

The Impact Effect of Intergenerational Care: An Analysis Targeting Middle-aged and Elderly Individuals

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Abstract. Grandparental care has always been a hot topic of research both domestically and internationally, and with the increasingly prominent phenomenon of global population aging, the occurrence of grandparental care has become more widespread. Existing academic research has explored the impact of grandparents' care on the elderly, childbearing-age individuals, and children, with a focus primarily on the elderly. However, there is an urgent need for a systematic summary of the progress in research on grandparents' care. This study adopts methods such as literature review to provide alternative directions for future scholars based on a summary of existing research. Based on the integration of existing literature, this study finds that grandchild care harms the labor supply of middle-aged and elderly individuals, while moderate grandchild care can promote their physical and mental health. In the future, scholars can broaden the breadth of their research in terms of time and space, incorporate more factors, and strive to achieve a closer integration between research content and reality. In the future, scholars can broaden the breadth of their research in terms of time and space, incorporate more factors, and strive to achieve a closer integration between research content and reality.

Keywords: Intergenerational care, middle-aged and elderly people, aging society, health of middle-aged and elderly people, labor supply.

1. Introduction

Intergenerational care, where grandparents provide care for grandchildren [1]. From a global perspective, grandparents' involvement in the upbringing of grandchildren is extensive and has a profound impact. Research shows that an increasing number of grandparents are participating in the caregiving services for their grandchildren [2]. In the United Kingdom (UK) in 2014, nearly 6 million grandparents were involved in the daily care of their grandchildren, saving the country over £7 billion. British Prime Minister Cameron hailed them as "unsung heroes". Across Europe, the SHARE survey revealed that 44% of grandmothers and 42% of grandfathers regularly or occasionally participate in the care of their grandchildren. Despite the relatively well-developed municipal childcare services in Nordic countries, grandparents are still deeply involved in other aspects of child-rearing. In Southern European countries, due to limited public childcare support, grandparents are even the primary caregivers for their grandchildren [2]. In the Philippines, due to parents working abroad, a large number of children live with their grandparents or relatives [2].

Focusing on China, where population aging is intensifying, whether in urban or rural areas, families often choose either grandparents to take care of children, or one parent (mainly women) to give up employment and stay at home to take care of children. According to the data from CFPS in 2014 on "who takes care of children during the day", intergenerational care accounts for about 21.75% of childcare responsibilities within the family, second only to maternal care [3]. It can be seen that grandparental care, as a family phenomenon that transcends culture and national boundaries, is increasingly playing a pivotal role in the global demographic transition and social development process.

Based on an overview of grandparental care globally and in China, it is evident that grandparental care has become a widespread and significant family phenomenon. In this context, it is particularly necessary to conduct in-depth research on the impact of grandparental care on specific groups, especially the elderly, which is also the focus of this article.

Research on grandparental care is relatively mature, with foreign academic research starting relatively early. However, with the gradual promotion of the "Universal Two-Child" and "Universal Three-Child" policies, grandparental care has gradually attracted the attention of domestic academia [4].

Research on grandparental care is primarily categorized into three types based on the target population: middle-aged and elderly individuals, childbearing-age individuals (mainly women), and children. Among these, the majority of research focuses on the first category, primarily examining the impact of grandparental care on the middle-aged and elderly. Within this research scope, studies in China emphasize labor supply aspects, while foreign research emphasizes health and psychological aspects. According to the population age classification standards issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2025, the target population of this study is the middle-aged and elderly individuals engaged in grandparental care, which includes the following four categories: middle-aged individuals (45-59 years old), young elderly individuals (60-74 years old), elderly individuals (75-89 years old), and longevity elders (90 years old and above). In recent years, despite a surge in research on grandparental care, there is a lack of systematic summarization of research progress. This article focuses on the impact of grandparental care on the middle-aged and elderly, provides a systematic and in-depth review of the latest literature, and proposes directions for future expansion, aiming to provide useful references for subsequent research.

2. Macro analysis of intergenerational care-based on Citespace data

This article selects foreign literature from 2016 to 2025 for data analysis. As shown in Figure 1, grandparents' care has been a hot topic in the past decade, exhibiting a research trend that shifts from individual to societal focus based on the family. From 2016 to 2020, research keywords included age, gender, and so on, with a focus on the role of mothers. After 2021, factors such as social support were incorporated, and ethical influencing factors were explored. Since 2023, scholars have begun to focus on analyzing the risks of grandparental care in the context of an aging society, paying attention to a series of challenges such as physical and mental health.

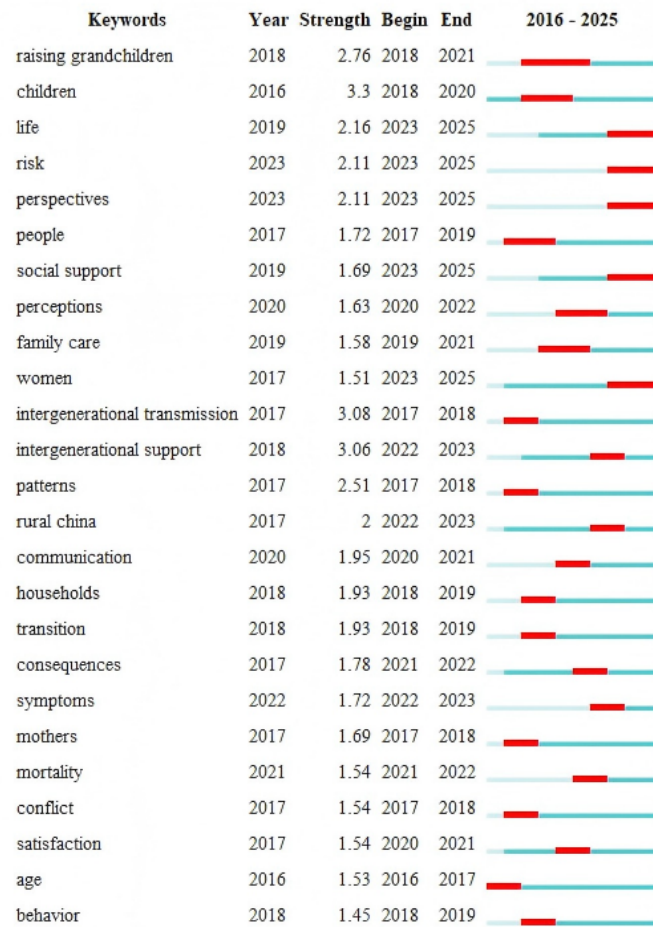


Figure 1. Top 25 keywords with the strongest citation bursts

3. The impact of intergenerational care on the labor supply of middle-aged and elderly people

Research on the impact of grandparental care on the labor supply of middle-aged and elderly individuals primarily focuses on China, and academic opinions are divided. On the one hand, according to the role strain theory, the time spent on grandparental care occupies the labor time of middle-aged and elderly individuals, and this phenomenon becomes more pronounced in China with the increase in the number of grandchildren under the "two-child" and "three-child" policies. On the other hand, according to the intergenerational exchange theory, many scholars have proven that intergenerational economic transfer, a phenomenon associated with grandparental care, can indirectly promote the labor supply of middle-aged and elderly individuals [5].

3.1. Overall population analysis based on charls data / direct effect study on the overall population based on Charls data

Existing research has used "living with grandchildren" as the basis for the state of intergenerational care, indicating that the impact of participating in and withdrawing from intergenerational care on labor participation among middle-aged and elderly individuals exhibits gender heterogeneity. On the one hand, participating in intergenerational care significantly reduces the labor participation of middle-aged and elderly women [6]. Based on Caldwell's intergenerational wealth diversion theory

and Mead's social role transformation theory, studies have found through methods such as two-stage least squares estimation that grandparental care has an inhibitory effect on the labor participation of middle-aged and elderly individuals. Furthermore, in terms of labor participation and supply time, compared to middle-aged and elderly individuals with urban household registration, the negative impact of grandparental care is greater for those with rural household registration [7]. On the other hand, compared to those who participate in intergenerational care, the labor participation of middle-aged and elderly people who withdraw from such care experiences is a more pronounced decrease. This withdrawal significantly reduces the labor participation of middle-aged and elderly men. The phenomenon that withdrawal from intergenerational care leads to a more pronounced decrease in labor participation among middle-aged and elderly people challenges the traditional viewpoint in role strain theory that the end of family care can release labor supply potential [5]. Regarding solutions, the latest research has put forward suggestions covering multiple aspects, specifically including expanding the supply scale of public childcare services, strengthening relevant policy support for family care of infants and young children, improving the institutional system of rural elderly care security, and advocating mutual assistance within the family.

3.2. Focusing on specific groups/direct effect research focusing on specific groups

The differences in family structures between China and the West result in a partial overlap in the focus of research in Chinese and Western literature. Chinese literature primarily focuses on researching specific groups in urban or rural areas. For instance, based on the theory of family division of labor and human capital theory, it explores the impact of intergenerational care responsibilities on the non-agricultural employment of middle-aged rural women. It points out that the burden of childcare responsibilities has shifted between generations. Specifically, while intergenerational care responsibilities alleviate the child-rearing pressure on young mothers, they have a negative impact on the non-agricultural employment of middle-aged rural women. This is especially evident when grandchildren are aged 0-5 (during the breastfeeding and preschool education stages). Even if some middle-aged rural women choose to continue working out of economic necessity, their wage income decreases [8]. English literature has introduced the concept of "sandwich parents", referring to middle-aged and elderly individuals who have both living parents (or parents-in-law) and young grandchildren. They often face caregiving demands from multiple generations. To assist their daughters or daughters-in-law in remaining in the labor market, grandparents take care of their grandchildren during working hours, which is positively correlated with the amount of remittances they receive from their migrant children. Studies have found that approximately one-third of sandwich grandparents in China are unemployed, and even fewer (only 11.6%) are self-employed in the non-agricultural sector, indicating their overall lower socioeconomic status [9].

3.3. Research on the moderating effect of external factors

Many scholars have moved beyond the direct relationship between intergenerational care and labor force participation, introducing other external variables for a multifactorial analysis. Among these, the increase in pension levels has had a significant positive impact on the probability of female middle-aged and elderly groups providing intergenerational care, thereby prompting them to withdraw from the labor market. However, this has no significant effect on the male population [10]. The availability of social childcare resources has alleviated the reduction in labor supply among middle-aged and elderly people caused by intergenerational care. However, as the cost of

community childcare increases, the cost for families to send children to childcare institutions becomes higher than before. This increases the opportunity cost of labor supply for middle-aged and elderly people, making them more inclined to withdraw from the labor market [11].

It can be seen that intergenerational care reduces the labor supply of middle-aged and elderly people, and this phenomenon exhibits gender and urban-rural heterogeneity. At the same time, this phenomenon is also influenced by other influencing factors, and this process also exhibits group heterogeneity. It can be observed that the quantitative analysis methods in the latest research have seen innovations, and they are mostly combined with relevant policies and social realities, with most of them proposing countermeasures to alleviate the decline in labor supply of middle-aged and elderly people. Subsequent research can expand the scope of study beyond China, refine the intensity and type of care, combine more external factors such as regions, and evaluate the effectiveness of policy interventions.

4. The impact of intergenerational care on the health of middle-aged and elderly individuals

The health issues of middle-aged and elderly individuals have always been a research hotspot both domestically and internationally. In recent years, with the increasingly prevalent phenomenon of grandparental care, the relationship between grandparental care and the health of grandparents has become a hot topic. Academic research is primarily conducted based on theories such as intergenerational reciprocity, internalization of responsibility, altruism, and value entrustment. It is generally believed that grandparental care is a complex experience that can simultaneously have both positive and negative impacts on the health of grandparents [12]. Overall, there is no unified conclusion in academia on whether the impact of intergenerational care on the health of middle-aged and elderly people is positive or negative.

4.1. Exploring the impact of grandparental care on the health of middle-aged and elderly people from multi-dimensional health indicators

Some scholars have used dimensions such as self-rated health deterioration, instrumental activities of daily living (IADL) impairment, and physical pain as criteria for measuring the health of middle-aged and elderly individuals. They have found that the heterogeneity of intergenerational care is primarily manifested in gender, education, and urban-rural differences. Overall, intergenerational care has a significant negative impact on the health of grandparents. Specifically, there is a "U-shaped" relationship between the intensity of intergenerational care and physical pain among grandparents, indicating that moderate levels of intergenerational care can reduce physical pain [12]. Some scholars have also focused on the study of grandparents in rural areas, and similarly concluded that moderate intergenerational care is beneficial to the health of grandparents. Specifically, it is reflected in the improvement of the psychological and social dimensions of the health status of rural grandparents, and to a certain extent, the physical health of caregivers is compromised [13]. In the United States, the phenomenon of intergenerational care is also widespread. Based on the tracking data from the Health and Retirement Study (HRS) spanning from 1996 to 2014, scholars evaluated Americans aged 51 and above from three aspects: self-reported health status, physical functioning, and mental health. They pointed out that intergenerational care, as an activity in which older adults participate to assist their families, can have adverse effects on the health of grandparents, and this phenomenon is more pronounced among the group of older grandparents [14].

4.2. Exploring the impact of grandparental care on the health of middle-aged and elderly people from a single objective indicator

Jennifer Ivy Kim and other scholars, using relative grip strength as an indicator to measure the health level of middle-aged and elderly people, focused on Korean grandparents aged 45–84 and concluded different from the aforementioned studies. The study pointed out that when the weekly intergenerational care time is less than 40 hours, the risk of low grip strength significantly increases due to scattered care tasks and irregular physical exertion; when the weekly intergenerational care time is 40 hours or more, it forms a stable habit of physical activity, which has no significant damage to grip strength. At the same time, long-term caregivers who have cared for ≥ 26 weeks in the past year have a significantly lower risk of low grip strength compared to short-term caregivers. The study also found that positive health cognition can offset the physical exertion of care to some extent, specifically reflected in grandparents with good self-rated health having a lower risk of low grip strength [15].

4.3. The mechanistic linkage between intergenerational caregiving and the health of middle-aged and elderly people

Donghong Xie and other scholars selected Chinese middle-aged and elderly individuals aged 45-80 to explore the relationship between grandchild care and biological aging from a medical perspective. They found that excessive involvement can lead to role strain, meaning that high-intensity grandchild care can increase biological aging in grandparents, especially grandmothers. At the same time, there are gender differences between shared care and biological aging, as shared care with spouses can accelerate biological aging in grandmothers [16].

In summary, appropriate intergenerational care is permissible as long as the health level of grandparents allows. However, excessive caregiving burden can pose a threat to the health of grandparents, and this harm exhibits significant gender heterogeneity. While conducting data research, academia has proposed countermeasures to address the detrimental effects of intergenerational care on grandparents' health, including but not limited to establishing a balance between the caregiving responsibilities of parents and grandparents, strengthening parenting guidance based on the needs of intergenerational childcare, and accelerating the development of rural industries. At the same time, some expandable spaces in existing research can be observed. Firstly, some studies have small sample sizes, resulting in insufficiently convincing results. In the future, sample sizes can be expanded. Secondly, due to cultural context limitations, most discussions are confined to a single country. In the future, more universally applicable research can be developed. Thirdly, there are certain limitations in care measurement, as it does not distinguish between different types of caregiving, nor does it further refine the classification discussion based on the age of care recipients. In the future, further refinement can be achieved. Fourthly, most literature only analyzes short-term health changes. In the future, research on long-term effects such as chronic diseases can be strengthened. Fifthly, most literature simply conducts data analysis without linking it to policies, resulting in weak policy recommendations. In the future, it can be combined with current political analysis and envisaged intervention measures.

5. Conclusion

Based on the induction and summary of the above literature, firstly, grandparental care reduces the labor supply of middle-aged and elderly people, and this phenomenon exhibits gender and urban-

rural heterogeneity. At the same time, it is also influenced by other influencing factors, and this process also demonstrates group heterogeneity. Secondly, appropriate grandparental care is permissible given the health level of grandparents, while excessive care burden can harm grandparents' health, and this harm exhibits significant gender heterogeneity. Finally, the positive impact of grandparental care on life satisfaction only exists at a moderate intensity. In the future, scholars can explore the following three research directions:

In terms of the temporal and spatial selection of research scope, the breadth of existing research remains to be expanded. Temporally, most existing studies select survey data from a single year for data analysis and draw corresponding conclusions, without analyzing trends over a certain period, thus lacking dynamic evolutionary analysis and only yielding relatively static research conclusions. Future research could extend the time span of the study or conduct comparative analysis on data from two or more time periods, combined with factors such as policies, for causal analysis. Spatially, Chinese literature mainly analyzes data on China as a whole, data on Chinese cities or rural areas, and data on a specific region in China, while English literature mainly discusses data from a single country. It can be seen that there is a lack of comparison between data from different countries, which also makes the conclusions drawn from the research less universal. That is, the research on the role of intergenerational care on a global scale, which is also the significance of this paper, is to provide a more comprehensive discussion result for subsequent scholars. In the future, scholars could expand the geographical scope or conduct comparative analysis on the phenomenon of intergenerational care between two countries, thereby drawing more specific conclusions.

It can be observed that the influencing factors currently studied in academia are primarily confined to intergenerational care, which is analyzed assuming other factors remain constant, which actually does not align with real-world situations. Some scholars have also incorporated other social factors that significantly impact intergenerational care, such as pensions and childcare services, to conduct scenario-based analyses. In the future, academia can consider incorporating more other factors into the scope of analysis, or primarily analyze the role of a specific variable in influencing intergenerational care. Meanwhile, it is possible to examine the relationship among grandparents, parents, and grandchildren together, such as how grandparents are influenced by intergenerational care, and how parents and grandchildren are affected in turn, to explore how to strike a balance among the three.

On the one hand, some scholars incorporate an analysis of current policies and suggestions for future policies at the beginning or end of their research, but they do not integrate policies into the research process, which mostly involves pure data analysis. Therefore, it is difficult to explore the significance of policies in their research. In the future, consideration could be given to incorporating the impact of policies throughout the research. On the other hand, the arguments in the final suggestions section are somewhat weak. In the future, after proposing hypothetical solutions, further exploration of their feasibility and innovativeness could be conducted, and even questionnaire surveys could be included to enhance persuasiveness.

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