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Descriptive Finding

Looking after grandchildren: gender differences in ‘when,’ ‘what,’ and ‘why’: Evidence from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing

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Looking after grandchildren: gender differences in ‘when,’ ‘what,’ and ‘why’: Evidence from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

Grandparents play a vital role in providing childcare to families. However, little is known about when grandmothers and grandfathers look after grandchildren, what they do with them, and why.

OBJECTIVE

Using novel questions on grandparenting, we first describe the periodicity of grandchild care, activities undertaken with/for grandchildren, and motivations for such care to then assess if there are gender differences.

METHODS

We used wave 8 (2016/17) of the nationally-representative English Longitudinal Study of Ageing. The extent to which the periodicity, activities, and motivations are gendered was assessed using logistic regressions. Analyses were carried out on the entire sample of grandparents who provide childcare as well as on coresiding grandparent couples where both grandparents provide grandchild care.

RESULTS

More than 50% of grandparents looked after grandchildren, with the majority doing so throughout the year and about one in four during school holidays. Few gender differences were observed in the periodicity of grandchild care and reasons for looking after grandchildren, with almost two-thirds reporting that they wanted to help parents go to work and give them a break. However, when activities undertaken for/with grandchildren were analysed, clear gender differences emerged. Overall, grandmothers were more likely to report caring and helping activities (e.g., cooking, caring when sick, helping

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with homework, and collecting them from school) than grandfathers, even when they coresided.

CONTRIBUTION

Our study is the first to document, at a population level, gender differences in the periodicity of grandchild care, what grandparents do when they look after grandchildren, and why they provide such care.

1. Introduction

Interest in the role that grandparents play in family life has grown considerably over the last decades. This is in response to trends such as rising life expectancy, which means that it is now common for a child to grow up with living grandparents and even great grandparents (Murphy 2011). Also, the rising percentage of mothers in paid work, and higher rates of divorce and relationship breakdown, mean that the role grandparents play in family life as providers of financial, emotional, and practical support has become increasingly important (Herlofson and Hagestad 2012). A considerable body of work shows that around the globe grandparents are significant providers of grandchild care (Grundy et al. 2012; Knodel and Nguyen 2014; Ko and Hank 2013; Ku et al. 2013). In Europe in 2004–2005, 58% of grandmothers and 49% of grandfathers looked after at least one of their grandchildren under the age of 16 (Hank and Buber 2009), with 12% providing care almost daily or for at least 15 hours a week (Di Gessa, Glaser, and Tinker 2016a).

Evidence consistently shows that women perform the majority of unpaid domestic work and are the main providers of informal care (Craig and Mullan 2011; Zigante 2018), with theories explaining such persistent gender inequality ranging from reflecting traditional gender roles to (lack of) independent economic resources (Evertsson 2014; Kühhirt 2012; Raley, Bianchi, and Wang 2012). A vast literature also shows that grandmothers provide more grandchild care than grandfathers (Fuller-Thomson and Minkler 2001; Glaser et al. 2013; Hank and Buber 2009; Horsfall and Dempsey 2015), with similar arguments brought forward to explain their higher involvement, i.e., the gendered nature of grandparental caring tasks, expectations of behaviours, and responsibilities (Stelle et al. 2010; Waldrop et al. 1999). For instance, a recent mixed-methods study of Australian grandparents suggested that grandmothers spent more time providing grandchild care compared to grandfathers because they were deemed more appropriate carers for their grandchildren (Horsfall and Dempsey 2015). In their pioneering study of grandparenting in Europe, Hank and Buber (2009) found that grandfathers' involvement in grandchild care varied crossnationally to a similar extent to

grandmothers', and that unpartnered grandfathers were less likely to look after grandchildren than those living with a partner. These findings, also observed in Australia by Horsfall and Dempsey (2015), suggest that some grandfather involvement is linked to that of grandmothers.

While there are indications that, despite a generally high participation of grandfathers in grandchild care, gender inequalities in care among grandparents exist, to our knowledge no previous studies have investigated this issue at a population level. This is partly because, as highlighted by Hank et al. (2018), most quantitative surveys have collected limited information about grandparenting. We know whether grandparents look after a grandchild and if so, how frequently and/or how much time is spent on this activity. Yet, we do not know *when* in the year the care takes place, *what* grandparents actually do when they look after grandchildren; and *why* they provide care as such information has not been collected in quantitative surveys to date. For instance, quantitative surveys have so far assumed that grandchild care is uniformly distributed across the year, although qualitative studies suggest that it reflects parents' working and school hours, with many grandparents looking after children particularly during the school holidays (Wheelock and Jones 2002). Similarly, the little information there is on the activities grandparents do with grandchildren is largely collected at parent level (Huskinson et al. 2016; Speight et al. 2009), is qualitative (Airey et al. 2020; Horsfall and Dempsey 2015; Wheelock and Jones 2002), and comes from time-use diaries (Dunifon, Near, and Ziolk-Guest 2018), which, by design, do not collect any information on grandparents and therefore do not permit the investigation of gender differences in grandparent roles. Qualitative interviews with grandparents (Horsfall and Dempsey 2015) suggest that grandmothers were mostly involved with physical and emotional care for their grandchildren, even when grandfathers were present, whereas grandfathers were mostly involved in leisure activities. Similarly, a mixed-method study in the United Kingdom (Wheelock and Jones 2002) that used a convenience sample of (mostly) working mothers found that it was grandmothers who were helping with picking up grandchildren from childcare/school and caring for them until parents returned from work, as well as with stepping in when emergencies arose (such as when grandchildren are sick). Finally, both studies on parents and qualitative interviews with grandparents suggest that grandparental childcare provision is influenced not only by material and practical circumstances (such as availability, cost, and flexibility of childcare), but also by family values (Airey et al. 2020; Kanji 2018; Peyton et al. 2001; Wheelock and Jones 2002). For example, grandmothers particularly tend to lament that they generally feel greater pressure to provide grandchild care than grandfathers, who feel they can opt out of caring tasks (Horsfall and Dempsey 2015).

While there is some evidence to suggest that grandmothers and grandfathers may perform grandchild care differently and be motivated for different reasons when

supporting their grandchildren, evidence on gender differences at population level is scarce. Only recently, the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA), a nationally representative survey, collected more detailed information about grandparenting. Our study – exploiting this new and bespoke battery of questions on grandparenting available from England – aims to describe the when, what, and why of grandparents looking after grandchildren and assess gender differences. We provide further understanding of the gendered experience of grandparenting by analysing grandmothers and grandfathers who are partnered.

2. Data and methods

2.1 Study population

We based our study on ELSA, an ongoing multidisciplinary longitudinal biennial survey of individuals aged 50 and over. In the first wave collected in 2002–2003, around 12,000 respondents were recruited to provide a representative sample of the population aged 50 and over living in private households in England (household response rate was 70%). The sample is periodically refreshed to maintain its representativeness of all individuals aged 50 and over in England. More details of the survey's sampling frame, methodology, and questionnaires have been reported elsewhere (Steptoe et al. 2012; Zaninotto and Steptoe 2019). Data were drawn from the eighth wave of the study, collected in 2016–2017, based on 8,445 individual interviews. Wave 8 was the first wave of ELSA which introduced a new module on grandparenting, hence the focus on this wave of the study. Analyses were initially restricted to core respondents aged 50 and over who had at least one grandchild. Also, given that questions on grandparenting were not asked to respondents who could not be interviewed in person because of a physical or cognitive impairment, we excluded proxy interviews ($N = 267$). This may overestimate grandparents' involvement in childcare provision given that health status is an important selection factor in grandparenting (Di Gessa, Glaser, and Tinker 2016a, 2016b; Glaser et al. 2013). This resulted in a sample of 5,300 grandparents, of whom 2,837 looked after grandchildren. Because our focus is on gender and grandparenting, for our descriptive and multivariable models we further restricted our sample to include respondents who looked after grandchildren and were in coresiding opposite-sex couples. After excluding grandchild carers in couples with incomplete information for one of the partners ($N = 376$, about a third of which proxy respondents) the analytic sample for couples included 1,728 grandparents (864 couples).

2.2 Measures of grandchild care

All grandparents were asked whether they looked after any grandchildren without their parents being present during the 12 months prior to the interview. Those who reported having looked after grandchildren were then asked a battery of questions on grandparenting. Note that ELSA does not provide information about custodial care and does not collect detailed information about the childcare provided to each grandchild, but rather asks general questions related to all grandchildren and ‘all the time’ spent looking after them. First, grandparents were asked (thinking about all the time they spent looking after grandchildren) a battery of questions on the periodicity of care (with categories including weekdays, weekends, school holidays, throughout the year, or difficult to say). Second, grandparents were asked to provide information on the caring tasks undertaken when looking after grandchildren. The following activities were listed: having grandchildren stay overnight; caring for them when sick; playing with them and/or taking part in leisure activities; preparing meals for them; helping them with homework; taking them to (or collecting them from) the nursery or school; or just being around in case the grandchildren need them for anything. For each of the activities selected, grandparents were asked if they were involved frequently, occasionally, or rarely. Finally, grandparents were asked to report the main reasons for looking after grandchildren, with options including financial (e.g., so that parents can go out to work or to help financially), voluntary (e.g., it keeps them young and engaged with young people), or involuntary motives (such as because it is difficult for them to refuse).

2.3 Statistical analysis

First, we provide the prevalence of grandmothers and grandfathers who looked after grandchildren considering the entire sample as well as distinguishing by household composition (that is, living alone, living with a partner with missing information on grandparenting, living with a partner with available data on grandparenting). Second, focusing on the whole sample as well as on couples where both grandparents provided grandchild care, we present the percent distribution of the periodicity of grandchild care, of the activities grandparents undertake with/for their grandchildren, and of the reasons for such care separately by gender. For couples, we also show homogeneity in responses, that is the percentage of both partners providing the same answer on grandchild care for each question. Third, we present odds ratios (ORs) resulting from logistic regressions to explore the link between gender and the likelihood of reporting each of the periodicities, activities, and reasons for grandchild care listed in the questionnaire: results are shown for all grandparents as well as those in a couple. The models controlled for grandparents’

age, marital status (partnered vs not), employment (in paid work vs not), education, and nonhousing wealth quintiles, as well as total number of grandchildren, the age of the youngest grandchild, and proximity to closest grandchild (from less than 15 minutes to more than 2 hours). All analyses were performed using Stata 15.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive findings

Table 1 shows the prevalence of grandparental childcare provision by gender and across households, and the descriptive characteristics of grandparents who provided grandchild care by gender. Approximately 54% of grandparents provided some type of care for a grandchild, with a higher percentage of grandmothers (55%) providing some type of grandchild care over the 12-month period prior to the interview than grandfathers (52%). This gender difference is noticeable across both grandparents who are unpartnered and those who are in couples. However, the prevalence of grandchild care is much higher in couples (61%) than it is among unpartnered grandparents (37%). Also, in 91% of couples providing grandchild care (with no missing information for either partner) both the grandmother and the grandfather reported providing grandchild care (defined here as '*concordant*' grandchild caring couples), whereas only in 3% of couples was the grandfather the only one reporting grandchild care.

Overall, among grandparents who looked after grandchildren, grandmothers were generally younger and had more grandchildren than grandfathers. They were also more likely to be in the lowest wealth quintile and to be less educated than grandfathers reflecting well-documented gender differences in socioeconomic characteristics among the older population.

Table 1: Percent provision (and N) of grandchild care by gender and household structure, and sample characteristics (mean/percentages) of grandparents looking after grandchildren by gender

	GF	GM	Tot	p value
Provision of grandchild care				
All sample (N=5,300)	51.6 (1,161)	55.0 (1,676)	53.5 (2,837)	0.014
Couples, missing information (N=688)	44.9 (132)	61.9 (244)	54.7 (376)	<0.001
Unpartnered (N=1,484)	29.5 (116)	40.2 (438)	37.3 (554)	<0.001
Couples (N=3,128)	58.4 (913)	63.6 (994)	61.0 (1,907)	0.003
Both cared			90.6 (1,728)	
Only GM cared			6.8 (130)	
Only GF cared			2.6 (49)	
Grandparents looking after grandchildren				
Sociodemographic and health individual characteristics				
Age (mean)	68.8	66.6	67.5	<0.001
In paid work	26.4	25.8	26.1	0.691
High education	24.1	14.7	18.6	<0.001
Self-rated health >= good	78.7	80.5	79.8	0.250
Partnered	86.1	69.0	76.0	<0.001
Lowest health quintile	11.2	16.8	14.5	<0.001
Grandchildren's characteristics				
Distance to closest grandchild:				
Less than 15 minutes away	50.6	51.4	51.1	
Between 15 and 30 minutes away	22.5	23.5	23.1	
Between 30 minutes and 1h away	10.2	9.3	9.6	0.851
Between 1 and 2 hours away	7.9	7.4	7.6	
More than 2 hours away	8.9	8.5	8.6	
Age youngest grandchild (mean)	5.04	5.05	5.05	0.948
Number of grandchildren (mean)	3.48	3.61	3.55	0.046
Total respondents (N)	1,161	1,676	2,837	

Source: ELSA, Wave 8. Authors' calculations.

Note: GF indicates grandfathers; and GM grandmothers. "Couple, Missing information" indicates couples where the information on grandparenting was missing for one of the two partners.

Table 2 shows the periodicity of grandchild care among grandparents who provided any childcare, and among 'concordant' grandchild caring couples (i.e., couples with no missing information where both partners looked after grandchildren). Given that only 9% of couples were discordant in their grandchild care provision, it was not possible to look in more detail at these grandparents. Overall, such commitments were substantial with more than half of grandparents (56%) having looked after their grandchildren throughout the year; and one in six reporting grandchild care on weekdays or at weekends during the school term (which, in England, covers about 38 weeks of the year). About a quarter of grandparents reported grandchild care during school holidays. We found few gender differences in the periodicity of grandchild care, with some evidence (at the 10% level) to suggest that grandmothers provided grandchild care more often than grandfathers on

weekdays during the school term. However, when we focus on ‘concordant’ grandchild caring couples, we observe no gender differences in the periodicity reported by grandfathers and grandmothers, with overall almost 90% of them reporting they looked after grandchildren during the same period as their partner.

Table 2: Periodicity of care by gender, for the whole sample of carers and among ‘concordant’ grandchild caring couples

Periodicity	All grandparents who looked after grandchildren				Couples where both grandmother and grandfather looked after grandchildren				
	GF	GM	Tot	p value	GF	GM	Tot	p value	Same response
	%	%	%		%	%	%		%
During school term - weekdays	16.3	19.2	18.0	0.056	16.3	19.2	17.8	0.118	88.7
During school term - weekends	16.6	17.3	17.0	0.624	16.9	17.0	17.0	0.958	89.6
During school holidays	26.5	28.5	27.7	0.239	26.3	28.2	27.3	0.366	86.5
Throughout the whole year	54.9	57.4	56.4	0.194	57.8	58.6	58.2	0.754	81.8
Difficult to say	11.5	9.8	10.5	0.152	9.9	8.7	9.3	0.402	91.8
Respondents (N)	1,161	1,676	2,837		864	864	1,728		

Source: ELSA, Wave 8. Authors’ calculations.

Notes: P values refer to the chi-square tests for the difference in periodicity of care between grandmothers and grandfathers. GF indicates grandfathers; and GM grandmothers. The last column represents the percentage of couples where both partners provided the same response.

Table 3 shows descriptives pertaining to what grandparents do when looking after grandchildren. Overall, about 80% of grandparents mentioned that they played and/or took part in leisure activities with them, and that they cooked for them. The activities least mentioned were helping grandchildren with homework (39%) and looking after them when they are ill (36%). Unlike periodicity, we found gender differences in all the activities undertaken by grandparents with their grandchildren. Overall, a higher percentage of grandmothers reported doing the listed activities than grandfathers, and they also reported doing them more frequently. For instance, almost half of grandmothers reported preparing meals for grandchildren frequently compared to 30% of grandfathers. When we focus on coresiding grandparents who both reported looking after grandchildren, gender differences are even more striking, suggesting that within the household grandmothers undertook most tasks and more frequently than their partners.

Table 3: Activities grandparents undertake with/for their grandchildren and their frequency, by gender – All grandchild carers and ‘concordant’ grandchild caring couples

Activities	All grandparents who looked after grandchildren				Couples where both grandmother and grandfather looked after grandchildren				Same response %
	GF %	GM %	Tot %	p value	GF %	GM %	Tot %	p value	
Leisure activities									
<i>Not mentioned</i>	17.3	17.3	17.2	<0.001	16.4	13.7	15.1	0.009	59.8
Frequently	36.1	42.9	40.1		36.9	44.6	40.7		
Occasionally	37.8	31.7	34.2		39.3	34.1	36.7		
Rarely	8.8	8.3	8.5		7.4	7.6	7.5		
Prepared meal									
<i>Not mentioned</i>	34.7	12.7	21.7	<0.001	35.1	10.0	22.5	<0.001	46.9
Frequently	27.2	47.8	39.4		27.7	49.9	38.8		
Occasionally	29.5	32.0	31.0		29.4	33.0	31.2		
Rarely	8.5	7.5	7.9		7.9	7.2	7.5		
Stay overnight									
<i>Not mentioned</i>	35.8	30.7	32.8	<0.001	30.0	26.3	28.1	0.056	67.5
Frequently	12.6	17.6	17.6		13.8	17.5	15.6		
Occasionally	37.7	39.3	39.3		42.0	44.0	43.0		
Rarely	13.9	12.4	12.4		14.2	12.3	13.3		
Just around									
<i>Not mentioned</i>	41.7	35.0	37.8	<0.001	39.7	35.5	37.6	0.002	53.8
Frequently	28.3	38.4	34.3		28.9	37.7	33.3		
Occasionally	24.9	21.6	22.9		26.4	22.1	24.3		
Rarely	5.0	5.0	5.0		5.0	4.6	4.8		
Taken to/collected from									
<i>Not mentioned</i>	46.9	42.4	44.34	<0.001	44.8	37.5	41.1	<0.001	57.3
Frequently	20.9	27.8	25.0		21.5	30.7	26.1		
Occasionally	23.9	23.4	23.6		24.9	25.2	25.1		
Rarely	8.1	6.4	6.4		8.8	6.6	7.7		
Helped with homework									
<i>Not mentioned</i>	64.4	56.4	59.7	<0.001	64.1	53.6	58.8	<0.001	59.6
Frequently	9.8	14.2	12.4		9.7	14.8	12.3		
Occasionally	20.8	23.5	22.4		21.2	26.0	23.6		
Rarely	7.0	5.9	5.5		5.0	5.6	5.3		
Looked after them when ill									
<i>Not mentioned</i>	72.9	57.7	63.9	<0.001	71.9	56.6	64.2	<0.001	61.9
Frequently	3.6	4.8	4.3		3.5	6.0	4.8		
Occasionally	13.4	21.0	17.9		14.1	21.9	18.0		
Rarely	10.1	16.5	13.9		10.5	15.5	13.0		
Respondents (N)	1,161	1,676	2,837		864	864	1,728		

Source: ELSA, Wave 8.

Notes: Activities are sorted in ascending order for all grandparents. Authors' calculations. P values refer to the chi-square tests for the difference in frequency of activities of care between grandmothers and grandfathers. GF indicates grandfathers; and GM grandmothers. The last column represents the percentage of couples where both partners provided the same response.

Table 4 shows why grandparents look after grandchildren. The two most common reasons mentioned by both grandmothers and grandfathers were ‘to help parents go to work’ (64%) and ‘to give parents a break’ (62%). ‘Preference for family care’ and ‘It is

difficult to refuse’ (two options which capture a feeling of obligation towards grandchild care) were mentioned as reasons for looking after grandchildren by about 20% of grandparents. Overall, there were few gender differences in the reasons mentioned for grandchild care provision. However, grandmothers were significantly more likely to report ‘preference for family care’ and that grandparenting ‘keeps [them] young and active.’ Similar results were also observed among ‘concordant’ grandchild caring couples, with grandmothers more likely than their partner to also report that they felt engaged with young people and that they wanted to help out financially.

Table 4: Reasons for grandchild care, by gender – All grandchild carers and ‘concordant’ grandchild caring couples

Motivations	All grandparents who looked after grandchildren				Couples where both grandmother and grandfather looked after grandchildren				
	GF %	GM %	Tot %	p value	GF %	GM %	Tot %	p value	Same response %
To help their parents go to work	62.7	64.6	63.8	0.312	65.4	66.7	66.0	0.576	78.1
To give their parents a break	63.1	61.6	62.2	0.426	65.2	64.1	64.6	0.651	69.3
So their parents can go out at night	52.7	53.1	52.9	0.838	54.3	55.9	55.0	0.498	67.8
It keeps me young and active	40.0	48.3	44.9	<0.001	39.6	49.3	44.4	<0.001	61.3
To help them develop as people	44.4	41.8	42.8	0.170	45.7	46.4	46.1	0.772	60.4
I feel engaged with young people	31.8	34.8	33.6	0.090	30.7	36.8	33.7	0.007	61.9
To help out financially	30.2	32.7	31.7	0.151	31.0	35.4	33.2	0.057	70.4
To give my grandchild(ren) a break	28.1	29.3	28.8	0.482	30.0	32.8	21.3	0.213	67.8
Our family prefers family care	18.7	25.1	22.5	<0.001	20.0	27.4	23.7	<0.001	72.5
It is difficult for me to refuse	17.1	17.4	17.2	0.831	17.0	20.0	18.5	0.107	75.0
Respondents (N)	1,161	1,676	2,837		864	864	1,728		

Source: ELSA, Wave 8.

Note: Reasons are sorted in ascending order for all grandparents. Authors’ calculations. P values refer to the chi-square tests for the difference in frequency of activities of care between grandmothers and grandfathers. GF indicates grandfathers; and GM grandmothers. The last column represents the percentage of couples where both partners provided the same response.

3.2 Associations between gender and grandparenting

Table 5 shows the odds of grandmothers reporting each of the periods, activities, and reasons for grandchild care mentioned above when age, employment, education, partnership, wealth, health, and grandchild characteristics are controlled for. We present results for the entire sample of grandchild caregivers and for couples. In line with the descriptive analyses discussed above, even controlling for basic socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, grandmothers were more likely than grandfathers to look after grandchildren on weekdays during the school term (at 10% level). Grandmothers were also more likely to report all activities described above except for leisure ones. The logistic analyses also confirm that motivations given for care are quite similar among

grandmothers and grandfathers, with the former being more likely than grandfathers to state that this activity keeps them young and active and that they prefer family care. When we focus on ‘concordant’ grandchild caring couples, we observe very similar patterns: grandmothers were more likely (at 10%) to care for their grandchildren during weekdays of school terms, whereas there were no gender differences during other periods of the year. When activities are considered, even within the same household, grandmothers were more likely than their partners to cook for their grandchildren, help them with homework, look after them when ill, and take them/collect them to/from school. ‘Concordant’ grandchild caring grandparents reported similar reasons for grandchild care, although grandmothers were more likely to mention that they preferred family care and that looking after grandchildren keeps them young and engaged with younger people compared to their partners/spouses.

Table 5: Adjusted ORs indicating the effect of being a grandmother on reporting different extents of grandchild care, activities, and reasons for such care – All grandchild carers and concordant grandchild caring couples

	All caring grandparents OR (95% CI)	‘Concordant’ caring couples OR (95% CI)
<i>Periodicity</i>		
During school terms - weekdays	1.22 (0.99 – 1.51)	1.27 (0.98 – 1.65)
During school terms - weekends	0.96 (0.77 – 1.19)	0.94 (0.72 – 1.23)
During school holidays	1.11 (0.93 – 1.34)	1.07 (0.85 – 1.34)
Throughout the whole year	1.07 (0.91 – 1.27)	1.01 (0.82 – 1.25)
<i>Activities</i>		
Leisure activities	1.08 (0.86 – 1.35)	1.14 (0.85 – 1.52)
Prepared meal for grandchild(ren)	3.47 (2.83 – 4.26)	4.15 (3.16 – 5.45)
Stay overnight without parents	1.25 (1.05 – 1.49)	1.08 (0.86 – 1.36)
Just around in case they need me	1.26 (1.07 – 1.49)	1.15 (0.94 – 1.42)
Taken to/ collected from nursery/school	1.18 (1.00 – 1.39)	1.27 (1.03 – 1.57)
Helped with their homework	1.33 (1.12 – 1.57)	1.48 (1.20 – 1.82)
Looked after them when ill	1.78 (1.50 – 2.13)	1.82 (1.47 – 2.26)
<i>Motivations</i>		
To give their parents a break	0.88 (0.74 – 1.04)	0.85 (0.68 – 1.05)
To help their parents to go to work	1.03 (0.87 – 1.22)	1.03 (0.83 – 1.27)
So their parents can go out at night	1.02 (0.86 – 1.21)	1.03 (0.84 – 1.27)
It keeps me young and active	1.35 (1.15 – 1.60)	1.48 (1.21 – 1.81)
To help them develop as people	0.95 (0.80 – 1.12)	0.99 (0.81 – 1.21)
To help out financially	1.08 (0.90 – 1.29)	1.13 (0.91 – 1.41)
I feel engaged with young people	1.16 (0.98 – 1.37)	1.31 (1.06 – 1.61)
To give my grandchild(ren) a break	1.02 (0.85 – 1.22)	1.05 (0.84 – 1.31)
Our family prefers family care	1.43 (1.18 – 1.75)	1.47 (1.16 – 1.86)
It is difficult for me to refuse	0.94 (0.76 – 1.17)	1.18 (0.91 – 1.53)

Source: ELSA, Wave 8.

Note: All the above regressions control for grandparents’ age, employment, education, wealth quintiles, partnership (only for all caring grandparents), self-rated health, as well as the number of grandchildren, the age of their youngest grandchild, and the distance to their closest grandchild.

4. Discussion

Grandparents play a significant role in family life, including looking after grandchildren. Therefore, it is important to understand when they care for their grandchildren, what activities they undertake with/for their grandchildren, and why. Using a suite of new questions on grandparenting that have been included in the most recent wave of the nationally representative English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, and analysed here for the first time, our aim was to describe gender differences in grandparents' contribution to family life. We did so by analysing gender differences across all caring grandparents as well as among couples where both grandparents reported looking after their grandchildren.

In line with earlier studies, our findings show a high level of support in terms of prevalence of childcare provided by grandparents similar to the ones observed in other European countries (Glaser et al. 2013; Hank and Buber 2009). Although more grandmothers than grandfathers reported grandchild care, we found few gender differences in the periodicity of care both overall and among 'concordant' grandchild caring couples. Similarly, our study suggests that the reasons for providing grandchild care are generally similar for grandmothers and grandfathers, with help to parents (give them a break, help them go to work, and go out) being reported most often. Grandmothers, however, were more likely than grandfathers to state that grandparenting keeps them young and active, and that they prefer family care.

However, when we analysed the activities grandparents undertake for/with their grandchildren, we found marked gender differences. Both descriptively and in our multivariate analyses, results suggest that grandmothers were generally more likely to help and care for their grandchildren. This is the case also when we consider couples of grandchild caring grandparents: despite reporting similar levels of engagement with their grandchildren, grandmothers ended up undertaking more tasks more frequently than their coresiding partner/spouse. Also, our analyses showed no gender differences in overall engagement in leisure activities, in disagreement with previous studies suggesting that grandfathers were more involved in such activities than grandmothers (Dunifon, Near, and Ziol-Guest 2018; Gauthier 2002; Horsfall and Dempsey 2015). Results from our analyses suggesting gender inequality in grandparenting tasks are in line with a recent study on younger couples (aged 16–65) in the United Kingdom that also showed that women are still responsible for most housework and care with gender norms remaining strong (McMunn et al. 2019).

Overall, our study suggests that there is a gendered division in grandparental childcare. However, this is likely to have been hidden in previous studies, which have mostly collected information on how often on average grandfathers and grandmothers look after grandchildren. Similarities in the frequency of time masks gendered

inequalities regarding how that time is spent with grandchildren, giving further support to the idea that grandfathers' frequency of involvement is linked to that of their spouses (Hank and Buber 2009; Horsfall and Dempsey 2015).

Our descriptive study provides a more detailed picture of the role grandmothers and grandfathers play in family life in England. While we recognise that grandparenting as well as gender norms and couple's division of caring tasks is likely to vary across welfare states and different cultures and family norms, this new and robust demographic descriptive data on grandparenting will nevertheless help inform further research on important topics (including, among others, the association of grandparenting with socioeconomic status; the health consequences of specific activities or reasons for grandchild care; how activities change by grandchildren' and grandparents' ages; and how grandparents combine and share activities within the same household), which will help to inform policy on how the role of grandparents in family life can be best supported.

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