CONTEMPORARY GRANDPARENTHOOD.
STUDIES ON PROVIDING CHILD CARE AND THE IMPACT OF DIVORCE

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ABSTRACT

Grandparents and grandchildren often play an important role in each other’s life. Yet, there has for long been relatively little scientific evidence on grandparenthood. As a compilation of five empirical studies focusing on the provision of grandchild care and on the role of grandparents in divorced families, the aim of this thesis was to contribute to our knowledge of grandparenthood in contemporary families.

Results based on data from the European Social Survey (round 2) showed that parents’ reliance on grandparental child care is not only influenced by individual characteristics and the supply of formal child care, but also by the cultural context. Those living in regions with more conservative norms about family and gender roles were found to be more inclined to use grandparents as the main source of child care for their children rather than formal alternatives.

The studies based on data from the multi-actor survey Divorce in Flanders demonstrated that the impact of divorce reaches beyond the nuclear families of the divorcing partners and their children. Grandparents are involved too. Results showed that the majority of (grand)parents provided their divorcing son or daughter with support. But grandparents can also be affected emotionally, especially if it concerned the divorce of a son and if there were grandchildren involved. Grandchildren from divorced parents were found to have less frequent contact with grandparents than grandchildren whose parents were still married, and differences were more pronounced for contacts with paternal grandparents. It was shown that this is closely linked to the post-divorce residence arrangements for the grandchildren. Grandchildren whose parents are divorced have especially less frequent contact with the grandparents on the side of the non-residential parent, and in the majority of cases this is the father. Yet, two studies indicated that grandparents can play a significant role in buffering the impact of a parental divorce on grandchildren. The quality of grandchild—grandparent relationships was found to be positively associated with grandchildren’s well-being, and compared to grandchildren in intact families, having a very good relationship with a grandparent was especially valuable for grandchildren with divorced parents. Moreover, this was found for good relationships with maternal, but also with paternal grandparents. This suggests that grandchildren in divorced families can benefit from good relationships with grandparents on both sides of the family.