



Interaction between incarcerated adolescents and their grandparents in the processes of living and ageing

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Abstract

Objective: To describe the interactions between incarcerated adolescents and their grandparents during the processes of living and ageing. *Method:* An exploratory, descriptive, qualitative study was carried out, based on a semi-structured interview with 11 adolescents aged from 17 to 20 incarcerated in a youth detention center in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. The discourse of the adolescents was analyzed based on content themes. *Results:* Categories that were both intertwined and complete among themselves were constructed: a) grandparents as affective support for incarcerated adolescents and b) relationships of reciprocity and healthy coexistence between the adolescents and their grandparents. *Conclusion:* The results showed that despite relational conflicts, the participants perceived the role of their grandparents in their lives as beneficial, as they offer a familial reference space, providing shelter and affection against the anxieties of the adolescents and those related to their families. This form of coexistence was a potential part of the development of young people in conflict with the law, and a favorable environment of mutual exchanges and learning, and as figures continuing the transgenerational family culture. Family separation was mentioned as a recurring and underreported process in the lives of adolescents and their grandparents.

Keywords: Grandparents.
Adolescent. Family Relations.
Aging.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen a number of changes in population demographics. The population has increased, the age structure has changed, and there has also been a relative increase in the number of elderly people. The phenomenon of ageing is connected to swift and complex political, economic and social changes, which often coincide with important changes in family life and family ties¹, meaning that a longer life results in a longer period of coexistence between grandparents and grandchildren.

The social and family changes that stem from the ageing process also bring profound changes to the roles of grandfather and grandmother, with teenagers often being brought up by their grandparents². The reasons behind this new model of family life include teenage pregnancy, divorce, parents who live alone, incarcerated parents, drug abuse, child abuse, domestic violence³, difficulty in establishing bonds with one or both parents, situations at work, parents who are emotionally immature⁴. In such circumstances, grandparents must take on parental responsibilities towards their grandchildren, and sometimes must be fully responsible for their care. However, responsibilities extend well beyond daily care, with grandparents also responsible for financial commitments and obtaining legal custody of the grandchildren⁵.

A survey of children and adolescents with incarcerated family members, in the Brazilian states of São Paulo and Amazonas, and in the Federal District of the country, found that these young people report being in their mother's care, when their father was incarcerated, or under the care of their grandparents, with aunts/uncles and other family members the third and fourth choices⁶.

A systematic review of literature regarding guardian grandparents⁷ reveals that children brought up by grandparents are considered to high risk, with a strong likelihood of problems at school and not being successful in life, due to the probable traumatic events that caused this family configuration.

This means that, in most cases, adolescents in conflict with the law find themselves in situations of social vulnerability. According to the National

Justice Council (or CNJ), some 22,640 young people are currently incarcerated in Brazil, in one of the 461 youth detention centers that exist in Brazil, having committed an infringement of the Law. Of these, 3,921 are provisional inmates, who do not yet have a definite sentence⁸.

Fonseca et al.⁹ show that children and teenagers are vulnerable to environmental and social situations, which often involve routine violence within the family and the school environment, forcing children into work and/or drug trafficking. This situation suggests the absence and/or insufficiency of social apparatus, and the repercussions thereof result in increased opportunities for involvement with crime¹⁰.

The Brazilian Statute of the Child and the Adolescent (or ECA) states that the required age for possible admittance to youth detention centers is between 12 complete years and 20 incomplete years, and that this measure should be seen as a last resort following a series of other possible social and educational measures¹¹. The ECA adds that this incarceration shall take the form of the deprivation of freedom subject to the principles of brevity, exceptionality, and respect for the specific characteristics of the developing individual. The statute therefore addresses the issue of incarcerating the young person, when the infringement of the law involves serious threat or violence against the person; the repeated commission of other serious violations of the law, and/or by repeated and unjustified failure to comply with a previously enforced measure¹¹. In the Brazilian State of Rio Grande do Sul, the state organization responsible for the incarceration of youth offenders is the Socioeducational Service Foundation, (*Fundação de Atendimento Socioeducativo* or FASE), which consists of several regionalized youth detention centers known as *Centros de Atendimento Socioeducativo* (or CASE).

Investment in studies on the life trajectory of adolescents in conflict with the law, and also their affective family ties, representativity and identification with older parental figures helps us to understand the situation in which grandparents establish the concepts of life they have constructed.

Research has also shown that, while grandparents help their grandchildren, they also take care of them

as a result of their parents absence through work, offering financial support and monitoring their daily routines¹². This type of coexistence between different generations, involving affective care, brings benefits to both sides.

The relationship between grandparents and grandchildren, which has the effect of a bond of caring, and includes both emotional support and the provision of resources, is known as grandparenthood. Grandparenthood, which translates into an exchange between grandparents and grandchildren, is a fairly recent phenomenon, resulting from increased life spans and characterized by the execution of decision-making roles based on a dual condition of mother/father-grandmothers/grandfathers, in an intergenerational transmission process, and is related to the development of the subject, namely the grandchild¹³.

The transmission of principles, the sharing of life stories and even of habits and culinary recipes, represents a type of exchange of experiences, so that the older person feels more valued¹⁴. In addition, solidarity between generations, namely between the elderly and the young, can also help to resolve individualism in relationships, which arises from the tensions of coexistence to which we are accustomed¹⁵. The study also shows that taking care of grandchildren, the children of parents who have separated, passed away or simply no longer wish to take responsibility for rearing their offspring, allows the grandparents to experience satisfaction, well-being, love and happiness². Because of this coexistence between different and often distant generations, the study of the conceptions of incarcerated adolescents regarding their relationships established with their grandparents throughout their lives is highly significant.

Within this scenario, the main goal of the present study was to understand the interaction between incarcerated adolescents and their grandparents, as part of the process of living and ageing.

METHOD

This is an exploratory, descriptive and qualitative research study, using a qualitative approach,

developed in a CASE unit in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, where there were 68 adolescents who had infringed the law. A total of 11 incarcerated adolescents, aged between 17 and 20, took part in the study. The following inclusion criteria were established: adolescents with a final sentence defined by the Brazilian Juvenile Court, who had been definitively sentenced to incarceration and who had lived with their grandparents at some point in their lives. Temporarily incarcerated adolescents were excluded, as they could leave the system at any time. The definition of the sample also used the criterion of theoretical saturation, as proposed by Fontanella et al.¹⁶.

In-depth interviews were employed, as these are considered useful in qualitative research, as they assume the possibility of the transmission of issues involving subjectivity as contained in the coexistence of the subjects, and also their singularities¹⁷.

The data was collected through individualized interviews by a single interviewer, in February and March 2018. The study used a social and demographic questionnaire to characterize the participants, and also guiding questions to meet the aims of the survey, including the type of offence committed, whether drugs were used, the type of coexistence with parents and grandparents, the importance of these people in their lives, and what they think of ageing and its meaning. The interviews took place on the CASE premises, in a suitable room, to preserve the confidentiality of those involved. Absolute secrecy was applied to the data obtained and with the permission of the people involved, the interviews were recorded and transcribed in full, for subsequent encoding and analysis, with the guarantee that this information would be destroyed at the end of the survey.

The participation of the adolescents in the study was entirely voluntary, and was formalized through the signing of a Free and Informed Consent Form.

The responses of the adolescents underwent content analysis¹⁸ carried out by a panel of three evaluators, one of whom was the interviewer and two of whom were well versed in the fundamentals of intergenerational relationships and also experienced in content analysis, especially the skills of categorizing,

comparison, and seeking agreements among systems of themes and categories. Content analysis consisted of three phases: the first phase, namely pre-analysis, consisted of the construction of the corpus through a skim reading of all the responses, seeking to identify meaning units (verbal utterances of any size involving statements about the relationships of the adolescents with their grandparents). The second phase involved division into categories under the supervision of the experts. Finally, in the third phase there was a general review of this separation into categories, and the final treatment of results, inference and interpretation¹⁸. The participants were all identified by the letter A (for adolescent) followed by a number, according to the order of the interviews, to ensure the total anonymity of those involved. This research study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Universidade de Passo Fundo, under opinion statement No. 2.408.199.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The ages of those involved ranged from 17 to 20. For most of these adolescents, entry into FASE occurred at the age of 16 years old, while five of the 11 adolescents interviewed were repeat offenders. The crimes committed by these incarcerated adolescents were: theft, drug trafficking, and crimes against the life of others, including murder and first-degree murder. With regard to criminal activities in their families, eight of the adolescents reported that they had family members had also had problems with the law. Out of the 11 adolescents interviewed, five knew only their mothers, as either their fathers had died or the couple had separated. The self-reported family income was between one and two Brazilian Minimum Wages (MW), for most of the households of the adolescents; in the others, the family income was less than one MW.

The discourse of the adolescents was then subjected to content analysis, and was then divided into categories that overlapped yet completed each other: a) grandparents as affective support for incarcerated adolescents, and b) relationships of reciprocity and healthy coexistence between adolescents and their grandparents.

Grandparents as affective support for incarcerated adolescents

Based on the reports, it can be seen that the grandparents are figures who are present in the family unit, and also that grandparenthood¹⁹ occupies a prominent position within the family, sometimes even taking greater importance than the image of the parents.

In contrast, this information shows, in some cases, a gender gap in relationships established throughout life, with women, be they mothers or grandmothers, playing a visible role:

“I lived with my grandmother, who brought me up, for a long time. It was a very good experience. [...] They (the grandparents) treated me as if I was their son [...]. She (the grandmother) does not want me following that other path, using drugs and living on pavements like a beggar” (A2).

“I lived alone with my mother. However, my grandmother would always go there to give me guidance [...] My mother would speak to me, but it would go in one ear and out through the other. I wouldn't listen to her. My grandmother would also come and talk to me. I didn't listen to either of them” (A11).

The statements of A2 and A11 showed the influence that these grandmothers have on adolescents, results consistent with specialized Brazilian and international literature, which shows the maternal prevalence in relationships with grandparents^{1,3,10,20}. According to A2, this substitution exceeds practical and instrumental limits, being inserted in the imagination of the grandchild, and representing an important reference for the grandchild, reported in the mention of the consideration the grandmother has for the child. In the opinion of A11, the advice given by the grandmother is still remembered to this day.

Considering these statements, it can be understood that, possibly, the echo reverberates as a result of the fact that intergenerational relations can also be marked by differences and conflicts, a healthy form of coexistence, as shown in a study carried out

with adolescents aged between 15 and 18 years old, in which benefits were found, as differences and conflicts are important for setting limits on behavior and the operating customs of the family unit²¹.

Regarding their conditions of incarceration, the adolescents accept the attempts that the grandmothers have made to restrain their conduct, which is a subliminal way of enforcing limits and values²⁰, and is a long-standing aspiration of grandmothers, which in the past proved to be ineffective, as described in the perception of the grandchildren. The paradox of this type of coexistence between adults and adolescents is a change that is necessary in order to adjust their relationships²².

It was also mentioned that there are many specific differences in the method and type of coexistence between generations, these being characteristic of the level of maturity and experiences of different lives, together with stereotypes produced by society and then reproduced by the adolescents:

“With my grandmother, sometimes she has a turn. You know, she is getting on a bit” (A2).

“They are a bit stubborn, and a bit hard to handle, you know?” (A11).

“Older men, they just want to give orders, because they are not as flexible as someone younger” (A10).

The statements made by the adolescents show prejudice in relationships that are also full of negative connotations, reflecting the stigma with regard to elderly people that is present in society and in many families. This result is backed up by studies that confirm the negative view of grandparents within intergenerational coexistence, which is also impregnated with stereotypes that are firmly ingrained in the collective memory²³. Torres et al.²⁴ commented that this is a cultural process where people apply prejudice within intergenerational coexistence, as this is how they see the world. Along similar lines, the research study made by Calderón²⁵, with incarcerated adolescents, showed that studies focusing on intersubjectivity are essential for the understanding of the individual and social dimensions of adolescents in conflict with the law.

Relations of coexistence are established within the family unit. Like parents, grandparents also have an educational role in their relationship with the grandchildren. With regard to this influence, adolescent A4, aged 20, mentions the educational character and general assistance provided by parents and grandparents:

“My mother, my father, the people who have helped me most, my grandmother too [...] With my grandmother and my late grandfather, it was a good experience [...]. I learnt a lot through my grandfather and, had I listened to most of the things he said, maybe I wouldn't be here” (A4)

With regard to the educational process and the coexistence between grandparents and teenagers, the statement of A4 shows that family relationships have been based on an interaction between parents, grandchildren, and grandparents, marked by beneficial influence^{19,20} and affective ties that add value to life experiences in different generations²³.

Several changes have occurred within the makeup of the families. Often, grandparents are responsible for caring for their grandchildren^{2,26}. However, the statement made by a participant shows conflicting family relationships:

“So, I started to curse at my grandmother, you know? Then she got very cross with me, and then I went to live with my mother [...]. Later I went back to live with my grandmother, and she did not like me trafficking drugs or robbing [...]. So, I lived with my aunt for a while [...] and then went back to live with my grandmother” (A2).

The statement made by A2 shows a situation of conflict amid disharmonious relations, which suggests an incompatibility of social and cultural values between the adolescent grandson, a thief and drug dealer, and his grandparents. A lack of flexibility on the part of the adolescent in the light of the statements made by his grandparents can be observed. The only choice was to flee, to move house, maybe at the insistence of his grandparents in discussing his living and coexisting with criminal offences.

Relations of reciprocity and healthy coexistence between adolescents and grandparents

The narratives reinforce the link with, and attachment to, the family, praising the affective involvement and ties between adolescents and their loved ones who despite the difficulties, are always loved and included in future expectations. One of the participants describes the meaning of the affective ties with loved ones, which also represent a reference when trying to change behavior and the pleasure of occasional coexistence:

“My godmother came to see me, and when I looked at her I wept, as I had not seen her for six months. My grandmother is very important: everyone is important for me, as they are, sort of, part of my life [...] My grandmother is already elderly, and I am very much afraid that something will happen to her, a true fact, something like that, so the people who are important to me are like my treasures, my sources of energy, you know? Like God, Jesus, things like that [...] And I feel very happy, you know? [...] I go there every Saturday, so I spent and spend time with elderly people like that [...] and I intend to spend time with my grandmother for a long time yet” (A11).

Relationships between different age brackets of the population produce ties based on affection, care and the social and psychological life between those involved. In the statement made by A11, the feelings with regard to his grandmother take on proportions wider in scope, where positive feelings are prevalent. Apart from harmonious relationships, the possibility of losing a loved one brings fear and worry, as there is quality in this relationship, as well as emotional involvement and a family structure that is closely linked to well-being throughout life²⁷.

With regard to reciprocity within a positive family environment, the statement made by A9, aged 18, who has been incarcerated as a result of robbery, reveals his perception of trust, friendship, hope, and psychological support with regard to family members:

“I consider that the people who are most important to me are my mother, my late brother, my grandfather and my friend D. My grandfather

is really great [...], I came over on a family visit and at home he started to cry, he cried in front of me, and said he did not want me here anymore, and asked me to change. I am afraid of losing my grandfather, and be in here [...] I always take grandpa's chair, I go there and put the chair in its place, Grandpa sits there and I leave him alone, or stay there talking to him, but at six o'clock in the morning I need to make him some mate tea.” (A9).

The literature^{10,13,23} confirms this reciprocity as perceived, in some cases, in the relationships between grandparents and the grandchildren they care for, highlighting the importance of the reproduction of the family culture between different generations, thus upholding a healthy and active process of ageing of the grandparents.

Within a family context, there is a constant exchange between the different psychological realities of each family member. The essential roles are constantly alternating and being reconstructed. The method of healthy coexistence with other people means that bad habits must be constantly overcome, and new habits are being acquired and legitimated.

“I went away to live with them (my grandparents), and then I briefly stopped having a wildlife, living just to party and things [...] And then I went to live with them, and they exercised more control over me [...]. Then I started to go back to study and work, and then I started working again, with my grandfather. My grandfather was a construction foreman [...] So all my family, they all gave me a lot of support in here [...] I have great affinity for my great-grandmother as well, and also get on well with my grandparents” (A8).

The destructuring of the family is a recurrent process subjacent to the lives of teenagers, and the grandparents appear as a kind of reference, to ease this instability, be it positive or negative, as they are physically present and also have life experience, including experience in groups. This kind of coexistence is also an option within the search for quality in forming the personalities of young people in conflict with the law, and an environment which encourages mutual support and exchanges.

“[...] He (referring to his grandfather) taught me tons of things. He taught me... And I felt calmer when I was with him. When I was with him, I was calmer, and did not think about the streets so much” (A10).

“I mean, I used to spend time with my grandmother, I mean I still spend time with her, yeah? She very old, and she sees me, you know? And this makes me very happy, you know? Because, you know, she comes over every Saturday, *“even if I take the bus, I go there every Saturday”*, so I did and do spend time with her, she is very important to me” (A12)

In confirmation, a study carried out in the Federal District, appraising the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren according to their perceptions, found, in the category of feelings, a result showing that the grandchildren tend to bring out the personal qualities of their grandparents, constructing different types of relations between them. In the ‘significance of advanced age’ category, some of the grandchildren showed that they were unaware of what the term meant, while other people did indeed have some idea of what advanced age would be, in their minds²⁸.

According to Almeida²⁷, when there is intergenerational contact, affective exchanges are then established. In daily life, the subjectivity of the child or the adolescent is created and reveals itself, through interaction between one’s own self and the important people within the family unit, be they grandparents, father, mother, and siblings.

In this context, a study carried out with 30 elderly people who took part in a further study product at the University of Maturity at the Universidade Federal do Tocantins, 70% of whom have legal and financial custody of their grandchildren, showed, in declarations made by the participants, that having an extended role has a positive effect, through a feeling of personal renewal and that one has done one’s duty, but may also have a negative effect, through possible conflicts and financial burden²⁹.

The statement by A8 shows the moments of emotional approximation and interaction between grandparents and grandchild, and here we see a

feeling of transmission of certain family values, and of strengthened generational bonds. It is quite likely that the “control” as exercised by the grandparents was echoed in the conduct of the teenager, as the style of exercising grandparenthood caused changes in the behavior of the grandchild. Thus, grandparents have an important role to play in the transmission of family values to adolescents^{5,30}, in the new family configurations. The experiences of A8 demonstrate a possibility that extends well beyond the support given to the grandchildren by the grandparents. These are affective ties that have been established and have become stronger, overcoming situational and socioeconomic difficulties and also important components for a condition of living which is detached from social or individual vulnerabilities. Stronger interpersonal ties, in the intergenerational dimension, make a positive contribution towards the process through which the adolescents live and age. The operation of the family context, during life, reflects the ability that individual people have, to adapt to challenges and limitations of the social environment and also the events of the life cycle^{28,31}.

Limitations of the present study include the fact that it involved a small group of adolescents of very similar realities, which means that generalization is not possible. Further studies in other sociocultural and economic contexts would be of value.

CONCLUSION

The results of the present study show that the participants consider the roles of the grandparents in their lives as beneficial and healthy, even with relational conflicts. They occupy a space of family reference and coexistence that has not been filled by the parents, providing care, affection and support in situations of family distress and problems characteristic of adolescence, contributing to the construction of the personal identity of the adolescent. Elderly people are also mentioned as being bearers of the transgenerational family culture among family members, thereby generating some homeostasis in relationships within the family.

It is also important to stress the key role played by women who, within the overall scenario in which there

is a need to assume custody of their grandchildren, can also find themselves in a situation of vulnerability through their own impairment, especially with regard to their physical and emotional health.

The dialogue with participants showed the results of the ageing process and of increased lifespan, as the number of families with the presence of elderly

people is steadily growing significantly, especially with regard to the universe of intersubjective relationships as established between young people and the elderly. From this standpoint, it is useful to understand these familial and intergenerational relationship dynamics within their own contexts and specificities, especially through more profound studies involving a greater number of subjects.

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