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EXPLORING RECIPROCITY IN GRANDPARENT-GRANDCHILDREN CARE: THE CASE OF MDLANKOMO LOCATION, LIBODE IN THE EASTERN CAPE, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

In South Africa, there appears to be a paradigm shift where the majority of the country's children are taken care of by their grandparents. This article explores the states of reciprocity existing in grandparent-grandchildren care in Mdlankomo location, Libode of the Eastern Cape of South Africa. The study utilised a qualitative approach to explore the perceptions of grandparents on reciprocity between them and their grandchildren. Nine grandparents were interviewed. The findings revealed that grandparents manifested love for their grandchildren, who also reciprocated the gesture; delinquent behaviours of grandchildren exasperated their grandparents; the conflict between grandparents and grandchildren ensued when children suspected the abuse of their children's welfare grant by their grandparents. The researchers urge the Department of Social Development and NGOs working in the children's domain to strengthen the programmes for the well-being of older persons and children.

Keywords: reciprocity; best interests of children; aging and older persons; child delinquency; child welfare grants

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The care of grandchildren by their grandparents has significant socio-cultural and historical relevance in many African countries, including South Africa. In fact, situations such as the pandemic of HIV/AIDS that claimed many lives in the last few decades among several African countries led to the phenomenon of grandparent care being vastly increased. Although the South African childcare environment attracts a lot of policy support through the various

children welfare grants, whether foster care or child support grants, the role of communities remains a very important consideration.

In South Africa, it is a common practice for children to live separately from their biological parents (Folorunsho & Tanga, 2021). In Libode, for example, the phenomenon of grandparents raising their grandchildren is normalised and considered a socio-culturally routine phenomenon. The researchers, therefore, considered it important to empirically investigate the nature of this relationship, including its benefits and challenges, in Libode. It also needs to be kept in mind that these grandparents are a vulnerable population and may have been forced to care for their grandchildren involuntarily and due to circumstances beyond their control, such as their own living and untraceable children leaving their offsprings with them. Apart from the social grants, there are no parenting support programmes specifically developed for this type of caregiving (Kang'ethe, Muggedya & Nomngcoyiya, 2022).

Grandparents largely face challenges in their caregiving tasks, such as aging, health hazards, delinquent behaviour of their grandchildren, and accusations by their grandchildren of misusing grants meant for their upkeep (Soganga, 2019). Kang'ethe (2018), reveals that grandparents often face some forms of oppression that deny them the opportunity of gaining some respite. This is supported by the work of Soganga (2019), who indicate that in some quarters, especially in an environment deprived of caregiving resources, elderly caregivers could be driven to an early grave.

For some grandparents, perhaps the biggest stressor is the financial hurdle in that they are not only taking care of their grandchildren but are also expected to provide for their own needs (Motsa & Morojele, 2022). While the negative health outcomes experienced by these elderly grandparents because of their age may impact their ability to provide proper care for their grandchildren (Lumsdaine & Verneer, 2015). The nature of relationships between children and their grandparent carers are also affected by the children's behaviours. In a study by Malinga-Musamba (2015), grandparent carers indicated that at times, children display some disturbing behaviours that include rebellion and withdrawal, which might be related to feelings of inadequacy, rejection, and a sense of being unloved. Also, these grandparent carers reported that such behaviours are frustrating and demoralising for them and affect their caregiving experience detrimentally (Malinga-Musamba, 2015).

Looking at the other side of the coin, DiGessa, Glaser and Tinker (2016), are of the view that the care of grandchildren can be wholly rewarding as grandparents can enjoy a closer relationship with their grandchildren. This is important, especially during their sunset years when they cannot socialize with their peers, nor attract a sizeable number of friends (Kang'ethe, 2018). Surprisingly, some grandparents contend that one of the benefits of raising their grandchildren is the opportunity to be parents again (Lee & Blitz, 2016). Furthermore, some carers may feel that they are more experienced parents now and could provide appropriate care for their grandchildren with ease (Lee & Blitz, 2016). Jennings, Farrell and Kobayashi (2021) found that caregiving grandparents have better cognitive functions than non-caregiving grandparents because providing care for grandchildren could stimulate cognitive functioning.

Also, caregiving by the grandparents provides an opportunity to inculcate moral and ethical values in their grandchildren's lives (Buchan, 2015). In many traditional societies in Africa, grandparents have been beacons and vanguards of morality and shepherd their grandchildren through all aspects of socialisation. It is culturally acceptable, very often, for the parents of the children to place their trust in the children's grandparents to shape and discipline them to prepare them for a successful future, as grandparents still have vitality and wisdom to share. For example, they teach grandchildren about the virtues embedded in cultures and religions, such as embracing the values of gratitude and stewardship, as well as how to develop the qualities of good citizenship. According to Rogers (2021), grandparents are also a source of recreation for children, because they facilitate fun activities and storytelling. According to Strom and Strom (2015), these carers can model and encourage self-reflection in their grandchildren; encourage open expression of their thoughts, emotions, and worries; as well as undertake self-assessment when dealing with behavioural issues.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

There is a need to explore whether children and their grandparents manifest any form of mutuality and reciprocity in their relationship, as well as the virtues and possible challenges of such a relationship. This is because child caregiving, although socio-culturally supposed to be a responsibility of their biological parents, has to an increasingly large extent in countries such as South Africa been placed in the hands of their grandparents (Sepulveda *et al.*, 2017), who may not always be well placed to undertake such caregiving because of challenges stemming from aging and other socio-economic circumstances. Since grandparents have needs those children can fulfil, such as running errands, fetching water, bathing their grandparents, washing clothes, cooking as well as being a source of fun and company, it is important to investigate the nature of such a relationship in Libode. This is important because the government of South Africa has not initiated any grandparent-grandchildren assistance programme that can strengthen the bond between these two groups and address an array of socio-economic as well as psychosocial deficits that they may be facing. This study can therefore be a platform to advocate for such a programme to be officially launched.

STUDY AIM AND OBJECTIVES

This study aimed to explore reciprocity in the grandparent-grandchildren care relationship. Data were collected from the grandparent caregivers and provided insight into the different dynamics, experiences, and perceptions of how grandparents live with their grandchildren. The outcome could be important in that grandparents and children under their care could receive the necessary family and community support.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Attachment theory

The care relationship between grandchildren and their grandparents can be examined through the application of attachment theory. This is a theory of personality development in the context of close relationships derived from the work of John Bowlby in the 1980s (Howe, 2011). This theory provides a basis for the theoretical understanding of the phenomenon of grandparents

caring for their grandchildren. The theory emphasises the mutual and reciprocal relationship between children and their caregivers to ascertain whether the children will achieve optimal growth and development (Holmes, 2015).

Attachment itself

Parents provide an attachment bond that ensures emotional, social, psychological, and cognitive development (Holmes, 2014). This is relevant to the current study because children need a strong relationship with their caregivers to establish a healthy emotional bond that will ensure healthy human development. This is important because behavioural problems and delinquency have been documented to develop if the child fails to receive his/her mother's love, warmth, and cordial engagement (Malinga-Musamba, 2015).

However, in some instances, certain aspects of behaviours might influence the formation of an alternative attachment between grandparents and their grandchildren, such as the bad experiences of the child with the primary attachment figure (biological parent). For example, the phenomenon of a child neglected by his/her parent might also affect the relationship between a child and a secondary attachment caregiver figure, which in this case is the grandparent.

Both children and their grandparents experience mixed feelings regarding their attachment. DiGessa *et al.* (2016), found that some grandparent caregivers reported positive feelings such as joy from positively caring for their grandchildren and witnessing their accomplishments. Some grandparents reported that they were experiencing a greater sense of purpose in their lives. Hence, the theory indicates that grandparents must find effective and meaningful ways to form attachments to their grandchildren. This is because the quality of attachment has implications for children's social and emotional development (Sprecher, 2013).

Love

Secondly, the theory provides for a strong relationship that would strengthen the love between the child and the caregiver. This love for the child is critical for social, psychological, emotional and cognitive wellbeing (Bretherton, 1995.). This is applicable in the current study because children need love to build their self-esteem and self-determination, and can provide a basis for confident exploration. Shehan (2016) contends that love and strong relationships can be formed between grandparents and grandchildren when multi-generational family situations are approached with openness and respect.

Trust, safety, and security

Thirdly, the theory highlights the need for trust. Trust goes hand in hand with security (Gully, 2014). When a child-parent relationship is secure, children trust that they can get help from their caregivers when they need it (Gillath, Karantzas & Fraley, 2016). This is because the caregiver is seen as a secure base from which the child can begin to explore his/her world (Marrone, 2014). The theory emphasises that children who are secure in their relationships would easily seek contact with kinship carers when under stress. The author further stated that strong attachment bonds between grandparents and their children are essential to their overall development with secure attachment, providing all essential psychological components to meet

their developmental needs and hence ensuring future success (Ryan & Coughlan, 2013). Additionally, the theory posits that a child's sense of security depends on a caregiver being available and protective.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research approach and design

The study utilised a qualitative research approach that provided a clear perspective on the phenomenon of grandparents caring for their grandchildren, from the perspectives of the grandparents themselves. This approach also enabled the identification of beliefs, attitudes, concerns, reasons or motives, emotions, and experiences related to the support provided by grandchildren to their grandparents.

The study utilised an exploratory and a descriptive design. The researchers selected an exploratory design as advised by Akhtar (2016), to gain an insight into the phenomenon as well as to develop an initial familiarity with the issue of grandparents raising grandchildren as well as their mutual relationship. The study was descriptive and took a cue from Kumar (2014), to describe in some more or greater detail the reciprocity existing in grandparent-grandchildren care.

Research domain and justification of choice

The study took place at Mdlankomo Location in Libode under Nyandeni Local Municipality, OR Tambo District Municipality in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. The phenomenon of grandparents raising their grandchildren was normalised and considered a socio-culturally relevant phenomenon in the study area.

Study population

A total of nine grandparents shared their feelings, perceptions, and experiences regarding their caregiving. These participants, aged 55 and above, had cared for or were still caring for, their grandchildren.

Sampling procedure

The sample size was guided by the principle of saturation. This means that the researchers would stop further investigation when they felt that the outcome of an investigation from subsequent participants was repeating what the previous participant shared (Creswell, 2014). The researchers adopted the non-probability sampling method which means that the researchers choose those samples that were deemed to be data-rich (Nayeem & Huma, 2017).

Data collection

The study conducted in-depth interviews to understand the experiences of grandparents and the meaning they make of caring for their grandchildren. The principal researcher visited the prospective participants at their homes to recruit them as well as to explain the purpose of the research and arrange interview schedules at a time suitable for them. The specific sampling technique utilised was the snowball technique (Creswell, 2014). First, the researcher contacted the participants whom she knew to be caring for their grandchildren and they in turn referred

her to other grandparents-caregivers to be potential participants. Each interview took about 30-40 minutes. The principal researcher guided the interviews at certain times when leading questions were asked. The principal researcher asked the participants to explain the nuances pertaining to their relationship with their grandchildren.

The purpose of in-depth interviewing was not to test a hypothesis but to gain insights into the understanding of the grandparents' lived experiences. During the interviews, the principal researcher kept three personal things in mind: (1) the researcher kept her ego in check; (2) she avoided being at the centre of the discussion; and (3) she tried to be as neutral as possible, both in her speech, temperament and verbal cues (Morris, 2015).

Data analysis

The researchers used thematic content analysis, which Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019 define as a set of techniques used to analyse textual data and elucidate themes; its key characteristic is the systemic process of coding, an examination of meaning and provision of a description of the social reality through the emergence of themes. The themes that the researchers identified and arranged provided in-depth information and insight into reciprocity in grandparent-grandchildren care.

Ethical and legal requirements

The principal researcher obtained ethical clearance (Reference number: KAN261SSOG01) to collect data from the Govan Mbeki Research & Development Centre, at the University of Fort Hare Alice Campus, and was acquainted with the institution's policy on ethics. The principal researcher asked for participants' consent and built a good rapport with the older persons, resulting in them giving their informed consent and agreeing to be research subjects. The principal researcher interviewed them when the weather was warm to ensure their comfort and their personal protection was ensured using pseudonyms. There were no promises of benefits from participating, and the participation was voluntary. The participants were given the freedom to withdraw at any time during the interviewing process if they felt under any form of duress.

KEY FINDINGS

This section presents the results related to the attitudes, perceptions, and insights of the nine (9) participants who were interviewed. The first section of the findings will present the demographic characteristics of the research participants, while the second section of the findings will present the emergent themes.

Table 1: The demographic profile of the participants

No	Pseudonyms	Age Range	Gender	Number of grandchildren cared for
1	Nomsa	55-59	Female	3
2	NoAmen	70 & above	Female	1
3	Nozitshongo	55-59	Female	3

4	Nozibhexengeshe	59-69	Female	3
5	Nomgqabhuzo	59-69	Female	4
6	Nomalinge	55-59	Female	3
7	Noziqendu	55-59	Female	4
8	Noziqamngana	70 & above	Female	2
9	Nomapere	59-69	Female	2

Age range

The participants' ages ranged from 55 years to 70 and above. This age range implies that they had ample experience in caregiving, and probably displayed tenderness and empathy. However, some were apparently experiencing some of the difficulties of aging, which was compromising their caregiving predisposition.

Gender

All the grandparents were women. This indicates the feminisation of caregiving tasks, which is a cardinal characteristic of many patriarchal societies such as South Africa.

Number of children cared for

Study findings established that many grandparents were caring for more than one grandchild. Caring for more than one child could point to a state of financial burden, with the possibility of compromising the quality of care offered to the grandchildren. This is because the more the children are cared for, the greater the likelihood of the care burden is heavy.

Table 2: The emergent themes

No	Thematic Findings
1.	Grandparents manifested love and compassion for their grandchildren
2.	Grandparents viewed the care of their grandchildren as a blessing
3.	Delinquent children were a thorn in the flesh of their grandparents
4.	The grandparents' abuse of grandchildren's grant creates bad blood between them

Grandparents manifest love and compassion for their grandchildren

The study found that although care of the children was daunting, grandparents were driven by the spirit of love and compassion to care for their grandchildren, making them cope with the challenges associated with caregiving. The finding is supported by the following sentiments:

It is the pangs of love I have for them that keep me going. Otherwise, caregiving in an environment bereft of resources is indeed a daunting task. I indeed love my grandchildren. (Nomsa)

Although I first did not approve of my daughter abandoning her children, but due to love emanating from blood made me to change and now I indeed love them. Now they are the ones who perform the activities in the house because I am old now. (Noziqamngana)

The sentiments above indicate the elements of love and compassion as drivers that give grandparents the resilience to provide care. This is also compounded by a possible reciprocal relationship in which the children being cared for also help the older caregivers by doing some household chores.

Grandparents viewed the care of their grandchildren as a blessing

Study findings indicated that most caregivers felt that the grandchildren they cared for were a blessing to them in various ways. For example, they provided some socio-cultural and spiritual benefits to them, as well as being a source of happiness. Some children were also reciprocating the assistance they got by helping their grandmothers in various ways. The finding is supported in the following sentiments:

When I am sick, my grandchildren are the ones who pray and ask God to keep me for them, I am not alive because of my faith, but because of their prayers. I am happy with them. (Nozitshongo)

My own children died immaturely, therefore caring for my grandchildren brings happiness and a sense of social accomplishment.; It is like God has given me a second chance to bond, they treat me like their parent, and I am treating them like my own children. (Nozibhexengeshe)

The sentiments showed that the cared for children offered some social and spiritual upliftment to their grandmothers.

Delinquent children are a thorn in the flesh of their grandparents

The study findings showed that caring for delinquent children adds stress and worry to the already stressed grandparents. Some grandparents expressed unhappiness and worried that the delinquent behaviours that their grandchildren were manifesting such as abusing drugs and bunking classes against their counsel and guidance were likely to mess up their lives. The following verbatim comments support this finding.

I suspect that one of my boys is using drugs. He is careless, untidy, and eats a lot. He comes back home late every day; he spends a lot of time with friends that are not even attending school. (Nomgqabhuzo)

I keep on warning my grandchild that I am old, and if she gets pregnant, I won't have the energy to look after their kids, because I am looking after them because their mothers who bore them did so after failing to take my advice. (NoAmen)

Indeed, the phenomenon of delinquency and the ill-discipline that grandchildren displayed had a detrimental socio-psychological and emotional impact on the grandparents and affected the quality of their care.

Grandparents' abuse of grandchildren's social welfare grants creates bad blood between them

Study findings reflected an environment of conflict and despondency when children realised that their grandparents were abusing the social welfare grants meant to assist them financially, while the grandparents also enjoyed their own old age pension grants. The conflict arose from two sides, as some grandparents were also not happy with how their grandchildren handled them by asking for money and other needs, some of which far exceeded the foster care grant/child support. They were also exasperated when their grandchildren reported a possible misuse of their welfare grants to the area social workers. The following sentiments support the finding above.

I do drink alcohol, but I don't buy it with their money, I drink from my friends, my grandchildren and I don't always get along because they think I am misusing their money. They listen to people too much more than myself, I buy things that we need and pay funeral parlour. They think a child welfare grant is a lot of money, but what about food and my societal groupings? They stress me too much, hence sometimes, I decide to come back home late and shout the whole night. (Nomalinge)

Sometimes we are happy, but most times we are not, because of many things. I am treated like a dumb old lady who should give them money to buy clothes each and every month because they want to fit in with friend., I know it's their money, but there are a lot of things to do with it. (Noziqendu)

We grandparents are harassed by these children we care. They sometimes report us to the social workers that we are abusing the child welfare grant accorded to them by the government. (Nomapere)

Indeed, cases of the grandchildren-grandparents conflict left them all in a state of exasperation. This makes their lives desperate.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings from this study revealed that some grandparents perceived caregiving as a source of joy from the company of their grandchildren. This is in line with the work of DiGessa *et al.* (2016), who held the view that the provision of care by grandparents to their grandchildren has its benefits in that grandchildren provide grandparents with the company they cherish most. The grandchildren and grandparents usually strike up a mutual and reciprocal relationship that symbiotically benefits each one. In a study by Lee and Blitz (2016), carers felt that they were parents with more experience to provide reliable care to their grandchildren. On the other hand, the children were also reciprocating the love given to them in various ways. For instance, they performed activities in the house and displayed love for their grandparents, with some even referring to them as mothers. They also displayed loving gestures to their grandparents such as affording them a lovely smile that make their grandparents happier.

The grandchildren were a major source of happiness and fun for their grandparents. They also performed some dances that they practised in school as well as in churches with relish and gusto (Massenzio, Hughes & Whitaker, 2014). This reminds them of their past when they could do the same. Moreover, according to Mhaka-Mutepfa, Cummings and Mpofu (2014) these acts can contribute significantly to enhancing health and wellbeing of the grandparent carers, especially those in their advanced sunset years (Kang'ethe, 2018). On the other hand, the storytelling, warmth and love the grandparents show to their grandchildren promotes their social capital and can teach important life lessons. Indeed, grandparents' availability in the lives of their grandchildren can be points of reference for the grandchildren in several ways (Hillier & Barrow, 2015).

But the findings also revealed that the grandparents were finding it difficult to discipline their grandchildren when they manifested delinquent behaviours. This was perhaps due to their age and, as a result, the children became mischievous and delinquents. This is in line with the study by Lumsdaine and Verneer (2015) who found that the negative health outcomes experienced by carers as a result of aging may impact on their ability to provide optimal care for their children. Additionally, the declining physical health of carers is a key factor that could negatively affect their coping and adjustment mechanisms.

This study identified that grandparents' care was negatively affected by grandchildren's indiscipline. This was a source of stress for the older grandparents. This finding correlates with a study by Malinga-Musamba (2015) who contends that at times the children cared for by grandparents displayed some disturbing behaviours, such as rebellion and withdrawal.

Study findings revealed an environment of conflict between the grandchildren and their grandparent caregivers when the grandchildren reported to the area social workers the possibility that their grandparents abused their welfare grants. This challenge could be attributed to factors such as higher rates of inflation and children's misinformed interpretation of the size of the welfare grant and its limitations (Tanga & Gutura, 2013). Yet cases of grandparents abusing either the children's foster care grant or the child support grant have not been uncommon in South African context (Soganga, 2019).

CONCLUSION AND SOCIAL WORK IMPLICATIONS

Social workers need to strengthen their advocacy for communities to accept assisting the children of their distant kin who may be made vulnerable, especially as result of the early death of their parents, or other forms of parental incapacitation. This is because care is more constructive where children are taken care of by kin they have some blood relationships with. It is important that the societies recognise the role that the grandparents play, some of whom may themselves be battling to cope with various maladies associated with aging. These older grandparents need recognition of their tasks, either as guardians or foster care parents.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted within a short period of time; grandchildren were not interviewed, but only grandparents, who shared their sense of the dynamics, experiences and perspectives

of caregiving. The researchers therefore recommend a future longitudinal study that will conduct several observations and that will also involve grandchildren.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers recommend family support services, social support groups for grandparents, and community support for grandparents and children under their care. Since caregiving is also complicated by the indiscipline of the children being cared for, it would be important that social workers strengthen their behaviour modification skills for these children, so that they can also be able to face life with discipline. This can ensure they are able to pursue schooling and give their grandparents a peaceful environment. It is vitally important that the grandparent carers are also invited to attend some caregiving workshops and sessions, even if these are ad hoc and presented in the homes of the caregivers. This is to energise them and ensure they make strong and good decisions on various aspects of care. It would then be important that the Department of Social Development and the NGOs working in the children's domain facilitate some training sessions on the care of children. Also, children need to be recognised as being important stakeholders in the caregiving environment. Their role in helping their grandparents needs acknowledgment.

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