations of changes and the occurrence of events that may have an influence on development during the life cycle. This aspect has a direct impact on the life project and the future expectations of the child and the team (Antoni, & Koller, 2001).

Thus, the analysis of time within these three levels must focus in the person in relation to his life events, from the closest to the most distant. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) emphasize that the changes occurring over time, in the four properties of the bioecological model, are products and also producers of historical change.

Material and Method

This paper corresponds to an exploratory, descriptive and qualitative study, carried out between April and May 2015. Six grandparents and six grandchildren were interviewed, with 12 participants ending the sample by theoretical saturation.

The inclusion criteria for the grandchildren were: a) aged between 6 and 11 years; b) live with grandparents in the same city. The inclusion criteria for grandparents were: a) they were between 50 and 75 years old; b) be available to participate in data collection.

First, a sociodemographic questionnaire was used, focusing on the following dimensions: type of grandparent; gender; age; marital status; educational level; profession; type of residence; wage income; type and reason for care. For a better perception of the coexistence of grandparents and grandchildren, two questions were chosen: “*How much time do you dedicate to care?*” and “*What do you teach and learn with your grandparent and your grandchild?*”

The study was carried out in a private middle-class school located in the city of Salvador (Bahia), in Brazil. The location of the families was indicated by the school coordinator. Initially, the researcher was authorized by the board of the institution and the coordinator surveyed the children living with their grandparents.

Data collection was done in pairings of grandparents and grandchildren. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed. To guarantee anonymity, the names used in this study are fictitious. The responses to the interviews were grouped by themes, according to the content analysis procedure proposed by Minayo (2001), which allowed the construction of descriptive categories.

The analysis was carried out through successive derivations, guided by bioecological theory, starting from concrete data resulting from the elements obtained through the instruments used, in an increasingly abstract direction, choosing the categories by the nuclei of meaning of the participants' statements, extracting relevant and corresponding excerpts.

Results and Discussion

12 participants were interviewed, six grandparents and six grandchildren. Table 1 shows the sociodemographic profile of the grandmothers participating in the study.

Table 1 – Sociodemographic profile of the surveyed grandmothers

TYPE OF CARE	GRANDMOTHERS							
	Name	Age	Education	Profession	Marital Status	Address	Lineage	Socioeconomic Classification
Full-time	Begônia	65	High School	Retired teacher	Married	House	Socio-affective	B2
	Orquídea	70	Primary School	Pensioner	Widower	House	Maternal	C1
Systematic	Margarida	63	Higher Learning	Retired bank worker	Divorced	Apartment	Maternal	B2
	Violeta	56	High School	Autonomous	Married	House	Maternal	C1
Sporadic	Alecrim	72	High School	Retired civil servant	Widower	Apartment	Paternal	B2
	Jasmim	61	Higher Learning	Social Assistant	Married	Apartment	Maternal	C1

Source: Own elaboration

Note: Class B2: average family income of R\$ 3,118; Class C1: family income of R\$ 1,861, according to data from the Brazil Economic Classification Criterion (Brazilian Association of Research Companies, 2017). Source: Own elaboration

From the data presented in Table 1, grandmothers were classified as being of the *full-time* type (those who are dedicated to daily care); *systematic* (those taking responsibility on a specific day or at the end of the week); and *sporadic* (eventually called to care for their grandchildren).

As for the age of the maternal and paternal grandparents who make up the group, this varies between 59 and 62 years old. Regarding the marital situation, a couple of grandparents are married and the other two grandmothers are divorced. Regarding the level of education, one grandfather said he had completed high school, while the other grandparents had completed higher education. Regarding professional occupation, the couple declared to have paid work outside the home, one reported being a housewife and the other is retired. The grandparents' economic class varies between classes A and C, according to the Brazil Economic Classification Criterion (Brazilian Association of Research Companies, 2017).

Then, in Table 2, the profile of the grandchildren participating in the study is presented.

Table 2 - Sociodemographic profile of the grandchildren surveyed

Type of Care	Name	Gender	Age	School year	Co-habitation	Contact maternal grandparents	Contact paternal grandparents	Socioeconomic Classification
Full-time	Duda	Female	7	3 rd	Adoptive grandparents	Never	Never	B2
	Leo	Male	9	5 th	Grandmother and mother	Daily	Never	C1
Systematic	Joca	Male	8	4 th	Parents	Grandmother weekends	Sometimes	B2
						Grandfather Sometimes		
	Lia	Female	6	2 th	Parents	Week days	Never	C1
Sporadic	Tino	Male	6	2 nd	Parents	Sometimes	Daily	B2
	Kate	Female	9	5 th	Parents	Daily	Sometimes	C1

Source: Own elaboration

Regarding the grandchildren, the age varies between six and nine years of age, with three males and three females. With regard to schooling, two attend the 2nd year, one the 3rd year, one the 4th year and two the 5th year of school. As for co-residence, two grandchildren live with their grandparents, one of them lives together with the mother and the others with their parents. Regarding the contact of grandchildren with grandparents of maternal lineage, two of them live together daily, two at weekends and two sometimes or never. As for the contact of grandchildren with grandparents of paternal lineage, one occurs daily, two sometimes and three never. The economic class of children also varies between classes A and C, according to the aforementioned classification criteria.

The bioecological approach to human development proves to be useful for understanding the phenomenon under examination, since it starts from the premise that development can only be understood when properly contextualized and in its ecological-cultural context. Coexistence related to the care of grandchildren and generational transmission was organized from the three divisions of Time: microtime, mesotime and macrotime, containing five categories: 1) *Regularity of meetings*; 2) *Coeducation*; 3) *Routine at the grandparents' house*; 4) *Perception of limits*; 5) *Health fragility*.

Microtime:

1) *Regularity of meetings*

With grandparents, the notion of time is different. Without the urgency of accelerated rhythms, by enjoying time to observe the world and contemplate the beauty, it is possible to enjoy quality time to carry out the necessary daily and educational activities (Luz, & Favretto, 2013; Rodrigues, & Ramos, 2017).

As for the regularity of the meetings, we realized that this depends on the type of care. Systematic grandparents usually have a day of the week to stay with their grandchildren, as Margarida states: *“He comes to my house on weekends”*. And also, Violeta: *“My grandson comes every thursday, that was the deal”*. We found that the presence of systematic grandchildren requires the elaboration of previously planned activities, as reported by Margarida: *“On saturdays, my grandson goes to my house and, depending on the weather, I plan whether or not to go for a walk and play in the park”*. And Violeta adds: *“When he comes over, we have to plan what we are going to do”*.

Regarding the care of systematic grandchildren, there is a routine that involves commitment and planning, as evidenced in these statements: *“When I go there on saturdays, my grandmother takes me to lunch at the mall and in the afternoon, we play football at the park”* (Joca); *“At my grandparents’ house there are always new things. Sometimes we go to the pool, sometimes to the beach”* (Lia).

On the other hand, the regularity of full-time grandparents’ meetings with their grandchildren occurs daily: *“In the morning, my grandfather takes me to school; in the afternoon, I do my homework with my grandmother and watch TV with my grandfather, and on sunday I go to church with my grandmother”* (Duda); *“My grandmother takes me and brings me from school”* (Leo). We realized that in the words of the co-resident grandmothers, the definition attributed to living with their grandchildren is company, as declared by Begónia and Orquídea: *“I am a constant companion for my granddaughter because she lives with me”* (Begónia); *“I’ve been keeping my grandson company since he was born. He and his mother live with me and I take care of him”* (Orquídea). This type of relationship is based on an attitude of companionship, a component of the organization of grandchildren’s free time, which are recreational, sporting activities, outings and visits. With grandparents, the notion of time, in general, is different, without the anxiety and urgency of rushed rhythms.

2) *Coeducation*

It is known that the coeducation of grandparents and grandchildren is rich in social contact, mutual teaching, respect and appreciation for the other. When grandchildren were questioned about what they teach their grandparents, it was possible to refer to the notion of “coeducation”, as a possibility of intergenerational exchange, that is, what effectively one generation can teach the other. In this sense, Leo (full-time grandson) says that his grandmother “*teaches him to respect his elders*”. Bob (systematic grandson) says that his grandmother teaches him to “*say excuse me when interrupting the conversation between people*”. The grandmothers add that, in addition to moral values, they teach religious values: “*I read the Bible and we pray together before he goes to sleep*” (Orquídea); “*I tell her biblical stories*” (Lia). The values transmitted by grandparents are also present in attitudes of respect and solidarity. These can often be based on the grandparents’ religious beliefs and teachings (Janela, 2006; Minuzzi, 2007).

It is worth mentioning that, besides the transmission of moral values between grandparents and grandchildren, it is possible to exchange instrumental knowledge on the part of grandparents on a daily basis, such as, for example, “*cooking food*” (Kate); “*Making embroidery*” (Duda); “*Teaching how to wash the car*” (Tino). In contrast, grandchildren teach grandparents to deal with new technologies: “*I teach my grandmother to play on the cell phone*” (Joca); “*I play videogames with my grandfather*” (Lia); “*I teach how to use Whatsapp, to download images, videos, because she asks me*” (Leo). The grandmothers confirm these teachings of the grandchildren and declare: “*When I am unable to access the internet, I call my granddaughter*” (Begónia); “*He helps me to get on the Internet*” (Violeta); “*Sometimes we play games on the computer*” (Alecrim).

It is a current reality: children are immersed in a new culture of the open, technological and contemporary network society and have a greater mastery, in relation to their grandparents, of information and communication technologies. These new technological and communicational realities can contribute to strengthen intergenerational relationships and communication and to blur spatial, cultural and generational boundaries and distances.

This means that there is an interaction of mutuality, solidarity, cooperation and reciprocity around the computer and electronic games, through which these two generations help, play, interact and co-educate (Ramos, Rabinovich, & Azambuja, 2020). For this reason, the importance of the company of a caregiver is emphasized by Bronfenbrenner (1996/1979), when stating that the ecological transition allows for greater development when, by entering new environments, the child has the presence of people with whom he shares other environments.

Mesotime

3) Routine at the grandparents' house

We found that the routine established by the full-time grandparents is directed to the supervision of small domestic services, which refers to the words of the grandchildren: *“I help to put the cutlery, plates and glasses on the table”* (Duda); *“I wash the dishes”* (Kate); *“I sweep the floor”* (Lia). It also encompasses study habits, with grandparents paying attention to school tasks: *“I do my tasks alone, but if I need help, I ask my grandmother”* (Tino). In addition, grandparents monitor the children's school performance and only stop attending parties and meetings at school when the parents are in charge of this task: *“When the grades report is delivered, it is my grandmother who attends, but when my mother can attend, my grandmother stays at home”* (Leo).

Grandmothers consider it essential that their grandchildren help them with household chores, with the full-time grandmothers and systematic grandmothers both commenting, for example, *“Since she was a little girl, I taught my granddaughter to keep her toys stored”* (Begónia); or *“I teach my grandson to help, just as I did with his mother, when she was a child”* (Violeta). Grandparents' coexistence with their grandchildren makes them regain hope and the past, since, while they educate their grandchildren, they are re-educated by these children. It is such an active participation that it leads them to relive situations, bringing back memories, experiences and experiences of yore, and makes them put into practice old habits, customs and knowledge (Rodrigues, & Ramos, 2017).

4) *Perception of limits*

In the grandparents' house there are rules, both for full-time grandchildren, as well as for systematic and sporadic ones, and one of them is related to mealtimes, bathing and rest. *"When I get home from school, I shower before lunch"* (Lia); *"At my grandmother's house, I have to rest after lunch"* (Joca). As for bedtime, two grandchildren say that: *"At my grandmother's house, after the national news [around 8:30 pm], she tells me to go to bed... I think it's annoying, because I'm not sleepy yet"* (Tino); *"When I sleep at my grandmother's house, she sends me to sleep early and turns off the light"* (Kate).

Likewise, Machado (2008) found that grandmothers value healthy eating and meals taken at certain times; promote nap in relation to frequency, quantity and quality of sleep; boost autonomy in daily routines; encourage physical activity by not delimiting interdiction zones in the house; allow and favor outdoor play in the yard and in nature; promote play and spend a lot of time with their grandchildren; they develop the relationship in their daily lives with a lot of communication and affection and paying attention to security issues.

Affective and emotional involvement does not prevent grandparents from taking disciplinary actions towards their grandchildren. When parents are not there, they often have this role of imposing limits: *"When I misbehave, my grandfather grounds me and then he talks to me"* (Tino). In general, when grandparents need to "act", this behavior seems to take more the form of a warning, which does not necessarily lead to the form of intergenerational conflict (Ramos, 2011). In addition, coexistence with grandchildren and education and active participation leads to reliving situations, bringing back memories and habits of the past, allowing to put knowledge into practice, which is considered to be magic, as well as there may also be facts and situations that will provide them with learning, through new situations, programs and habits (Dias & Costa, 2006).

Macrotime

5) *Fragility in the health of grandparents*

The world is aging, as statistics and studies from recent years confirm. According to studies carried out, between 2000 and 2050 the percentage of people over 65 will double.

This aging is due to several factors, among them, the decrease in the birth rate, the improvement of living conditions, the better coverage of social and health needs and the decrease in mortality rates (Flores, 2008).

Living with grandparents also allows children to be introduced to the process of fragile health, as stated by their grandchildren: “*When my grandmother returned from the hospital, I gave her water and fruit*” (Leo); “*I put the thermometer under her arm*” (Duda), and they have to deal with the process of fragility, vulnerability and aging. Thus, children also help and learn to face their grandparents’ illness, in addition to loss: “*My grandfather became ill and died*” (Kate). This increased time of coexistence can occur in a context of dependence or independence from grandparents, where not only grandparents take care of grandchildren, but also, more and more, grandchildren can also be expected to take care of grandparents. “Thus, a relationship of mutual care emerges: grandparents take care (or help to take care of) grandchildren while they are young, and grandchildren will be able to take care of grandparents when they reach a stage of life of greater weakness” (Harper, 2006).

Conclusion

This study brought, in the sum of its results, contributions that value the understanding and the importance of the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren in the current family and society. The research enabled a detailed analysis of the data, based on the dialogue with the participants, thus meeting the objectives that were proposed to be researched. As for the time devoted to grandchildren, it depends on the type of care. Full-time grandmothers dedicate themselves daily, while systematics have a specific day in the week, and sporadic grandparents only when requested by their children.

Regarding coeducation, the interviewed grandmothers said they learned from their grandchildren how to deal with new technologies, while they teach them moral and spiritual values.

As, in general, children have a greater mastery of new technologies than their grandparents, an interaction of mutuality, reciprocity and solidarity is generated between the computer and electronic games, through which these two generations help each other, playing, interacting and establishing alternative ways of knowing, dominance and power and where there is a 'two-way direction and solidarity'.

In the opinion of full-time grandchildren, the games that take place inside the house are videogames, although there are also recreational activities, such as “playing hide and seek” and paintings, while the activities outside the house take place in squares, parks or swimming pools. The same is true for grandchildren from systematic and sporadic times, for whom game activities prevail, with a greater variety of activities outside the home, such as football and the beach.

It should be noted that the social, technological, family and cultural transformations that have been taking place, especially in industrialized societies, and the growing migration and urbanization process, with the influx to cities, have brought changes in the ways of living, communicating and cohabitating: children's lives are increasingly spent in apartments, closed condominiums and shopping centers, where contact with the environment and nature is almost non-existent, however, making the grandparents house a place of fun, of adaptation to create interactive, playful and welcoming environments for their grandchildren and where children can play with their siblings and cousins. Grandparents and grandchildren adapt to the new circumstances of contemporary life, changing the ways to interact, live and play, in order to continue to interact, play and learn. In this sense, we must highlight the importance of microtime, where coeducation takes place through the teaching of moral and religious values by grandparents towards grandchildren and, from grandchildren to grandparents, by teaching new technologies; in mesotime, the frequency of meetings, daily or weekly, changing the type of relationship; in macrotime, children were introduced to the process of vulnerability and fragility of their grandparents health and feeling of loss.

Finally, the research points out that intergenerational contact emerges as an interactive and coeducational process, where both older and younger generations have the opportunity to learn, teach and share and help to understand, how the bonds that unite grandparents and grandchildren can be so strong and enduring, that even the separation and finitude of grandparents is not able to undo these strong and eternal bonds of love and affection.

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