

Grandchildren's Relationship with Grandparents and Well-being after Parental Divorce

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Background & research questions: Demographic changes of the last decades have given more room to grandparent-grandchild relations. Greater longevity implies that it is now common for grandchildren and grandparents to share several decades of their lives. Lower fertility rates in subsequent generations translate into a lower ratio of grandchildren to grandparents and potential greater time and attention for each grandchild. At the same time, high divorce rates imply that many grandparents and grandchildren will be confronted with a divorce in the parent generation. While some scholars note that divorce may increase the risk of extended family ties being weakened or even severed, others emphasize that the rise in divorce rates makes grandparents become ever more important for the socialization and well-being of children (e.g. Bengtson 2001).

There exist two prevailing norms on grandparenting in contemporary Western societies: the 'norm of non-interference' prescribes that grandparents should not interfere too much in the upbringing of their grandchildren, while the 'norm of being there' asks a grandparent to be ready to provide support when needed. These two expectations make grandparents serve as a latent network, the 'Family National Guard' (e.g. Hagestad 1985) waiting on the sidelines, but ready to march in in case of an emergency. A divorce can be regarded as such a situation. Much research has shown that a parental divorce often has a big and negative impact on children and their emotional well-being. It is argued that, in the difficult times following the parental break-up, grandparents can be an extra important source of support and stability for their grandchildren.

Still, very little is known about the influence of grandparents on the well-being of grandchildren after their parents divorced, and existing evidence is often based on small or specific samples. Ruiz and Silverstein (2007) found that greater cohesion with grandparents decreased depressive symptoms with young adult grandchildren, particularly among those raised in single-parent families. Lussier et al. (2002), based on a rather small sample from a stable community in England, found that children's closeness to grandparents was associated with fewer adjustment problems after parental divorce. A study by Henderson et al. (2009) with adolescents in Texas suggests that a close relationship with maternal grandmothers following parental divorce positively affects their psychological functioning.

In our paper, we will use a large random sample to study whether the quality of relationships with grandparents is associated to grandchildren's emotional well-being. More specifically, we ask whether the relationships with grandparents can moderate the impact of a parental divorce on the emotional well-being of grandchildren.

Data: We use data from the multi-actor survey "Divorce in Flanders" (DiF). Flanders is the Dutch speaking, Northern part of Belgium. In the context of this survey, partners from married and divorced anchor couples, and a common child, were interviewed

between October 2009 and December 2010. We select a subsample of 1139 children between 10 and 25 years old still living with at least one parent and with at least one grandparent still alive. Two-thirds of these children have divorced parents, for one third the parents are in their first marriage. We merge information given by the children with the data provided by one or both participating parents.

Dependent variables: We consider positive and negative indicators of children's emotional well-being: self-esteem, depressive feelings, feelings of mastery and life satisfaction. Self-esteem (results presented in this abstract) was measured with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, consisting of 10 items to be rated on a five-point scale. Cronbach's Alpha was 0,86. We used principal components analysis to create a factor with higher scores representing higher levels of self-esteem.

Independent variables: *Grandchild-grandparent relationship quality* was assessed by asking grandchildren, for each grandparent still alive, if they had contact, and if yes to rate their relationship on a five-point scale from very bad to very good. We selected the highest rating among all available grandparents and constructed a variable with 3 categories: not having a good relationship with any grandparent – having a good relationship with at least one grandparent – having a very good relationship with at least one grandparent. *Other independents* include a variable indicated whether the parents are divorced or still in their first marriage, age and sex, educational level of highest educated parent, quality of the relationship with mother and with father and the number of grandparents still alive. For the analysis of children with divorced parents, we add the child's living arrangement, parental conflict and the years passed since the divorce.

Results: Table 1 presents results from analyses with self-esteem-scores as the dependent variable. *Model 1* confirms, in line with earlier evidence, that a parental divorce is negatively associated with children's self-esteem, and *Model 2* shows that the negative effect of the divorce becomes smaller and statistically insignificant when controlling for the quality of the child's relationships with his mother and father.

But *Model 3* reveals that the quality of children's relationship with grandparents also matters, above and beyond the relationships with parents. Compared to the reference group of children having a good relationship with at least one grandparent, children who do not have any good grandparent-relation report lower self-esteem, while children having a very good relationship with a grandparent, on the contrary, report higher scores of self-esteem.

In *Model 4*, we introduce an interaction term between parental divorce and relationship quality with grandparents. The results of this interaction effect are also graphically presented in Figure 1. Especially for children whose parents have divorced, having a very good relationship with a grandparent seems to be associated with higher levels of self-esteem when compared to the reference category of children having a good grandparent relationship. When parents are still in their first marriage, grandchildren not having a good relationship with a grandparent have significant lower levels of self-esteem.

In *Model 5* we only include grandchildren whose parents have divorced. Also when taking into account their living arrangement, the level of parental conflict and the time

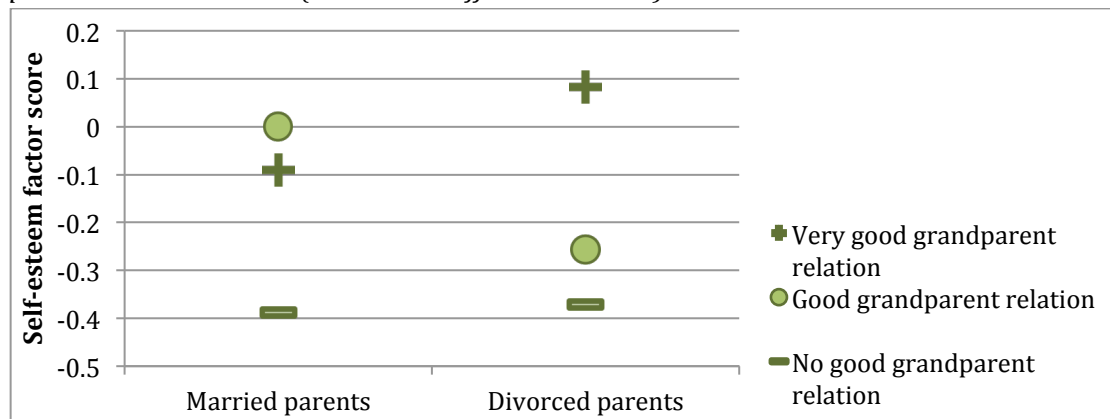
Table 1: Linear regression analyses modeling grandchildren's self-esteem

	All children						With divorced parents			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	B	S. E.	B	S. E.	B	S. E.	B	S. E.	B	S. E.
(Constant)	0.06	0.14	-0.40	0.15 **	-0.42	0.19 *	-0.25	0.20	-0.51	0.26 °
Divorced parents	-0.11	0.07 °	-0.03	0.07	-0.02	0.07	-0.26	0.10 **		
Age	0.02	0.01 **	0.03	0.01 ***	0.03	0.01 ***	0.03	0.01 ***	0.04	0.01 **
Girl	-0.39	0.06 ***	-0.39	0.06 ***	-0.38	0.06 ***	-0.38	0.06 ***	-0.34	0.07 ***
Highest educational level parents (ref.=high)										
Low	-0.15	0.12	-0.15	0.11	-0.14	0.11	-0.15	0.11	-0.17	0.13
Medium	-0.21	0.06 **	-0.19	0.06 **	-0.18	0.06 **	-0.17	0.06 **	-0.24	0.08 **
Relation with mother (ref.=good)										
Not good			-0.40	0.10 ***	-0.40	0.10 ***	-0.40	0.10 ***	-0.36	0.12 **
Very good			0.31	0.06 ***	0.27	0.06 ***	0.27	0.06 ***	0.29	0.08 ***
Relation with father (ref.=good)										
Not good			-0.06	0.07	-0.04	0.07	-0.04	0.07	-0.02	0.09
Very good			0.31	0.07 ***	0.29	0.07 ***	0.29	0.07 ***	0.32	0.10 **
Relation with grandparents (ref.=good)										
Not good					-0.20	0.11 °	-0.39	0.23 °	-0.14	0.13
Very good					0.21	0.06 **	-0.09	0.11	0.34	0.08 ***
Number of grandparents alive					-0.04	0.03	-0.04	0.03	-0.05	0.04
Relation with grandparents * divorce parents										
Divorced parents * not good							0.27	0.26		
Divorced parents * very good							0.43	0.13 **		
Living arrangement (ref.=with mother)										
joint physical custody									-0.01	0.10
with father									0.14	0.13
other									0.01	0.14
Conflict between parents (ref.=occasionally)										
frequent									-0.36	0.08 ***
no contact									0.19	0.17
no information									0.01	0.15
Years since parental divorce									0.00	0.01
Adjusted R Square	0.05		0.12		0.13		0.14		0.17	
N	1080		1076		1076		1076		721	

°p<0,10, *p<0,05, **p<0,01, ***p<0,001

that has passed since the divorce, we see that children having a very good relationship with a grandparent report more self-esteem. Extra analyses (results not shown in table) indicate that when their divorced parents frequently have conflicts, having a very good grandparent relationship has a stronger effect on grandchildren's self-esteem. Although this abstract only presents results for children's self-esteem, regressions using the other well being-indicators yield similar results. Including the quality of relationships with grandparents as a continuous variable or using a score composed of relationship quality and contact frequency as the dependent variable, leads to the same conclusions.

Figure 1: Quality of relationship with grandparents and grandchildren's self-esteem by parental marital status (interaction effect in Model 4)



Conclusions: Our findings show that the strength of grandchild-grandparent relationships is positively associated to different indicators of grandchildren's emotional well-being, particularly when parents are divorced. Although the cross-sectional nature of our data does not allow firm statements on causal bonds, the results suggest that, next to the parents, grandparents can play a role in buffering the negative impact of a parental divorce on grandchildren's emotional well-being. Moreover, these results are in keeping with the idea of grandparents as 'family guards' who are activated in times of need.

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