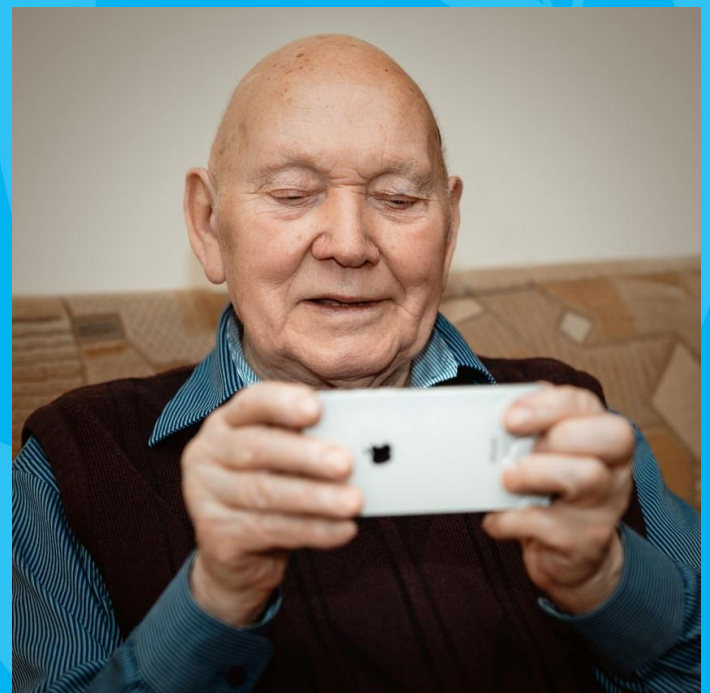


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Staying in touch across space and time: Polish grandparents, geographic distance and the COVID-19 pandemic

How to bolster family ties across geographical distance? If your New Year resolution has been to improve relationships with your significant others amidst the pandemic, we have some expert advice for you. Polish grandparents with migrant families share their strategies for quality time together and effective online communication with their grandchildren, the younger and the older alike.



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Staying in touch across space and time: Polish grandparents, geographic distance and the COVID-19 pandemic

Weronika Kloc-Nowak

Introduction

Sustaining kin networks is a vital part of the experience of aging well. Grandparents visiting their adult children and grandchildren abroad fulfil multiple functions, contributing to family cohesion, cultural transmission and care provision at crucial moments. However, these face-to-face meetings are often hindered by economic and legal constraints (Wyss and Nedelcu 2019). To overcome this, migrant family members who wish to stay connected with their kin at a distance need to rely on information technologies (ICT) and communication practices. For the older ones, these are often challenging but also rewarding (Baldassar and Wilding 2020).

Transnational families put great effort into maintaining ties with family members left behind. Migrant children often feel very attached to their grandparents and talk with them regularly, relying on phone and computer technologies. One of the key factors here is transmission of the heritage language, enabling children brought up

abroad to communicate with their grandparents and other kin online and during visits in the country of origin (Sime and Moskal 2015). The reliance of migrant families on grandparent's childcare provision evolves over life course, and so do the place and length of visits, usually starting with intense babysitting in the country of stay, turning to summer holidays at the grandparents' place in the country of origin (Ryan and D'Angelo 2018).

Data

To understand better the experience of [*Grandparenting at a distance*](#), I conducted 8 focus group interviews (FGIs) with Polish grandparents. Due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the FGIs took place in two rounds. The first 4 were conducted face-to-face, using personal protective measures, in July 2020, when Poland opened up after the first lockdown period. The second round of 4 were organised online on a popular videoconferencing platform in March 2021, during the third, massive wave of COVID-19

infections. The participants' age ranged from 50 to 81 years, based on which they were grouped into pre- and postretirement age groups. The interviewees varied with respect to the number of grandchildren from 1 to 11. There were 5 groups of female and 3 of male participants, resident in 3 Polish regions. In 6 groups all grandparents had at least one grandchild resident abroad or at least at a distance larger than 25 km within Poland, while 2 local only FGIs served as a quasi-control group.

Biographical time: reflections on the grandchildren growing up

Firstly, I will present the findings along the biographical timeline, that is how the grandparenting experience evolves with the grandchildren's age. Physical contact and touch are very important ways of displaying affection, which was expressed the most vividly in the discussions of older grandmothers and grandfathers. A distinct feature of the smallest grandchildren is being always ready for a hug; predilection that they may lose as early as by the age of 5, according to some participants. Online communication with them is a valuable opportunity, but only a substitute of physical co-presence:

There is no hugging, there is no hair stroking, it is so different. I kiss the screen, but it is not the same.

FGI3, women, 65+, distant/transnational

The normative expectation of not interfering (May, Mason, and Clarke 2012) and following the rules set by the children's parents were quite strong among my participants, especially men and face-to-face discussants. Yet the transnational grandparents found the infrequency of their meetings with the grandchildren an excuse for spoiling them:

If you can't see them much, pamper them as much as possible, and then let the mother deal with it. If you can't see each other much, you have to make up for lost time.

FGI6, women, 50-64, transnational

As the grandchildren grow older, the grandparents have to be prepared for more active ways of spending time together. While the local grandparents, especially older ones, may become tired with such demanding activities (one example was a granddaughter recreating her P.E. classes with her grandma), the transnational grandparents mobilize during their rare visits to make the time together intense and memorable, as illustrated by this grandfather with 2 granddaughters abroad:

We come and do a show. With the grandchildren we sit down, we stick, we make sculptures, we make paintings, we draw comics, we swim, we ride bikes, we just go crazy. Usually these trips last a week, a week at most, but this week is so intense that it's like a week that turns into a month.

FIG7, men, 50-64, transnational

In early childhood remote communication with grandparents is mediated and controlled by the parents. Some participants gave examples of preschoolers able to make a call, others – complained about the parents' strict no screen rules which limited their occasions to see the grandchildren online. However, when grandchildren become adolescents, family conversations may feel enforced upon them, making grandparents feel resentful:

If I call, she always answers, but my point is that she could sometimes call of her own free will.

FGI1, women 65+, local

A strategy to sustain the relationship was to engage in conversations repeatedly and actively, to keep up with the young ones' lives. One of the most experienced grandmothers shared in the interview:

I admit that the older grandchildren get a bit distant... I rather provoke a conversation... tell me about your studies... what your work consists of.... I myself refer to this, but they tell me eagerly... some things I know, some things I don't know...I say, I will ask 10 times, and you have to answer me 10 times.

FG15, women, 65+, distant/transnational

Devoting full attention and showing genuine interest in the lives of the grandchildren were a recurring strategy, applicable equally to afternoons spent with the local grandchildren and to the remote communication with the ones living abroad.

Pandemic time: evolving experience of separation from family

In the first round of FGIs most of the participants reported the experience of strict isolation, which limited their meetings even with the local grandchildren. The ones with families abroad reported cancelled Easter visits and summer holidays and postponed family celebrations (e.g. baptism of a baby born abroad).

By March 2021, grandparents had more experience of dealing with the coronavirus in their family. Meetings with kin abroad had been blocked for over a year due to the interviewees' own illness, being in a risk group or avoiding travel-related quarantine. This was especially painful for the participants whose grandchildren were born

abroad shortly before or during the pandemic and with whom they had not managed to meet face-to-face. If these were their first grandchildren, these participants declared they differed from the group, as if their experience of grandparenthood was not yet complete. One grandfather who used to visit his older granddaughter at least once per year, was afraid he would not be able to establish a comparably strong bond with the younger one, whom he has not met face-to-face so far (almost 2 years at the time of the interview). This participant felt videocalls served well to sustain the bond, provided the grandchildren remember the grandparents who had met with them in person. Yet he doubted the grandchildren would connect well with someone they knew only from the screen.

Skype video helps a bit, but it's the contact, when the granddaughter remembers the grandfather or grandmother, when they had been there... and then it's perceived quite differently.

FG17, men 65+, distant/transnational

Paradoxically, as for some people life became less busy during the pandemic lockdown, they had more time for family and conversations. Examples of such situations included a closed nursery, making the grandchild abroad available for calls throughout the day, or a grandmother in Poland on furlough, prompting her migrant daughter to call her more often during weekdays. One adult granddaughter, studying abroad, could stay at her grandparents' after Christmas, as her classes were online and she could participate in them from Poland.

Recommendations for maintaining good relations through ICT

Electronic devices and Internet connection are the prerequisite for modern remote communication. Younger family members, including adult grandchildren have been vital for setting up the infrastructure for some of my participants. A striking example was one of the oldest interviewees, who received a precious gift from his adult children and grandchildren some time in 2020:

They gave me an ipad, because they wanted to keep in touch...well that's almost every day now.

FIG8, men, 65+, distant/transnational

Family members on call were named, along with an IT course for local senior citizens, as a source of instruction and skills to use the ICT devices.

However, maintaining family bonds requires also a 'social software' in the form of attitude and practices. A repeated piece of advice was being systematic and establishing a routine of calling and texting. As everyone's time is usually limited, one young transnational grandmother recommended practicing short calls, to get the 'snapshots' of each other's everyday life like the walk to the kindergarten. Following the current events, supported by shared photos, gives the feeling of participation. Listening attentively, showing interest in the grandchild's activities allows the grandparents to 'live their lives'. In addition, to establish strong bonds with grandchildren, one needs a good relationship with one's own children, so they will 'allow you to be the grandparent you want to be'.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic affected heavily the family lives. Initially everyone, even the spatially close family members, were separated. Those who had established routines of remote communication were well equipped for this difficult period, while others had to learn new skills. As the society gradually adapted to the pandemic, the grandparents returned to meetings with local families and support networks, even at the cost of spreading the infection among each other. For many grandparents in transnational families, and to some extent for those with grandchildren in distant regions of Poland, the period of not seeing each other in person prolonged painfully. Systematic remote conversations using the preferred method (ranging from phone calls to sharing content in family groups in Internet communicators) have been for many a tool for following the family members' lives and expressing affection for them. These practices, covered by Baldassar and Wilding's (2020) term of digital kinning, sustain existing family bonds across geographic distance. Yet the future will show if they suffice to establish emotional ties with the newborn grandchildren as the generations remain spatially separated.

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