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Grandparents and Grandchildren in the Family and the Welfare State

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UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TORINO

Grandparents and Grandchildren in the Family and the Welfare State

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Abstract

Grandparents play an important role in family life, providing financial, emotional and practical care and support to their children and grandchildren. This has become more relevant since today grandparents are younger and in better health than decades ago. Grandparents' engagement is considered as something that is relevant not only for the family but for society as a whole, and is related to specific welfare state arrangements compensating different supply of childcare.

Key words: grandparents, children development, welfare state, family economics

JEL: J14, J13, I31

1.Introduction

In nowadays societies, population ageing and increased life expectancy, makes it more likely for individuals to become grandparents during their life course. In Europe and the US the proportion of grandparents among people over 50 ranges between 50% and 67% (Glaeser et al 2013). Recent evidence from Europe and North America shows that the length of an individual's life as a grandparent varies considerably across countries and is largely influenced by the differences in the timing of childbearing. However, delays in the transition to parenthood might reduce the number of years grandparents spend living with their grandchildren, despite improvements in survival at older ages. Leopold and Shopek (2015) report that the timing of grandparenthood varies strongly across countries: compared to the United States (49 years among women, 52 years among men), grandparenthood in Western Europe occurs up to eight years later.

Grandparents play an important role in family life, providing financial, emotional and practical care and support to their

children and grandchildren. This has become more relevant since today grandparents are younger and in better health than decades ago. Recent research has also reported an increase in the period of healthy grandparenthood, which may offset delays in the transition to grandparenthood due to delayed childbearing in the US as in other European countries (Margolis 2016).

While overall grandparents provide high levels of childcare, there are striking variations in the intensity and frequency of the care provided across countries. In France, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands between 50% and 60% of grandparents provide some childcare compared with just 40% in the Southern European countries. However, the type of childcare is different. Regular and intensive grandchild care is more common in Southern Europe, with 20% of grandparents in Italy providing almost daily childcare compared with just 2% of grandparents in the Netherlands. Across the European countries, grandparents who are younger, with higher educational levels, in better health, are more likely to provide childcare.

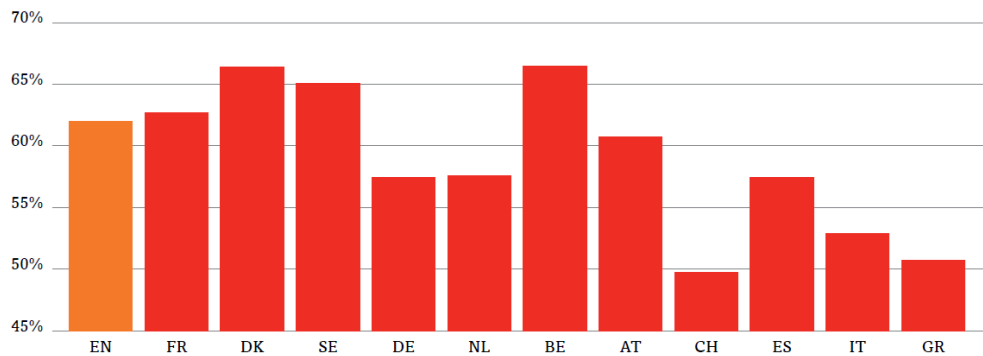
Grandparents' engagement is considered as something that is relevant not only for the family but for society as a whole, and is related to specific welfare state arrangements compensating different supply of childcare (e.g. Bordone et al. 2017). Understanding the role of grandparents in supporting and maintaining families is critical given changing policy environments—and changes to pension and retirement policies in particular—and for understanding inequalities in health and well-being across the life course. Important factors affecting the importance and role of grandparenting depend on the characteristics of the welfare state of the area of residence as well as several characteristics of the grandparents such as their health and wellbeing, the styles they adopt to interact with the grandchildren. These characteristics are likely to affect the impact on their grandchildren development. In this paper we present recent research exploring the links between grandparenting characteristics and grandchildren outcomes. This research concerns different countries and within specific countries (mainly Europe and the US).

2. Statistics on grandparenting and measurement issues

Increased longevity and the rising share of elderly individuals have made grandparenting a prominent feature of contemporary societies. However, obtaining precise information on this phenomenon is complicated by the difficulty of linking birth data across two different generations. Currently, the most widely used data source for describing this phenomenon is the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE), which collects demographic and socio-economic information on individuals aged 50 and over across several European countries. Similarly, the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) and the Health and Retirement Study (HRS) provide comparable data for the elderly populations in England and the US, respectively. The approach in these studies—which aim to provide a broad overview of the ageing population—is to gather information on grandparental status directly from the elderly individuals, who may report having several grandchildren even if they do not provide care to any or all of them.

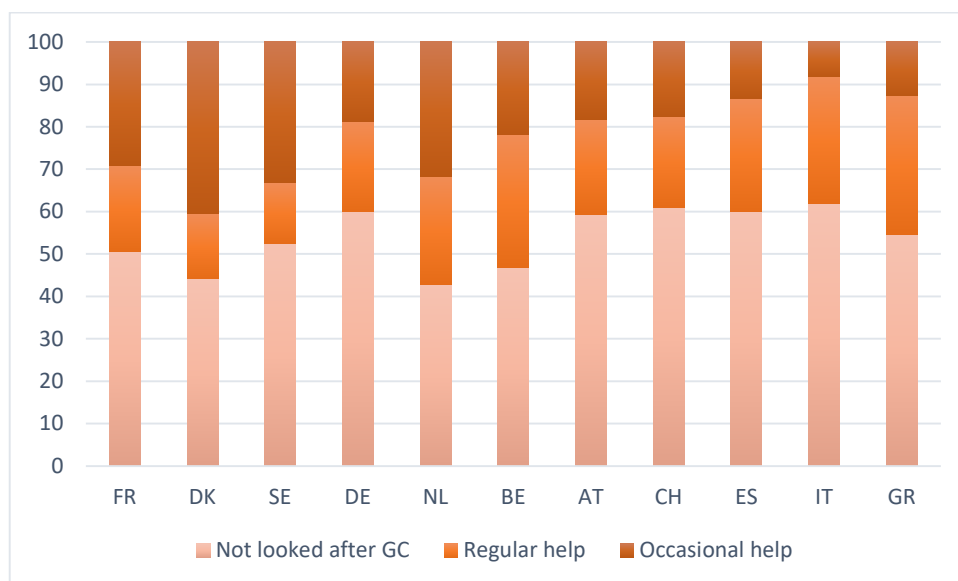
Figure 1 reports the share of individuals aged 50+ who are grandparents in selected European countries and England. The data suggests that, with the sole exception of Switzerland, grandparents represent the majority of the 50+ population, despite the falling fertility rates that have characterized these countries. However, the policy relevance of grandparenting increases when grandparents are actively involved in the lives of their children and grandchildren. SHARE data allows respondents to report whether they provide regular or occasional help with childcare. Glaser et al. (2013) indicate that 44% of grandmothers and 42% of grandfathers provide such help. Figure 2 presents these statistics across countries: regular help ranges from 14% in Sweden and Denmark to approximately 30% in Belgium and Italy. The figure also shows that not all grandparents provide care, with the proportion of involved grandparents hovering around 40–50% in most countries.

Figure 1. Percentage of adults aged 50 or over who are grandparents



Source: Glaser et al (2013).

Figure 2. Percentage of grandparents looking after grandchildren by frequency and country



Source: own elaborations on Table D-12 in Glaser et al (2013). “Regular help” includes “almost daily” and “almost every week; “Occasional help” includes “Every month” and “Less often”.

While SHARE data primarily provides information on the frequency of childcare, we complement this evidence with

an exercise on the harmonised European time use survey (HETUS) statistics publicly available on the Eurostat database website.¹ This dataset measures the time use of individuals on a reference day, by asking respondents to report the activity performed in each time spell; importantly, the coding of the activity has been harmonized across different countries. For the purpose of this analysis, we use the statistics on time spent and participation rate in the main activity and in the secondary activity, provided by Eurostat by sex and age group. We select the same countries presented in Figures 1 and 2 (when available) and focus on individuals of both genders aged 45–64 and 65+. In order to identify the time spells in which the individual was likely to perform a “grandparenting” activity, we select the following activities: for the main activity, we select “Household management and help family members” (AC37_39), “Childcare, except teaching, reading and talking” (AC38A), “Teaching, reading and talking to child” (AC38B), and “Transporting a child” (AC938); for the secondary activity, we select the category

¹ The statistics used for this section are available here: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/time-use-surveys/database>. The data refers to the year 2010.

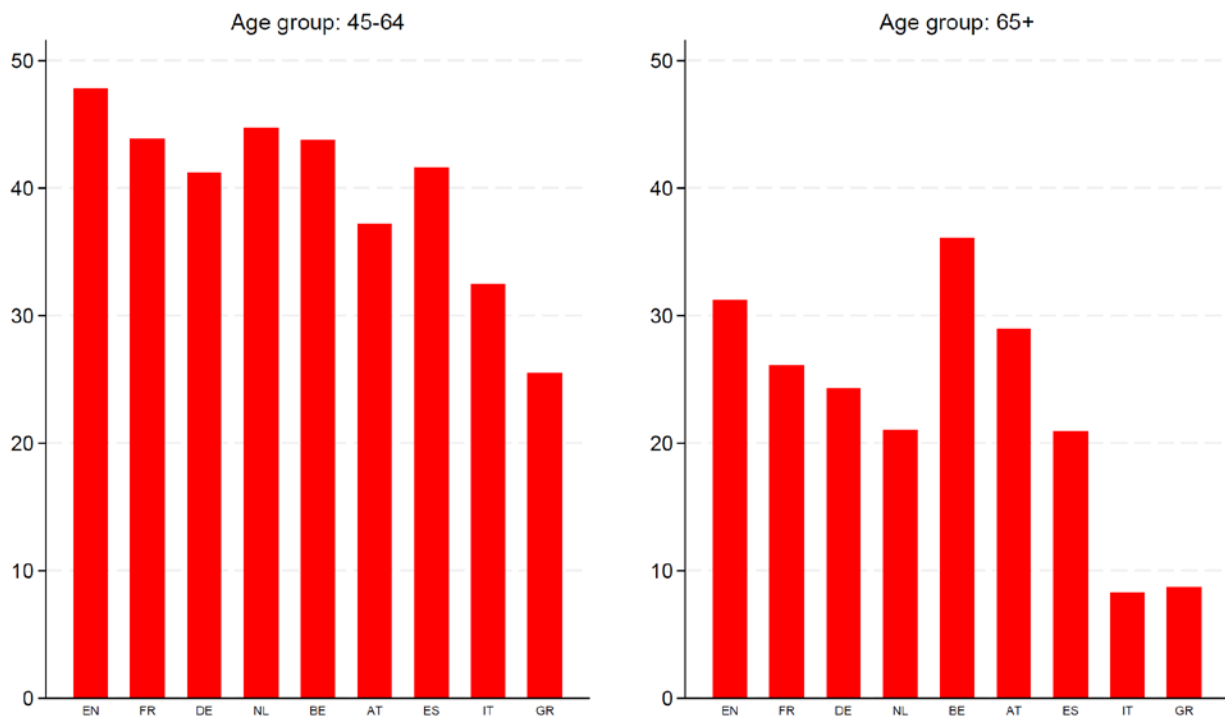
“Childcare” (AC38). The downloaded statistics allows us to observe the total time spent in each category of activity and the participation rate of each group (defined as the proportion of individuals with a positive amount of time in a specific activity). We then sum up the values obtained for each gender and age-group.

The advantage of looking at HETUS data is that it allows us to observe the *actual* amount of time individuals may spend on grandparenting activities. However, several caveats are in order. First, it should be noted that, in HETUS, observed interactions with children may not be limited to family members, as individuals might also spend time with children in a professional capacity. While this possibility cannot be excluded for the 45–64 age group, it is presumably less common among those aged 65 and over, who are typically out of the labor force. Hence, statistics for the 65+ group may provide a more reliable measure of 'active' grandparenting. Second, due to the increased age at first birth, which has characterized all developed countries in the past few years, we cannot exclude either that the reported child is the son or daughter of the respondent, rather than the grandchild.

Again, this issue is less problematic for the age-group 65+, which more likely represent the age range of active grandparents. Third, due to the difficulty of precisely identify category of activities in which the individual is with a child, we made a broad selection of categories, with the implication that the observed values may represent an upper bound of the true extent of the phenomenon.

For the purpose of this exercise, we first show the proportion of individuals reporting a positive amount of time spent with children, which proxy a measure of the extensive margin of the phenomenon. Figure 3 indicates that these values align with the values of Figure 2, with Central European countries (such as Belgium, the Netherlands, and Austria) showing the highest proportion of involved grandparents.

Figure 3. Proportion of individuals spending a positive amount of time with children, by age group and country.

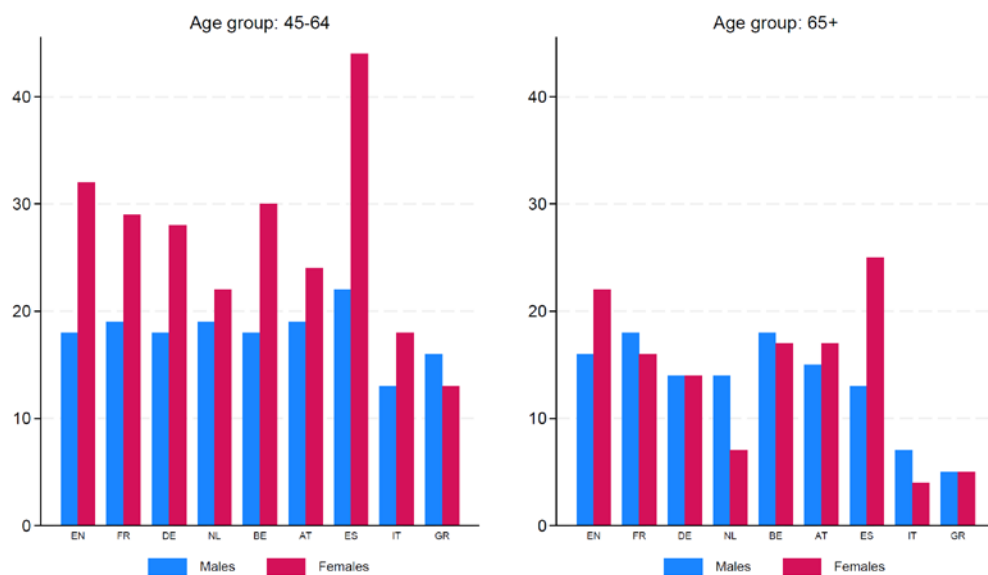


Source: own elaborations on the Eurostat database on Harmonized Time Use Survey (2010).

Furthermore, we use the available data to show the time use patterns across countries. Figure 4 reports the total amount of time (measured in minutes) spent by each category (identified by age, gender and country) with children. If we focus on the 65+ age-group for reliability, the figure suggests a negative relationship between the prevalence of the phenomenon and the number of hours of care per grandparent, which has been also documented in other studies (e.g.

Meroni and Pronzato, 2026; Hank and Buber 2009). The figure also shows that grandparenting is mainly a *grandmothers'* activity: we will get back on the gender dimension of grandparenting in Section 5.

Figure 4. *Total amount of time spent with children, by age group, gender and country.*



Source: own elaborations on the Eurostat database on Harmonized Time Use Survey (2010).

Finally, both SHARE and the evidence provided with HETUS data offer limited detail on the specific activities performed by grandparents with children. In contrast, the ELSA dataset (for the UK) provides more granular detail, identifying the specific grandchild receiving care and offering a comprehensive picture of the time-use, activities, and motivations underlying grandparenting.

Other data sources, such as the European Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) or the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS), adopt the opposite approach by asking parents about their use of grandparental care. Similarly, cohort studies (e.g., the Millennium Cohort Study in the UK or the Child Development Supplement of the PSID in US) include sections on childcare arrangements, though they do not always categorize grandparents separately, which can complicate the study of this phenomenon. Furthermore, it should be noted that also in the case in which the respondent is the parent or the child, it is not straightforward to recover information on the frequency of the activity and on the quality of the interaction.

3. Grandparental child care, welfare state regimes and grandparenting styles

Significant variation in the time spent by grandparents with grandchildren appears to be strongly linked with the country characteristics, institutions and welfare state arrangements. In particular, it has been shown that grandparents may provide care for children, depending on the availability and cost of alternative forms of care. Clearly, the literature shows a negative relationship between the availability and affordability of high-quality formal childcare and grandparental care, either at the extensive or intensive margins.

A central finding is the distinct North-South gradient in the nature of grandparental care. By using SHARE data, Hank and Buber (2009) found that while grandparents are strongly involved across all continental European countries studied, the prevalence and intensity of care vary significantly, suggesting a strong interaction between the supply of services provided by the local welfare state and intergenerational

family support. Igel and Szydlik (2011) show that generous welfare states in Nordic countries "crowded in" the *prevalence* of grandchildren care but "crowded out" the *intensity*. Their analysis confirms significant country differences: in Northern Europe, where public childcare is more widely available, grandparents are more likely to provide childcare, but much less intensively.

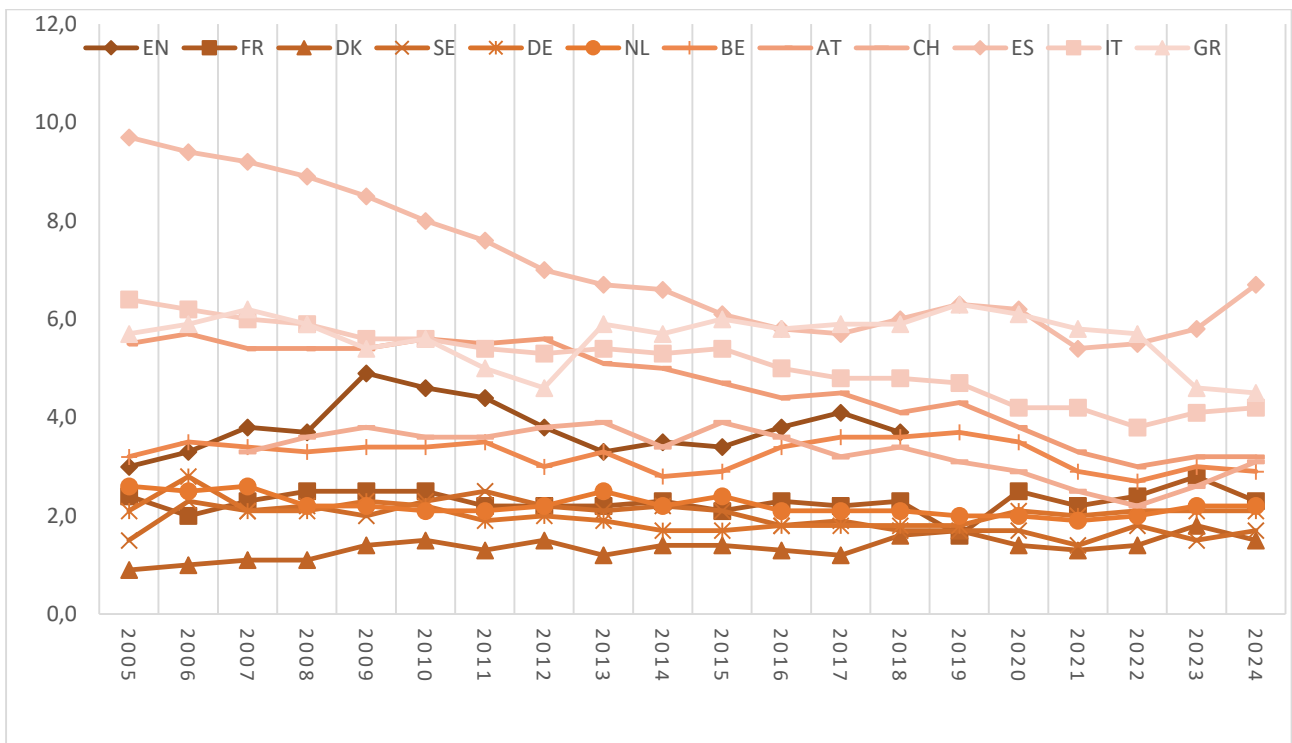
In Southern Europe, where state-subsidized care is more limited, grandparents engage less often overall but provide far more intensive, regular care, often playing the primary role while parents are at work. Building on these findings, Bordone et al. (2023) identify three distinct models of care: the Mediterranean model (intensive care), the Northern European model (occasional role), and an intermediate Western European model where grandparents provide childcare services on a weekly basis.

Furthermore, while the inverse relationship between the degree of grandparental care and the formal childcare services offered by the public sector is reasonable and expected, other cultural and institutional characteristics may influence the probability of grandparents looking after their

grandchildren. One such characteristic relates to the family structures most prevalent in a country. As described in the seminal work by Todd (1990), there has been significant evidence regarding differences in population structures across European states. He argues that the anthropological foundations of the continent—specifically family structures—affect the geographical spread of religious and political ideologies. Figure 4 reports the share of households with at least three adults and a child across countries in the last 20 years: as it was anticipated by Todd (1990), Mediterranean countries are the ones with the largest share of multiple-generation households; however, in the past twenty years, such share has declined especially in those countries where it was higher at the beginning of the years 2000s. Even though the share of multigenerational households has decreased—even in Mediterranean countries, which have experienced profound demographic shifts—the involvement of grandparents in childcare remains closely linked to living arrangements and co-residence. This suggests that, despite modernizing trends,

certain cultural path-dependencies continue to shape the intensity and form of intergenerational support.

Figure 5. Share of households composed by three adults and a child, by country and over time.



Source: Eurostat.

A separate discussion should refer to the US. While the rates of grandparent care in the US are similar to Europe, there is a significantly higher prevalence of "custodial" and "co-residential" grandparenting. In these specific arrangements, grandparents, often from racial and ethnic minority groups, have primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren.

Research from the United States has shown significant increases in the prevalence of three-generation households and in households consisting solely of grandparents and grandchildren (Cherlin and Seltzer 2014). Such shifts in household composition, which are associated with socio-economic disadvantage, may reflect the activation of grandparents as a latent network of support in response to social and demographic changes such as rising partnership disruption. Reasons for the increase have primarily focus have primary focused on two factors. The first refers to generational needs especially the support needs of the parent generation due to socioeconomic trend (increase in drugs epidemic of the 1980-1990, parental incarceration and financial difficulties) ad changes in family life (rises in single parenthood and divorce). The second relates to social welfare reforms such as policy changes aimed to moving mothers from welfare to work, requirements that unmarried teenage mothers live with an adult.

To date, little is known in Europe about trends in grandparent households or whether these households are also likely to be disadvantaged. We may expect evidence of grandparent

households in contexts characterized by familistic societies with few public alternatives to family support, or by socio-economic disadvantage. Multigeneration households may be an adaptive strategy to a wide range of changing family or financial difficulties, as being in a grandparent household may be particularly well suited to respond to these changes.

In addition to the amount of time grandparents spend with their grandchildren, another dimension largely overlooked in the existing literature is the qualitative nature of these interactions, which can be described as *grandparenting styles*.

To frame the emerging literature on grandparenting styles, it is first necessary to reference the foundational framework of parenting styles established by Baumrind (1967). This family psychology literature posits that parents adopt distinct approaches to interacting with and guiding their children, which subsequently shape child behavior and development. This taxonomy is built upon the intersection of two primary dimensions—responsiveness and demandingness—which yield four distinct categories: the authoritative style,

characterized by a balance of support and clear boundaries; the authoritarian style, which emphasizes strict obedience; the permissive style, marked by high warmth with few constraints; and the uninvolved style, defined by a lack of engagement in either dimensions.

Recently, Doepke and Zilibotti (2017) introduced this taxonomy into economics, highlighting remarkable cross-country differences in societal views regarding the role of parents in children's choices. Furthermore, Cobb-Clark et al. (2019) demonstrated that parenting styles influence child development, while Brill and Moriconi (2024) emphasized that these styles possess a significant cultural component tied to the parent's culture of origin.

Building on these foundations, sociological research has adapted these concepts to the study of grandparents. In their seminal work, Cherlin and Furstenberg (1985) identified three primary grandparenting styles based on contact frequency, exchange of services, and influence: detached grandparents, who maintain sporadic contact; passive grandparents, who enjoy an affectionate relationship without active involvement in upbringing; and influential

grandparents, who combine emotional closeness and frequent care with an active educational role. A later study by Mueller et al. (2002) expanded this typology by categorizing grandparenting on three main dimensions: frequency of contact, types of activities (instrumental and expressive), and parental role-taking. This further classification identified five types of grandparenting styles: (i) influential refers to grandparents who are highly involved across all dimensions, and often play a "parent-like" role in mentoring and disciplining; (ii) supportive grandparents provide frequent help and attend activities, however they do not take a "parental-like" role; (iii) passive grandparents maintain a moderate level of contact but are not deeply involved in the child's life, though maintaining a positive relationship with the grandchildren; (iv) authority-oriented grandparents take the role as a disciplinarian or carrier of family tradition, even though they have limited interactions and contacts with the grandchildren; (v) detached grandparents, who have the least amount of involvement. Notably, the Influential and Supportive typologies represent the most substantial investments of care labor, frequently

functioning as a vital informal social insurance mechanism for parents engaged in the formal labor market.

While there is an extensive literature regarding intergenerational dynamics in European countries (see, for instance, Hank, 2007; Hank and Buber, 2009), a precise cross-national distribution of these specific grandparenting styles remains elusive. This empirical gap is primarily a function of data constraints: accurately operationalizing these five typologies requires a multidimensional battery of survey instruments—covering contact frequency, instrumental support, and authority dynamics—that are currently absent from large-scale comparative datasets. Transitioning toward these nuanced models is, however, essential for the economics of care. It suggests that the socio-economic impact of grandparental involvement is contingent not merely on the volume of time transferred, but on the qualitative nature of the intergenerational relationship—a research frontier that warrants closer attention as more granular data becomes available. Grandparents' availability may be also crucial in shaping the fertility decisions of their adult children, even if it is difficult to directly

estimate a causal impact of this relationship, as grandparents' help can only be observed once there is already a grandchild.

Meroni and Pronzato (2026) using data from the 2023 wave of the European Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), show that the likelihood of having another child is positively associated with receiving a moderate amount of grandparental support (1-5 hours per week), but this effect diminishes as the intensity of grandparental care increases. This suggests that while grandparental support can facilitate fertility decisions, it may also indicate the existence of family vulnerabilities that limit the couple's ability to have more children.

4. Grandparental care and grandchildren's human capital

The theoretical architecture for understanding the development of a grandchild's human capital is rooted in the seminal work of Ben-Porath (1967), which formalized the production of human capital as a cumulative process of investment over the life cycle. More recently, this framework has been operationalized as a child production function, most notably by Todd and Wolpin (2003), who assume that the acquisition of cognitive competences is the output of a dynamic process involving parents' and school's investments decisions. According to Todd and Wolpin (2003), current

developmental outputs depend not only on contemporary inputs but also on the history of previous investments and the child's initial endowment. By incorporating past outputs into the estimated equation, researchers can implicitly control for these historical inputs and innate characteristics. In this discussion we focus on family inputs, which may relate to the investments of parents concerning time and financial resources, as well as the use of alternative forms of care. Del Boca (2015) emphasized that policymakers must consider the interplay of all these inputs when designing programs to improve cognitive and non-cognitive skills.

We can thus interpret the acquisition of both cognitive and non-cognitive abilities as the output of a dynamic process involving history-dependent inputs. In this model, the "stock" of a child's abilities is shaped by a diverse vector of inputs: parental time (often disaggregated into maternal and paternal contributions), childcare services, and household financial resources. There is an extensive literature attempting to estimate the role played by maternal and paternal time as well as income for child development (e.g. Del Boca et al. 2014, Agostinelli and Sorrenti 2018), as well as several studies trying to understand the effects of alternative forms of care in case parents work: these studies rarely distinguish between formal care provided by welfare or private institutions and informal arrangements, including grandparents, other relatives, and

babysitters(e.g., Brill, 2022; Bernal and Keane, 2011; Caucutt et al. 2025). Results from this literature show that while maternal input is crucial—especially in early childhood—the contributions of fathers, and of alternative childcare providers are also significant as the child grows up; moreover, in contexts with traditional division of gender roles within the household, nonparental childcare is likely to be a crucial substitute for maternal time, in case the mother works.

In economics, the evidence on the effect of grandparental care on child development is very limited. Grandparental care enters the child production function specified above as a significant non-parental time input, and as one of the possible forms of informal care (opposite to other relatives, friends or babysitters). From an analytical perspective, the impact of grandparental involvement on a child's human capital is determined by whether this care acts as a substitute or a complement to existing parental investments, and to formal childcare and schooling. The fact that grandparental care has two potential counterfactual situations (i.e. the child is cared for by the mother/parents or cared for in a formal setting) complicates even more the estimation of the effect of interests, which is substantially affected by issues related to unobserved heterogeneity and omitted variable bias. In order to overcome these estimation issues, the existing studies attempt at controlling for as many

observable characteristics as possible, especially by including family fixed effects which account for time-invariant heterogeneity at the household level.

Del Boca et al. (2018), using data from the UK Millennium Cohort Study, specifically analyze the link between grandparental care and various cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes, comparing it directly to center-based care.

The availability of non-parental care can alter the amount of time parents spend with their children, thereby affecting development. Within this production function of children wellbeing, their outcomes are assumed to depend on various inputs, including grandparental care, formal childcare, family characteristics, and the child's individual traits. To evaluate the differences between grandparental child care and formal childcare estimate the following equation has been estimated:

$$K_{k,i} = \beta_0 + \beta_{k1}C + u_i + e_{k,i}$$

where K_i is the cognitive and non cognitive outcome of the child when she is 3-5 years old. C is the child care modalities experienced at that age by the child, u_i is the personal family effect of the child fixed over time and $e_{k,i}$ is a random error normally distributed. The

findings reveal that grandparental care has a positive effect on vocabulary development—likely due to the one-on-one nature of the interaction—but a detrimental impact on school readiness and behavioral issues, such as hyperactivity. Specifically, children cared for by grandparents tend to be better at naming objects but perform worse in problem-solving, object construction, mathematics, and the development of basic concepts compared to those in formal childcare centers. These effects are highly heterogeneous: the positive association with vocabulary is strongest for children from advantaged households, whereas the negative associations with school readiness and numeracy are significant only for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This suggests that grandparental care interacts deeply with the resources available in the parental home. Furthermore, children primarily cared for by grandparents occasionally exhibit lower levels of socio-emotional well-being, including less discipline and emotional regulation, compared to their peers in formal care settings.

Similar results came from an earlier study by Hansen and Hawkes (2009), which used two waves of the Millennium Cohort Study to compare the impacts of different childcare alternatives (formal group, formal non-group, partner care, grandparents care and otherinformal care) on a vocabulary test and a school-readiness test, as well as on the behavioural development. They find that children

who receive informal care from the mother's partner or from grandparents do better on vocabulary, but worst in terms of school readiness than children who receive formal child care. They also show that grandparental care increases behavioural problems.

While much of the literature focuses on the mere presence of care, recent evidence suggests that the quality of interactions is equally important. Zanasi and Bordone (2025), using German data, explored a broad definition of grandparental involvement—including childcare, contact, and financial support—on school grades. After accounting for 'positive selection' (the tendency for advantaged families to receive more grandparental support) through a heterogeneous treatment effect analysis, they found no statistically significant effect of grandparental investment on grandchildren's grades.

5. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, the 'grandparent effect' on child development is far from monolithic. It acts as a double-edged sword that can either complement or substitute for parental and state inputs, depending heavily on the family's socioeconomic status and the specific developmental domain. As the research frontier shifts from measuring the quantity of care to evaluating its qualitative styles, it

becomes essential to further investigate how these nuanced intergenerational dynamics shape the next generation's human capital,

Grandparenting is not a uniform phenomenon; rather, its effects are moderated by socioeconomic background and the quality of intergenerational ties. Collectively, these results offer significant implications for social policy, suggesting that interventions aimed at household well-being and early childhood development must account for the complex and vital role of the extended family.

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