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Grandparental Involvement in Chinese Intergenerational Coparenting: A Digital Collage-Assisted Interview Study of Adolescents' Experiences

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Abstract. In multigenerational families in China, grandparents typically share child-rearing responsibilities with parents, but little is currently known about how adolescents experience this arrangement. Using the Process Model of Family Functioning (PMFF) in seven essential dimensions, this study observed how teenagers understood grandparental contribution in family interactions and connected it with family relationships and their experience of happiness. Seven participants who were being interviewed aged 15–18, all living with their parents and grandparents, took part in online interviews (Tencent Meeting). Thematic analysis mainly identified three themes: task accomplishment and role performance in daily care; communication and emotional expression during family conflicts; and teenagers' interpretations of how grandparental contribution how to impact their experience of happiness. Grandparents directly managed daily routines but had less authority over educational decisions. For instance, during conflicts they explained both sides and spoke for participants, though they could not always change parents' decisions. In addition, participants often experienced warmth from those caring and understood reasonable discipline as care. Finally, these findings suggest that interactions between grandparents and teenagers, as well as the teenagers' interpretations of these interactions, jointly shape the meaning of grandparental involvement.

Keywords: intergenerational coparenting, grandparental involvement, adolescents, digital collage-assisted interviews, Process Model of Family Functioning

1. Introduction

Grandparents share child-rearing responsibilities with parents in many Chinese multigenerational households [1, 2]. However, little is known about how adolescents experience these family arrangements. Much previous research on grandchildren's developmental outcomes has focused on custodial grandparenting and has linked such care with developmental difficulties [3, 4]. In contrast, some broader studies examining grandparental involvement have found positive psychological effects [5]. These conflicting findings suggest that intergenerational caregiving, as a caregiving arrangement, does not have a definitive direct association with adolescents' psychosocial outcomes.

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The combination of family interactions among parents, grandparents, and teenagers may also play an important role.

This study is focused on Chinese families in which parents and grandparents shared child rearing responsibilities. Showed by the Process Model of Family Functioning (PMFF), the study used online interviews to support participants' engagement to discuss sensitive topics. It addressed two questions: How do grandparents interact with parents and teenagers in multigenerational families? How do teenagers experience grandparental contribution link to their happiness?

2. Literature review

2.1. Grandparental childcare

Grandparental childcare can be divided into three main forms [6]. First, in non-coresident care, grandparents share child-rearing responsibilities but live separately from the family. Second, in multigenerational families, parents, grandparents, and children live together, with parents and grandparents sharing child-rearing responsibilities. Third, in custodial grandparental care, grandparents become the primary caregivers due to absent parents.

Research attention has been uneven across these forms, and the available evidence varies by region and family background. Danielsbacka et al. [6] reviewed 92 English-language articles covering 117 studies of grandparents' health and well-being. Of these studies, 65 examined non-coresident grandparental involvement, 34 focused on custodial care, and only 18 examined three-generation households. Although the review focused on grandparents' own health, these figures also show the limited attention given to three-generation care.

In Western countries, custodial grandparental care always happens when parents have died, been incarcerated, are struggling with substance abuse, have serious health problems, or are unable to provide care [6]. By contrast, grandparental care in East Asia, especially China, often develops differently. Of the eight Chinese studies included by Danielsbacka et al. [6], five examined non-coresident involvement and two examined multigenerational families. Chen et al. [1], using data collected from nine Chinese provinces between 1991 and 2004, found that grandparents, parents and grandchildren typically live together in China. From a cultural perspective, collectivist values support grandparents' care by emphasizing intergenerational responsibility and family obligations. Limited public childcare also increases families' reliance on grandparents [1, 2]. Therefore, research limited to custodial care cannot fully explain Chinese families. Further research is needed to explore adolescents' psychosocial development in Chinese multigenerational families.

2.2. Intergenerational coparenting and adolescent psychosocial outcomes

Studies of families in which grandparents are the primary caregivers have reported developmental difficulties among children and adolescents. Rapoport et al. [7] found that children in grandparent-led families had experienced more adverse childhood events than those in parent-led families. Xu et al. [3] reviewed 42 studies of custodial grandfamilies and found more psychological, behavioral, and educational difficulties among children. In China, continuous primary care by grandparents from childhood through adolescence was also associated with poorer adolescent mental health [4].

In contrast, studies that did not limit grandparental care to grandparents acting as primary caregivers have examined the extent and quality of grandparental involvement and found possible protective effects.

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Barnett et al. [5] found that greater grandmother's greater contribution in child care weakened the conflict between harsh mother's punishment and children's bad feelings after punishment. Another study found that grandparents' emotional contribution was positively associated with teenagers' prosocial behavior [8]. Ruiz and Silverstein [9] also suggested that supportive relationships between grandparent and grandchild can diminish depressive symptoms among grandchild.

Overall, these research findings suggest that conclusions about the influence of grandparents on grandchildren are inconsistent. One possible explanation is that in families with the same caregiving arrangements, other family interactions lead to differences. For example, Barnett et al. [10] found that conflicts between mothers and grandmothers were associated with behavioral problems in young children, and this effect was manifested directly or indirectly through mothers' negative parenting behaviors. This finding highlights the importance of examining the ways family members interact. Therefore, a family process framework may help clarify the roles of grandparents, parents, and children in shaping adolescents' family experiences.

2.3. Process Model of Family Functioning

The Process Model of Family Functioning (PMFF) [11, 12] provides a suitable framework to analyze the interactions within the family. It shows the family as a changing system that include everyday needs, members' development, and family disasters. The model includes seven connected dimensions: task accomplishment, role performance, communication, affective expression, involvement, control, and values and norms. These dimensions operate within individual (intrapsychic), interpersonal, family-system, and sociocultural contexts [12]. This study applied these dimensions to teenagers' accounts of grandparental involvement.

2.4. Adolescent perspectives and collage-assisted interviews

In previous research, researchers' understanding of teenagers' interpretations of their family situations always relied on scales. A review by Xu et al. [13] pointed out that the majority of grandparental involvement studies collecting data by self-report questionnaires, which let to bias and stereotypes. Although questionnaires can reveal associations between variables, they provide few details on certain interactions. Therefore, qualitative methods should be used to get a deeper understanding of how teenagers view family interactions.

Qualitative interviews can explore teenagers' experiences in greater detail. Particularly, art-assisted activities help teenagers discuss sensitive family issues [14, 15]. However, open-ended visual materials may lead to overinterpretation by researchers [16]. To solve this problem, researchers have experimented with activities such as clay modeling [17] and collage [18], using participants' designs with existing materials to deepen interviews. This kind of art activity enables participants and researchers turns fragment ideas into topics that can be used for discussion [19].

Therefore, this study used the PMFF and digital collage-assisted interviews to examine grandparental involvement in Chinese intergenerational coparenting families. It focused on adolescents' accounts of family interactions and how they connected these interactions with their experience of happiness.

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3. Method

3.1. Purpose of the study

Guided by the Process Model of Family Functioning (PMFF), this qualitative study examined family relationship experiences and the experience of happiness among adolescents in intergenerational coparenting families. During one-on-one digital collage-assisted interviews, participants recalled family conflicts, described grandparental involvement, and explained how they understood and evaluated it. The study addressed the following questions:

How do grandparents interact with parents and adolescents in Chinese multigenerational households?

How do adolescents in Chinese multigenerational households experience grandparental involvement in relation to their happiness?

3.2. Participants

The study used convenience sampling. A school email invited adolescents who lived with grandparents involved in their daily care. Ten adolescents registered, and seven had sufficient time to participate. All lived with both parents and grandparents, and their parents continued to provide care. Participants were 15-18 years old; one was male and six were female. A grandmother was the main grandparent caregiver in five families and a grandfather in two families.

3.3. Procedure

After registration, participants received an informed consent form explaining the study. For participants younger than 18, a guardian provided electronic consent before the interview, and the participant also provided assent. Participants aged 18 provided their own consent.

Data were collected through one-on-one online interviews. Each participant recalled a memorable family conflict involving at least two family members, including a co-resident grandparent. Participants then used a web-based collage tool to represent the setting, people, and facial expressions. The completed collage guided the interview. Participants described the event's cause, process, and outcome, grandparental care, parent-grandparent interactions, and their own feelings. Later questions extended from the event to everyday interactions with grandparents. Each session lasted approximately 40 minutes: about 10 minutes for creating and discussing the collage and 30 minutes for the interview. Tencent Meeting automatically audio-recorded the interviews.

3.4. Digital collage tool

The researcher designed a web-based digital collage tool with ready-made visual elements (Figure 1). Social media examples of grandparental involvement were reviewed to guide the selection of visual materials. The researcher then drew and grouped elements, including basic shapes, common furniture, and facial expressions. The web application was developed with assistance from GPT-5.6 Sol. The tool allows users to select elements, change their colors, and resize, rotate, and arrange them to depict scenes from family life. Examples of participants' digital collages are shown in Figure 2.

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Figure 1. Screenshot of the web-based digital collage tool

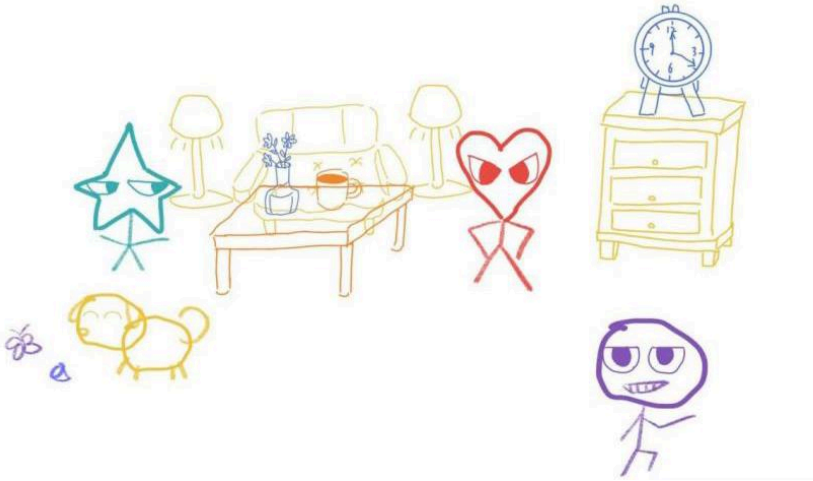


Figure 2. An example of one participant's digital collages depicting the scene from family life

3.5. Data analysis

Transcripts were first produced by automatic transcription of Tencent Meeting. The researcher checked each transcript against the audio recording, corrected errors, and removed personal information. Early observations related to the research questions were recorded during this process.

The study used thematic analysis guided by theory and participants' experiences [20, 21]. Initial coding followed the seven PMFF dimensions: task accomplishment, role performance, communication, affective expression, involvement, control, and values and norms. Other material was coded inductively. A psychologist with relevant experience then reviewed the codes and related interview sections. The researcher and psychologist discussed different interpretations and revised the meaning and range of the codes.

Themes were developed by grouping related codes and checking them against the original data. The interviews were reviewed again to determine whether each theme reflected participants' accounts and addressed the research questions. This process produced the final themes, which covered grandparental involvement and interactions, together with participants' feelings and evaluations of these interactions.

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4. Results

Guided by the PMFF, the analysis identified three connected themes. The first two themes describe family responsibilities and interactions, while the third shows how participants understood and evaluated these processes.

4.1. Task accomplishment and role performance: grandparents' daily caregiving responsibilities and decision-making authority

Grandparents were involved in the participants' daily care, including managing their diet, sleep, and homework. For example, Participant 6 recalled that her grandmother wanted her to go to bed early when she was a child. When she was still excitedly moving around in bed, her grandmother would forcefully turn off the light and tell her to be quiet. Furthermore, matters would be referred to parents. Participant 5 explained that his grandparents took away food when they found him secretly eating snacks. When necessary, they involved his mother and warned him, "I'm going to tell your mom." It can be seen that grandparents enforced some rules directly while drawing on parental authority to strengthen others.

However, this authority did not extend to every family matter. Participant 6 distinguished household matters from educational decisions. Her maternal grandparents had greater influence over household matters, but she said of education, "If it is mainly about education, it is probably still up to my parents." Grandparents exercised direct authority in daily care, while parents retained final authority over child-rearing decisions.

4.2. Communication and affective expression: grandparents' mediation in family conflicts and its limits

During family conflicts, grandparents often becomes a mediate between parents and participants by explaining both sides and speaking for participants. Participant 3 described her grandmother's approach as follows: "She tries to make me feel sorry for my mom, also tries to make my mom feel sorry for me." Grandparents also questioned parents' behavior. When exam results were discussed during a meal, Participant 3's grandmother said, "Don't punish her at the dinner table." Similarly, after Participant 4 was criticized for playing games, her grandparents asked her mom not to speak so harshly. It can be found that grandparental contribution could reduce the pressure created by conflict.

However, grandparental contribution did not always change the course of a conflict. Participant 2 placed two chairs at the corner to represent her paternal and maternal grandmothers. Her parents were arguing about their contributions to the family. Her grandmothers asked them to stop, but the parents continued, so her grandmothers felt helplessly. She felt that both grandmothers could only worry and had little power to intervene. Participant 3 similarly reported that her grandparents would say, "Just give it a couple of days, we can just wait your parents to figure out by themselves ." Because the grandparents were powerless to help, the participants' suffering continued despite the support they received. Participant 3 stated, "I was already in a bad mood, and what my grandparents said made me even more annoyed." It can be seen that although grandparents' mediation can provide emotional support, the troubles caused by the conflict for the participants still cannot be completely resolved.

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4.3. Involvement, control, and values and norms: adolescents' interpretations of grandparental involvement and experience of happiness

Although grandparents were not the decision-makers in families, participants valued their tolerance, support, and continued care. In her collage, Participant 4 used hearts for her grandparents and smiling faces to show their attitude during conflict. She explained, "No matter what I do, they are always very love me." Participant 1 described that she feels relax and pleasant when have time chatting with grandparents. Participant 6 stated that their care "makes me feel warm" and "puts me in a very good mood."

Positive experiences were also reported during discipline. Participant 5 explained why his grandparents controlled his diet: "They don't want me to overweight because it's bad for my health." He believed that he had limited control over eating and valued their involvement. Participant 7 also accepted criticism after making a mistake, and she described an experience of happiness because she received attention. In contrast, Participant 1 stated, "My grandparents' overindulgence actually felt like a burden to me, and she made me feel uncomfortable." Overall, restraint or indulgence has no direct correlation with the feeling by participants. Instead, how participants interpret these factors is the essential influencing factor.

5. Discussion

This study examined adolescents' accounts of intergenerational coparenting in Chinese multigenerational families. The findings suggest that participants' interpretations shaped the meaning of family interactions.

5.1. Caregiving authority and intergenerational coordination

The PMFF treats family processes as connected aspects of family task completion [12]. Examining role performance and control separately helps distinguish caregiving responsibilities from decision-making power. Participants described grandparents who directly managed daily routines but had less influence over education and conflicts led by parents. Similarly, Bai et al. [22] identify the division of labor, power, and authority as related but distinct aspects of intergenerational coparenting.

Grandparents' position between two generations may require them to support parents' rules while also responding to participants' distress. Lo and Lindsay [23] describe grandparental care as involving intergenerational negotiation and emotional management. In this study, grandparents explained each side's position, but they did not always resolve disagreements. Their involvement could change how rules were expressed, while parents retained final authority. Therefore, participants could feel supported yet remain distressed by unresolved conflict. Hence, emotional support and conflict resolution were distinct and parallel outcomes of grandparental coordination.

5.2. Family processes and adolescents' experience of happiness

Within the PMFF, control should be understood together with communication, affective expression, involvement, and values and norms. Some of our participants' interpretations connect being disciplined with their experience of happiness. Soenens and Vansteenkiste [24] distinguish behavioral structure from psychological control, noting that rules can be communicated through support or pressure. This distinction may explain why limits and positive relationship experiences appeared together.

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In this study, some participants also experienced grandparental contribution has some restrictions. Similarly, Dolbin-MacNab and Keiley [25] found that teenagers raised only by grandparents expressed strong emotions by the sources of stress. These accounts suggest that affection for grandparents can exist with dissatisfaction because they lacking of particular caregiving practices. Hence, understanding teenagers' experience of happiness requires much attention to how they interpret its effects on their everyday lives.

5.3. Limitations and future directions

First, the study's sample included 7 participants from Shanghai High School, aged between 15 and 18, with 6 of them being female. Therefore, the findings only reflect a limited range of experiences. Second, even though the analysis was based on the participants' self-descriptions, the ready-made collage materials might have influenced their narratives as well. Finally, recalling a single conflict can't show cause-and-effect or how happiness changes over time. Future studies could consider including more diverse participants, allowing the use of custom collage materials, and comparing the effects of collage-assisted interviews with standard interviews. Also, by keeping daily records and considering multiple perspectives, the psychological state of teenagers in multigenerational households could be further explored.

6. Conclusion

In Chinese multigenerational families, Grandparental caregiving involves more than the care provided. It also depends on how family members share responsibilities, authority, communication, and emotional support. Grandparents managed routines and protected participants from harsh criticism, but limited authority reduced their ability to resolve conflicts. Adolescents' interpretations shaped the emotional meaning of these interactions. Reasonable discipline could be experienced as care, while support could exist with unresolved pain. Future research might examine more families and consider narratives from third parties. Art-assisted interviews, like digital collage, may help teenagers express family experiences that are difficult to describe through direct questions.

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